

Kim-Aeran's Creative Response to the "Original Face" Zen Koan

In Kim-Aeran's story, "[The Youngest Parents with the Oldest Child](#)", progeria is portrayed less as an inexorable medical condition than a metaphor that converges youth with experience, progress with tradition. It is at once a bold and relatable metaphor: progeria as a portrait of literature that affirms familial bonds while capturing the plight of South Korean youths unmoored by their country's relentless march toward globalisation. As a writer deeply aware of the previous generations' sacrifices and yet profoundly sympathetic to the youths of her generation, Ms. Kim, through her protagonist A-reum, says that "writing is about making decisions" from a progression of inquiries. One could read the story as representing Ae-rum's multi-faceted responses to the classic Zen koan on Original Face, 'Without thinking good or evil, in this moment, what is your original face before your parents were born?'"

The koan on Original Face represents an inquiry into the nature of self-knowledge, outside the confines of time and social stricture. In this sense, the story resembles a Russian nesting doll. Both the fictional framework, created by the author, and the story as narrated by A-reum, are responses – or "essays" to the koan. Can a young person ever "know" his or her face while living in a society that values external attributes, like A-reum's grandfather who asks his future son-in-law, 'So, what are you good at?' Thus the search for the Original Face has to transcend not only chronological age or lived experience, but also value judgements based on a person's abilities, or lack thereof.

There is a narrative and structural inversion at work in "[The Youngest Parents with the Oldest Child](#)". A-reum, the teenager afflicted with progeria, looks backward into the past to recreate his parents' origins story. While the story is told from the first person point-of-view, A-reum, on one level, is not the principal character, but more often an observer to his parents' courtship and marriage that took place when they were seventeen – the same age as he is now. At times, the focus is less on the ravages of A-reum's illness than on the colorful trials and tribulations of his young parents, Dae-su and Mi-ra – who narrate their destinies as work in progress, embryonic and vital, capable of endless reinvention:

Their stories overlapped and went different ways and crumpled into me. I was going to make something out of it. Of course, nobody knew what that might be. Not even me. That way, beauty could become beautiful on its own, and would not suffer the fate of a puppy dying soon after birth because humans had handled it.¹

On another level, A-reum himself is indeed the Creator, for he himself writes his parents' love story, in order to make sense of, or poetically reverse, his potentially terminal existence. 'I want to reborn as you and father me', A-reum replies to his father.² In a way, progeria allows him to switch place with his parents. In physically accelerating through time, A-reum assumes

¹Kim, Aeran., (2016) 'The Youngest Parents with the Oldest Child'. Translated by Chi-Young Kim. *Asian Literary Review*, 30 (Spring 2016), pp. 29-49, 45.

² Ibid., p. 29.

their place, while they, still progressing through “real” time, embody his “future face” - the face he would wear were he to proceed through the normal course of existence. This swapping of places (or “faces”) provides a mystical bond between parents and child, a sort of trinity, so to speak. A-reum tells Mi-ra, “Someone like me / Can only create parents like mine.”³ Parents and child seem to be on equal footing based on this profound understanding. This connection redefines the conventional family hierarchy where parents, no matter how old, exert an authoritarian hold over their children.

The Korean traditional family structure prompts A-reum to ask the question, ‘Why does a child always have the face of a child no matter how old he is?’ This notion of “constant face” – as opposed to interchangeable face - is embodied by Grandpa Chang, who, despite his advanced age, still looks like a seven-year-old when scolded by his ninety-year-old father. Dae-su and Mi-ra, on the other hand, violently subvert this rigid hierarchy when they become parents while still being children. Dae-su, resembling a moody Hamlet, is expelled by his athletic high school for beating up a mentally challenged classmate out of despair and envy for the latter’s complete freedom from social judgement. Mi-ra is nicknamed Princess Fuck in her neighborhood for her foul mouth and willful nature. It is however interesting that the parents’ pariah status – accentuated by Mi-ra’s out-of-wedlock’s pregnancy – appears temporary rather than outright tragic. The orderly fabric of Korean society coupled with its capitalist bend means that the rebellious couple is gradually reabsorbed into the fold of family and community. It seems as if rebellion is neutralized by inexorable pragmatism. While having to make do in their claustrophobic shack among peasant laborers hired by the family patriarch, the couple is not exactly cast out of Eden or being thrown into a dark place with lots of crying and teeth gnashing. In time the formerly belligerent husband is offered a job in the bride’s family business. Their child, A-reum, while plagued with health issues, is not always their sole focus, cared for by other family members while Dae-su is at work or when Mi-ra goes into town to meet her best friend Sumi for tea and gossip. Slowly Dae-su rises through the family corporate ranks to become the manager of a Nike store in town; Mi-ra in turn is pleased to be addressed as the boss’ wife.

Yet, Dae-su and Mi-ra’s progression from outcasts to respectable citizens is only one response to the enigmatic koan. The parents’ social rehabilitation could be read as secondary to the story of ‘how they made A-reum.’ A-reum’s creation story goes to the heart of knowledge – both physical and spiritual. Is the act of creating life purely physical, something an animal, or ‘even an idiot’⁴ can do, as Mi-ra’s mother seems to think, or is it deliberate and conscious - the search for someone who carries ‘a wardrobe inside just like me’⁵, as Mira observes? Similarly, Dae-su gives A-reum a startlingly wise advice on the contrast between filial devotion (external/automatic) and emotional attachment (internal/spiritual), “There are a lot of people who are devoted to their parents without really liking them So you should never ... try to be good to me.”⁶

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

The search for spiritual meaning, independent of social pressures, paradoxically requires an organic understanding of *being*. A-reum, due to his progeria, spent ‘most of [his life] coming to the realisation that ‘[he] had a body, the way you don’t ever think about your tongue until the moment you have a sore on it.’⁷ Subject to rapid deterioration, he is deeply aware of words like skin, lungs, heart, liver, muscles, because they induce vivid pain and suffering. Illness, in the works of Kim Ae-ran, seem to be a conduit to self-knowledge. A-reum’s attempt to recreate his parents’ love story is a way to gain inside knowledge of their suffering and joys as human beings, besides or beyond their roles as his parents. He defines the human reproductive act not as a utilitarian or automatic impulse but as a conscious and redemptive process, a way ‘to relive the life [the parents] don’t remember.’⁸

The search for meaning requires that one has sufficient space to explore. Mi-ra talks about having a wardrobe to get lost in as a teenager. A-reum’s personal computer - located in his room, away from the common area – represents his virtual sanctuary. Via his computer A-reum can create his own inquiries and improvise quests to connect himself with the larger world – of which many things are mysteries since he – due to his condition – is excluded from it. In this sense his computer, while representing technology, is more benign than the mobile devices that serve to isolate young, able-bodied professionals of Kim Ae-ran’s other stories like “A Dignified Existence” and “Where Would You Like to Go.”

Due to the urbanisation of South Korea that began nearly 50 years ago and has continued until the present day, Korean literature deals mostly with young people who migrate to the city and are at odds with their traditional, rural upbringing. Kim Ae-ran, having grown up in Seosan, a rural village in South Chungcheong Province, intimately understands the lives of country people beset by harsh economic circumstances and marginalized by the industrialized, mainstream society. Her fictional construct – the intertwined relationship between a child rendered decrepit by illness and parents still young and open to change – can be read as an affirmation of family ties and also a thoughtful pursuit of individual fulfillment.

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⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

⁸ Ibid., p. 37.