

# **Sex and the City: The Female Gaze, Resilient Body and Urban Desire In The Poetry of Ch'oe Yong-mi<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Sex and the City: Introductory Remarks**

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

I am left wondering what could be the origin of the shock factor that these critics identify? Could it be the in-your-face quality of her imagery? These (male) commentators are as 'honest (Y Kim 121)' as the poet they welcome wholeheartedly, whose gritty urban realism they interpret, quite rightly and generously, as 'youthful honesty expressed in the language of urbane sensitivity (Ch'oe Won-shik 1994)'. I agree; I read that, too. She must be indeed a 'Seoul woman *par excellence* just like her poetry (Y Kim 119)'; and not only does she have, allegedly, the 'tall slim body (Y Kim 119)' of a sophisticated Seoulite, she must also have the resilient body of a

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<sup>1</sup> All translations in this essay are my own; see Appendix for a full translation of the poems cited in this essay. An earlier, shorter version has appeared in *Naked Punch* 03 ([www.nakedpunch.com](http://www.nakedpunch.com)) and a different version of 'At Thirty, The Party is Over,' on which Sara Maguire and Kyoo Lee worked together, has appeared in *Poetry Review* 94.4 (Winter 2004/5).

city dweller. Ch'oe, the poet, has the urbanity of Kim Soo-young, the blood of revolutionaries, and the slipperiness of postmoderns: all at once. She is, in a word, complicated.

Now then, I want to talk 'fight' – about the theme of fighting that runs through Ch'oe's poetry. The text I am going to use is her first anthology, *At Thirty, The Party is Over*, which muscled its way onto the contemporary Korean literary scene in 1994. My immediate aim here is to introduce her work to a wider range of readership outside Korea. Although this is only a brief introduction, a close reading of her text, I hope, may also help us understand the on-going 'postmodernist' or 'new-age' trend in Korean literature that started, roughly speaking, from the late 1980s, coinciding with the end of the military regime and the beginning of a democratic era, and, as a result, with the disappearance of the enemy and the appearance of a lost generation. I do not, however, intend to go into any extensive analysis either of Korean postmodernism or of the work of Ch'oe taken as a whole. Although some issues arising from, and conceived in terms of, feminist literary criticism, are introduced in the commentary that follows, this will not lead to any in-depth discussion, textual or contextual. I am going to leave such a project to more capable hands, hoping that I myself may in the future have a chance to develop some of the ideas I have touched upon. The scope of this essay is therefore limited to that extent, and the style of reading highly subjective. What I wish to do in what follows is merely to spotlight some recurrent themes in the poetry of Ch'oe, which I will divide into three sections, and to set up an interpretative framework around each topical heading as a way of exploring the 'newness' and power of her poetic sentiment, of which I have already spoken briefly, and which remains

relatively unexplored. The first theme I want to touch on, as indicated above, is that of fighting.

**Poetics of Resistance: I Fight, Therefore I Am.**

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

The transparent makes me drunk.  
Poetry does it,  
alcohol does it.  
[...]

Whenever in fight with someone, I become transparent,  
fiercely  
freely  
transparent.  
A proof that I am still all right  
a proof that I can still feel pain  
that something is still alive.

On a day when transparent things fight transparently,  
one does not get drunk, no matter how much is taken in.  
(‘I Live Because’)

I will discuss ‘the transparent’ later on in section four. Here, I wish to focus on the centrality of the ‘I’ that fights – the *body* of the ‘I’, to be more specific. Fighting presupposes endurance. Endurance is an enabling condition for confrontation. In a fist fight, for instance, what has to remain solid, as a rule, is the fist. The same principle applies to a more idealised kind of fight, such as a war between two nations or a class struggle: each

party has to keep alive the cause for which the fighting takes place. In the case of Ch'oe, the struggle is inward. What she fights against is nothing other than herself, her postmodern self prone to despair. In the face of the fundamental obscurity of postmodern life she demands 'proof' – proof that the lyrical I remains alive. Ch'oe's poetry transforms the banal, amorphous I into an experiential, and explicitly bodily I that is at once explosive and sensual, which renders the whole process of poetic self-confrontation more enjoyable than painful:

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

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

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

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

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

But tell me, so what?  
(‘At Thirty, The Party is Over’)

The poet's I is torn between two choices: either heading home just like others, or staying there, preparing for another party, all alone, all over again. This is a scene that must be fairly familiar to those who lived through the turbulent Korea of the late 1980s, when there was a sense of new beginning in the air, whether negative or positive. The most obvious image evoked in ‘At thirty’ is that of weary local leftists having a *soju*<sup>2</sup> meeting at their favourite haunt, somewhere in the backstreets of *Shinchon*, the heavily commercialised yet still youthfully preserved, university area in Seoul. One may easily and convincingly provide a socio-political reading of this passage. Yet the ‘we, the people,’ implicit in this piece, is also open to a number of other different readings, such as gender-political, anthropological, or even ego-psychological, which I am not ready to explore here in detail. A more general point I wish to make here concerns the *location* of Ch'oe's

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<sup>2</sup> Korean sake, cheap and strong, 100% chemical

'bloody struggle' (Y Kim 122), or the resiliency of her poetic ego, the singular I. For her, to write is to fight against the nothing, the misery of being reduced to nothing, often cushioned by the inward smile of postmodern cynicism – 'Tell me, so what? ('At Thirty')'. Despite her pronounced gregariousness, she is alone in this fight against her cynical self. Her poetic belligerence comes from a natural, intuitive anger, the anger of being lost, being left alone at the party.

Exposed in her poems are not only the playfulness, but also the relentlessness of such a state of 'postmodern madness', the madness of poetic hunger caught between the freedom of a flying bird and the destiny of starving animals:

A bird gliding through one perfect line,  
as if it knew whereto,

the sky the sliding bird slit open, dazzling blue,

that afternoon sky under which I dream of postmodern  
madness,

those unable to find seats were standing at the entrance of a  
restaurant, without a queue.

('The Hunger of a Survivor')

Often portrayed in her poems with visual precision and dramatic humour is the post-capitalist urban fatigue of Seoul, the place the poet nevertheless refuses to leave. Ch'oe's weapon is the poignancy of microscopic realism, another more recent example of which can be found in Ha Sung-nan's novel, *The Woman Next Door* (1999), where the obsessive energies of female

scopophilia find a novelistic expression.

### **'I Saw It': A Transparent Gaze**

I saw it:  
food worms<sup>3</sup> crawling into *soondae*<sup>4</sup>.  
(‘Seoul Underground 1’)

Ch’oe’s voyeurism is more comical than cruel and yet, as with all good comedies, the humour of her poetry carries an echo of something not so funny. She is a bit like ‘a dirty little secret’ revealed in a poetic form. Her poetry speaks not gently but poignantly and it bespeaks the practical truth that obscurity is not only the opposite of clarity, but its opponent.

For instance, the exacting edginess of Ch’oe’s poetic sentiment certainly is not ‘feminine’ in the conventional sense of the word. A case in point is the poem entitled ‘What It Means To Be Alone,’ which depicts the desperate loneliness of a woman eating ‘hot *soondae* soup’ all alone in a squalid *shilbi-jip*<sup>5</sup> territorialised by working class male customers. Such a *soondae*-eating, *soondae*-observing woman cannot be the same as the one featured in ‘Oh, thou flower standing in front of the mirror, looking like my elder sister’ (‘Master Midang’). Rather, Ch’oe’s I of ‘I saw it’ is the other, less elegant sister, fiercely more perceptive and fiercely more voracious:

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<sup>3</sup> ‘food worm’ is a literal translation of ‘*bop-bullae*’, ‘*bop*’ meaning rice or food stuff, and ‘*bullae*’, a worm; a ‘food worm’ in colloquial Korean is equivalent to ‘a good-for-nothing’, i.e. an idle person.

<sup>4</sup> ‘*soondae*’ is not a sundae misspelled, but Korean-style black pudding, emblematic of inelegant peasant food.

Boning a grilled *goolbi*<sup>6</sup> on breakfast table,  
I saw it,  
the secrets of the body finally revealed.  
Five viscera and six entrails, the flesh shattered and scattered,  
is this what is called the truth?  
[...]  
Ripping off the dead flesh, I realised  
wounds were the clothes of the living, only the living,  
a promise that I won't be in pain any longer  
(‘The Recollections of the Last Sex’)

When, with the sore imprint on the first apple  
biting a circle out of the crescent,  
a fat candle completes a night  
[...] before me who hesitates, first, love comes.  
(‘First, it’)

What we see here is the fighter's gaze, fighter's body, fighter's desire, not the Romantic shackle of feminised consciousness but a focused articulation of female desire which recognises the disgusting truth of carnal violence as well as its fatal attraction. A hard woman is always trouble, added sensitivity makes her a hardcore poet. True, this explicitly and explosively ‘female’ voice and body, as feminist scholar Kim Hye-sook observes painfully (1995), has long been silenced and controlled by traditional Confucian ideology that uses literature as a disciplinary apparatus, as a means to transform the potentially threatening female gaze into a docile mirror which reflects nothing other than its arbitrary, patriarchal values. If verbal inhibition is a form of oppression, verbal explication can be used as a political means to resist such oppressive power.

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<sup>5</sup> Somewhere between a pub and a budget restaurant, popular amongst manual workers and local men, ‘*shilbi*’ means no-nonsense price, and ‘*jip*,’ house or place.

<sup>6</sup> ‘*Goolbi*’ is dried corbina, a popular side dish in Korean cuisine, considered a delicacy, more luxurious than cod or mackerel.

The suggestion here is, namely that the ‘transparent’ gaze of Ch’oe’ poetry, often mirrored in her painterly language, can be read as a potential weapon, a feminist weapon, for instance.

The implicit hardness and resiliency of Ch’oe’s ‘body’ language also exemplifies what Kim Mi-hyun (1996) calls the female ‘poetics of in-between-ness’, where silence intersects with talkativeness, and lack with excess. A ‘quivering concentration’ of erotic energy, described below, is a kind of secret, ‘orgasmic’ experience, arguably exclusive to female – not necessarily feminine – imagination:

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

Such a concrete, bodily dynamism of ‘in’ (e.g. ‘pushing’) and ‘out’ (e.g. ‘pushed’), caught in the lively imagination, is already detectable in Ch’oe’s preoccupation with the language of digestion (food and drinks), which she uses skilfully and poetically. If her ‘sex and drink’ poems concern the interior and intensity of the body, her ‘*jihachul* (underground train)’ poems, by contrast, focus on its extensiveness, the human body as a psychophysical entity in itself, a mobile weapon even (see Appendix, poems 7 and 8). Ch’oe, the poet who not only gazes at, but more importantly thinks *with*, the body, pulls it out from the amorphous mass of flesh. With her amorous, poetic touch, the body is transformed from an inert, ignorable mass/mess to a

dynamic site where the subjective forces and dramas of desire, passivity and aggression are present all at once, present in a form that is either intensely and repeatedly repressed (7) or less opaque and more straightforward (8). The body she portrays, with a surgical yet self-implicative humour, is sad yet also funny – exquisite even when sagging.

### **Alternatively Pornographic: Liquidisation of The Corporeal**

There are elements of masochistic solipsism in Ch'oe's poetic sentiment. True, there are elements of claustrophobic monologue in her poetic language. Some may see these elements as regressive rather than transgressive, and reactionary rather than revolutionary: in other words, as interesting only in commercial terms. The charge of sensationalism or aesthetic nihilism, often raised against her, can be understood in this regard.

While granting, to a certain extent, these critical points, I would like however, in conclusion, to propose a slightly different, more constructive way of reading Ch'oe's poetry, a kind of reading that makes her neither 'a Seoul chic' nor 'a mad woman in the attic,' but a woman with a delightful, pornographic insight. By 'pornographic' here, I mean initially, of course, 'sexually explicit.' But this widely accepted notion seems barren and mechanical, charged only with phallic aggression. What this word does is merely to make corporeal i.e. solidify objectively the tightly binarised aggressive-passivity of sexual acts. In other words, it remains ultimately impotent in the face of the more fluid, female joy, or *jouissance*.' Hence, in conventional pornography palatable to the 'male' viewer, for instance, the focus, whether literal or allegorical, is laid on the ultimate object, the

phallus; with this, the liquid capacity of her vagina (as in the ‘wetness’ of ‘pussy’ as the barometer of her sexiness) becomes only a supplementary and ultimately unmasterable measure against which the solidity (‘hardness’ and ‘volume’) of his penis can be sized up. To this rather photographic, object-oriented notion of ‘explicitness,’ I would like to add some painterly, subjective dimension, which Ch’oe calls ‘the transparent.’ The point to note is that Ch’oe’s transparency is more liquid than solid, her poetry is transparent to the point of *becoming* watery:

[...]

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

This morning-after reminiscence started with *goolbi*, the dried fish; and it is now ending with something qualitatively different – saliva. Likewise, the poem opens with the crisp morning light, closing with an unintentionally lubricated mouth. In the poetic space of Ch’oe, aggressive optics dissolves into, and is transformed into, a taste, a reclaimed taste of orgasm, as it were, which remains intensely private, yet not necessarily unsharable.

A similar interplay between the solid and the fluid, between the airy and the watery, takes place in the following poem:

[...]  
shall I play a cold fish or stage a maudlin show?  
Not knowing where to put the bandaged finger,  
shall I grip the tea-cup or rest it on my lap chastely?  
Shall I lower my eyelids or steal a glance?  
A weedy DMZ in my heart<sup>7</sup>, lodged somewhere,  
all these seasons I have never known  
where to anchor or discover, will you enter?  
Will you someday suddenly wet the bottom of the passing  
showers?

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

wishing it rained at least.  
(‘A DMZ in My Mind’)

‘Will you someday suddenly wet the bottom of the passing showers?’ – this odd yet beautiful sentence is a product of an exquisite, complex word play on ‘judd’ and its linguistic neighbours: ‘judd’ (breasts or rather, boobs), ‘judd-da’ (to be wet or to wet, homophonic with ‘to stir’), ‘gutt-da’ (to walk). At this point, ‘judd’ the noun, the objectified ‘boobs,’ turns into ‘judd-da,’ the verb and the action, the transition, is sudden, unscheduled.

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<sup>7</sup> ‘kasum’, also meaning breast.

Are we then ready to walk into this zone? Are we persuaded?  
Tempted? Why not?

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Appendix

*At Thirty, the Party Is Over.*

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

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**1. At Thirty, The Party Is Over.**

Of course I know

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

The party is over.

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

But tell me, so what?

**2. The Hunger of a Survivor**

A bird gliding through one perfect line,  
as if it knew whereto,

the sky the sliding bird slit open, dazzling blue,

that afternoon sky under which I dream of postmodern madness,

those unable to find seats were standing at the entrance of a restaurant,  
without a queue.

### **3. The Recollections of the Last Sex**

Boning a grilled goolbi on breakfast table,

I saw it,

the secrets of the body finally revealed.

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

One layer behind is a story, frighteningly simple,

reduced to the bones and flesh, like the private parts of that night.

Ripping off the dead flesh, I realised

wounds were the clothes of the living, only the living,

a promise that I won't be in pain any longer.

That sort of love I've made several times.

That morning shine, pouring in from the sky,

the glorious scales, the layers of cloud, removed,

You and I, shrinking with the shell, startled by the transparency,

pierced the cold scales into all over the bodies, not knowing who goes first.

The words stirring with life

the gestures hungry for life

all lost, I chewed

the recollections of the last sex

flooding into my mouth.

### **4. First, It**

comes, with its head bowed down

with the energy that warms and cools the pavement

with the silent force with which a bedroom closet closes

with a few crystal beads of sweat on the nervous forehead  
love comes.

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

like the whine of a whinging child  
like the consolation of a steamless tea  
beyond the ennui beyond the reflection  
perhaps love comes.

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

### **5. I Live Because**

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

Whenever in fight with someone, I become transparent,  
fiercely  
freely  
transparent.  
A proof that I am still all right  
a proof that I can still feel pain  
that something is still alive.

On a day when transparent things fight transparently,

one does not get drunk, no matter how much is taken in.

### 6. Seoul Underground 1

I saw it:  
food worms crawling into *soonda*.

### 7. Seoul Underground 2

The next station is Shinrim.  
The doors will open on the **right** side.  
The next station is...  
Hearing the announcement making its way, suddenly I,  
through the left **mouth**<sup>8</sup> firmly closed, wanted to go.

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

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

perhaps it is only me who is in exile  
from the ground to the underground,  
pushed along, alone into the hell-train<sup>9</sup>,  
entertaining such doubts, everyday, like having a meal, like going to work,  
lightly,

<sup>8</sup> Translator's note: a pun on the word 'ip-gu', meaning an entrance or gate. 'Ip', used as a verb, means 'to enter', and used as a noun, a mouth; and 'gu' also means a mouth.

<sup>9</sup> Translator's note: a word play on the word, 'ji-ha-chul', meaning a subway (ji-ha) train (chul). The word used here is 'ji-ok-chul', meaning a train to hell (ji-ok).

forgetting such thoughts,

click,

the next station is Shinrim.

The doors will open on the **right** side.

The next station is...

### **8. Seoul Underground 4**

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

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

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

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

### **9. Unrequited Love**

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

### **10. A DMZ in My Mind**

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

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

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

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

wishing it rained at least.

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