

Lee Yangji's Literature Read through the Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism: The Ethical Lines, Knots, and Limbo of Koreans in Japan

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Abstract: This paper examines the narrative structures of Lee Yangji's novels *Nabi T'aryŏng* and *Yuhi* to explore the ethical conflicts that define the literature of Koreans in Japan. Drawing on Nie Zhenzhao's Theory of Ethical Literary Criticism, the study situates Lee's works within their historical and moral context to analyze the ethical dilemmas arising from issues such as naming, discrimination, naturalization, and the linguistic tension between Korean and Japanese languages. The pursuit of identity in this context emerges as a process of continual ethical dialogue and self-examination. Employing Nie's core concepts of the ethical line—which delineates the boundary of moral consciousness—and the ethical knot—where conflicting ethical forces become entangled—this paper demonstrates how Lee transforms moral contradictions into the driving force of her storytelling. Furthermore, by introducing the ethical limbo, which describes a psychological and moral state of being caught between self-affirmation and self-denial, the analysis reveals how Lee's protagonists, as Koreans in Japan, inhabit a gray zone of ethnic identity. Through these interrelated concepts of the ethical line, knot and limbo, *Nabi T'aryŏng* and *Yuhi* emerge as paradigmatic examples of how ethical conflict operates as both structural and thematic cores of Lee's storytelling. Ultimately, her works paint literature as an ethical practice—one that confronts identity fragmentation through moral reflection and invites readers to reconsider their own ethical relationships with others.

Keywords: ethical literary criticism; Lee Yangji; *Nabi T'aryŏng*; *Yuhi*; Nie Zhenzhao

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标题：文学伦理学批评视域下的李良枝文学研究——论在日朝鲜人的伦理线、伦理结与伦理悬置

内容摘要：本文以李良枝小说《蝴蝶打令》与《由熙》为研究对象，运用文学伦理学批评理论，剖析在日朝鲜人文学中呈现的伦理冲突特质。论文以聂珍钊的文学伦理学批评为理论框架，将作品置于在日朝鲜人的历史境遇与道德语境中，考察姓名选择、歧视与归化问题、母语（朝鲜语）与居住国语言（日语）之间的张力所引发的伦理困境。在此过程中，身份追寻被诠释为一种持续进行的伦理协商与自我反思。论文重点借助“伦理线”与“伦理结”这一对核心概念，阐释李良枝如何通过跨越与重构道德边界来构建叙事张力并推动伦理觉醒。在此基础上，进一步引入“伦理悬置”概念，用以剖析作品中人物徘徊于自我肯定与自我否定之间的心理与道德状态，从而揭示在日朝鲜人分裂性意识的伦理存在特征。通过伦理线、伦理结与伦理悬置这三个相互关联的理论透镜，《蝴蝶打令》与《由熙》展现出伦理冲突如何同时构成其叙事结构与主题内核的双重驱动。最终，李良枝的文学实践表明，文学本身即是一种伦理实践：它通过对身份冲突的伦理反思，催生道德自觉，并邀请读者重新审视自我与他者之间的伦理关联。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；李良枝；《蝴蝶打令》；《由熙》；聂珍钊

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Introduction

In Japan, there exist communities of descendants of Koreans who migrated during the period of Japanese imperial rule. In Korea, these individuals—commonly referred to as Koreans in Japan¹ are often described as part of the “600,000 compatriots,” even though it remains difficult to determine their precise population. This complexity arises from the diverse legal and cultural statuses among Koreans in Japan. Some maintain their Korean nationality and affirm their identity through the possession of a Korean passport, while others have become naturalized Japanese citizens. There are also individuals who identify North Korea as their homeland and consequently face restrictions associated with North Korean passports. Even within a single family, it is not uncommon to find both naturalized and non-naturalized members. Furthermore, in today’s globalized context, a newer group—often referred to as “newcomers”—has emerged, comprising those who have relocated from Korea to Japan in recent years.

1 Also referred to as Zainichi Chosenjin, Zainichi Korean, Zainichi Kankokujin. Generally used terms expressed in English are used here.

Among these communities, writers who have made their literary debut in Japan and produce works in Japanese that portray the experiences of Koreans in Japan are collectively referred to as “Korean-Japanese writers”¹. This study examines the narrative structures of Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* (나비타령, 1982) and *Yuhi* (유히, 1988) to explore the ethical conflicts that characterize the literature of Koreans in Japan.²

This paper analyzes the ethical narrative structure using Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism Theory, applying the concepts of “ethical lines”³ and “ethical knots” (Nie 525-528).⁴ A previous study employing Ethical Literary Criticism proposed the concept of *ethical limbo* to explain the ethical conflicts experienced by Koreans in Japan. Building upon this framework⁵, the present study further examines how ontological anxiety produced through ethical self-exploration shapes the formation of Korean-Japanese identity. The research first explores the moral issues and historical dimensions underlying the literature of Koreans in Japan, within its broader ethical framework. It then analyzes how Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* and *Yuhi* develop into narratives of moral consciousness and reflects on the wider significance of their ethical vision.

The Korean-Japanese community and Lee Yangji as a backdrop

During the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), large numbers of Koreans

1 For a more detailed paper, please see Inseop Shin, “Post-colonial Narratives of Korean-Japanese Literature: Ethical Issues for the Displaced,” *Unitas* 1 (2018): 3-28.

2 Though supplementary, besides Lee Yangji, I will also briefly mention other authors such as Kim Sarang (金史良), Kaneshiro Kazuki (金城一纪), and Kang Sang-jung (姜尚中), pointing out the ethical devices central to their works. Through this, I aim to understand why Korean-Japanese writers' novels function as ethical texts.

3 The expression format of an ethical line is to directly weave the leading ethical issues within the entire literary work. See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, translated by Soon-jin Kim et al., Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Knowledge Publishing Content Center, 2022; Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

4 What is explained in the Korean review is “The ethical knot refers to the ethical contradictions and conflicts that are completed within the structure of a literary text by being penetrated or connected by the ethical line” (Jinhyoung Lee, “Popular Narrative and The ‘Ethical Turn’ in Literature” 344). For an example of application to Korean novels, see Jooyoung Kim, “A Korean Mobility-Themed Novel Read from an Ethical Literary Criticism Perspective: The Green Juice Girl Has No Time for Sorrow,” *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2021): 614-626.

5 See Inseop Shin, “The Review of ‘Koreans in Japan’ Novels Through the Lens of Ethical Literary Criticism: Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* and Other Stories,” *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2024): 702-713.

settled in Japan, including both voluntary migrants and forcibly mobilized laborers. Although many repatriated after liberation, a substantial population remained, forming the historical foundation of the Korean-Japanese community. In the post-war era, this community's ambiguous status—caught between two nations and cultures—emerged as a central social and ethical concern that continued to shape debates on identity, belonging and citizenship.

In this historical context, Koreans in Japan who chose to remain faced a profound ethical dilemma regarding their relationship with their homeland. Most first-generation Korean immigrants dispossessed of their nation after liberation chose to stay in Japan, raising their descendants while striving to preserve their Korean identity. This generation lived in a state of linguistic and cultural duality, navigating life simultaneously through both Korean and Japanese languages. Although their continued presence in Japan was met with ambivalence and, at times, hostility, expulsion was not a viable course of action for the Japanese government, which bore moral and political responsibility for imperialist past.¹

Over time, Japan's policies towards Koreans residing within its borders have gradually shifted toward greater flexibility compared to earlier decades. In contemporary society, a formal system has been established to categorize Koreans in Japan as permanent residents, and the process of naturalization has become more widely recognized and accessible.² Nevertheless, both overt and covert forms of discrimination and repression continue to affect this community. Living in Japan while striving to preserve Korean culture, they often find themselves—each prescribing different norms of belonging and morality. Their enduring identity crisis, in which they cannot fully belong to either culture, can be understood through three key dimensions:

Firstly, it is noteworthy to consider the ethical implications surrounding names. Names serve as vital symbols that reflect one's identity. In the context of Korea, historical events such as forced name changes during Japan's colonial rule resulted in Koreans bearing both their original Korean names and what were termed pass names (Japanese names). Consequently, their ethnic identity could vary depending on how they are addressed.

Secondly, discrimination against Koreans in Japan and the conflicts arising from naturalization are significant. This situation greatly differs from voluntary

1 See The Committee for Writing *the History of Korean Residents in Japan*. *The History of Korean Residents in Japan-History Textbook*, Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2006, 60-82.

2 See The Committee for Writing *the History of Korean Residents in Japan*. *The History of Korean Residents in Japan-History Textbook*, Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2006, 98-112.

immigration and obtaining foreign citizenship in today's globalized society. By contrast, most Zainichi Koreans are long-term residents with permanent residency and native-level Japanese proficiency. Therefore, the decision to acquire Japanese citizenship carries a far more complex significance. It represents not only a legal or administrative act but also a symbolic shift in the identity from Korean to Japanese, one that potentially disrupts their historical and cultural heritage.

There exists a spectrum of diversity ranging from those who choose naturalization and adopt Japanese pass names, to those who others reject such names to preserve their ethnic identity. The ethical dilemma emerges from the fact that, in the process of naturalizing, individuals are compelled to suppress or even negate their ancestral narrative rooted in the Korean Peninsula. Unlike in many other societies where dual citizenship is permitted or immigrant backgrounds are openly acknowledged, naturalization for Koreans in Japan is fraught with the weight of historical displacement and inherited stigma. This complexity provides a crucial lens through which to examine the intergenerational and familial ethical conflicts portrayed in Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng*, as will be discussed later.

Thirdly, the tension between the native language and the language of the host country constitutes another critical site of the ethical conflict. It is important to note that the global ethics surrounding multilingualism and language proficiency, commonly accepted in today's globalized world, do not easily apply to the Korean experience in Japan.

These three ethical circumstances profoundly shape the narrative structure of *the literature of Koreans in Japan*, particularly in relation to the formation of ethical lines and ethical knots as proposed in Nie Zhenzhao's theory of Ethical Literary Criticism. Each of these circumstances—naming, discrimination and naturalization, and the conflict between the Korean and Japanese languages—generates ethical tensions that shape the moral universe of Korean-Japanese literature. Within these frameworks, the characters in Lee's novels repeatedly cross over and recross the boundaries of selfhood, creating moments of rupture and reconciliation that resemble the drawing and untying of ethical lines and knots.

Lee Yangji was a writer who sought to weave her personal experience into her novels to explore the condition of living as a Korean in Japan. Previous studies (including "The Review of 'Koreans in Japan' Novels Through the Lens of Ethical Literary Criticism: Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng and Other Stories*") have traced the trajectory of identity conflict that later formed the foundation of her literary universe. Born in Kyoto to first-generation immigrants from Jeju Island, Lee Yangji grew up as a naturalized Japanese citizen yet later rediscovered her Korean heritage

through art and education. Her experiences of family discord, repeated flight from home, and eventual encounter with Korean traditional culture—particularly gayageum, pansori, and dance—profoundly shaped her creative imagination. These experiences gave rise to her debut work *Nabi T'aryŏng* and her award-winning novel *Yuhi*, both of which transformed personal struggle into ethical narrative.

Korean-Japanese writers' awareness of their names and how they use them

Previous studies on Kim Sa-ryang help contextualize the development of Zainichi (Korean-Japanese) literature and reveal important precedents for Lee Yangji's ethical concerns. Kim Sa-ryang, who emerged as a writer during Japan's colonial period, embodied the ambivalence and characteristics of colonial intellectuals (Kim, "The Identity of a Young Intellectual in Korea" 236). Kim is renowned for his novel *Into the Light*, which was nominated for the Akutagawa Prize, the most prestigious Japanese literary award, held semiannually. Although it did not win, *Into the Light* was groundbreaking in its exploration of ethical identity¹ as it relates to naming and recognition. The story revolves around a Korean university student who teaches at a night school alongside his Japanese peers. Despite his awareness of his Korean heritage, both his fellow teachers and the students address him by his Japanese name, exposing the ethical tension embedded in colonial identity.

I cannot recall exactly when, but at some point I became known as *Minami* (南) sensei (先生) within the association. As you may know, my surname should be pronounced *Nam* (南), yet for various reasons, I was addressed by its Japanese reading. Above all, it was likely because my colleagues called me so. At first, the thought weighed heavily on my mind. Later, however, I began to rationalize that it might be better this way, for the sake of playing along with these innocent children. Repeatedly I told myself that I harbored neither a hypocritical intent nor had I a reason to be servile. Perhaps I was simply preparing an excuse for myself that if there had been a Korean child in this class, I would have insisted that he call me Nam. (S. Kim 7) (*italics mine*)

The issue of naming does not trouble the protagonist until a young Korean student directly confronts him with a simple yet piercing question: "Why'd even someone like you, sir, wanna hide your family name, huh?" (S. Kim 8) In that moment,

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

he is rendered speechless—caught between shame and a desperate urge for self-justification, unable to articulate which name truly represents his identity. His silence signifies a moment of moral paralysis, awakening him to the realization that even the seemingly mundane act of choosing a name carries profound ethical implications. The novel employs this dilemma as a central narrative device, the protagonist's decision to reclaim his Korean name becomes both an ethical and cultural act of self-restoration.

However, it is important to note that such a narrative framework does not necessarily extend to all Koreans who have settled abroad. For instance, a Korean immigrant to the United States might prefer to be addressed as Tomas Park, as the surname Park already conveys his ethnic and familial identity. In contrast, Korean immigrants in Japan occupy a liminal condition in which the act of naming is fraught with historical and ethnical tension rather than being grounded in personal preference.

For them, choosing a name extends beyond a matter of simple identification—it becomes a moral signifier negotiated between assimilation and resistance. The protagonist's confusion, hesitation, and self-reproach vividly expose these tensions reflecting not only personal uncertainty but also the ethical contradiction of being simultaneously an insider and outsider within a single cultural system. This condition illustrates the term ethical limbo—a state that frequently serves as a central device in the literature of Koreans in Japan. Ethical limbo may be defined as “a state of psychological turmoil caused by the conflict between the self that seeks to establish a proper sense of identity and the self that negates its own existence” (Shin, “The Review of ‘Koreans in Japan’ Novels” 706).

In Japan, Koreans of Japanese descent are often perceived as secondary beings and historical burdens, a perception that perpetuates their social discomfort and marginalization. A notable example is Kang Sang-jung, a second-generation Korean in Japan who is a prominent scholar in Japan. During his university years, Kang abandoned his pass name Nagano Detsuo (永野鉄男) and reclaimed his original Korean name. He pursued studies in political philosophy at the University of Nuremberg and later became the first Korean resident with Korean citizenship to hold a professorship at the University of Tokyo.¹

The reclamation of Korean names became a significant ethical turning point for many Koreans in Japan. This transformation later appeared in third-generation works such as Kaneshiro Kazuki's *GO* (2000), where questions of identity are negotiated within a more globalized social context. Writing under his Japanese pass name, Kaneshiro interrogates the complexities of national identity and belonging in

1 See Sangjung Kang, *Living in Japan*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 2004, 69-135.

a postmodern Japan. However, despite his attempts to transcend national borders, his position as a Korean in Japan continues to complicate his negotiation with identity and social acceptance. Derogatory expressions such as “half-Japanese,” used even within Korea to stigmatize Koreans in Japan¹, and the persuasive notion that a Japanese partner might find such a background undesirable², expose the deep-seated prejudices embedded in both Korean and Japanese societies³.

In *Yuhi*, this tension is vividly articulated, whereas in *Nabi T'aryŏng*, the protagonist, aware of the significance of her Korean name, turns toward Korean traditional culture and engages in exchanges with the homeland, marking a process of ethical progression. Therefore, the main character who finds their name embarks on a journey towards their ethical identity. Korean-Japanese novels serve as narratives where individuals impose ethics upon themselves in order to establish their identity. Ultimately, this intersects with the universal theme of literature that prompts readers to examine their own ethics in how they treat others.

***Nabi T'aryŏng*: Discrimination and Naturalization**

Nabi T'aryŏng serves as the cornerstone of her literary legacy, delving into the psychological and moral conflicts that arise from the protagonist's process of ethical selection.⁴ The novel opens with the main character returning from Kyoto—her place of escape—to Tokyo, where she reunites with her older brother. Here, two principal narrative threads intertwine: one revolves around the ethical condition of the protagonist, a Japanese-born Korean, who fears renewed discrimination after choosing to naturalize as a Korean in Japan; the other concerns the familial conflict between the protagonist, who sides with her mother in an ongoing trial, and her older brother, who supports their father. Another narrative strand involves the protagonist's affair with a Japanese married man named Matsumoto. Her impulsive decision to love a man who already has a family is not ethically justified but accompanied by deep remorse, revealing the intricacies of moral consciousness and the human capacity for guilt.⁵

1 See Kazuki Kaneshiro, *GO*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 2000, 83.

2 See Kazuki Kaneshiro, *GO*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 2000, 178-179.

3 Inseop Shin and Jooyoung Kim, “Ethics of Father and Son in Ri's 流域へ (Watershed Above) and Kaneshiro's Go,” *GCLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5 (2015): 3-4.

4 See Nie Zhenzhao, “Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection,” *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

5 See Inseop Shin, “The Review of ‘Koreans in Japan’ Novels Through the Lens of Ethical Literary Criticism: Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* and *Other Stories*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2024): 708-710.

In Nie Zhenzhao's framework of Ethical Criticism, the ethical line refers to the moral boundary that governs human behavior and sustains identity within a given ethical order. Structurally, it functions as the central melodic line running vertically through a narrative, preserving ethical coherence and guiding the moral progression. Within this structure, the ethical knot signifies a point of tension or dissonance, where conflicting ethical forces become intertwined and demand resolution as the narrative unfolds.

The character's act of crossing the ethical line signifies a departure from their intrinsic moral values, thereby disrupting the ethical harmony of the narrative. In *Nabi T'aryŏng*, the protagonist's dual existence—torn between Japanese assimilation and Korean heritage—embodies this very ethical knot. The moment she conceals her ethnic identity in order to survive in Japanese society, she crosses the ethical line, distancing herself from her moral sense of authenticity rooted in her origins. Conversely, her later decision to reclaim her Korean name, Ae-ja, represents an effort to untie the knot and to realign her life with the ethical melody that defines her true self. Thus, *Nabi T'aryŏng* portrays ethical lines not as fixed boundaries but as shifting axes of identity and moral awakening. It is along this axis that the ethical consciousness of Koreans in Japan takes shape, articulating their perpetual negotiation between cultural assimilation and moral authenticity.

In this novel, the exploration of identity, deeply intertwined with ethical considerations, centers around the possibility of rebuilding a fractured sense of self. This expectation is reflected in the protagonist's psyche, who harbors resentment towards their father for naturalizing as a Japanese. Despite lacking concrete evidence, the protagonist suspects their father of having an affair with a Japanese woman and sides with their mother in their parents' conflict. However, as observed in the earlier discussion on the naming issue, the protagonist's attempt to conceal their Korean identity as a resident of Japan underscores the enduring presence of their Korean heritage even post-naturalization.¹

An electrician named Kanemoto, who frequently came to the inn, was obviously Korean; he spoke Japanese with a strong Korean accent [...] I paid close attention all the time to watch for any changes in everyone's attitude and behavior.

A terrible anxiety gripped me without ceasing. (Y. Lee, "Nabi T'aryŏng" 335)

1 See Jaebong Lee, "The Distance between 'Urinara/Korea', 'Urimal/Korean language'—Yangji Lee's Bilingual Literary World," *The Journal of Literary Theory* 51 (2012): 311.

Her worries turned out to be accurate. When she made her mistake at her ryokan, her innkeepers immediately discriminated against her because she was Korean.

“You ungrateful wretch!”

“We put up with you and let you work here, even knowing that you are Chōsen.”

[...]

“All Chōsen are ungrateful and shameless by nature. Ah, I’m so sick of them!”

(Y. Lee, “Nabi *T’aryŏng*” 341-342)

“Chōsen” is a term used by Japanese speakers to refer to Koreans residing in Japan. As shown in the excerpt, although the inn staff’s prejudice is not explicitly stated, their subtle contempt toward the protagonist—who conceals her ethnic identity—reveals the pervasive undercurrent of discrimination. While this episode may draw Lee Yangji’s own experiences working at a ryokan, it is important to clarify that she was not directly subject to such treatment. According to her biography, the ryokan owner was, in fact, a compassionate figure who supported her education. Thus, the ryokan scene should be read not as autobiographical realism, but as a narrative device illustrating the ethical complexities of discrimination faced by Koreans living in Japan.

In her essay *I am Korean*, written at the age of twenty, Lee Yangji recounts her family’s experiences as Koreans in Japan. Her parents migrated to Japan as teenagers and endured hardships, including periods of homelessness caused by unstable housing. Although they eventually achieved some economic stability, their home life remained fraught with conflict. Frequent and heated arguments often resembled battles between adversaries, sometimes escalated to discussions of divorce. During these disputes, Korean was spoken only occasionally. They refrained from eating kimchee at home, suppressing visible traces of Koreanness in their daily lives. It was not until high school, when Lee Yangji needed her family register for a study abroad exam, that she discovered her official status as a Korean residing in Japan. This was a revelation that fractured her assumed sense of belonging. “I constantly felt torn between the urge to hide, to keep hiding, and the desire to deny, shaking my head and saying no” (Lee, “I am a Korean” 585).

To combat discrimination, one must affirm rather than conceal one’s identity. For the protagonist, this act of affirmation begins with a simple yet profound request of being called by her Korean name “Ae-ja” instead of the Japanese name “Aiko.” She tells Matsumoto, “Please call me Ae-ja. I am Kim Ae-ja, not Aiko” (Y. Lee, “Nabi

T'aryŏng" 365). This declaration signifies more than a correction of name. It marks a moral awakening and an assertion of selfhood within a society that demands concealment. Yet, the protagonist's affair with a married Japanese man further highlights the ethical dilemma and the fragility of their identity.

At this juncture, the protagonist enters a state of ethical limbo, a psychological and moral condition in which her desire to affirm her Korean self-clashes with the internalized impulse to conceal it. As previously defined¹, this ethical limbo signifies to assert identity and the self that seeks to negate its own existence. The protagonist's hesitation between revealing and concealing her ethnic identity, between moral integrity and social survival, exemplifies this inner crisis. Suspended between two ethical poles, she personifies the divided consciousness of a Korean in Japan—a liminal being caught in the ceaseless motion between self-affirmation and self-denial.

Despite the evident portrayal in the novel that the relationship between the two characters is hindered by unrealistic and exaggerated revenge motives, the ethical complexities are strategically reinforced. Mirroring the family history of the author Lee Yangji, the deaths of both the elder and younger brothers ultimately lead to the resolution of the longstanding conflict between the parents through separation. As the protagonist grapples with these complex ethical dilemmas, the ethical boundary leads her towards Korea. Immersing herself in traditional Korean dance and mastering the "gayageum," she strives to embody the Korean spirit within herself. Yet, despite her efforts, she ultimately recognizes the impossibility of full belonging: neither wholly Japanese nor Korean, but exists as a Korean in Japan. This revelation strikes her most poignantly when she falters in pronouncing Korean words even on Korean soil.

"Ae-ja, when saying *p'okp'o*, you need build up tension around your lips and pronounce the syllables with a burst of air. Your pronunciation sounds like *bōbō* instead, which means 'to kiss' in Korean," [...] Hearing this laughter behind me sent my back muscles into spasm.

Afraid of staying in both Japan and *urinara*², [...] (Y. Lee, "Nabi *T'aryŏng*" 409-410)

The journey to establish the identity of being a Korean living in Japan was a process

1 See Inseop Shin, "The Review of 'Koreans in Japan' Novels Through the Lens of Ethical Literary Criticism: Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* and Other Stories," *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* 4 (2024): 706.

2 Korean for "our country."

of unraveling fundamental issues such as discrimination and naturalization. The narrative structure of *Nabi T'aryŏng* exemplifies how a Korean in Japan author operates ethical texts in a compelling way during this process.

Between Native Language and Mother Tongue: *Yuhi*

Yuhi is a novel that intricately portrays the ethical dilemmas arising from the clash between one's native language (language spoken in country of origin) and the host language (language used in the country of residence). While some may perceive the ability to speak both Korean and Japanese as a straightforward matter, the reality is far more nuanced.

Yuhi is a unique novel with a distinctive temporal and narrative structure. The narrative begins with the protagonist, referred to as "I," receiving a phone call from Yuhi, who is leaving for Japan, and abruptly ending the call. Rushing to the house of the aunt where Yuhi used to stay, "I" arrives only to find that Yuhi has already left. The narrative is led by "I" who reminisces the moments spent with her over a six month period she was absent. Yuhi addresses "I" as her older sister and follows her lead. Moreover, "I" serves as a guide, assisting Yuhi in embracing Korean culture as if she were a native. From the perspective of this facilitator "I," the narrative unfolds the process of Yuhi, a second-generation Korean resident in Japan, returning to Japan as neither a Korean nor Japanese. In contrast to *Nabi T'aryŏng*, where the protagonist, dealing with an identity crisis, narrates its inner thoughts in the first person perspective, here a third-person perspective is utilized to depict the inner self of a second-generation Korean in Japan. The narrator initially fails to understand the suffering of second-generation Koreans in Japan, but gradually recognizes that even empathy may reproduce subtle exclusion.

This novel explores discrimination among compatriots through the conflict between native language and mother tongue. Furthermore, Yuhi's poor Korean language skills, her experiences with the rudeness of compatriots, cultural maladjustment, and her attempt to sublimate these aspects through playing the gayageum are set as ethical knots, guiding the ethical line. For instance, second-generation Koreans in Japan, who experience discrimination merely because their ancestors came from Korea, are inherently subjected to ethical conflicts.

Yuhi, who found herself neither Japanese nor Korean, wrote about her limitations:

언니¹ Ōnni Ōnni

1 The book is written in Korean in this part. The same applies to the following lines.

저는 위선자입니다 *Chō nŭn wisŏnja imnida* I am a hypocrite

저는 거짓말쟁이입니다 *Chō nŭn kōjinmaljaeng'i imnida* I am a liar

When Yuhi had finished writing, she slammed the pen down on the notebook and picked up the bottle of shōchū. “Stop!” I said, trying to get the bottle away from her. But she wrenched it out of my hands and drained the remaining liquid in one swig. (Lee, “Yuhi” 91)

The self-reproach of admitting to oneself as a hypocrite stems from the unequal treatment experienced by Koreans in Japan, who face ethical suppression compared to Koreans or Japanese. For instance, individuals born in Japan readily embrace their Japanese identity stemming from their ancestral lineage and are spared from encountering comparable ethical suppression. Similarly, those born in Korea inherently recognize themselves as Korean by virtue of their ancestral heritage, thus eluding such suppression. Thus, the ethical narrative framework of *Yuhi* not only exposes the moral contradictions faced by Koreans in Japan but also invites readers to confront the ethical boundaries within their own consciousness, transforming the act of reading itself into a moral experience.

Yuhi undertakes an evaluation of Korea within this context.

“In this country, the students spit on the floor of the dining hall and don’t bother throwing away their garbage.” Yuhi said. “They don’t wash their hands when they go to the bathroom. They’ll borrow a textbook and write notes in it with a pen, and return it like nothing happened. This country’s people, as soon as they find out you’re a foreigner, they hike up their prices. When you share a cab with someone, they don’t even say thank you. They bump into you or step on your feet and don’t even say sorry. They yell for no reason. They never think of others [...]” (Lee, “Yuhi” 83)

The ethical knot critiquing Korea is epitomized by Yuhi’s portrayal of her homeland as a place riddled with moral shortcomings, referring to it simply as “this country.” She had no other choice but to represent Japan as “this country,” while also referring to Korea, the homeland she longed for, as “this country.”

The absence of “our country” is portrayed as a destiny for Koreans in Japan. Yuhi’s criticism of Korea is met with a defiant attitude from “I,” who finds it hard to accept. The following passage reflects the stereotypical views of Koreans who perceive Koreans in Japan as not being truly Korean.

“Yuhi, you’re a bigot! I guess *tongp’o* from Japan really are Japanese—no, you’re worse than Japanese, the way you look down on Korea. You whine about every little thing. You just can’t let anything go. I used to think you were just overly sensitive, but that’s not it. You’re narrow-minded. You’re a bigot,” I shouted at her once. I just couldn’t take it anymore.

“Well if it weren’t such a shitty country it wouldn’t be so easy,” she shot back. I almost lost it. I couldn’t believe how closed-minded she was. Always “this country” this, or “this country’s people” that. (Lee, “Yuhi” 84)

It is shocking to hear the remarks from “I,” who had endeavored to establish a close bond with Yuhi as well as a good understanding of her. Even as she comforts herself by attributing Yuhi’s suffering to the fate of compatriots raised outside their homeland, “I” consciously regards Yuhi as foreigners, redrawing the very national boundaries of “Korean” and “Japanese.” The imagery of delineating the boundaries between Korea and Japan and placing the severed “Koreans in Japan” on both sides. This, indeed, was another face of the category of compatriots.

From the perspective of Nie Zhenzhao’s Ethical Literary Criticism, Yuhi vividly illustrates the dynamic interplay of the ethical line, the ethical knot, and the emergence of ethical limbo. In this novel, the ethical line does not signify a fixed moral boundary but rather the ethical current of the narrative that guides the trajectory of the protagonist’s moral consciousness. It unfolds through Yuhi’s continual pursuit of authenticity amid self-examination and critique.

Her self-declaration as a “hypocrite” marks the precise moment where the ethical line momentarily falters, giving rise to an ethical knot within the narrative’s moral flow. This knot emerges as Yuhi becomes ensnared with the conflicting imperatives of belonging and estrangement, love and resentment, homeland and exile. When she confronts the discriminatory realities in both Japanese and Korean societies, the ethical line is bent and distorted—its moral movement obstructed by contradictions that defy resolution.

Yuhi’s repeated reference to both Japan and Korea as “this country” reveals the ethical knot at work: she is unable to sustain a continuous ethical line capable of connecting her fractured identities with a single moral rhythm. The absence of “our country” (*uri nara*, 우리나라) exposes the impossibility of ethical coherence for Koreans in Japan, whose historical and linguistic dislocation fractures their moral continuity. This loss of alignment draws Yuhi into a state of ethical limbo—a suspended moral and psychological space between self-affirmation and self-negation. In this liminal condition, she is neither reconciled nor fully alienated,

but drifts along a distorted ethical line. Her linguistic frustration and emotional exhaustion, expressed through contempt toward both nations, are not signs of arrogance but expressions of ethical fatigue within a divided world that denies belonging.

At the same time, the narrator's retort—"You're worse than Japanese"—further distorts the ethical line, marking the moment where moral distance between insider and outsider is reaffirmed. Yet this distortion rather than dissolving tension, only tightens the ethical knot, entrapping both characters within the same structure of exclusion. Through this dialectical interplay of movement and entanglement, *Yuhi* emerges as a narrative of ethical confrontation, where the protagonist's moral struggle unfolds along the oscillating rhythm of the ethical line. Ultimately, Lee Yangji discloses that ethical limbo is not merely a state of psychological confusion but an inevitable condition of disclosed existence for Koreans in Japan—a suspended line of becoming that defines their moral trajectory and narrative identity.

Conclusion

This study has examined the narrative structures of Lee Yangji's *Nabi T'aryŏng* and *Yuhi* to illuminate the ethical dynamics that define the literature of Koreans in Japan. The analysis focused on three key dimensions of identity formation—naming, discrimination and naturalization, and the tension between native and host languages—which together construct the ethical environment in which the characters exist. These dimensions do not simply delineate moral boundaries; rather generate a sustained ethical current running through the entire narrative, functioning as ethical lines. Within this flow, moments of conflict and hesitation crystallize into ethical knots, where competing ethical imperatives, emotional attachments, and social obligations intertwine to suspend the narrative's movement.

In this sense, Lee Yangji's literature reveals a continuous process of drawing, distorting, and reweaving the ethical lines. When the flow of the ethical line falters, the characters enter a state of ethical limbo—a space of moral suspension in which affirmation and denial of identity coexist. This triadic movement of line, knot, and limbo structures Lee's narrative ethics, transforming the struggle for identity into an aesthetic of ethical rhythm.

Through this framework, Lee Yangji transforms the personal trauma of living between two nations into a mode of ethical reflection. *Nabi T'aryŏng* unfolds as a narrative of untying one's knots—tracing the return from concealment to recognition—while *Yuhi* exposes the fragility of the ethical line itself, depicting the anguish of those who drift perpetually between two moral worlds. Together, these

works reveal how the literature of Koreans in Japan becomes a form of ethical narration, where the very act of storytelling itself operates as a moral gesture toward self-understanding and coexistence. Ultimately, Lee Yangji's fiction transforms ethical conflict into a form of moral reflection, inviting readers to reconsider belonging, exclusion, and otherness beyond national and linguistic boundaries.

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