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Sex and the City: 
The Female Gaze, Resilient Body & Urban Desire 
In The Poetry of Choi Yong-mi

Kyoo E. Lee

1. Sex and the City: Introductory Remarks

The reason why I had to get up this morning is this: "Choi, Young-mi has the kind of sensibility that I find most overwhelming, too frightening to write about (Kim Yong-taek 1994: 123)"; and this: "Her poetry, at first sight, is provocative. Somehow, she startles us; yet, we are still tempted to follow her through to the end. This guiding light of temptation takes us to a place where life-supporting stuff such as ideological faith or love has left us behind; and suddenly, the light goes off (Hwang Chi-u 1994)".

I am left wondering: could it be the in-your-face quality of her imagery? What could be the origin of this shock factor? These (male) commentators, it must be said, are as "honest (Y Kim 121)" as the poet(ess) they welcome wholeheartedly, whose gritty urban realism they interpret, quite rightly and generously, as "youthful honesty expressed in the language of urbane sensitivity (Choi Won-shik 1994)". I agree, I read that, too. She must be indeed a "Seoul woman par excellence just like her poetry (Y Kim 119)"; and not only does she have, allegedly, the "tall slim body (Y Kim 119)" of a sophisticated Seoulite, she must also have the resilient body of a city dweller whose life, as we all know, is the very antithesis of the life of the bird. Choi, the poet, has the urbanity of Kim Soo-young, the blood of revolutionaries, and the slipperiness of postmoderns: all at once. She is, in a word, complicated.

Now then, I want to talk "fight" — about the theme of "transparent fight (I live because)" running through the Poetry of Choi. The text I am going to use is her first anthology that muscled into contemporary Korean literary scene in 1994, At Thirty, The Party is Over. My immediate aim here is to introduce her work to a wider range of readership outside Korea; although very little can be said in the given space, a close reading of her text, I hope, may also help us understand the on-going "postmodernist" or "new-age" trend in Korean literature that started, roughly speaking, from the late 1980s, coinciding with the end of the military regime and the beginning of a democratic era, i.e. with the disappearance of the enemy and the appearance of a lost generation.

I do not, however, intend to go into any extensive analysis either of Korean postmodernism or of the work of Choi taken as a whole. Although some issues arising from, and conceived particularly in terms of, feminist literary criticism, are to be introduced in the commentary that follows, this will not lead to any in-depth discussion, textual or contextual. I am going to leave such a project to more capable hands, hoping that I myself may in the future have a chance to develop some ideas I will have left untouched — and untouched. The scope of this essay is therefore limited to that extent, and the style of reading, highly subjective: what I wish to do in what follows is merely to spotlight some recurrent themes in the poetry of Choi, which I will divide into three (§2-§4), and to set up an interpretative framework around each topical heading as a way of setting out to explore the "newness" and power of her poetic sentiment, of which I have already spoken briefly, and which, as far as I am aware, remains relatively unexplored. The first theme I want to touch on, as indicated earlier, is the "transparent fight (I live because)," to which I turn.

2. Poetics of Resistance: I Fight; I Am.

Choi Sung-ja (1994) suggests that the poetry of Choi Young-mi is "a kind of fighting record." This is an acute reading. A desire to fight does seem to be a hidden, irreducible impetus of Choi's poesy:

The transparent makes me drunk.
Poetry does it.
alcohol does it.

Whenever in fight with someone, I become transparent,
fiercely
freely
transparent.
A proof that I am still all right
a proof that I can still feel pain
that something is still alive.
On a day when transparent things fight transparently,
one does not get drunk, no matter how much is taken in. (I Live Because)

About "the transparent," we will have a chance to talk later on (§3). Here, I
wish to focus on the centrality of the "I" that fights – the body of the I, to
be more specific. Fighting presupposes endurance: endurance is an enabling
condition for confrontation. In a fist fight, for instance, what is to remain
solid, as a rule, is the fist. The same principle applies to a more idealised kind
of fight, e.g. a war between two nations or a class struggle; each party is to
keep alive the object for the sake of which the fighting takes place. In the
case of Choi, the struggle is rather inward, i.e. self-referential. What she
fights against is nothing other than herself, her postmodern self prone to
despair; in the face of the fundamental obscurity of postmodern life, she
demands "a proof," a proof that the lyrical I remains alive. Choi's poetry
transforms the banal, amorphous I into an experiential, and explicitly bodily I
that is at once explosive and sensual, which renders the whole process of
poetic self-confrontation more enjoyable than painful:

[...]
Ripping off the dead flesh, I realised
wounds were the clothes of the living, only the living,
a promise that I won't be in pain any longer.

[...]
The words stirring with life
the gestures hungry for life
all lost, I chewed
the recollections of the last sex
flooding into my mouth. (The Recollections of the Last Sex)

In other words, Choi, the poet, has an eternal itch for partying. Note, again,
the resiliency of the I in the following scene:

Of course I know
it was the revolutionary more than a revolution,
the beer pub more than a pint of beer, that I liked
not the protest song starting with Oh My Country!
but the love songs hummed in a low voice,
but tell me, so what?

The party is over.
The beer's run out, and one by one, people collect their wallets,
at long last he's also left, but,
the bill's been split, and everybody's fled
in their shoes, but,
vaguely I know
there will be someone remaining here alone
cleaning up the table for the taverner,
shedding hot tears, remembering every bit,
somebody will restart the song he's left unfinished
perhaps I know
somebody will set up a table, get the people together again
before the dawn,
somebody will put on all the lights and refurbish the stage.

But tell me, so what? (‘At Thirty, The Party is Over’)
A bird gliding through one perfect line, 
as if it knew where to, 

the sky the sliding bird slit open, dazzling blue, 

that afternoon sky under which I dream of postmodern madness, 

those unable to find seats were standing at the entrance of a restaurant, 
without a queue. ('The Hunger of a Survivor')

Often portrayed in her poems with visual precision and dramatic humour is 
the post-capitalist urban fatigue of Seoul, the place the poet refuses to leave, 
nev ertheless. Choi's weapon is then, one can say in this regard, the poignant 
ancy of microscopic r e alism, another example of which, more recent, can be 
found in Ha Sung-nan's novel, The Woman Next Door (1999), where the obses 
sive energies of female scopophilia find a novelistic expression.

3. "I Saw It": A Transparent Gaze

I saw it: food worms\(^3\) crawling into soondae\(^4\). ('Seoul Underground 1') 
Choi's voyeurism is more comical than cruel; and yet, as with all good comedi 
dies, the humour of her poetry carries an echo of something not so funny. 
She is a bit like "a dirty little secret" revealed in a poetic form. Her poetry 
spokes not gently but poignantly; and it bespeaks the practical truth that ob 
scenity is not only the opposite of clarity, but its opponent. For instance, the 
exacting edge of Choi's poetic sentiment certainly isn't "feminine" in the 
conventional sense of the word; a case in point is the poem entitled 'what it 
means to be alone,' wherein depicted is the deeper ate loneliness of a woman 
eating "hot soondae soup" all alone in a sleazy shibbi-jip\(^5\) territorialised by 
working class male customers. Apparently, such a soondae-eating, soondae 
observing woman cannot be the same as the one featured in "oh, Thou 
flower standing in front of the mirror, looking like my elder sister (Master 
Midang)." Rather, Choi's I of "I saw it" is the other, less elegant sister, 
fiercely more perceptive and fiercely more voracious:

Boning a grilled goolbi\(^6\) on breakfast table, 
I saw it, 
the secrets of the body finally revealed.

Five viscera and six entrails, the flesh shattered and scattered, 
is this what is called the truth? 

Ripping off the dead flesh, I realised, 

wounds were the clothes of the living, only the living, 
a promise that I won't be in pain any longer ('The Recollections'); 

When, with the sore imp rint on the first apple 
biting a circle out of the crescent, 
a fat candle completes a night

[...] before me who hesitates, first, love comes. ('First, it')

What we see here is the fighter's gaze, fighter's body, fighter's desire: not the 
Romantic shackles of feminised consciousness but a focused articulation of 
female desire which recognises the disgusting truth of carnal violence as well 
as its fatal attraction. A hard woman is always a trouble; added sensitivity 
makes her a hardcore poet. True, this explicitly and explosively "female" 
voice and body, as feminist scholar Kim Hye-sook observes painfully, all too 
clearly (1995), has long been silenced and controlled by traditional Confucian 
ideology that uses literature as a disciplinary apparatus: as a means to trans 
form the potentially threatening female gaze into a docile mirror which re 
lects nothing other than its arbitrary, patriarchal values. If verbal inhibition is 
a form of oppression, verbal explication can be used as a political means to 
resist such oppressive power. The suggestion here is, namely that the "trans 
parent" gaze of Choi's poetry, often mirrored on her painterly language, 
can be read as a potential weapon — a feminist weapon, for instance. The 
implied hardness and resiliency of Choi's "body" language also exemplifies 
what Kim Mi-hyun (1996) calls the female "poetics of in-between-ness", 
where silence intersects with talkativeness, and lack with excess. "A quivering 
concentration" of erotic energy, described below, is a kind of secret, 
"orgasmic" experience, arguably exclusive to female — not necessarily femi 
nine — imagination:

Inside a stranger's car who offered a ride: 
the power of silence fastened into the seat belt, 

the imagination caught in the crossed legs, caught in the mirror 
pushing and pushed, 
a self-binding, quivering concentration! ('Unrequited Love')

Such a concrete, bodily dynamism of "in (e.g. pushing)" and "out (e.g.
4. Alternatively Pornographic: Liquidation of The Corporeal

True, there are elements of masochistic solipsism in Choi’s poetic sentiment. True, there are elements of claustrophobic monologue in Choi’s poetic language. Some may see these elements as regressive rather than transgressive, and reactionary rather than revolutionary: in other words, as interesting only in commercial terms. The charge of sensationalism or aesthetic nihilism, often raised against her, can be understood in this regard. Granting these critical points, I would like however, in conclusion, to propose a slightly different, more constructive way of reading the poetry of Choi: a kind of reading that makes her neither “a Seoul chic” nor “a mad woman in the attic,” but a woman with a delightful, pornographic insight. By “pornographic” here, I mean initially, of course, “sexually explicit.” But this widely accepted notion seems barren and mechanical, charged only with phallic aggressivity: what this word does is merely to corporalise, i.e. solidify objectively, the tightly binarised aggressive-passivity of sexual acts. In other words, it remains ultimately impotent in the face of the more fluid, female joy, “jouissance,” as the French say. Hence, in conventional pornography palatable to the “male” viewer, for instance, the focus, whether literal or allegorical, is laid on the ultimate object, the phalus; with this, the liquid capacity of her vagina (as in the “wetness” of “pussy” as the barometer of her sexiness) becomes only a supplementary and ultimately unmasterable measure against which the solidity (“hardness” and “volume”)
wishing it rained at least. ('A DMZ in My Mind')

"Will you someday suddenly wet the bottom of the passing showers?"—this odd yet beautiful sentence is a product of an exquisite, complex word play on "judd" and its linguistic neighbors: "judd (breasts or rather, boobs), "judd-da (to be wet or to wet, homophonically with 'to stir')," "gutt-da (to walk)," etc. At this point, "judd" the noun, the objectified "boobs," turns into "judd-da," the verb; and the action, the transition, is sudden, unscheduled. Are we then ready to walk into this zone? Are we persuaded? Tempted? Why not?

Appendix: At Thirty, the Party Is Over.

Poetry of Choi Yong-mi (1994), selected and translated by Kyoo E. Lee © 2001


Of course I know it was the revolutionary more than a revolution, the beer pub more than a pint of beer, that I liked not the protest song starting with Oh My Comrade! but the love songs hummed in a low voice, but tell me, so what?

The party is over. The beer's run out, and one by one, people collect their wallets, at long last he's also left, but, the bill's been split, and everybody's fled in their shoes, but, vaguely I know there will be someone remaining here all alone cleaning up the table for the taverner, shedding hot tears, remembering every bit, somebody will restart the song he's left unfinished perhaps I know somebody will set up a table, get the people to gather again before the dawn, somebody will put on all the lights and refurbish the stage.

But tell me, so what?

References

Primary Text

Other References
Choi Sung-ja's commentary: see the backcover of Seuron, Janchineun Kkunnat-da (1994)
Choi Won-shik's commentary: see the backcover of Seuron, Janchineun Kkunnat-da (1994)

Hwang Chi-u's commentary: see the backcover of Seuron, Janchineun Kkunnat-da (1994)
2. The Hunger of a Survivor

A bird gliding through one perfect line,
as if it knew whereto,
the sky the sliding bird slit open, dazzling blue,
that afternoon sky under which I dream of postmodern madness,
those unable to find seats were standing at the entrance of a restaurant,
without a queue.

3. The Recollections of the Last Sex

Breakfast: Boning a grilled goolbi* on stage,
I saw it,
the secrets of the body finally revealed.
Five viscera and six entrails, the flesh shattered and scattered,
is this what is called the truth?

One layer behind is a story, frighteningly simple,
reduced to the bones and flesh, like the private parts of that night.
Ripping off the dead flesh, I realised
wounds were the clothes of the living, only the living,
a promise that I won't be in pain any longer.

That sort of love I've made several times.
That morning shine, pouring in from the sky,
the glorious scales, the layers of cloud, removed,
You and I, shrinking with the shell, startled by the transparency,
pierced the cold scales into all over the bodies, not knowing who goes first.
The words stirring with life
the gestures hungry for life
all lost. I chewed
the recollections of the last sex
flooding into my mouth.

4. First, It

comes, with its head bowed down
with the energy that warms and cools the pavement
with the silent force with which a bedroom closet closes
with a few crystal beads of sweat on the nervous forehead
love comes.

When, with the sore imprint on the first apple
biting a circle out of the crescent,
a fat candle completes a night
like the whine of a whinging child
like the consolation of a steamless tea
beyond the ennui beyond the reflection
perhaps love comes.

Entering the middle of a lingering mind,
ereasing the love of yesterday,
groping along today, love comes to me
before me who hesitates, first, it comes to me.

5. I Live Because

The transparent makes me drunk.
Poetry does it,
alcohol does it.
So does the wobbly toddler
the pasty look on his face yesterday
the love without how-are-you-today
the school girls' guffaws filling the Tube
the white paper ready to be crumpled
the rain outside the windows
the puppy's barking muting the raindrops
the mother's daily grumbles.

Whenever in fight with so meone, I become transparent,
fiercely
freely
transparent.

A proof that I am still all right
a proof that I can still feel pain
that something is still alive.

On a day when transparent things sight tran sparently,
one does not get drunk, no matter how much is taken in.

6. Seoul Underground 1

I saw it:
food worms\(^9\) crawling into soondae\(^9\).

7. Seoul Underground 2

The next station is Shinrim.
The doors will open on the right side.
The next station is...
Hearing the announcement making its way, suddenly I,
through the left mouth\(^11\) firmly closed, wanted to go.

Having thought of this thought,
a thought becoming a premature desire
a desire becoming a definite conviction.
jumping up and up
towards left and left,
my neck turned, the morning turns me back.

Only 10 minutes left, 5 minutes, ah, 1 minute,
chas\ed by the faceless time
pushed by the hair-mousse sweat fart semen sticky
smells without addresses,
rattled here falttering there
but ugh!, in search of a palm-fitting space of thinking
struggling to balance up with two glaring eyes,

perhaps it is only me who is in exile
from the ground to the underground,
pushed along, alone into the hell-train\(^12\),
entertaining such doubts, everyday, like having a meal, like going to work,
lightly,
forgetting such thou ghts,

click,

the next station is Shinrim.
The doors will open on the right side.
The next station is...

8. Seoul Underground 4

Three women are dozing off,
one woman's head on another's shoulder
one woman's shoulder on another's breast
one woman's fatigue resting on another's sorrow,
Do Re Mi side by side.

Three men are coming,
the Tube looking like the inside of soondae,
straining their soggy blanched eyeballs
surfing around the lump of flesh sagging as if boiled.

First, a beggar thrusts his hand,
then a blind man, singing a song,
followed by the bushy hair of a prophet,
prepare for the Heaven's opening, my people!
Desp ite his shouting, alerting, trotting around,
three women are dozing off,
three men are coming.

11:00 AM, the Tube is
filled with the unemployed.
9. Unrequited Love

Inside a stranger’s car who offered a ride:
the power of silence fastened into the seat belt,
the imagination caught in the crossed legs, caught in the mirror
pushing and pushed,
a self-binding, quivering concentration!

10. A DMZ in My Heart

It’s neither the coffee nor the black tea
that hangs onto an u ninteresting novella until late,
that is unable to close the umbrella after the rain’s stopped,
that packs and then unpacks the suitcase only to change again.
that revises yesterday’s poem,
it’s neither the coffee nor the black tea.

Unable either to cry or to laugh,
whether lying on the sides or on the stomach,
whether matting the hair or tying it up,

shall I play a cold fish or stage a maudlin show?
Not knowing where to put the bandaged finger,
shall I grip the tea-cup or rest it on my lap chastely?
Shall I lower my eyelids or steal a glance?
A weedy DMZ in my heart, lodged somewhere,
all these seasons I have never known
where to anchor or discover, will you enter?
Will you someday suddenly wet the bottom of the passing showers?

A glass of well-brewed memories
a night drowsy with drunkenness,
in to you, past your motionless shoulders,
I wish I could dive,

wishing it rained at least.

Sex and the City: Notes

1. All translations are my own; see Appendix for a full translation of the poems cited in this essay; see Appendix for a full translation of the poems cited in this essay. I wish to thank Professor Kim Hye-Sook at Ewha Womans University and Dr. Christine Batterby at Warwick University for their invaluable advice they kindly offered at the initial stage of my writing. Many thanks are also due to Kyu-Jin Lee for having read the first draft with care and insights, and to the receptive audience at the Harvard Korean Studies Conference, 200 whose poetic presence is inscribed here, anonymously and collectively, in this final, open draft.

2. Korean Sake, cheap and strong, 100% chemical.
3. “food worm” is a literal translation of “bop-bullae”, “bop” meaning rice or food stuff and “bullae,” a worm; “a food worm” in colloquial Korean is equivalent to “a good-for-nothing”, i.e. an idle person “not worth his salt.”
4. “Soondae” is not a sundae misspelled, but a Korean-style black pudding, emblematic of a more luxurious than cod or mackerel.
5. Somewhere between a pub and a budget restaurant, popular amongst manual workers an local gents; “shilbi” means no-nonsense price, and “jip,” ho use or place.
6. “Gooibbi” is dried corbina, a popular side dish in Korean cuisine, considered as delicate more luxurious than cod or mackerel.
7. “kasum”, also meaning breast.
8. Translator’s Note (TN): dried corbina, a popular side dish considered as a delicacy, more luxurious than cod or mackerel.
9. TN: a literal translation of “bop-bullae”, “bop” meaning rice or food stuff, and “bullae,” worm; “a food worm” in colloquial Korean is equivalent to “a good-for-nothing”, i.e. an idle person “not worth his salt.”
10. TN: not a sundae misspelled but a Korean-style black pudding, emblematic of inelegant peasant food.
11. TN: a pun on the word “ip-go”, meaning an entrance or gate. “ip,” used as a verb, mean “to enter”, and used as a noun, a mouth, and “go” also means a mouth.
12. TN: a word play on the word, “ji-ha-chul”, meaning a subway (ji-ha) train (chul). The word used here is “ji-ok-chul”, meaning a train to hell (ji-ok) on which, as we all know, th purgatory of commuting is staged every morning.