

Journeys in Korean Literature

Kim Aeran



When Kim Aeran was awarded the 38th Hankook Ilbo Literary Prize, in 2005, this created a considerable stir among Korea's literary circles. Along with being only 25, making her the youngest-ever award winner, she beat out a deep field of more experienced writers. Nevertheless, Kim immediately struck a chord within the heart of readers with her boundless imagination and witty expression, while becoming a symbol of change in Korean literature.

Plumbing the Imagination to Elude the Anguish of Trauma

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In the fall of 2005, word spread quickly when a young 25-year-old writer had been awarded the Hankook Ilbo Literary Prize, one of Korea's most prestigious literary honors, only 2 years after her literary debut. It was unprecedented in Korea for a writer, who had not yet published a collection of stories, to earn such a highly regarded literary award. The Korean literary world was abuzz with the fact that Kim Aeran had been awarded the Hankook prize for her "Run, Dad" work.

A collection of short stories bearing the same title, which was published after she had received this award, won over legions of literary-minded readers in Korea. What was it about Kim Aeran's writing that so intrigued the sentiments of literary critics as well as general readers? Of course, several factors are involved, but the foremost reason is no doubt related to the way in which she describes the relationship between the individual and the family—a fundamental theme in Korean literature—from an innovative perspective.

In large part, modern Korean literature has been characterized by such personal hardships as being "severely wounded," and suffering from "painful torment" or "melancholy." This is derived from the extreme hardship and tumult of Korea's modern history: in the first half of the 20th century Korea suffered from Japan's colonial rule, and the middle of the century was punctuated by the division of the nation into North and South, and the devastation of the three-year Korean War, while the second half of the century was highlighted by Korea's modernization and democratization.

As such, tragic hardship and painful suffering have played a central role in Korea's modern history as well as its modern literature, in particular regard to the relationship between a family and its individual members. In particular, the father has often played a lead role in the numerous works that have dealt with the intricacies of family relations. The father will often assume a

dual identity, at once a victim, wounded by the ruthlessness of society, and an aggressor, who is capable of lashing out at his family members. Many works of this kind depict the intense conflict between a father and his children, and a subsequent reconciliation upon the father's death.

So, what kind of father figure is portrayed in Kim Aeran's works? "Greetings of Love," one of the short stories in her *Run, Dad* collection, tells the story of a girl who is abandoned by her father in a park, when she was a child, and then she later sees him again, after some ten years, through an aquarium tank. What must have gone through the mind of this girl, after her father, who told her to wait for him, never returned? A typical person would no doubt have been traumatized, thinking, "I have been abandoned," but this girl instead is worried, "My father has gone missing." This is why, even while staying at a facility for abandoned children, she would believe: "I think my father must be lost."

This scene reveals the girl's strength of character, steadfastly refusing to be overcome by trauma or obsessed with resentment. Here, "resentment" refers to the heartfelt sentiments of someone who seeks consolation through an act of vengeance for a painful tragedy that cannot be readily soothed. Yet the protagonists in Kim Aeran's works never give up and allow themselves to be traumatized or to develop resentment toward their father. In this way, Kim Aeran's works, though having the appearance of a "family romance," are clearly distinctive.

"Run, Dad" is the story of a girl who can only imagine a father that she has never seen. A man moves to Seoul from the countryside and finds a place in a hillside slum. With him lives a woman, who after having fought with her father, abruptly leaves home and moves to Seoul. After days of pleading, the woman finally agrees that she will sleep with the man. But there is one condition: he must first buy contraceptives. So the man runs off in a frenzy to find contraceptives. When he later learns that the woman is pregnant, his face turns white and he runs out again. But this time he does not return. The daughter born out of wedlock always imagines

her father as running to somewhere or another.

"Run, Dad" incorporates the basic structure of a family romance, in which the children reject their parents as they are growing up and instead imagine that their real parents are royalty or aristocracy. This can be seen as an imaginary compensation of (or a revenge fantasy toward) the parents, and also understood as a kind of psychological drama based on self-pity. The key point is that the parents in a family romance are a source of the children's trauma. As such, in a family romance, the children protect and comfort themselves by using their imagination to transform the source of family-related trauma.

As for "Run, Dad," it is unique for adopting only a partial framework of a typical family romance. The daughter's imaginings of her biological father is based on the format of a family romance, but the underlying element of a family romance—the fantasy of revenge based on self-pity—is nowhere to be found. It is the story of an illegitimate child, whose birth itself is a traumatic experience; but the author does not allow the father's absence to become a source of trauma. The father is merely half of the daughter's biological origin, who has been absent from the start, and an entity that is not part of her conscious thought. The father is not simply a biological contributor that made the protagonist possible, but a sort of nagging symptom existing in her repressed subconscious. This approach represents an entirely new way of conceptualizing the father.

In "Run, Dad," the father is affirmed from the beginning to the end. It also reveals the self who affirms the father. These affirmations of the father are clearly evident in the staunch rejection of trauma, and the protagonist's appreciation of her imaginary realm. The unique imagination that transforms the father, a potential source of trauma, into an elusive shadow, is an innovative perspective that Kim Aeran brings to modern Korean literature. Kim Aeran thus seeks to deconstruct the traditional framework of the novel, from the inside, even as she adopts the outward appearance of a traditional literary work. 📖