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Why I Write The Way I Write

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Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do

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Kim Sa-in

Why I Write The Way I Write

I. Solidarity of Sorrow

At the Bijou Theatre a few days ago, I saw an American movie entitled, *Winter's Bone*. It was about the wretched life of people who were expelled to a desolate mountain region. My heart ached as I was watching the dark and sad film. At the same time, the film ironically comforted me with the realization that "Ah, this country, America, has the same misery and despair that we have in South Korea, we are not that different, after all." This realization came back to me with the Iranian movie, *Turtles Can Fly*, and the Indonesian movie, *The Rainbow Troops*. The scenes of war, poverty, and misery in the three films drew me closer to America, Iran, and Indonesia, because these scenes were not so different from what I used to experience in my country.

The sense of shared pain, sorrow, and shame brings people closer to one another. It makes people intimate. We are comforted when we meet people who have the same scars. It makes us laugh and tell jokes, even through the pain. As you know, misery consists of something other than bitterness: often we find unexpected humor and excitement in it. During my residency at the International Writing Program, I want to discover the scars, agonies, and darkness of America more than anything else. In doing so, I want to confirm that we are one as humans and to come closer to America. That is the power of pain: powerful solidarity based on shared sorrow.

I was born in 1956 in a poor rural village in South Korea and grew up through the era of developmentalism and authoritarianism. Today, the Olympic games, the World Cup tournament, Samsung cell phones, LG television, and Hyundai cars are symbols of South Korea, a newly emerging economy. However, they are only one face of the country. The other sides of Korean society still struggle with indelible scars from the past four decades, such as the division of North and South Korea, fierce ideological contestation originating from the division, military dictatorship that lasted until the end of the 1980s, and rapid industrialization and urbanization driven by authoritarian regimes. What we gained in return for deserting our cherished values, or for selling our soul, was money; specifically, money in the hands of a few. You already know that unjustly earned money is as fatal as poverty to humanity. I'm sure other developing countries would share such experiences.

When I started writing in this social atmosphere, to be faced with the question of how my writing can empower suffering neighbors was inevitable. South Korean writers of my generation, including myself, were ashamed of writing in a way that only elite readers could appreciate or that exaggerated the writer's own suffering. My writing became more bitter and louder with hatred of unjust power and the brazenness of the "haves". Simultaneously, I got involved in the social movement to express my hatred and rage. Since the late 1970s, I have been imprisoned three times, and have had to hide with pseudonyms from the oppressive regimes. It was not until ten years ago that I first obtained my passport.

In 1987, the democratization movement and the sacrifices of many people brought formal democracy to Korea. As the primary goal was attained, I lost direction for my literary energy. Reflecting on myself, I realized that my poetry was contaminated by an excessive

sense of duty, dogmatism, and frightening hatred. That realization was something like the shock of seeing the face of the enemy in the mirror. I saw the face of a miserable utilitarian who takes advantage of people in the name of people.

In the early 1990s when I returned to my normal life, I had to struggle to overcome dogma and hatred. When I lose the ability to appreciate things as themselves, when I lose compassion and sympathy, I cannot call myself a poet. When I lose humility toward the world and life in the circuit of my mind, I fail to reach the true name of anything, even grass or a stone. Since this time in my life, my writing has been marked by the same struggle to recover this humility and appreciation.

The self-reflective practice should be continued, and my entire life might not be enough. However, only when the humble self-emptying is attained, or at least when I struggle to attain it, I am a poet, and not a poetry specialist. I dare say that I have practiced God's work since God in Genesis called each being's true name. This is not news; poets of all ages and all countries have pursued this role. However, this is my only weapon against the terrible power of commercialization and the spell of money. Please forgive me if my way is too conservative and archaic. Still I believe this is a place where someone should stay behind and preserve.

I would like to conclude my talk with my "prayer" of late, which expresses my resolution to write poetry.

II. Poetry as a Devotion

For me, one of the most precious words in Korean is Seongim, which means giving service, or devotion. Just getting my tongue around this word makes me feel a little more docile and pure. Though I am afraid it might be presumptuous, I humbly pray that in my activity as a poet, I may serve even in some small way all the unconsidered things in the world. My hope is that the warm, pure passivity denoted by Seongim will enable my writing to arrive at a certain earnestness in both its content and form.

Rather than busily assert their own opinions, I want my poems to be heard by others. I look for poetry that waits in silence rather than rushes forward, one that, rather than readily reveals its own ideas, can be patient when patience is needed.

I want it to be a poetry of the defeated rather than of the victors. Even though bright, loud laughter is fine and seductive, I believe that the complete spiritual world can always be revealed in sorrow and bitterness. However, I would not be so bold as to claim that my poetry is written on behalf of the weak and overlooked.

I see writing poetry as something like *standing together in the rain*, beside the grass and the exposed trees. I would never insist that the best solution for dealing with the rain is to bring someone an umbrella. Standing side by side with those exposed to the cold rain of loneliness and sad resignation, I pray that I can console them, and thereby offer them a part of my umbrella, and also a part of my righteous anger. To be a victim with pleasure, to lose faithfully, that is my chosen path to victory. I am willing to take this as my metaphor and my metonymy as my principle of realism and subversion. Furthermore, if possible, I really hope to take this also as the principle underlying my ecological imagination and my feminism.

Finally, if these wishes are too ambitious, I earnestly desire that my poetry will at least avoid hurting others. I will never try to exploit the names of grass and stones, to embellish my poetry, nor its true identity to disguise my own identity. I will not force false names of invention on them. Instead, I will wait until they blossom with their own names. I will respectfully include in my poetry only as much as it reveals to me.

In conclusion, I pray that my creation of poetry will long remain with me as my training of the mind, my science, and my worship.