

Article

# Gender Hospitality in Novels about North Korean Refugee Women

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## Introduction

Discourse around the North Korean (hereafter NK) refugee diaspora created by the division of the Korean peninsula is diversifying: going beyond matters of survival and defecting from national ideology, to escape for a better quality of life. When it comes to the issues faced by NK refugee women, however, attention in South Korean society tends to be limited to themes of motherhood, space, and capitalism in the process of migration, with a tendency to generalize the context of individual lives. Accordingly, this study focuses on gender hospitality, using hospitality in the terms employed by thinkers such as Derrida (2000) and Kim Hyun-kyung (2018), as a means of comprehending the multiplicities in the individuation of gendered life, such as in issues of identity—in terms of family, motherhood, marriage, etc.—that NK women refugees deal with in the process of settling in South Korea, and the issues of membership (in a nation, society, or community) that restrict women's everyday lives. Encountering the margins of life, that cannot be understood only with the facts about NK women refugees, through novels, in what follows I examine the way of being for settled residents and consider the (im)possibility of unconditional hospitality for NK women refugees who cause cracks to appear in the stability of borders between places and positions.

Literature that portrays the reality of NK refugees narrates political, ethical, and cultural discord within an aesthetic discourse system. At the same time, “today North Korean defectors are problematic heroes who show that we are now in an era when literature, rather than being something that sutures national ideology, challenges nationally-centered master narratives and their fixity” (Kim 2016, 296).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, literature by or about refugees from North Korea, women in particular discloses the reality of the subaltern, divergent from the master narratives of ideology, nation state, and recorded history, and in doing so it is both a demonstration of their presence, existing as a social fissure, and a testament to the constant presence of more than is visible.

In the unique long armistice situation on the Korean peninsula, it was

from the mid- to late-1990s, during “the arduous march”<sup>2</sup> era, that refugees from North Korea entered South Korea in the largest numbers. The economic destitution and limits of governmentality in North Korea brought about by “the arduous march” have been reported on by South Korean authors including Kang Young-sook, Hwang Sok-yong, and Yi Kyoung-ja, and refugee writers who were once part of North Korea's Choson Writers' Alliance, such as Lee Jimyeong, Kim Yu-kyeong, Jang Jin-seong, and Seol Song-a. Works on this era mainly describe the political and economic conditions of everyday life in North Korea and deal with issues of human rights, ordeals and suffering in the process of escaping North Korea, and the difficulties associated with settling in South Korea.

With regards to novels by NK refugee writers, commentators have pointed out their focus on intense experiences and also criticized their form, which tends to be close to that of an essay, as limiting. In contrast, South Korean writers tend to focus on relationships between NK refugees who have settled in South Korea, the adjustment of refugees to their new environment, and the NK diaspora seen from a general or international point of view. Considering these characteristics, it is particularly enriching to analyze the novels of NK refugee writers and South Korean writers side by side.

Most of all, with the “womanification of escaping North Korea”<sup>3</sup> in recent years, 80% of NK refugees are women, and among NK refugees, women are twice as likely to have experienced living in a third country; clearly indicating that there is a need to devote greater interest to the issues faced by NK refugee

2. On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1996, in a joint editorial in the *Rodong sinmun* mouthpiece of the central North Korean government, “the arduous march” (*gonanui haenggun*) was first used as a kind of rallying cry. It was a movement deployed to overcome the social uncertainty and disordered systems brought about by food shortages. Generally used to refer to the period from the mid to late 1990s, in North Korea “the arduous march” was a slogan for overcoming crisis by emulating the spirit of the partisans during the late 1930s anti-Japanese movement led by Kim Il Sung, who survived by willpower and sharing their inadequate rations. In South Korea, however, it is used simply to label North Korea's period of extreme economic turmoil in the mid to late 1990s.

3. The reasons for this are identified as the ascent of women as the main economic agents of the unofficial market in the formation of street markets which are an aspect of the North Korean capital economy, combined with the fact that movement in the North Korea-China border area has become relatively less restricted, alongside the appearance of a problematic migration (movement) pattern where the vulnerability of North Korean women as refugees in China is being exploited in human trafficking whereby they are made responsible for a large portion of the reproductive labor domain through marriage and childbirth (Lee 2017, 4).

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1. The author of the article translated the citations in Korean language into English unless otherwise mentioned.

women. As well as narratives of escaping home and the process of journeying, novels that focus on women refugees from North Korea describe in full the patriarchal exploitation of their labor power in prostitution and forced marriage for the survival of their family members remaining in North Korea, the low-wage no-job-security labor sites in their new country, and the instability of their everyday lives as part of the lowest class of society. Faced with discrimination on multiple fronts such as gender, social membership, and class, but more similar to locals than foreigners from distant countries, NK refugee women are a kind of secret other, and have a sense of being stuck in the middle. This means that research into novels that extend hospitality to NK refugee women's gender can make a significant contribution to widening and deepening research on NK refugee literature.

However, due to the extreme nature of NK refugees' historical experiences, discord between the subject and the object they reproduce is a serious issue for NK refugee women's novels. This is because, as Spivak (2015) warns, writers who are not NK refugee women can commit the misdeed of representing themselves as transparent, hiding behind the subaltern and speaking as a ventriloquist, rather than representing (speaking for) the subaltern. Indeed, valid critiques have been made, such as that a male South Korean writer's work othered a NK refugee woman character in order to recover political correctness or as a narrative strategy to approach the mainstream of world literature (Kim 2016).

NK refugee literature has been classified as minority literature (Kwon 2012) and confessional literature, and many memoir-adjacent works have received the criticism that they fall short of being evaluated as novels (Lee 2015). Looking at Korean fiction research, there have been studies that briefly introduce work regarding NK refugee women in broader discussions of migrant women in the 2000s (Oh 2009; Huh 2012), and in sociology there is a tendency to refer to the content of novels in order to discuss the actual conditions for NK refugee women, but research centered on exploring NK refugee women's fiction is rare. In this study, I will contrast and analyze novels by a NK refugee woman writer and a South Korean woman writer, in order to consider the balance of representation, taking account of the difficulty of subaltern reproduction.

As the act of making a place for the other, of acknowledging the rights of the other within society, at root hospitality involves a judgement on identity and membership. In addition, hospitality must take into account multiple factors

such as ethics, a sense of empathy, and the interests of the community. The key point in this is that the hospitality between the subject and the other is not unidirectional. This research will prove an opportunity to contemplate examples of NK refugee women not merely remaining in the passive position of the object of hospitality, but making the subject of hospitality conscious of the need for it, and in addition having the potential proactivity to arrive at hospitality for oneself as the other. To achieve this, I will focus specifically on Kim Yu-kyeong's *Youth Sonata*, a graphic self-accusation by a North Korean refugee woman writer, and *A Third Home* by South Korean woman writer Yi Kyoung-ja.

Kim Yu-kyeong began her writing career as part of the North Korean Choson Writers' Alliance and escaped the country in 2000. Kim's works go beyond the majority of NK refugee novels, which can be described as in the memoir form due to an overwhelming desire to give testimony, and her works have been lauded as showing "the diversity of North Korean refugee consciousness and the quintessence of North Korean refugees by making the polyphony of fictional characters voices into novels" (Kwon 2012, 297), and recognized for securing an objective distance in her narration. In addition Kim's works have been identified as the process of transformation of "NK refugee" as an identity: through awareness of death and motherhood, and awareness of NK refugee diaspora and political consciousness with NK refugees' changing outlooks. It has also been identified that, in scenarios such as where maternal love conflicts with self-love, motherhood becomes the meaning and goal of life, or motherhood is denied in capitalist society, complex facets of Kim's characters are tied up with motherhood (Seo 2017, 2021). In another vein, Kim's work represents a new style, going beyond the previous testimonial narratives, demonstrated by the fact that *Youth Sonata* is a full-fledged narrativization of NK refugee collective consciousness. The current narrative literature of NK refugee writers demonstrates a deterritorialized condition, distinguished from North or South Korean narrative literature, and reveals the writers' desire for reterritorialization in order to enter South Korean society (Kim 2014). It has also been analyzed that the process of self-narrativization by NK refugee authors, as we see in *Youth Sonata*, is the journey of resisting the violent reality and becoming an ethical subject, and it is the materiality of the "body" that makes this possible. Calling on the work of Levinas, it is seen that *Youth Sonata* portrays the potential for the subject to experience a meeting with the other through their body, which also enables the subject to open oneself and become

an ethical subject (Baek 2017).

Since the beginning of her writing career in the 1970s, feminist novelist Yi Kyoung-ja has always been interested in the lives of women. In order to write *A Third Home*, Yi interacted with NK refugee women and based her depictions on a true story. *A Third Home* has been called a novel that “presents empathy as one form of community ethics to overcome the cultural conditions such as ideology, class, and gender that incite conflict and form a ranking between the subject and the other” (Kim 2016, 302). Unlike *Youth Sonata*, there have been no dedicated studies of *A Third Home*, so this research has the value of being an initial examination.

As outline above, research on NK refugee women’s novels is concentrated on grasping the subjecthood of NK refugee women characters in novels, investigating the nature of NK refugee narratives, and considering the distinctiveness of the authors’ awareness. However, an important consideration of NK refugee narrative now is the issue of how NK refugees live in the environments they have settled in, including South Korea. When it comes to NK refugee issues, we need research that goes beyond focusing on the “why” with the analysis of cause, to investigate the “how” of current everyday life. In particular, compared to NK refugee men, NK refugee women are exposed to sexual exploitation in their mother country, countries they pass through, and the country they settle in, and therefore their relationships with others are built up while going through various experiences of family, motherhood, and sexual objectification. In order to deeply research NK refugee women, then, we must not be limited to only research of their agency or methods of representation. I propose that hospitality research, which includes the subject and the other and the relationality of the community, is the most appropriate framework for in-depth analysis of NK refugee women’s novels.

In the two novels, a North Korean writer and South Korean writer focus on NK refugee women and portray the life of a foreigner as being trapped between borders—the gendered pressure coming from all sides, the essence of membership, and the search for a sense of identity. In this article I will focus on the following three points.

First, the resistant memories caused by the spatial border included in the diaspora route of NK refugee women are integrated into their “choice” of an outsider or other identity. The escapes of NK refugee women usually follow a route from North Korea through China or a third country to finally arrive in

South Korea, and the longer their stay in the transit country the longer they suffer in the incommensurability of the imagined border and real border. NK refugee women hire Korean Chinese brokers whom they anticipate a sense of ethnic kinship from but may turn out to be human traffickers, or else they give birth to the children of Han Chinese men and form a new family but are chased by the authorities as illegal border crossers.

In capitalist South Korean society, again NK refugee women are subordinated to the lowest forms of insecure employment such as restaurant work or agency cleaning work, or else work in the sex industry, as private karaoke room “helpers” or in “kiss rooms.” Occasionally they also have the opportunity to form a new family, but this is often postponed or else frustrated by the past that was carved into their bodies. The experiences of NK refugee women, such as family, motherhood, kidnapping, and violent memories of rape, continue in the countries they migrate to, and in the process of settling they are backed in to choosing between various existing identities.

Making clear that identity is not something that is “discovered” but rather something “chosen” stresses the importance of “substantial freedom regarding what priority to give to the various identities we may simultaneously have” (Sen 2007, 37). While the “discovery” of identity may call for tolerance from the perspective of the subject offering hospitality to NK refugee women, “choice” is important from the standpoint of NK refugee women because it becomes an opportunity to proactively develop various possible options with which to make existing settlers extend hospitality to them. For the hospitality of NK refugee women, the intersections of their gender, class, and social position that are plural, multilayered, and supranational, must be considered, and anything more than the freedom for NK refugee women to choose their own identities must be a precondition.

Second, in novels about NK refugee women, investigating the role of the subject of membership and hospitality is a fundamental prerequisite for hospitality toward the gender of NK refugee women. Through the apparatus of “proving identity,” the nation state categorizes individuals socially, and in order to conform to these categories they separate citizen and non-citizen, codifying and recording the identity of citizens bureaucratically (Lee 2017, 7). The receiving country demands that NK refugee women prove who they are. In China, as illegal border crossers, NK refugee women come into conflict with the Korean Chinese denizens and in South Korea they are national subjects

as opposed to true citizens. However, as the boundaries of everyday life are not only made up of legal status, whether or not the other is acknowledged remains important to the issue of social membership. Society “exists not as an objective truth with clear physical contours, but rather as a space that exists intersubjectively before each person” (Kim 2018, 58). Recognizing the other’s existence, and sending a signal of existence to them so they will know that recognition, is what it means to acknowledge their social membership. Hospitality that includes the other in social membership cannot only be based on the unilateral approval of the subject, but it must recognize the other’s right of approval.

Finally, I consider the meaning of the border between the subject of hospitality and object of hospitality (NK refugee woman) becoming ambiguous on the border of hospitality. As outsiders occupying the implicitly polluted space of society, NK refugee women are a metaphor for denial of existence, which can neither be killed nor tamed (Kim 2018, 80). This denial and fear of the social confusion around the NK refugee woman simultaneously acknowledges that such denial is in fact necessary and in doing so paradoxically acknowledges their agency. It is precisely their existence, revealing the imperfection of a society, which awakens the need for hospitality in that society. The powerlessness of subjects observing the unspeakable experiences and choices of NK refugee women and the ethics of listening intently to their language becomes the impetus for hospitality.

Derrida asserts that in order to extend genuine hospitality, rather than departing from a being with a fixed residence, it is possible from a position of deconstruction, of the lack of a home. In other words, only one who has experienced the lack of home can extend hospitality. With regards to this, Anne Dufourmantelle confirms that the question of hospitality, “Where?” does not depart from the self (*ipse*), or self-identity (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 56). Drawing on the viewpoint these two thinkers provide, the basic “where” question of hospitality proposes the problem of the impossibility of hospitality while also becoming a question of (im)possibility opening the potential for hospitality.

In the North and South of Korea, the traces of “diaspora” and the gender of “woman” are symbols of the oppression that decides what lies outside of the bounds of community. Through novels that center on NK refugee women, however, we hear their individual suffering and with this the performativity of

trying to grasp the reverse side of exclusion takes on meaning as an ethics of hospitality.

### **The Transformation of Spatial Borders and NK Refugee Women’s Choice of Identity**

Today’s borders do not merely exist as particular institutionalized zones or lines on a map but are every here and there in various forms (Balibar 1998, 217). A “national border” is not limited to the geographical border between nations but operates variously in areas such as everyday life, imagination, and reproduction, or in some cases it may not operate at all (Akaha and Vassilieva 2009). With this study, the focal point in this context is the issue of what meaning the space in question holds, and how it interacts with women who have fled from North Korea anticipating an expansion of the everyday geographical bounds of same language and cultural community, and whether there is an opportunity for choice between the multiple identities formed in the context of border crossing. Identity is evaluated according to the potential for acceptance and relative value in the social context one inhabits.

In *Youth Sonata* three NK refugee women show that their pasts and memories of escape are a traumatic experience, which means they cannot help but “choose” their present identity. Common to all three is the experience of motherhood. After escaping North Korea, Seon-hwa has many different relationships that entail various identities, such as illegal border crosser, nationless mother, South Korean citizen, and NK refugee radio reporter. After arriving in South Korea, Seon-hwa’s previous identities as a teacher or daughter are forbidden or denied. She is able to overcome the limitations of being a nationless person through the law, but her status as a mother only becomes her first priority when she is faced with a terminal diagnosis.

In China the children of nationless NK refugee women officially gain Chinese citizenship at birth, but because there is a danger that the mother will be repatriated to North Korea if her status is discovered in the birth registration process, the mother must first be registered through the Hukou system. Attempting to stop her from leaving, Seon-hwa’s Chinese husband does not facilitate this for her, but this means that her child cannot be registered and therefore cannot attend school, which remains with Seon-hwa as lingering guilt.



For Seon-hwa, unable to escape with her child and so settled in South Korea alone, her child is a being who is “vivid evidence of her past and reminds her every minute of all that has happened to her” (*Youth Sonata* 10).

In contrast, Bok-nyeo settles in South Korea with her child and with no such sense of maternal guilt: her child serves as her motive for making a good life in the South. In their transit country of China, NK refugee women tend to be bought and sold in under-developed rural areas or places where Chinese women refuse to go for marriage because of the men’s abnormality. Their prospective husbands, therefore, tend to be those for whom hatred and objectification of women are basic tenets of daily life. Because these men understand NK refugee women merely as spies, opportunists, and tools for making babies, they become the object of surveillance and abuse.

Unlike Bok-nyeo, who could easily escape surveillance because of her husband’s limited mental ability, in the midst of the dehumanization of repeated gang rape by her husband’s brothers, surveillance of her every move, and verbal abuse, Seon-hwa had to give up on motherhood in order to succeed in her escape. Later, Seon-hwa’s stable North Korean identity as a school teacher and the daughter of a professor influences her decision to become a writer for a NK refugee radio station in South Korea. Although Kim Yu-kyeong affirms Seon-hwa’s exemplary nature and wholesome way of thinking, the route of her escape from North Korea and her horrendous experiences in China are inscribed on her body, resulting in uterine cancer, implying that she is left as a polluted body and a subaltern outside of the border.

The third character, Gyeong-ok, was of the lowest social class in North Korea (in contrast to Seon-hwa) and is only just growing into adulthood. For Gyeong-ok, whose top priority is always her own survival, family is a mere burden. Having never been to school, Gyeong-ok learned early from her mother that the final weapon a woman has for her survival is her sex. Because female sex is no more than a tool of survival for Gyeong-ok, her experience of childbirth in her new country does not connect up with motherhood. Leaving the child she gave birth to in an adoption facility, Gyeong-ok works as a private karaoke room “helper” in South Korea, just like she did in China.

Later in the novel, having settled in South Korea, Gyeong-ok turns down the opportunity to attend university, hinting that as a social and cultural outsider, she cannot adapt to university or vocational education. Both Seon-hwa and Bok-nyeo are regarded as wholesome individuals, while Gyeong-ok’s choice

of identity makes visible the limitation of treating this as personal indecency rather than a problem with the receiving country’s welfare system, and Gyeong-ok is even derided among NK refugees.

Among NK refugee women, past experiences are also different according to their route of escape. Unlike the three characters discussed above who share the same rough road from North Korea through China to South Korea, Mi-seon’s family migrate straight from North Korea to South Korea, symbolizing the overt power of capital within communism and showing the huge difference money can make. Mi-seon and her mother escaped to South Korea because of her father’s corruption while running a foreign trade business, and while most North Koreans were suffering through the arduous march, they lived “watching the arduous march from a distance” (*Youth Sonata* 63). Having been sensitive to their class difference even from their time in “Hanawon,”<sup>4</sup> Mi-seon and her mother oppose the way that all the interviews with NK refugee women on American television treat their victimhood as identical. Owing to the head of their household taking up foreign trading in South Korea too, Mi-seon and her mother’s economic abundance seems to be continuing. However, after Mi-seon’s father disappears in China, mother and daughter find themselves in the same position as other NK refugee women.

Mi-seon’s mother’s various identities, as a Chosun art specialist, a business owner’s wife, and an upper-class lady, are all compacted in an instant into that of a NK refugee waitress. For her, the suffering other NK refugee women went through in their escape from North Korea is equivalent to her becoming a physical laborer in the struggle for survival in South Korea. The fact that Mi-seon’s mother easily finds work in a NK refugee restaurant because of Bok-nyeo’s success is limiting in that it simplifies the difficulty NK refugee women face when trying to choose a career and a place to belong in South Korea. However, in *Youth Sonata*, it is confirmed that irrespective of class divisions, NK refugee women exist as vulnerable bodies, exchanged for capital, sex, and labor at national borders and boundaries in everyday life.

Most NK refugee women have always been deprived of the most basic “right to have rights” (Arendt 1973, 296), in their home country, transit country, and receiving country. Like the reference to the fact that for one of the

4. The in-between space in South Korea where NK refugees stay before being incorporated into society.

characters “in the years gone by what tormented her almost to death, as well as the physical devastation, was that her identity disappeared” (*Youth Sonata* 226), while having their identity prescribed or denied by others, NK refugee women are not invested with the opportunity to choose their identities for themselves.

*A Third Home* begins with a NK refugee woman named Seong-ok, who has settled in South Korea, visiting the Japanese hometown of her Zainichi Korean father in search of her own identity. The path of Seong-ok’s life, travelling between Japan, North Korea, China, and South Korea, is also a process of looking for the reason that she could not receive hospitality in any place she went to. Among these, Seong-ok’s meeting up with South Korean women Jeong Yun-hui and Choi A-rim frankly portrays the position of NK refugee women living in the South, thereby suggesting a new identity dilemma.

Seong-ok parted with them, and on her way back on the last bus, she got to thinking. There’s another difference. This feeling that I suddenly feel... different to you after we part. Even though I can’t feel that we’re different when we’re together. And this awkward emotion I feel, this doubt. When I’m with you for a while I think, I belong here too, but once we’ve parted I wonder, do I really? Can you understand feeling like you’re an “island”? And surrounded by Seoul accents, finding yourself asking: *Who am I?* (*A Third Home* 117)

When the three women, “who are the same as women and unmarried too” are drinking together, Seong-ok strongly displays her identity as a NK refugee. They all have different hometowns but the difference between “hometowns you can go to and ones you can’t” lays bare the situation of division, while at the same time it is the space of the migrant who searches for a new path in the gap between two hometowns (ibid. 116). Jeong Yun-hui and Choi A-rim ask Seong-ok about her past for their academic work and novel writing. Their questions focus specifically on her journey of escape and have a consuming, exhibitivite nature that assumes self-hatred. In contrast, as the subject of Seong-ok’s hospitality, In-ho mainly asks about her present state and emotions. Rather than the difference in gender between the questioners Yun-hui, A-rim, and In-ho, it is the direction of their questions which brings difference, and receiving their questions Seong-ok falls into the confusion of having to reconfigure anew her multilayered identity as a Japan returnee, a NK refugee woman, someone who transited through China, a South Korean university student, and a *gimbap*

store part-timer.

Wanting to free herself from “the sense of alienation that comes from the history of being in a particular minority status” (*A Third Home* 2013, 159), Seong-ok dreams of an ordinary life, and South Korean citizens answer this with “freedom” However, the difficulty of such freedom is connoted within the question, “How mature would she have to be for the aggression and suggestions of boundaries towards her to feel like nothing at all?” (ibid. 189). By contrasting the identities of Seong-ok and In-ho, who lives as a middle-class divorcee architect, the novel goes so far as to prepare for conflict with In-ho’s mother who cannot accept a NK refugee woman as family.

In the rigidity of South Korea where multiple identities are not recognized, Seong-ok’s search for her father is a question about her roots. The conversation with In-ho that departs from here is free from the sexual objectification of NK refugee women but shows a tendency to asexualize Seong-ok. Thinking about her identity as she retraces the path of her life, Seong-ok is a character who doesn’t give up anything and develops her own new identity. By overlapping this process with architect In-ho’s construction of a historical memorial building, after father (origin) and leader (ideology), Yi Kyoung-ja opens up a third space of hospitality for Seong-ok, “a third home” (fixed residence).

Talking about the third in-between space, Homi Bhabha (2006, 325) explains that in this space where borders are muddled, by the exclusion and conflict inside complementarity, borders are constantly reformed. Coming and going between her past and present, Seong-ok’s establishment of her own identity as a third space is such a process of negotiation within society. This breaks away from the tendency in novels like *Youth Sonata* to focus on the gender of NK refugee women in terms of transnational motherhood and instead calls for reflection on a more underlying issue of making a place for someone. As outlined above, Kim Yu-kyeong and Yi Kyoung-ja’s novels portray the continual struggles that take place in the changing boundaries of incessant escape, between society which seeks to fix the identity of NK refugee women and NK refugee women who seek to choose their own third identity.

## Acknowledgement of Membership and the Subject of Hospitality's Performativity

On membership, Seyla Benhabib discusses recognizing the moral claim of refugees and asylees to first admittance, a regime of porous borders for immigrants, an injunction against denationalization and the loss of citizenship rights, and the vindication of the right of every human being “to have rights.” She urges the guarantee of a legal person who holds certain inalienable rights as human beings, regardless of status or political membership (Benhabib 2004, 3). At the level of legal membership, the ultimate goal of most NK refugees is settling in South Korea: after finally entering South Korea they register as South Korean citizens. However, the issues surrounding fleeing North Korea mean they are confronted with “the mutually separating border between national subject and refugee, citizen and human, and ‘way of life’ and ‘bare life’” (Ha and Bae 2013, 86). NK refugee women who leave North Korea and live as diaspora in a country other than South Korea clearly take on the latter identity, but even after entering South Korea and receiving guarantee of legal status and protection by social assurance systems, they are still the object of hatred, labelled as “second class citizen,” “a different species,” “illegal immigrant,” and “criminal” (S. Kim 2020). Legal status as a citizen and equality in fundamental human rights are a prerequisite condition of membership, but in everyday life communities, border hierarchies make the conditions for hospitality based solely on membership difficult.

The first community Seong-ok has contact with in *A Third Home* is a church. Having identified that the more extreme NK refugee women's experience of escape the more help they receive from the congregation, Seong-ok becomes absorbed in putting on a show of her suffering and is disgusted at herself for this. The sensational reports by other NK refugees that follow Seong-ok's are no more than replacement parts, used up and thrown away for criticism of the system in their homeland and South Korean citizens' human rights education. It becomes clear to Seong-ok that this is an exploited life when she learns of a NK refugee who earned money in South Korea and then returned with it to the North. She realizes that this was “the life of someone whose use had run out” (*A Third Home* 159). The limits of a life lived in South Korea for survival in capitalism and in North Korea as a tool of ideology mean that NK refugee woman is a complete other who may never receive hospitality in either

world.

Seong-ok is removed from the realm of motherhood, but after settling in South Korea she keeps getting requests to send money to her mother still in North Korea. In order to do this, Seong-ok accepts a proposition to form relationships whereby her memories of escape, where she often came close to death, are converted into data for a South Korean dissertation and material for a novel. This structure whereby the agonizing memories of the other are objectified and consumed for the relative sense of stability of community members is problematic.

Seon-hwa in *Youth Sonata* acquires all kinds of qualification certificates in order to adapt to South Korea society, and instead of finding a job for her survival, she chooses work based on a sense of duty, work where she can critique the realities of North and South Korea. Working in a restaurant, Bok-nyeo actively utilizes her identity as a NK refugee. Her eloquence and skill—getting South Koreans to experience cuisine that is exotic to them, serving as transmitter of unprovocative North Korean customs, and stirring up homesickness in NK refugees—is described in positive terms. However, working in NK refugee radio broadcasting and a NK refugee restaurant, Seon-hwa and Bok-nyeo are only safe while their NK identity is on display. This means that outside of the boundaries set by the community they cannot receive hospitality. Under the principles of protection and inspection, the national welfare that “manages” NK refugee women demands “adaptation” and “constraint” from them. This is what Derrida termed “conditional hospitality,” which proposes assimilation to the language and system of the country to foreigners (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 25).

In the same way, as a someone who has adjusted to the market economy of South Korea, Gyeong-ok plainly demonstrates how the sex of minority women is the object of consumption. The commercialization of sex is the means by which NK refugee women with unstable status, little education, and no family or friends can live in South Korean society. Good at singing South Korean songs and speaking like a local, Gyeong-ok and other private karaoke room “helpers” like her make up part of the sex service industry. Gyeong-ok's position outside of the border goes beyond South Korea and expands to the sex industry in Japan, and with this the transnational act of the process of escaping North Korea for survival is substituted with capitalist opportunities for survival. Because Gyeong-ok returns to South Korea on hearing Seon-hwa's



cancer diagnosis and Seon-hwa's life insurance is left to her, her situation is tied up neatly without exploration of the more structural problems of South Korean society's attitude to NK refugee women.

If all this is the case, what is it that makes hospitality to NK refugee women within the bounds of community membership possible? In the novels, the subject of hospitality is condensed into an individual, but the writers suggest the role of readers by including them in the goals of "us."

In-ho, the architect in *A Third Home* meets Seong-ok by chance at a restaurant, but it is through his work that he comes to understand Seong-ok "as a person." Faced with the melancholy of an incomprehensible other, In-ho's actions of visiting Seong-ok's father's hometown and giving her material and psychological help without a word when she has been hurt by other South Koreans comes close to everyday charity. However, it is when In-ho superimposes Seong-ok's past with his work that an opportunity for their relationship to change arises. In order to design a historical memorial building, "The Home of Memory," In-ho studies Korean history and ends up looking back on the history of North Korea which he had been indifferent to before. Seong-ok is not a universal model of NK refugee women but an NK refugee woman with her own individual experience. Of course, for the construction of the "reclaimed area memorial building" In-ho learns official history rather than personal affairs, but in the process he consistently imagines the position through which Seong-ok's experience is produced (Scott 1991) and tries to read her emotions. Seong-ok's past of conflict with her parents and going through changes to her identity calls attention to the borders in In-ho's life—such as his childhood where his longing was suppressed because of his parents' divorce and his own marriage that ended awkwardly without him ever knowing the meaning of true love—and provides an opportunity to reconsider the otherness of the subject and for injury and injury to meet. However, rather than Seong-ok and In-ho sympathizing with each other's pain and uniting, Yi Kyoung-ja describes this as a process of the pain of each of them being shared. This is because "describing their sympathy and an unconditional promise as impossible" is the role of the subject which offers more hospitality to the other's suffering (Okamari 2016, 218).

In *Youth Sonata*, the NK refugee Seong-cheol is a character who shares Seon-hwa's multilayered identity and the suffering that comes from this. Seong-cheol and Seon-hwa have the same experience of the hardships, dangers and fear

of death of the process of fleeing North Korea, but using his skills to become an important worker for a medium sized company and also attending university, Seong-cheol is almost like a South Korean citizen. After migrating to South Korea, Seong-cheol plays the role of broker, extricating women confined in the transit country of China and bringing them to South Korea, but he is merely a witness to the scene. In fact, the Korean Chinese brokers who transact NK refugee women's sex and the brokers who enable women to escape from these places are essentially the same: they use women's bodies as a medium to demand money. Because of Seon-hwa's cancer diagnosis, the safe union of marriage between NK refugees falls through, but by joining Seon-hwa's return trip to meet the daughter she left in China, Seong-cheol comes to witness her suffering. Confirming the terrible past of Seon-hwa (whom he had unrequited love for when he knew her as a teacher in North Korea), meeting with her hidden child, and more than anything, watching her gradual death, are all things which prove Seong-cheol's powerlessness. Precisely this kind of "powerlessness" is the impossibility of sympathy and unconditional promise, but "the violence of the event and those women's suffering and my sympathy for it should be narrated from my own thorough powerlessness, not a deep place within those women's bodies" (Okamari 2016, 218). Although he is a NK refugee too, just like the reader, Seong-cheol can only understand all of Seon-hwa's suffering as a witness, not a testifier. However, enduring his own powerlessness, he silently does everything that needs to be done for Seon-hwa before she dies—registering the name for her life insurance payout, watching over her sickbed, and arranging everything for her visit to China—and in doing so devotes himself to the role of subject of hospitality.

In the end it can be confirmed that a NK refugee woman's membership is not decided simply by legal status in the attainment of citizenship, but rather reconstituted by the positionality of the individual and the performativity of the subject of hospitality in responding to the NK refugee woman's identity.

### North Korean Refugee Women, Crossing the Hospitality Border

In general, it is considered that we become members of society by receiving hospitality and thus have a right to rights (Kim 2018, 207). This study goes

further, to reevaluate the proactivity of the other by concentrating on the way the actions or questions of the other seeking hospitality constantly resonate with the subject and demand their introspection.

In the novels by Kim Yu-kyeong and Yi Kyoung-ja, the (im)possibility of hospitality can be confirmed at that point where the border between physical and cognitive is no more and the roles of the subject and object of hospitality are reversed.

For Seon-hwa, with no family, Gyeong-ok is family. Gyeong-ok will remember her for a long time and cry for her. She will visit her grave every year. Seon-hwa isn't sure when such a deep affection between them formed. She just found herself worrying about Gyeong-ok as though she were kin, and her heart went out to her. She truly wished Gyeong-ok would live a good life and be happy. She had never believed in God and didn't know how to pray, but "Please take care of my Gyeong-ok," came from her lips.

(*Youth Sonata* 287)

That moment, she felt the warmth of the baby through her mouth latched to her nipple, and the baby sucking to get milk. She opened her still-blurry eyes slightly and looked up as though staring at her mother. The thrill that had spread throughout Seon-hwa's body at those times came back to her clearly. She put even more strength into hugging her daughter. Having become one like that, she hugged her daughter as if she had gone stiff. (ibid. 305)

Ultimately, *Youth Sonata* portrays a character close to death giving hospitality to herself. Of course, Seon-hwa's days living with terminal illness with devoted hospitality from Seong-cheol who is being incorporated as a secure South Korean citizen are depicted, but as shown in the quotes above, Kim Yu-kyeong configures Seon-hwa's hospitality to Gyeong-ok and her daughter Meiming in China in the novel as the true scenes of hospitality. For Seon-hwa, who became an orphan after fleeing from North Korea, her fellow NK refugee women Bok-nyeo and Gyeong-ok take on the role of substitute family. The depiction of Gyeong-ok wandering between jobs in private karaoke rooms has a kind of coercive character, as though the trajectory of her life eliminates any choice she might have had. For Seon-hwa, Gyeong-ok is like part of her past, reminding her of the sexual exploitation she suffered in China, and Bok-nyeo, working

hard to assimilate to life in South Korea, is projected as her present. Seon-hwa's wishing happiness for Gyeong-ok's future and praying for her is a process of Seon-hwa facing up to and accepting her own negated past and suppressed wounds. At the end of the novel, Kim Yu-kyeong overlaps the scenes of the moment Seon-hwa gave birth to her daughter as a result of gang rape and her last reunion with her daughter as she faces death. To Seon-hwa, her memories from China connected to Gyeong-ok and Meiming take up a place inside her as the other within. Kim Yu-kyeong suggests that for this NK refugee woman, coming face to face with the other within, accepting suffering as it is, and moving beyond it is self-hospitality. Through a character who as a testifier extends hospitality to her past that is the object of hospitality, author Kim Yu-kyeong makes the reader participate as a third-party witness. She reproduces in detail for readers who objectify NK refugee women and enjoy their own security in a safe space the issues faced by NK refugee women and narrates the potential for self-hospitality, thereby creating a kind of counter narrative. Kim Yu-kyeong incites deep introspection in her readers by implying that the narrative of the NK refugee women's diaspora is unfolding here and now, despite disinterest, and that it is intimately relevant to the reader: intersecting with the realities of South Korea including family, work, and welfare.

In *A Third Home* the scene of Seong-ok and In-ho travelling to the Yalu River in China portrays a dramatic moment of hospitality. Here both of them are "visiting" as uninvited foreigners and thus come to rethink the othering of hospitality. Citing the first scene of Sophocles' "Oedipus at Colonus," Derrida presents a conversation between foreigners. As the foreigner is a relative concept, two strangers meeting in one space are foreign to each other. Whether they have a foothold in the space and possess the language decides the rank of authority between them and transforms the two foreigners into the subject and object of hospitality. The question of the name and hometown of the object of hospitality—asking their identity—becomes the condition for hospitality, but alongside this, the subject of hospitality also answers the foreigner's question and in doing so their subject identity is recognized. In a community that thinks of itself as traditional and secure, the foreigner is the one who questions, "carries and puts the question," and "shakes up the threatening dogmatism of the paternal logos," taking on the position and role of an investigator, questioning from a different perspective (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 5).

In China, heading towards the Yalu River, In-ho constantly asks questions.

The space the two of them are passing through was Seong-ok's route of escape from North Korea, and her past of being caught by the authorities and sent back to North Korea and trafficked is narrated intersecting with the time of the present. In response to In-ho's questions, as a foreigner in this place, Seong-ok's memories of suffering in the past come out as disjointed answers. While In-ho was the subject of hospitality in South Korea, in the North Korean borderland region of China, he is a foreigner from another country, and Seong-ok, having learned Chinese through her past experiences and lived in the region as an illegal border crosser, is made by In-ho's questions to face the agonizing memories of her route out of North Korea which she previously concealed. To In-ho's questions, asking about everyday life and the system in North Korea, and whether it's possible to cross the river, Seong-ok's recollections are left as a silent response or else an opaque answer or monologue. Accepting this appearance of Seong-ok just as she is, in the midst of "a vision of a delicate life from which the spell has broken waving at him" (*A Third Home* 251), In-ho finally becomes to recognize Seong-ok as whole and gains the potential to give her hospitality.

Now with South Korean nationality, Seong-ok becomes the object of hospitality due to her past experience as "other," but while the division of the Korean peninsula remains unresolved and North Korean border crossers are in constant danger of forced repatriation, the subject of hospitality is made volatile. In spite of all this, the intersecting in this moment—where the subject of hospitality in South Korea becomes a foreigner (In-ho) and the object of hostility (Seong-ok) becomes a subject foreigner—holds within it the (im) possibility for unconditional hospitality in a foreign domain. While Seong-ok's past as "other" was superficial in South Korea, as In-ho, the subject of hospitality, accompanies her retracing her route of escape from North Korea in a foreign space, he witnesses and listens intently to her recall of agonizing memories, and his effort to respond to the waving hand of a fragile life is actualized as waving back.

In the process of understanding Seong-ok's family history, where the situation of diaspora created by colonization, empire, and escape from North Korea causes the impossibility of mourning injury, In-ho experiences "a feeling as though his soul were permeating into the ongoing cycles of Seong-ok's life" (*A Third Home* 62-63). With this, the "memorialization" of memory that he pursues in his work goes beyond a preserved specimen toward sympathy for the other. Seong-ok's efforts to understand her father in practice resonate with In-

ho and he in turn questions his father's past and love for him. In this way, the NK refugee woman does not simply serve as a tool in the novel for inciting the awakening or introspection of the subject, but she is a proactive other who has the potential to form cracks in the impossibly closed truth.

The novel ends with Seong-ok saying that she is "just a person living a life" (*A Third Home* 258) and making it clear that her address in North Korea is her home and the place where she now resides in South Korea is just where she happens to live. Although she knows she is a victim of history, Seong-ok is not bound to the identity of a diaspora woman and emphasizes that she is the fundamental object of hospitality as a "person." At the same time, she recognizes herself as an "other" who has awakened to her past, thus dissolving the border of hospitality and exceeding it on her own terms.

In the novel, In-ho's view that people are the same because they all have suffering and Seong-ok's view that one person's suffering cannot be the same as anyone else's form a continual parallel. The positive identification of a South Korean man who had given precedence to difference, and the negative counter argument of a NK refugee woman emphasizing particularity is a continuation of a discord that is not resolved. A South Korean man unfamiliar with collectivism and a NK refugee woman who struggles to endure liberalism acknowledge this for what it is. Not suturing that "difference" and coexisting in everyday life becomes Yi Kyoung-ja's way of offering hospitality to NK refugee women's gender.

## Conclusion

The designation "NK refugee women's novel" is ambiguous because it can mean both a work written by a NK refugee woman writer and a work which contains NK refugee women characters. Interconnected with issues of reproduction and representation by NK refugee women, NK refugee women writers, NK refugee men writers, South Korean men writers, and South Korean women writers, etc., there is a particular focus on the voice of the subaltern NK refugee woman. Often, as a subject with personal experience of an NK refugee journey, NK refugee women writers' works show some convergence between author and characters within the novel. Such reproduction by NK refugee women writers is important because the writing of personal experiences may go some

way to recovering NK refugee women's presence, and it sincerely conveys lives that continually come up against gendered issues related to motherhood, prostitution, and sexual objectification. Novelistic reproductions by NK refugee women authors centered around NK refugee women characters concentrate on the process of the subaltern putting down roots in their migrant country.

From the past to the present, the countries they migrate to coax NK refugee women to choose between various identities or demand rupture, depriving them of the opportunity to decide on their own terms. Accordingly, in the end, self-hospitality is the task NK refugee women characters are faced with in the midst of the conditional hospitality of South Korean society once their status as NK refugees is confirmed: recovering for themselves the female ego or relations of motherhood that were lost due to the oppressive and violent memories of the past. Self-hospitality is precisely the action of testifying the unspeakableness of the loss of subjecthood NK refugee women experience in the process of escape and the starting point of resistance to the reality of the violence directed at them from outside.

In contrast, the reproduction of a NK refugee woman character in a novel by a South Korean woman author encounters the problem of nonidentity between the author and character and the representative nature of reproduction. Here, rather than focusing solely on the NK refugee woman character, the author maintains an objective distance and widens the perspective to the relationality between her and the community in her migrant country. Critiquing the circumstances whereby the subaltern cannot speak and the irresponsibility of the community's ethics of listening, the author pays attention to the establishment of a third space, where boundaries are incessantly reconstituted through the exclusion and ambivalence behind the complementarity of the NK refugee woman as other. Despite her nonidentity with other characters, such as the silence or ellipsis in the place where her inner monologue plays out, she tries to understand North Korean defectors but does not agree, so she decides to live.

This recalls genuine hospitality because hospitality opens up when the boundary between host and guest is made meaningless. On such occasions the nonidentity between the subject and different other continually stimulates the hidden otherness of the subject and opens space for understanding the other. Although we may not be able to understand the entire escape process of NK refugee women, making the effort to listen unconditionally and preparing the foundations for understanding while granting them the authority to choose

their identity is the ethics of the subject of hospitality. In addition, refraining from passively restraining the conduct of NK refugee women, the object of hospitality, and understanding this as the proactiveness to make the subject introspect is a way to demolish the barrier to hospitality.

The right of NK refugee women to choose their own identity is made possible by the efforts of South Korean community to share their multiple identities. Through the characters Seon-hwa, Bok-nyeo, and Gyeong-ok in *Youth Sonata*, Kim Yu-kyeong suggests the causes for the identities they cannot help but choose in South Korea.

For NK refugee women, embodied memories of suffering and experiences of being excluded from membership are evidence of the inconsistency of the social structure. Of course, within the novels there are characters who actively assimilate in order to settle within the community, characters who end dramatic lives in suicide, and characters who constantly question reality and suspend judgement, all coexisting. Indeed, among NK refugee women there are some who, having secured their final goal of gaining South Korean citizenship, strongly desire to return to China. But the internal and external discrimination of communities means that wherever they are, they are assigned the status of transnational diaspora. Of course, it is not easy to give unconditional hospitality to all the various representations of the other. However, the perspective of a community hospitable to NK refugee women should not see their choices simply as selfish, disloyal, or opportunist in order to gain status, but rather they must sympathize with their proactive expansion of space, making options for wandering, migration, and settlement. We may ask of NK refugee women the question "Who are you?" but as Cavarero suggests, we should continue "to ask it without any expectation of a full or final answer" (Butler 2005, 43). With this the process of searching for ethics makes a place for the possibility of hospitality towards NK refugee woman as they cross and re-cross countless borders. This is because the question which asks their identity constantly resonates back to the questioner. Recognizing the various meanings that each identity implies and providing the right of "choice" to judge the validity and relevance of them is precisely the process of the question(ing). The characters that respond to the NK refugee women in the novels are subjects that walk into the border of the other, or conversely they experience the unfamiliarity that the other feels in the subject's world. The possibility for hospitality opens when the identity of the other is acknowledged and at the same time the identity of the questioner is



scrutinized.

Criteria such as nationality, gender, language, race, class, and culture that are easy to be judged as conditions of hospitality are important only insofar as they are “integrated into an individual’s narrative of identity.” In other words, the condition for hospitality must become “the authorship itself of a subject writing their own identity narrative.” Kim Hyun-kyung’s expansion of this point provides an important insight for this research, and she asserts, “acknowledgement of identity is not acknowledgement of the content of a particular narrative, but rather an acknowledgement of the editorial rights over the narrative, and even if we do not have much knowledge when it comes to identity movements, just by the action of listening intently and nodding, that kind of acknowledgement can be expressed” (Kim 2018, 215). By participating in the diaspora journey of the object of hospitality, the subject in *A Third Home* demotes himself to the position of foreigner, and while asking questions and introspecting, the subject puts into practice the “ethics for listening” for the other’s authorship (A. Kim 2020). With the other’s silence, recollections in place of answers, and answers that are opaque when they are given, Yi Kyoung-ja draws in not only the subject’s echoes of the subject but engages the reader—situated outside of the novel—as a witness to testimony.

Unlike Kim Yu-kyeong who herself identifies as a NK refugee and focuses on the past, the time before arriving in South Korea, South Korean writer Yi Kyoung-ja focuses on the empowerment and future of NK refugee women after arriving in South Korea, as they seek out a third identity in order to survive in a new society. The way that solidarity with NK refugee women can hold firm begins like this, with the ethical awakening of members of society who support their demands.

Literature does not only reproduce and present the conditions of the current era. Rather, it discovers the significance of existence within a particular time and gets us to reconsider the ethical value of life, which is often overlooked. In this vein, the gender hospitality of novels that focus on NK refugee women becomes an opportunity for introspection by subjects who can cross borders with ease and even feel reassured that they are within borders that are not fixed. In addition, in the proactivity and critical consciousness shown by the NK refugee women characters, rethinking the author’s role in expressing the voice of the subaltern can present a chance to seek the (im)possibility of hospitality.

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## Abstract

This research examines the realities of diaspora through novels depicting North Korean (NK) refugee women and investigates how communities extend hospitality to their gender. The characters in these novels stand their ground as proactive subjects with critical consciousness despite sexual exploitation and social oppression, and therefore they also urge a rethinking of the writer's role in representing the subaltern's voice. I focus on *Youth Sonata* by Kim Yuyyeong and *A Third Home* by Yi Kyoung-ja, examining the identity choices of NK refugee women as objects of hospitality, the issues of membership in their receiving country, the role of the subject of hospitality, and boundary crossing between subject and object of hospitality. The women depicted in *Youth Sonata* each have a complicated past and must confront the other within themselves and accept them, becoming the object of their own self-hospitality. In *A Third Home* with identity conflict between her past and present, a NK refugee woman opens a third space that can accept difference. A scene of intersection in China, where the subject of hospitality becomes a foreigner and the object of hospitality becomes a foreigner with agency, demonstrates the (im)possibility of unconditional hospitality. Presenting NK women refugees' gendered suffering as part of history and the process of accommodating the coexistence of difference in everyday life, the novel suggests that hospitality is possible.

**Keywords:** Novels about North Korean refugee women, gender, hospitality, identity