
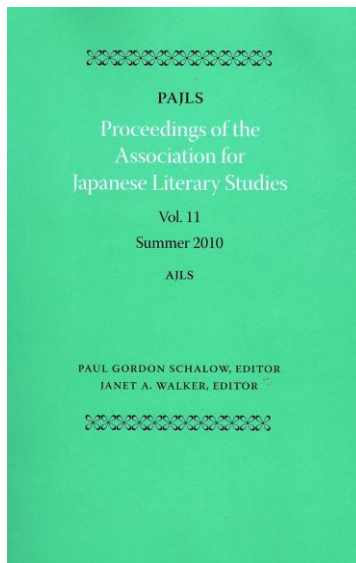


“Spatially Conceived: Gender, Desire, and Identity
in Yi Yang-Ji’s *Yuhi*”

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Spatially Conceived

Gender, Desire, and Identity in Yi Yang-Ji's *Yuhi*

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Over the last two decades, Yi Yang-ji's 李良枝 (1955–92) Akutagawa-Award winning novel, *Yuhi* 由熙 (1988),¹ has gained canonical status within the emergent field of *zainichi* 在日 studies in Japan and abroad. Featuring a second-generation *zainichi* Korean woman as its eponymous protagonist, this novel has generally been interpreted by literary critics and scholars alike as representative of a psychological turmoil in *zainichi* Koreans responding to their given hybrid identity, which in turn is rooted in the interstices of two nation-states, Korea and Japan.² The dominant critical intervention of the novel stems from the very question that the fictional native Korean characters—Yuhi's landlady and her niece by marriage—themselves have raised on the very evening of Yuhi's departure from their home but are unable to answer: "Why did Yuhi suddenly abandon her Korean studies and return to Japan"? Since this question remains unresolved within the novel, any attempt to uncover Yuhi's reasons requires sifting through, for possible indications however small and insignificant, the niece-cum-narrator's recollections about Yuhi. Yet, a critical interpretation drawn from this first-person narrator's rather limited understanding of Yuhi's life—an understanding calibrated only in terms of Yuhi's oscillations between Korean and Japanese identities—does not, and cannot, illuminate the overall significance of the highly self-conscious literary work that is *Yuhi*.

¹For this study, I used the Kōdansha publication of *Yuhi* (1989) as the main text for my analysis of the novel. The English translations and paraphrases of the original text cited in this study are my own.

²In recent scholarship in the U.S., Sonia Ryang and John Lie have been by far the most prolific authors on subjects related to *zainichi*. In their publications, Yi Yang-ji's *Yuhi* is treated as a major work of *zainichi* writings that showcases *zainichi* experiences, both personal and collective, in terms of language and identity. For their most recent critical reflections on *Yuhi*, see Lie 2009; Ryang 2008.

Of several indicators of the novel's self-conscious literariness,³ the narrative prominence of the three female characters is the one that I am particularly interested in exploring in this study. Notably, no living male characters of import appear in the novel, thereby throwing into higher relief than otherwise the question of gender, in particular the female gender, as the centerpiece of the author's meditation on identity construction.⁴ Yet, to date, no one has satisfactorily explored the significance of the female gender in Yi's novelistic interrogation of identity construction. This study is an attempt to address precisely that critical lacuna. To state my conclusion first, *Yuhi* is a finely executed picture of how a woman—*zainichi* or not—carves out her place in relation to the symbolic order of the world, that is, in relation to the patriarchal structures of power instituted in and by compulsory heterosexual marriage and mandatory national belonging.

Yi paints a nuanced portrayal of that very process of identity construction by imaginatively bringing together the lives of three females—two single women and a widow living in a house located in a quiet, old suburban district of Seoul. That is to say, the main characters in *Yuhi* are all marginally situated vis-à-vis the institution of compulsory heterosexual marriage, as well as the structures of power buttressed by the postwar ideology of nation-state building. By employing figures whose identities are not directly tied to the maintenance of the hegemonic ordering principles of society of which they are members, the author investigates, as will be seen presently, the persistent forces that pressure psychical structures so that desiring subjects—in the Lacanian sense of the term—emerge in the process

³The most obvious indicator is the author's construction of the narrator. Yi assigns this role to the niece character, a native South Korean, but denies her any Japanese language skills. Although many novels in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries feature narrators who express themselves in an idiom that is not directly tied to their national, regional, or socio-economic origins, or other markers of their social or historical identity, the case of the niece's monolingualism suggests something other than simply that the author wanted to communicate to a Japanese readership through the exotic device of a non-Japanese narrator's unfamiliar yet equally prejudiced national stereotyping. In *Yuhi*, the author has actually created the novel's own particular system of signification based on the premise of the narrator's language skills, or the lack thereof, as a means to sever the naturalized association between national identity and national language. Another indicator of the author's self-conscious construction of the novel is how she maps out international geopolitical spaces through the figures of daughters and their particular linguistic identity: the niece with Korean, *Yuhi* with Japanese, and the family's daughter with English. Then, the author interweaves their lives by bringing them together via their relationships with their respective father figures, both biological and symbolic. In so doing, Yi combines the experiences of different generations into the collective experience of colonial and postcolonial Korea vis-à-vis Japan. This is a topic I will deal with in depth in my next study of *Yuhi*. There are other numerous features that point to the author's highly wrought architectonic conceptualization of the novel.

⁴One exception is the real estate agent who first introduced *Yuhi* to the family. However, in the niece's recollections, he does not appear in person but only through a phone conversation between him and the niece-cum-narrator (pp. 27–29).

through which the three women forge their respective identities vis-à-vis others who constitute their world.⁵

To begin with, it is crucial to recognize that within the niece's recollections the three women living together at the house have one thing in common: they are in transit and thus call attention to the author's novelistic conceit of identity construction in terms of an incessant process of negotiation and renegotiation of various forces that shape a woman's sense of belonging in relation to the symbolic order that structures her life. Yuhi, a single woman aged twenty-seven and a rent-paying lodger hailing from Japan, is expected to leave the house and return home after she completes her studies. Even the landlady herself, a widow in her mid-to-late fifties and the legal owner of the house, plans to move to the U.S., where her only daughter, now married to a Korean American, lives in New York. This plan is based on her expectation that her non-rent paying niece, in her mid-thirties and from a nearby province will get married too and move out of the house.

Given the trajectories of their lives, the very fact that these three women occupy the same place at the same time even for a moment is of no ordinary occurrence, and thus points to the singular significance the author invests in this narrative situation itself. Figuratively speaking, their cohabitation of six months is a time during which the three female characters, like heavenly bodies in motion, momentarily come together and align themselves vis-à-vis one another. Seen from this perspective, a new line of critical inquiry presents itself: "What sustains the cohabitation of these women for as long as six months?" This is a question that the fictional characters do not, and cannot, raise or answer themselves, but it can potentially advance our understanding of the author's novelistic conceit of identity construction. The answer is actually posited within the question itself: the women stay together at the house because it contains the objects of their desires; namely, the women themselves. What is not so apparent, however, is the process through which each character's circuit of desire becomes entwined with that of another, and how in the course of pursuing the objects of their individually constituted desires in the other women, their respective identities emerge as the desiring subject. This study, then, is a preliminary investigation of that very process.

The lives of the two South Korean women, prior to Yuhi's arrival at the house, form the backstory of the novel, or the narrative unconsciousness, as it were. The niece offers only a fleeting glimpse into this portion of the family history in her recollections of Yuhi, which occur within a space of two or three hours, starting

⁵By alluding to Lacanian psychoanalysis, I do not mean to suggest that I am trying to privilege this Western critical framework as the most effective lens through which to interpret the novel. Rather, I want to underscore that only something like a Lacanian-informed analysis could possibly approximate and illuminate the complexity of Yi Yang-ji's novelistic conceit behind *Yuhi*. The task of defining the Lacanian notion of the desiring subject is beyond the scope of this study and, on that topic, see Fink 1995.

not long after Yuhi's flight for Japan departed at four o'clock.⁶ That is to say, the narrative present covers a period of no more than three hours: from about six o'clock to nine o'clock or so in the evening. The backstory itself, however, spans over a decade within the niece's own lifetime, beginning with her first arrival at the house when her late uncle, the patriarch of the family, was still alive.⁷ This time span is further expanded through the memories her aunt shares with her of her husband's family from as far back as the time of Colonial Korea. A portion of this backstory can be pieced together by analyzing the emphasis the niece herself places on the spatial relations forged and maintained by the two women up to the point of Yuhi's arrival. Thus, this "narrative unconsciousness" is, as will be discussed presently, a fertile site for gaining an initial understanding of the author's novelistic exploration of identity construction in spatial terms.

It is of great import that the landlady's niece continues to occupy a small study-cum-storage room on the second floor, even when a larger room, that is, her cousin's, becomes available after the cousin's marriage.⁸ Apparently, the aunt, a financially well-established matron, would rather rent out her daughter's vacant room to a stranger for extra income than offer it to her niece-in-law, who has been living in the same house for over a decade.⁹ The aunt's unwillingness to confer on the niece the symbolic status of the family's daughter signifies the failure of these two women to establish an intimate relationship beyond what is required of them by the familial connections that had initially brought them into each other's lives.¹⁰ Hence, the hybrid nature of the niece's designated room, a study-cum-storage room,

⁶Throughout the novel, the narrator emphatically marks the passage of time. When the novel begins, the reader encounters the character "I" in relation to her preoccupation with time. She looks at her wrist watch, marking that it is four o'clock, then glances at the office clock to observe that it is indeed four o'clock. She subsequently leaves work just when it turns six o'clock (p. 7). The reader learns later that Yuhi's flight to Japan departed at four o'clock (p. 22). Finally, toward the end of the novel, the aunt remarks, after dinner, that Yuhi must have reached her house by now since it would have taken her about three hours from Narita Airport (p. 113).

⁷The niece has been working for more than twelve years for a small magazine publisher specializing in history and classical art—a job that her uncle had procured for her (p. 25).

⁸In a relatively early portion of the novel, the narrator explains: "My uncle passed away in the summer of my fourth year of college. He had built the house and then died soon after. It was decided that I would occupy the room that used to be his study as well as a storage area" (p. 25).

⁹In the early part of the novel, the niece explains that her cousin's wish is to have her mother sell the house, which is apparently costly to maintain, and buy an apartment in the Kan'nam area, an area synonymous with a posy style of living, but the widow does not want to live in that newly developed area (p. 26).

¹⁰In the novel, there are several indications that, between them, the aunt and the niece have not developed an intimate relationship. The niece describes her life with her aunt at the house, prior to Yuhi's arrival, as "a quiet living" (*Shukubo to futari kiri de shizuka ni kurashite kite ita*, p. 26). Even when her cousin was still living with them, the niece characterizes her life at the house in terms of not having any particular problems (*kimazui koto mo butsukaru koto mo hotondo naku*, p. 26) rather than in terms of warm feelings she entertains for her aunt and her cousin. As Norma Field rightly observes, only a single depiction of physical contact between the aunt and the niece occurs in the entire novel, that is, toward the end of the novel when, after dinner, the niece massages her aunt's sore knee (p. 116). But Field offers this observation simply as an example of

reflects the hybrid nature of her identity established at the house.¹¹ The niece is simultaneously both an insider and an outsider, whose temporary residence at the house is sustained through the expectation and obligation ironically born out of the long history of her stay there.¹²

Unlike the niece, whose identity at the house is defined by the nature of the one room she occupies, the aunt's identity is determined by the nature of her relationship to the entire house. But, just as the niece's occupancy of a single room is an expression of her kinship with her late uncle, the aunt's ownership of the house is a manifestation of her marital ties with the same man. That is to say, the legal nature of their relationship, combined with the effect of its long duration, together with the birth of their child, has altered the aunt's initial status as an outsider to her husband's family. The transformation of her status into that of an insider is so complete that her life story prior to her marriage and the history of her own natal family are rendered irrelevant to the widow's self-perception, that is, at least in the story told by the niece, who is acutely aware of her own marginal status. Precisely in this sense, the widow's legal ownership of the house signifies her naturalized permanent insider status. In her husband's death/absence, the widow thus exercises her authority as the head of the family by allowing the niece to stay in the house for an indefinite period of time. In so doing, the widow is also able to postpone what she views as her own inevitable departure for the U.S. to be with her married daughter. In short, even though the niece may have been an unwelcome addition to the family, her presence accommodates the widow's desire to remain longer in the house—a concrete embodiment of the life she has shared with her late husband, the comfort afforded her by his financial achievements,

how the two women share their "bereavement" over Yuhi's departure through a gesture of give-and-take: the niece massages her aunt's sore knee, and the aunt in turn promises her niece to let her talk to her cousin after the aunt finishes her phone conversation with her daughter in New York, although in fact the aunt does not keep her promise (Field 1996, p. 167). The awkward interactions between the niece and the aunt on the very evening of Yuhi's departure can be more effectively explained when we take into consideration the symbolic significance of Yuhi's role not only at the house but also within the interlocked psychic structures of the aunt and the niece, which is indeed the focus of this study.

¹¹At the same time, the niece's continued occupancy of the study-cum-storage room reinforces her connections with the former occupant of the same space—her late uncle, a learned businessman, who graduated from the most prestigious university in South Korea. The study-cum-storage room is therefore figuratively connected with the realms of learning and the preservation of knowledge. Not surprisingly, the job that the uncle had procured for his niece is with a small magazine publisher specializing in history and classical art—disciplines both linked to the notions of knowledge and preservation. The niece's self-appointed role as the manager of Yuhi's Korean studies further amplifies the niece's symbolic presence in the novel as the guardian of tradition and knowledge tied to Korean national identity.

¹²In other words, the author provocatively assigns to this full-fledged native Korean character a set of conventional attributes of *zainichi* identity—that is to say, an identity generally understood in terms of, or in a state of, hybridity, indeterminacy, or even illegitimacy. In so doing, the author calls into question the fundamental assumptions about what differentiates *zainichi* identity from national identity.

and the social respect she has earned from various conventional signs of marital success.¹³

Since the relationship between the aunt and the niece is based neither on kinship nor on love, it has always been mediated by the presence of another person, be it that of the husband or the daughter. The daughter's unoccupied room now exposes, both figuratively and literally, the fundamental lack in the relationship between these two women. In this sense, the empty room upstairs can be seen as a placeholder for the third term necessary to mediate and sustain the relationship between the aunt and the niece at the house, now living in seeming isolation with no social life to speak of. Therefore, anyone who comes to occupy that room can, in theory, perform the required role of mediator.

Within the niece's narration, Yuhi is indeed that very lodger who has come to occupy the empty room but then left after a six-month stay. However, the very narrative situation, which has stirred up psychologically charged emotions in the niece, who now actually faces Yuhi's absence at the house, can shed light on the author's conceptualization of identity construction not only in spatial but also in psychical terms through an injection of a new factor—namely, desire. In fact, Yuhi's function as the third term emerges most clearly when it is viewed in the context of the former residents' desires on the psychical level. This hidden dimension is forced to emerge by the very way in which the author brings together the three women to live at the same house. Since Yuhi is a total stranger and a woman, there is nothing that can bind her both to the house and to these two women in any kind of enduring relationship. The only relationship plausible or viable to them is that of lodger and landlady. This contractual relationship, however, can be easily transferred, broken, or extended depending on the desire of any of the parties involved. For that very reason, in fact, their cohabitation comes to an abrupt end when Yuhi simply chooses to pack up and leave. In other words, precisely because the author places the three female characters in a situation that allows their desires to surface so as to negotiate and renegotiate their relationships vis-à-vis one another, the niece's recollections about their lives together at the house can be meaningfully analyzed in terms of the emergence and dissipation of the residents' mutual desires for one another.

On the level of the surface story, the arrival of Yuhi is recalled only to mark the originary moment of the cohabitation of the three women.¹⁴ On the meta-story

¹³The narrator surmises that the widow's real reason for not wanting to sell the house and move into an apartment in the Kan'nam area is that she does not want to let go of the house that her late husband had built (p. 26).

¹⁴In the novel, the narrator dwells on her recollections of the events related to Yuhi's first visit to the house, and this portion alone covers approximately a quarter of the entire narrative (pp. 25–55). Partially, it is because her recollections occur on her way home from work the day of Yuhi's departure, thus forcing her to look anew at the neighborhood and the house through what she imagines to have been Yuhi's perception of them when she first arrived at the house. More importantly, the narrator's sustained recollections of her initial encounter with Yuhi point to the

level, Yuhi's arrival functions as a catalyst to activate the former residents' circuits of desire, which have long remained "dead." Yuhi immediately introduces a new kind of tension to the family and catalyzes the establishment of boundaries within the house—boundaries that have hitherto neither existed nor even been deemed necessary. The boundaries, however, become necessary due to the former residents' perception of otherness in Yuhi specifically as a *zainichi* Korean.¹⁵ Their shared understanding of the new lodger's otherness brings about a swift implementation of the House Rules, that is to say, their unspoken rules pertaining to certain topics that must not be approached in Yuhi's presence:

1. No negative comments on Japan or references to the colonial era
2. No direct questioning of Yuhi about her ideological leanings vis-à-vis North Korea
3. No direct allusions to discrimination against Koreans in Japan

Whereas within the narrator's recollections, these self-imposed injunctions restrict the aunt's and the niece's politically charged verbal expressions for the sake of Yuhi's emotional and psychological comfort,¹⁶ for this study, the two women's interactions with Yuhi as such can potentially illuminate the author's conceptualization of identity in terms of the configuration of rules, desire, and gender.

More specifically, the former residents' relationship to the House Rules vis-à-vis Yuhi indicates how the author envisions the ways in which a woman can carve out her place in relation to the symbolic order of the world—that is, in relation to the patriarchal structure of power instituted in and by mandatory national belonging. Seen in this light, the House Rules signify the aunt's and the niece's unproblematic alignment with the official ideology of South Korea as a modern nation-state. The national identity of South Korea is, in fact, forged, to a great

fact that her subsequent relationship with Yuhi was largely based on her very first impressions of Yuhi. In fact, Yuhi's entrance into the family instantly sets into motion a complex circuit of desire for the niece as well as for the aunt. The rapidity with which this circuit of desire is wired and set into motion is of import for it is an unambiguous sign that these two former residents' desires are immediately fixed on Yuhi's presence without knowing much about her as an individual.

¹⁵Significantly, the initial encounter among the three women actually occurred through a phone conversation from a real estate agent inquiring about the room's availability for a prospective tenant. The two most important pieces of information conveyed about the potential tenant is that the applicant is a *zainichi* Korean and a student of S University studying Korean literature. Upon learning about Yuhi's affiliation with S University, the alma mater of the aunt's late husband, the aunt wonders whether Yuhi had looked up the information about former graduates or she had heard about her husband (pp. 28–29). As for Yuhi's *zainichi* status, the aunt is concerned as to whether or not she might be less than studious or related to a North Korean organization in Japan (p. 30). These two Korean women's initial information about Yuhi, in fact, serves as the foundation of all the rules and regulations that determine the niece's and the aunt's subsequent interactions with Yuhi.

¹⁶After observing Yuhi's uncomfortable reactions to the aunt's comments about the impossibility of forgiving Japan for its historical wrongdoings against Korea, the niece realizes that they had better not say much about the Japanese in the presence of Yuhi and thinks that her aunt must have come to the same realization about Yuhi (p. 44).

extent, through its desire to differentiate itself from communist North Korea and from its colonial master, Japan. Not surprisingly, the House Rules are derived from negative stereotypes of the Japanese people and North Korean residents in Japan extant in South Korea's collective imaginary. Due to their self-imposed injunctions, the aunt and the niece cannot directly confront or probe into Yuhi's ideological orientation.¹⁷ Consequently, while harboring their reservations about Yuhi, they are able to maintain their illusion of Yuhi as a "good" *zainichi* Korean—that is, one who is ideologically self-same as the "good" South Koreans they perceive themselves to be. That is to say, the House Rules are, in effect, a veiled form of the two former residents' unarticulated desire, on the psychical level, for a harmonious identification between them and the new lodger.

In actuality, Yuhi's transgressions of the House Rules—the embodiment of the other women's unarticulated desire for a unitary identification with Yuhi—serve as a catalyst for activating the self-awareness of the aunt and the niece as South Koreans. No matter how intimately the three women have come to share their lives together, Yuhi, being ignorant of the very existence of the House Rules, remains an outsider vis-à-vis the other residents. Therefore, Yuhi appears to "unconsciously" transgress the Rules by freely expressing to the niece and the landlady her negative views and experiences of Korea and its people and language. Yuhi's remarks served, at the time they were uttered, as they do now to an even greater extent than before in the niece's reminiscing mind, as constant reminders of how different she, a *zainichi* Korean, was from the South Koreans they were. Such manifested differences in Yuhi had further awakened and heightened the landlady's and the niece's self-perception as South Koreans, which in turn intensified their desire to transform and reform Yuhi to be more like themselves.

The realm of desire constituted at the house illuminates, in particular, the author's conceptual imagining of the relationship between nationalist desire and individual desire, as inflected by the female gender. By mobilizing a preexisting South Korean national identity in relation to Yuhi, who represents an aberration of that very identity, the aunt and the niece can finally and fully share an identity outside their obligatory familial ties and together inhabit the position of the desiring subject vis-à-vis Yuhi. Yet, despite the aunt's and the niece's emergent identity as that of South Koreans, their shared desire does not necessarily coincide with a nationalist desire *per se*. Even though they pepper their conversation with such ideologically potent and politically loaded terms as "the nationalist," "North Korea," "the Communist," "discrimination," etc., it is at best pure gossip emptied of any real political relevance, potency, or immediacy either for them or for their country.

¹⁷The narrator recalls that in the beginning of Yuhi's residence at the house, the aunt used to worry about the nature of the books Yuhi ordered from Japan (pp. 58–59), and that she had to assure her aunt that no such worries were necessary for Yuhi. But the Yuhi who reads Japanese books makes the niece equally, if not more, upset. For examples of the niece's reactions to Yuhi's reading Japanese books, refer to p. 59, 77, and 87.

At the same time, these two women's emergent sense of national belonging, however ineffectual it maybe, is mediated and reinforced by the spectral figure of the patriarch, the widow's late husband, who, even beyond death, wields his authority over these women—that is to say, his unquestioned patriarchal authority. For instance, one of their “parlor talks,” usually carried out in the living room, leads the aunt to declare to her niece, “You are a nationalist like your uncle.”¹⁸ The widow indeed constantly refers to her late husband as the measure of all things, and by including this particular remark made by the aunt in her own narration, the niece generates an impression that she herself is a true inheritor of her late uncle's nationalist legacy.

Yet by no means could the deceased patriarch of the family have been a pure nationalist, as the widow now remembers him, given that he was a successful businessman who conducted business with Japan in postcolonial Korea, despite his family's illustrious anti-Japanese legacy. Rather, in their heightened and hypersensitive self-perception as South Koreans, the problematic relationship between Korea and Japan in the colonial and postcolonial eras is recalled only to be domesticated, sentimentalized, and “feminized” to the extent that it carries a personal meaning for them vis-à-vis their new cohabitant, Yuhi. Precisely instances such as this one reveal how the author inserts the female gender and desire into a hegemonic paradigm of identity based on mandatory national belonging and alters that paradigm into a subjective idiom for the female subject to mold her own identity construction vis-à-vis others who constitute her world.

The author's conceit of gendered-identity construction in the novel becomes clearer still through the way in which this one set of identities—insiders/native South Koreans vs. Yuhi the *zainichi*/outsider—is sustained in tension, as well as in concert, with other unspoken sets of rules and rituals governing the cohabitation of the three women. The House Rules are, in effect, upheld by their mirroring rules, as it were—that is to say, those topics that can be safely approached in Yuhi's presence. Whereas the House Rules enable the aunt and the niece to align themselves with an abstract notion of South Korean national identity, this other set of rules—a softer form of cultural nationalism tailored for personal use—regulates the intimate rhythms and rituals of all three residents' daily existence. In this sphere of daily living, the aunt's and the niece's shared South Korean identity becomes individuated through the different roles they take on for Yuhi. As in the case of the House Rules, these native Koreans' respective self-appointed roles are each defined by a set of accompanying rules, through which a discrete configuration of insiders and outsiders emerges.

In her capacity as the landlady, the widow performs the role of a self-appointed practitioner of her late husband's goodwill towards Yuhi. The widow seemingly interminably alludes to an inseparable link between Yuhi and her dead husband

¹⁸The aunt makes this comment (*anata wa ojisan mitai na minzokushugisha ne*) when the niece does not agree with her that Yuhi's Korean is good enough for someone who was born in Japan (p. 95).

through their institutional affiliation with S University, glossed in the novel as the most prestigious institution in South Korea. In the widow's consciousness, the fact of this institution's potential function as a cultural apparatus of the ruling nationalist ideology neither registers nor is relevant. The widow's rules of conduct are simply that she must do, and will do, everything that her husband would have done for Yuhi. Hence, by narrowly and firmly inscribing her relationship vis-à-vis Yuhi in this time-honored cultural practice of seniors looking after juniors of the same academic institution, the widow not only puts aside Yuhi's problematic *zainichi* status but also claims an exclusive connection with Yuhi—one in which the niece cannot participate.

Most significantly, by aligning Yuhi vis-à-vis her late husband in such a way, the widow is able to inhabit the position of the desiring subject. Through Yuhi, the landlady's late husband, who has been dead for over a decade, can be rendered intimately and directly relevant to the fabric of this widow's everyday life. That is to say, Yuhi's presence has conveniently created for the landlady a legitimate space for the husband's specter to occupy once again the central place in this lackluster family life. Precisely in this way, the landlady is able to express and attain her pleasure through Yuhi's presence at the house. Thus, while spatially occupying the position of the daughter of the house and thus symbolically of the landlady's family, Yuhi functions as the cause for the widow's desire for the revived presence of her late husband, a desire generated and sustained through their triangulated relationship.

Similarly, the niece, too, comes to occupy the position of the desiring subject through her self-appointed role as the manager of Yuhi's Korean studies. Within the novel, the niece herself describes both the positive impact of Yuhi's arrival on her depression and the attraction she felt toward Yuhi. Yet, what sets into motion the niece's circuit of desire at the psychical level is the niece's very awareness of her lack of a discrete identity at the house prior to Yuhi's arrival and during her residence there. Since her aunt still views her as an outsider, the niece cannot establish a link with Yuhi through sharing her aunt's position as landlady. Moreover, unlike her aunt, who can easily mobilize pre-existing connections with the new lodger through her dead husband's cultural affiliation with S University and his Japan-related business affairs, the niece lacks any such connections and thus must forge one. Yuhi calls her, "Un'ni" (elder sister), but this appellation, common in Korean culture, lacks any personal specificity and intimacy, despite its familial connotation. Therefore, the coincidence of the two younger women's academic orientation serves as the only viable channel through which the niece can establish her individuated identity vis-à-vis Yuhi.

In other words, the niece is excessively invested in her self-appointed role as Yuhi's Korean studies monitor because that is the sole means by which she can differentiate herself from her aunt in relation to Yuhi. Therefore, the niece's desire to erase any linguistic sign of Japanese-ness in Yuhi is not necessarily an expression of her "nationalist" leaning. Rather, it is a reflection of how the niece aligns her personal and nationalist desires through her academic background in Korean

language and literature. Put differently, within the author's overall conceit of the novel, the niece is structurally positioned in such a way as to generate a narrative situation to envision how a female subject may negotiate various forces to construct her sense of belonging vis-à-vis others in relation to a larger symbolic order that structures her world.

The niece's newly gained identity through her self-appointed role in Yuhi's studies is sustained, again, by a set of rules. Just as her identity at the house, prior to Yuhi's arrival, was linked to her designated room (the study-cum-storage area), the niece's newly gained identity vis-à-vis Yuhi is also tied to her altered spatial perception of the house. The structural division of the house—the upstairs vs. the downstairs—registers with an unusual degree of visceral clarity in the niece's perception as she recollects her interactions with Yuhi at the house during the past six months. In fact, the niece even observes that these two parts of the house smell different.¹⁹ In her recollections, the upstairs, where the niece's and Yuhi's rooms are located, appears as a domain framed by the rules and rituals governing Yuhi's studies. The upstairs, where Yuhi's mind is nurtured, thus constitutes the realm of the private between Yuhi and the niece in opposition to the downstairs, the realm of the public, in which all three residents interact together and in which the aunt/landlady is in charge of providing bodily nourishments. This spatial differentiation is further extended to a temporal distinction between day and night, as the niece remembers that her private interactions with Yuhi occur mostly after the aunt retires for the night, or early in the morning before the niece goes to work. That is to say, in the niece's recollections about Yuhi, nearly all aspects of the niece's life at the house appear to have been newly defined by and subjected to the rules and rituals pertaining to her self-appointed role as guardian of Yuhi's studies.

The relationship between the niece's self-appointed role and her perception of the house offers another entry point into the author's understanding of the psychical pressure involved in identity construction. Precisely because the niece's role was not initially desired by Yuhi, the niece consciously and unconsciously subjects herself to multiple sets of rules so as to render more solid and concrete, to herself if to no one else, her self-perception of centrality in Yuhi's life. Moreover, to maintain this perception of her identity at the house as Yuhi's tutor, the niece also must assume that the lives of the other inhabitants are also regulated by the same rules that shape hers. This explains why, on the very evening of

¹⁹As she returns to the house from work, the niece initially mentions that the air in the house smells different from that outside and that she is surprised at herself for being so sensitive to smells (p. 11). In the next line the niece immediately connects her sensitive olfactory perception with her recollection of Yuhi's utterance, "*ii nioi*" (a nice smell). But until p. 53 the reader does not learn about the full context in which Yuhi herself made that utterance. The niece then reveals that Yuhi commented on how nice the house smells at the end of her first visit to the house. The niece's long series of recollections about Yuhi's initial visit to the house is therefore bracketed by the narrator's growing identification with the absent Yuhi through references to her own heightened sensory perception, to the extent that she even observes that the upstairs, where she used to interact with Yuhi, has a smell different from the one downstairs (p. 16).

Yuhi's departure, the niece is surprised to learn that her aunt used to visit Yuhi in her own room while the niece herself was away at work. Moreover, her aunt knew aspects of Yuhi's family history about which the niece had not been informed by Yuhi.²⁰ That is to say, in Yuhi's absence not only does the niece belatedly find out from her aunt that Yuhi had personal reasons for coming to Korea, in connection with her own family history, but that such a conversation between her aunt and Yuhi took place in Yuhi's own room. The niece's surprise therefore clearly reveals her assumed exclusive access to Yuhi's mind and her room, as well as her keenly-felt sense of rivalry with her aunt vis-à-vis Yuhi.

Similar to the case of the House Rules, Yuhi's frequent transgressions as a student of Korean studies intensify the niece's desire invested in her role as Yuhi's tutor. In the niece's recollections, the figure of Yuhi who reads books written in Japanese in the privacy of her room creates, and embodies, the deepest fear and the strongest resentment in the niece.²¹ Yet, it is precisely this objectionable and seemingly incorrigible aspect of Yuhi that allows the niece to occupy the position of the desiring subject vis-à-vis Yuhi. In fact, the niece's self-perception as the manager of Yuhi's studies becomes further crystallized through the combined effect, upon this self-appointed manager, of her charge's linguistic transgressions and her transgression of the bounds of what the niece deems to constitute feminine decorum—that is, Yuhi's late night drinking and physical self-violence in the privacy of her room. The niece explains her desire to keep Yuhi's "secrets" from the aunt as a way to "protect" Yuhi from the aunt's potential disapproval and withdrawal of her affection. Yet, it is not merely the question of what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior for women.²² Yuhi's drinking has direct implications for the niece's self-appointed role as her tutor and the new life she has built around that role. In fact, it was not long after the niece witnessed Yuhi's late night drinking episode that Yuhi decided to quit her studies altogether. In other words, the niece's self-appointed guardianship of Yuhi's secrets can be seen as an expression of her own desire to preserve her image of Yuhi as that of a child—one who, metaphorically speaking, not only needs protection but whose will and behavior can be molded. The image of Yuhi as such is necessitated to sustain the niece's illusion of Yuhi's need for her.²³

²⁰For the passage concerning Yuhi's own family history, refer to pp. 104–106.

²¹For the passages dealing with the niece's emotions vis-à-vis the Yuhi who reads Japanese publications, cf. footnote 17.

²²The niece's reprimanding words are, "*Hitori de osake o nonde ita no? Yuhi, onna no ko ga nante koto o suru no*" (p. 81).

²³Norma Field, for one, assesses Yuhi's image as that of a child as one of Yi's two accomplishments in this novel, the other accomplishment being non-Japanese nationals' claim of the Japanese language and the space of the Japanese nation (Field 1996, pp. 161–67). Yet, Field does not fully explore the significance of the two South Korean women's perception of Yuhi as a child because Field overlooks the significance of the marginal relationship these two women maintain vis-à-vis South Korea's official nationalist desire. Hence, Field comes to the inadequate conclusion that "through Yuhi's radical representation as a child, the national questions escape rehearsal in their worn grooves because the narrative refuses their intellectual resolution" (Field 1996, p. 167).

Through her role as the self-appointed manager of Yuhi's Korean studies, the niece also participates in the aunt's newly activated circuit of desire vis-à-vis her late husband and Yuhi. The niece's exasperation over Yuhi's failures to fully comply with her rules of conduct is translated into nationalist sentiments and idioms through which both the niece and the aunt can deepen their bonds. In this way, the niece, too, indirectly creates via Yuhi a new channel through which the widow's late husband's specter can appear. Notably, the niece herself does not make any direct references to her late uncle, as if to suggest that the aunt and the niece share yet another unspoken understanding that only the widow is entitled to bring him back to life. For instance, it is the aunt who draws a connection between her late husband and the niece by pointing out that the niece is more nationalist than her uncle. In other words, these two women have gradually come to inhabit their national identity as South Korean only as it became relevant to them vis-à-vis Yuhi, who, in turn, has revived at the house the specter of the landlady's late husband.

The patterns of the interlocked circuits of desire for the two women become even more complex when Yuhi's own circuit of desire is connected to theirs. Just as Yuhi comes to occupy a place laid out for her at the house and functions as a cause for the former residents' emergent desires, so do the two South Korean women in Yuhi's preexisting vision of her own Korea. Within the novel, the niece belatedly learns from her aunt Yuhi's complicated family history in Japan—her father's failed business and his troubled marital history, including three marriages. This backstory is important to the aunt for it further increases her understanding of and sympathy for Yuhi. To the niece, it signifies an initial moment of re-examining her own perceptions regarding her past relationship with Yuhi. For this study, Yuhi's family history is crucial in assessing how the author paints, from yet another vantage point, a nuanced portrayal of the process through which a female subject carves out, on the psychical level, her place in relation to the symbolic order of the world she inhabits.

Within the niece's narration, Yuhi is recalled as someone with a unique view of Korea, its history, language, and people. For instance, she believes that the sound of a traditional Korean flute is that of the real Korean language.²⁴ At other times, she concerns herself with such odd questions as what King Sejong would think of how people are writing horizontally the Korean script he created.²⁵ On another occasion, she likens the naked surface of the rocky mountain to the unveiled minds of Koreans.²⁶ To the narrator, all such observations made by Yuhi are vivid reminders of how uniquely different Yuhi was, and how much her absence affects her.

The same observations recalled by the narrator carry a different set of implications for understanding the author's novelistic conceit for identity construction

²⁴Ibid., p. 84.

²⁵Ibid., p. 91.

²⁶Ibid., p. 122.

as inflected by the female gender. As I have analyzed elsewhere,²⁷ even prior to her arrival in South Korea, Yuhi had already fully formed her imaginary Korea in relation to her father's negative experiences with Korean expatriates in Japan. That is to say, Yuhi's desire for a particular kind of Korea is tied to the specter of her late father, who has also been dead for over six years. In this sense, the triangulated psychical structure of Yuhi's desire is similar to that of the landlady's desire, which requires both the specter of her late husband and Yuhi's presence.

Moreover, similar to the cases of the landlady and her niece, Yuhi's identity, too, emerges as a desiring subject through the pressures exerted upon her psychic structure by her self-imposed rules and her own transgressions against them. Rather than aligning herself with an existing Korean national identity, Yuhi has created her own identity vis-à-vis her late father as the good daughter who can help transform her father's negative view of Korea. In this sense, of all three women's identities, hers constitutes the most personal, and radically warped, form of mandatory national belonging. Ultimately, Yuhi's self-identity vis-à-vis Korea is bound to her desire to exercise control over the construction and management of her own vision of Korea specifically as an ideal realm of plenitude and beauty—the polar opposite of her father's Korea. Her exacting standards have required Yuhi to move no fewer than eight times in and around the greater Seoul area in order to find a concrete reality that corresponds with her idealized vision of Korea, even though the landlady and her niece interpret Yuhi's numerous moves before her arrival at their own house merely as a sign of the inhospitable environment to which Yuhi had been subjected, hence another reason to take good care of Yuhi.

Selected through such a long process of elimination, Yuhi's Korea ends up being a homogenous realm filled only with a very few objects and people endowed with the aesthetic qualities that she personally endorses and appreciates. For Yuhi and her Korea, the presence of the two native Koreans, as well as the Korean language they speak, is as indispensable an element as that of the rocky mountain at which she loves to gaze from the house. Those objects all function as the validation and embodiment of her vision of Korea. In other words, the house, together with its surroundings, gains a new identity specifically as "Yuhi's Korea." It is the only version of Korea that Yuhi self-authorizes to exist, and she keeps it physically apart from "the real Korea"—a Korea with its raw, heterogeneous, multifaceted, and unmediated qualities and features.²⁸

Significantly, the force that disturbs Yuhi's idealized Korea comes from within—that is, when she turns her exacting standards on herself and finds a lack.

²⁷Ryu 2004, pp. 95–107.

²⁸In this connection, it is important to note that Yuhi chooses her lodging at this particular house despite the fact that it takes her about two hours, each way, to commute to and from S University. Her impractical decision can be seen as an expression of her desire to maintain a physical distance between her "ideal Korea" and the "real" Korea. Similarly, despite her professed affections for the view of the rocky mountain range and the sound of the Korean flute, she refuses to climb the mountain or to learn how to play the instrument. She only gazes at the mountain from a distance and listens to the flute on a cassette player.

In one of the most memorable scenes in the narrator's recollections, Yuhi, in a drunken stupor, calls herself a "hypocrite" and a "liar."²⁹ Even though she refuses to identify with or accept Korea—that is, the official version of Korea that she studies at S University—as "urinara" ("our country"), she did write the answer "urinara" to complete one of her examinations.³⁰ In accordance with her own rules for an aesthetically stringent Korea, the moral duplicity she finds within herself, too, must be eliminated.

Yuhi's subsequent decision to return to Japan and the resoluteness with which she carries out her decision gains a new significance in light of the unique nature of her Korea. Prior to her departure, the physical space in which her idealized Korea could be situated had been gradually diminishing—that is, from greater metropolitan Seoul, to the house in a secluded suburb, then to her room on the second floor, and still further to only one corner of her room, and finally to her own person, that is, to her own heart. Within the niece's narration, however, this gradual disappearance of the physical space for Yuhi's Korea is rendered only in terms of Yuhi's self-withdrawal due to her deepening sense of despair over her inability to deal with her conflicting Korean and Japanese identities.³¹

I argue that, by returning to Japan, Yuhi negates or abolishes the last remaining potential physical site for her Korea. Hence, rather than constituting a rash action, her return to Japan is a logical, though extreme, step guided by her self-imposed rules for her ideal Korea. As such, it marks both her absolute compliance with her own rules and the untenability of her ideal vision of Korea sustained by those rules. At the same time, her return to Japan signifies that her desire is no longer fixated on that vision, and by extension, on the specter of her late father. In other words, Yuhi's circuit of desire that had initially brought her to the house and kept her there has thus run its full course and taken her presence away from the house. Her departure from the house thus signifies an emergence of a newly wired circuit of desire in Yuhi, and not necessarily her failure to master the Korean

²⁹Because the narrator recalls how Yuhi wrote out these words in a notebook instead of speaking them directly to the niece, within the novel Yuhi's words are laid out as short sentences, visually separated from the long and continuous prose for the narration. Yuhi's words appear first in the Korean script, Hangŭl, with *furigana*, followed by a Japanese translation as *On'ni watashi wa gizensha desu. Watashi wa usotsuki desu* (p. 82). Significantly, these two sentences reappear without the *furigana* on p. 107, thereby reinforcing an impression, within the surface story, of Yuhi's self-conflicts vis-à-vis her Korean identity. But in actuality, it is the narrator herself who is obsessed with Yuhi's utterances as such, for she desires Yuhi's words to signify something more than what Yuhi might have meant—that is, the reason for Yuhi's decision to return to Japan.

³⁰It is important to observe that Yuhi's reasons for calling herself "a hypocrite" and "a liar" are given about ten pages later (pp. 98–99). Within the given context, it does make sense why Yuhi should have felt that she was a hypocrite. But by withholding this crucial information from the reader, the narrator dramatizes, to a greater effect than otherwise, Yuhi's inner conflicts as a near mental, psychological, and physical breakdown resulting from her conflicting emotions toward Korea.

³¹One of the most dramatic episodes in the niece's recollections of Yuhi pertains to what appears to have been Yuhi's nervous breakdown (pp. 78–82).

language or her disappointment in Korea, as the other two women left behind are inclined to believe.

Likewise, the circuits of desire for the landlady and her niece are activated afresh through Yuhi's absence. To the niece, in particular, Yuhi's abandonment of her studies and her subsequent departure not only from their shared residence but from South Korea constitute her own complete and irreversible failure as the self-appointed manager of Yuhi's Korean studies. Yet, this failure, which forces the niece to recognize Yuhi's own desire as separate from hers, in turn stirs a fresh desire in the niece, a desire to recover Yuhi, the Yuhi "unseen" by the niece during the time of their cohabitation. A new alignment vis-à-vis Yuhi is forged again through the niece's self-imposed rules. On the day of Yuhi's departure, for instance, the niece chooses not to call her at home or see her off at the airport, despite her desire to do so. She self-consciously decides not to wait for a call from Yuhi either, even though she does in fact wait. Under normal circumstances, she would have naturally taken such actions for Yuhi. Had she gone to the airport to see Yuhi off, the niece could have delayed, however briefly, her experience of Yuhi's final departure. Through such willful suppressions of her desire, the niece in effect experiences Yuhi's inevitable absence more acutely than she would have otherwise.

At the same time, and more importantly, through a conscious suppression of her desire to be with Yuhi, the niece triggers her own images of Yuhi to appear in a different register of her consciousness—that is to say, in her memory. In fact, this is exactly how the novel *Yuhi* itself is structured, for it allows the reader to encounter the absent Yuhi only through the niece's reminiscing mind's eye. The niece's most dramatic self-construction therefore occurs precisely in her self-appointed role as the first-person narrator who is engaged in the process of recovering discursively the irrecoverable Yuhi.

As the storyteller of Yuhi's life at the house, the niece's identity is again bound by rules—this time, pre-established rules governing the conventions of first-person narration. Most importantly, it is the first-person's limited perspective that defines the limits of what the niece can possibly actualize discursively as Yuhi's storyteller. There is always an unbridgeable gap between what the first-person narrator desires to know about Yuhi and Yuhi's own self-knowledge. Yet, Yi constructs one of the most unusual and memorable first-person narrators by breaking this fundamental premise of first-person narration—that is, through a radical form of spirit possession, as it were. As the novel progresses, the niece gradually eliminates the gap between herself as the first-person narrator and Yuhi, the object of her desire, by discursively creating the space of Yuhi's psychological interiority and ultimately occupying it herself as if she were Yuhi. Indeed, the novel itself is structured as the niece's re-enactment of Yuhi's arrival and stay at the house. As I have elaborated elsewhere,³² this re-enactment, which is

³²Ryu 2006, pp. 312–31.

sustained throughout the novel, is more than a momentary hallucination, but rather something akin to spirit possession. It is as if the niece consciously calls forth the spectral figure of Yuhi. As the niece proceeds from her workplace toward Yuhi's room at the house to retrieve a piece of writing that Yuhi herself has written in Japanese and left behind in a drawer for the niece, the niece in fact imagines Yuhi's growing presence in her body and even viscerally experiences as her own Yuhi's pain of being a *zainichi* Korean who must oscillate between the Korean and the Japanese languages. In such a self-induced state of spirit possession, the niece then attempts to decipher the meaning of Yuhi's unintelligible writing of no less than 448 pages in Japanese.

The Yuhi that emerges from the niece's first-person narrator is therefore not necessarily Yuhi herself, but the narrator's reconstruction of her—an image of Yuhi only as that of a *zainichi* Korean in psychological pain. By employing the language of psychological drama laden with archetypal emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anxiety, the niece portrays Yuhi's life at the house as a series of crises for which the narrator is the sole witness, interpreter, and chronicler, whose own feelings toward Yuhi, at the time of her recollections, oscillate among extreme ranges of anger, disappointment, despair, and regret. That is to say, the niece's very act of storytelling manifests her desire to recuperate retrospectively her own lost opportunity to have differently aligned herself vis-à-vis Yuhi so as to not to have incurred Yuhi's departure in the first place. In short, the Yuhi the reader encounters and experiences in the novel is ultimately a projection of the niece's desire for her self-identity mediated by Yuhi to such an extent that their relationship takes on the aura of an obsessive romance.

As this study has shown, in *Yuhi*, both the landlady and her niece unquestionably subscribe to the idea that national identity anchors one's sense of self and place in the world and that this identity is inextricably tied to one's access to national language. Yet, by strategically ascribing to the fictional characters such a monolithic understanding of the relationship between national language and identity, and, most importantly, by showing that these two women's perceptions of their own national identity as South Koreans are not a given but a constructed form of identity in response to their respective emergent desires tied to Yuhi, Yi paints a nuanced portrayal of how a woman, *zainichi* or not, negotiates and renegotiates her place in relation to the symbolic order of the world. Furthermore, by privileging the three female characters' cohabitation at the house as a site for rethinking the critical issue of construction, Yi renders it possible to imagine how a woman can occupy the position of a desiring subject that is not subsumed under the paradigm of identity based on the nation-state and its attendant national language, but rather translates this hegemonic paradigm into a subjective idiom with which to forge her own identity construction vis-à-vis others who constitute her world.

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that such identity construction is comprised of a set of shifting and interlocking triangulated relationships. In the case of the niece, she inhabits the position of the desiring subject first and

foremost as the dramatic storyteller of an absent Yuhi. This position is forged through the triangulated configuration of her present self as the first-person narrator, her past self, and Yuhi the ever-present specter in the memory of the niece's present self, while each component of this configuration is simultaneously positioned as the object of the desiring subject's gaze, and vice versa. This is a kind, and degree, of layered profundity that cannot be articulated through either the existing conceptual and interpretive framework of *zainichi* identity or a hegemonic rubric of nation-states and their national languages. The rich theoretical implications of Yi Yang-ji's novelistic imagination on the critical issue of identity construction have yet to be explored. This study has made a limited attempt to demonstrate one aspect of that novelistic imagination.

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