



Comparative Analysis of the Imagery of Death in the Poetry of Kang Eunjo and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract. After World War II, feminism flourished, and ever more feminist authors began to emerge on the literary landscape. Although living in different cultural and social contexts, the Korean feminist poet Kang Eunjo and the American feminist poet Plath both chose to present a great deal of death imagery in their poetry. Kang Eunjo sees death as one of the positive processes in the life cycle, showing her discontent with patriarchy and determination to defy it. The death imagery in Plath's poetry, on the other hand, while also expressing hatred for the patriarchal system, is more of a helpless choice for women under the oppression of the patriarchy. Although the meanings of the death imagery in both poems are different, they both show the oppression of women by the patriarchal system and their determination to resist it. Moreover, Kang Eunjo and Plath deconstruct the patriarchal culture of war through the death imagery in their poems, illustrating through a unique female perspective that war represents the irrational desires and ambitions of the patriarchal system. Through a comparative analysis of the imagery of death in the poetry of Kang Eunjo and Plath, this thesis reveals the post-World War II understanding of death and life by female poets in Korea and the United States, deconstructing the culture of war in patriarchy and explaining the unique meaning of death from a female perspective, which has positive implications for the development of feminism and the comparison of poetry between Korea and the United States.

Keywords: Feminism · Kang Eunjo · Sylvia Plath · Comparison

1 Introduction

Feminism originated in the aftermath of the French bourgeois revolution and the Enlightenment, which aimed to understand the nature of gender inequality to eliminate it. Feminism grew exponentially during the Second World War. During the Second World War, the labour shortage led to an increase in the number of jobs available to women and an awakening of female power. The post-World War II stabilisation of the world landscape and the rise in economic, scientific, and technological standards contributed to the development of feminism. The 1960s saw a surge in feminist activism in the United States, as feminists realised the importance of democracy and began to mobilise the grassroots to join the feminist movement. Along with the sexual liberation movement

and changing values, feminism became increasingly influential. In terms of ideological claims and the scale of development, feminism in post-World War II America has progressed and developed greatly compared to the first feminist movement. It had a great impact on the awakening of women's consciousness and changing attitudes in American society. Meanwhile, South Korea's economy was growing rapidly far away in Asia, but social problems were becoming more serious. The military dictatorship of President Park Chung-hee sparked a massive movement for democratisation and a women's workers' movement [1]. As industrialisation progressed further, Korean women workers waged even fiercer struggles. Particularly under the influence of Western feminism, Korean leftist female intellectuals began to translate and introduce Western feminist theories to change the traditional consciousness of Korean women and educate women from all walks of life about the ideology of women's liberation. As a result, more Korean women joined the struggle and contributed to the independence of women. The Korean female poet Kang Eun Jo and the American female poet Sylvia Plath, both well-known feminist poets of the World War II era, show commonalities in their choice of imagery in their poetry. There are many studies on Kang Eun-jo or Sylvia Plath, but few studies have addressed their commonality. This thesis uses the feminist critical method and the parallel research method in comparative literature to analyse and compare the recurring death imagery in the poems of Eunjo Kang and Sylvia Plath and to find the commonalities and differences. Through a comparative analysis of death imagery in post-World War II Korean and American women's poetry, we reveal the understanding of death and life by Korean and American women poets in the post-World War II period and interpret the unique meaning of death in women's perspective to focus on the emotional state of women's existence, which has positive implications for the comparative interpretation of poetry in both countries.

2 The Development of Feminist Literature in Context

2.1 The Development of Korean Feminist Literature in Korea and America

Korean feminist literature began to take shape in the 1920s, and under the traditional patriarchal system, women poets focused on individualistic ideas and the emancipation of women as the mission of the times in their poetry. After the failure of the '3.1 Movement', feminist writers began to experiment with lyrical works that had a sense of sadness and nihilism, but they received many negative reviews. Under these circumstances, it was not easy to find the right direction for women's literature. After the 1930s, female poets came into the limelight more and more, and in the 1940s, when Korea was during the joy of national liberation, feminist poetry of this period also had a romantic flavour. In the 1950s, Korea experienced the Korean War, and against this background, Korean female poets tried to overcome the conditions of the times by expressing the true emotions of their hearts, but their work does not discover the value of contemporary women in a realistic light, nor does it propose solutions that would resolve the contradictions of reality [2]. The 1960s was the period when Korean feminist poetry made its formal debut and when women formally expressed their dissatisfaction with gender inequality and the injustices suffered by women. However, most of the poems were lyrical and sensual in their approach to expressing women's inner emotions and monotonous in their methods

of depiction, lacking a spirit of deep exploration. In the 1970s, Korean women's poetry developed rapidly, and during this period, women poets focused on expressing women's sense of independent existence, with Kang Eunjo's poems focusing on the 'consciousness of nothingness' and 'death imagery' in the early stages, but gradually shifting to focus on the small existence and community issues in society in the middle of the period [3]. In the early stages, Kang's poems focus on the 'consciousness of nothingness' and 'death', but in the middle stage, they gradually turn to focus on the small existence and communal issues in society, expressing the suffering and bewilderment of the people through their own unique perceptions, and emphasising the female consciousness of resistance [3].

2.2 The Development of American Feminist Literature in Context

Similarly, American feminist literature flourished in the twentieth century, with the early twentieth century seeing women's domestic lives as the focus of American women's writing, revealing the repression and persecution of women by the patriarchy by depicting the misfortunes of American women. The women portrayed in this period were mostly women who had awakened to the oppression of patriarchy and were constantly challenging the traditional patriarchal society and fighting for their rightful place. Overall, American feminist literature of this period faced the pressures of patriarchy and approached society with resistance but was ultimately stifled. In the mid-20th century, the United States experienced the brutal World War II, and many women abandoned their former social roles and shouldered the double burden of work and family. In this context, American feminist literature entered a new phase of development, with many works expressing women's feelings of confusion and uncertainty. Plath, a well-known female poet of this period, is a poet whose works are full of despair caused by confusion and presented to the reader with images of death. In Plath's later works, she focuses on her love of life and her helplessness, and her fascination with death stems from her confusion about life. Unhappy with the oppression of women, Plath ends up in the vortex of patriarchy because she does not know how to escape from a world that makes her feel at a loss; in the end, she has no choice but to die. Overall, American feminist literature of this period shows the new challenges faced by American women who, despite successfully asserting many rights, were still bound by the constraints of marriage and patriarchy and had no real freedom to change their destiny [4].

3 Commonalities of Death Imagery

Throughout Kang Eunjo's early works, images of death and emptiness pervade, especially in her poem 'Diary of a Poor Man', which draws on various images of death to express her perceptions of life [5]. In this poem, Kang Eunjo shows death imagery several times, such as 'congealed blood', 'death', 'poison', 'black bells', and so on. It is worth noting that the person who gives the 'poison' in the poem is the father, who refers to the patriarchal society, and the poison given by the father represents the oppression of women by the patriarchal society, which women can only 'love' and cannot resist. Likewise, Plath's poem "Daddy" contains many references to "death" and "blackness", through which she expresses not only her hatred of her father but also her hatred of the

patriarchal system. In this respect, Kang Eunjo and Plath have something in common. Both use father figures in their poems to refer to patriarchal society and use death imagery such as 'death' and 'blackness' to express women's oppression by the patriarchy and their desire to resist it. Similarly, in both Kang Eunjo's and Plath's poems, the women cannot directly resist the patriarchal system but continue to suffer it in silence. In Kang's poetry, women know that the poison given by their fathers is poison, yet they continue to 'love' the poison given to them by their fathers. In the poem 'Daddy', Plath longs to return to her father, even after he has died. Through the line "If I have killed one man, I have killed two," Plath's attachment to his father is evident. It is this complex emotion that causes Plath to suffer mentally, finally crying out her heart: "Daddy, I will kill you, and you will die before I can do it." It also symbolises the powerlessness of women in the face of a powerful patriarchal system.

4 Differences in Death Imagery

The difference is that the figure in Kang Eunjo's poetry sees through the patriarchy, accepts the reality that women cannot fight it head-on, and frankly defies 'boring death'. The image in Plath's poetry, on the other hand, is caught up in the helplessness of hating patriarchy and being powerless to resist it, tormenting herself in a whirlpool and deifying death as her only support. Both poets share this tragic understanding of the world, and both see death as liberation and rebirth, longing for the cycle of life. However, Kang Eunjo does not remain in the nothingness of death itself. Instead, from a female perspective, she breaks away from the confines of death as the only anchor and rationally expresses the cyclical nature of life and the root of existence, searching for a new world of rebirth through nothingness. Kang Eunjo does not see death as destruction but as a necessary process leading to new life; life does not end in death but continues in a state of repeated cycles. It is a symbol of the fact that even though women have been oppressed by the patriarchal system for thousands of years, and even in the face of defeat, there are still waves of women who continue to fight. In another poem by Eunjo Kang, 'Spin', she writes, "Yes, the sea, spinning in the womb of all women [6]." It is because of the existence of the "womb" that nurtures life in her world of nothingness that her life does not end in death. The female body is the mother of life, capable of transcending the limits of death and allowing new life to be regenerated [7]. For Plath, although she too believes that death represents rebirth, she is different from Kang Eunjo. Plath pursues death as a central place in her creation, essentially to achieve pure spiritual regeneration. The complexities of death and her feelings for her father that permeate her poetry left her mentally tormented in real life, and she, therefore, believed that death was the only way to free her from her mental torment [8]. A womb capable of bearing new life is a wonderful rebirth for Kang Eunjo, but for Plath, it is the culprit that plunges her into misery. Marriage and children add to the torment of an already pessimistic Plath, ultimately leading to a mentality where she wants relief but must face reality and can only pin her hopes of rebirth on death.

5 Deconstructing the Myth of War in Patriarchy

The frequent occurrence of death imagery in the poetry of Kang Eunjo and Plath is not only because the patriarchal system severely oppressed women but also because the war normalised death and cast a heavy shadow on the hearts of both poets, which led them to make frequent references to death in their poems. Although the imagery of death in the poetry of Kang Eunjo and Plath takes on different meanings depending on the social context, cultural environment, and personal experiences, they are both essentially a deconstruction of the patriarchal system. Since ancient times, war has been deified by the patriarchy as a positive symbol of bravery and masculinity, and men who fight in war are called 'brave warriors' and are constantly celebrated. Women have been portrayed as weak and timid in warfare, subordinate to the bravery and greatness of men. In constructing the myth of war, the patriarchy has consolidated its own position and devalued the value and existence of women. The famous feminist writer Virginia Woolf wrote in her work "Three Gold Coins": "The world of the many is closely linked to the world of the self, and the tyrannical slavery of the former derives from the tyrannical slavery of the latter [9]." "When he was in Italy or Germany, we called him a dictator. He thinks he has the right to dictate how other people should live and what they should do, whether he derives this right from God, nature, sex, or race [10]." She even asks directly, "Is it not the patriarchy that makes you tend towards war? [9]" As Woolf puts it, men's unquenchable desire for aggression, domination and enslavement brought about war and justified their own desires by deifying it. Women are excluded from war, reduced to the subordination of men, and at the same time, have little or no political rights. It is thus clear that war is not only a political issue but also a gender issue. Both Kang Eunjo and Plath experienced the brutal Second World War and were similarly excluded from it as women, and thus their poetry reflects the unique perspective of women's view of war. The war cost many lives and caused the population to live in misery. At the same time, the prevalence of death in war has made people accustomed to it as if death is the only true resistance. There are many ways for women to fight against the patriarchy, but it is no mere coincidence that Kang Eunjo and Plath coincidentally choose to fight to the death in their poems, but it shows that war leaves a lingering shadow of death for women in any country. Moreover, while 'fighting to the death' is celebrated and praised in traditional masculine literature, this is not the case in the poetry of Kang Eunjo and Plath. In their poetry, 'fighting to the death' is not glorious but the only way out of pain and helplessness. This suggests that war has a completely different meaning in the female perspective than it does in the male. In their poems, Plath compares her father to a 'fascist', illustrating the inextricable link between war and patriarchy from the female perspective and exposing the hidden nature of war in patriarchy from a feminist perspective -Patriarchal tyranny, deconstructing the patriarchal myth of war. Overall, Kang Eunjo and Plath's use of death as the theme of their poetry not only reflects women's defiant attitude toward the patriarchal system but also shows the connection between war and patriarchy in the female perspective and the unique meaning of death, showing the helplessness and suffering of women to the readers to arouse the public's concern for the emotional state of women's existence.

6 Conclusion

This thesis focuses on the meaning of death imagery in the poetry of Eunjo Kang and Plath. The analysis of Kang's poems "Diary of the Poor" and "Spin" shows that Kang sees death as an active process of rebirth, taking the female womb as the mother body, in which countless people die and are born again, and that death is only an inevitable part of the cycle of life. However, the imagery of death has a different meaning in Plath's poetry. For Plath, death is the only option available to a woman oppressed by the patriarchy, but her dissatisfaction with the patriarchy forces her to choose death while also placing her hope for rebirth in it. Although the imagery of death in both poems takes on different meanings, they are both essentially deconstructions of the patriarchal system. Both Kang Eunjo and Plath use death imagery to express the unique meaning of war from a female perspective, dismantling the myth of war constructed by the patriarchal system. Although Kang Eunjo and Plath were from the same era, their cultural backgrounds, social environments, and personal experiences were very different, and the two countries were at different stages of feminist development, which has a bearing on the comparison of their poetry in terms of death imagery. Overall, through a comparative analysis of the death imagery in the poetry of Kang Eunjo and Plath, this thesis reveals the post-World War II understanding of death and life by female poets in Korea and the United States and interprets the unique meaning of death from a female perspective, which has positive implications for raising public attention to the emotional state of women's existence, the development of feminism and the comparison of Korean and American poetry.

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