“The Language of Red in Kim Ch’ang-saeng’s ‘Akai mi’”

Catherine Ryu

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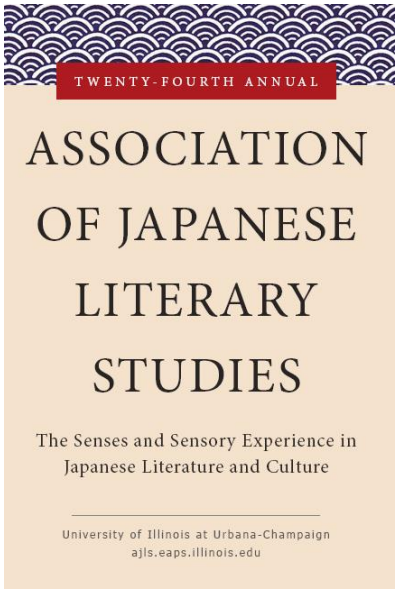

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THE LANGUAGE OF RED IN KIM CH'ANG-SAENG'S "AKAI MI"

Catherine Ryu

文学 (bungaku) Literature.
在日コリアン (zainichi Koreans) Koreans residing in Japan.
在日文学 (zainichi bungaku) Zainichi literature.
How do zainichi authors use color in their writings?
What might be some chromatic signatures of their literary styles?
Why does it feel odd just to hear myself posing such questions about zainichi literature, even though color is a common idiom in the language of literature?
What is the source of this discomfort, if not my awareness of transgressing the boundary of established critical practices vis-à-vis zainichi literature?
The unease I feel is, then, symptomatic of the rigid critical habits I have internalized over the years.

Personal reflections on *zainichi writing*, Catherine Ryu

Zainichi literature is conventionally defined as the writings for, by, and about a diasporic community of Koreans in Japan.[1] Their historical roots go back to Japan's colonial rule of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945. As such, *zainichi* literature is readily interpreted as reflections of *zainichi-ness*, the irreducible uniqueness of *zainichi* Koreans. Despite the emerging heterogeneity within *zainichi* communities and their literary output, critical practices still focus largely on *zainichi*-ness by interpreting the significance of *zainichi* writings based on their varying degrees of sociopolitical and cultural ties with Korean ethnicity and its national language. Even now canonized as a minority literature in Japanese national literature, or more precisely due to its marginalized status as such, *zainichi* literature has yet to be appreciated as a *bona fide* body of literature.

This study aims to develop a new approach to interpreting *zainichi* literature, by focusing on a particular novella by Kim Ch'ang-saeng—a relatively unknown *zainichi* woman author, hailing from Ikaino, Osaka, the heartland of *zainichi* Korean communities in Japan. With her 1988 novella "赤い実" ("Akai mi," Crimson Fruit), Kim invites readers to experience *zainichi* literature beyond *zainichi* Koreans' struggles with their national identity and national language, as well as the *zainichi* authors' creolized use of Korean and Japanese. In fact, by highlighting the adjective "akai," or "red," as the very first word in this succinct and intriguing title, the author foregrounds the importance of the language of color, in particular that of red, as the literary device of her choice.

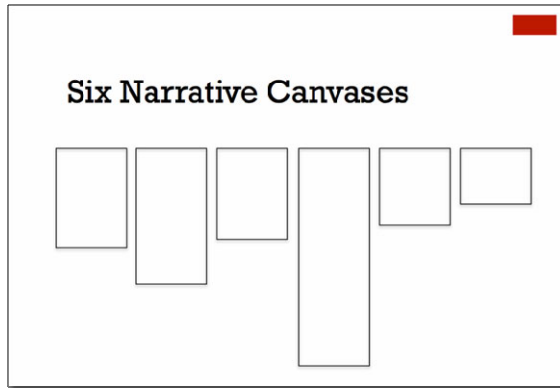
[1] Elise Foxworth succinctly articulates a pervasive view of *zainichi* literature when she states, "*Zainichi* Korean literature is, by definition, written by *zainichi* Koreans about *zainichi* Korean issues." Elise Foxworth, "A Tribute to the Japanese Literature of Korean Writers in Japan," *New Voices* 1 (2006): 46-55.

As will be seen, this novella is especially notable as Kim's literary project to address the question of how to represent consciousness in fiction—a question that all engaged literary artists must grapple with in one way or another, regardless of their ethnic, racial, and gender identities. Kim does so by self-consciously employing the color red both as a perceptual stimulant and a synaptic connector that activate the protagonist's sensory perception, long- and short-term memories, and fantasies that are intimately tied with this fictional character's pain, regrets, and desires. Put differently, the author's portrayal of the *zainichi* character's interiority in "Akai mi" can be most meaningfully appreciated as a color-coded literary mapping of consciousness, the site in which the protagonist privately experiences herself as an individual and forms her personal connections with the world outside.

"Akai mi," in a nutshell, concerns a second-generation *zainichi* woman On-nyo, a working single mother in her mid-twenties. She is still trying to build a new life for herself and her daughter after getting divorced a year before from her taciturn, occasionally violent husband. In terms of plot development, nothing really happens other than On-nyo carrying out her domestic routines. After returning home from work at a coffee shop and seeing that her daughter, Chi-na, a first grader, is not there to greet her, On-nyo goes out looking for her. In due time, she finds her daughter, prepares dinner for her, and puts her to sleep. Her evening routines are thus completed over a span of no more than a few hours. However, the episodic nature of the novella, with its many flashbacks, intervenes and disrupts the linear temporal progression from all angles, thereby transforming this seemingly uneventful story into a highly elusive and complex narrative.

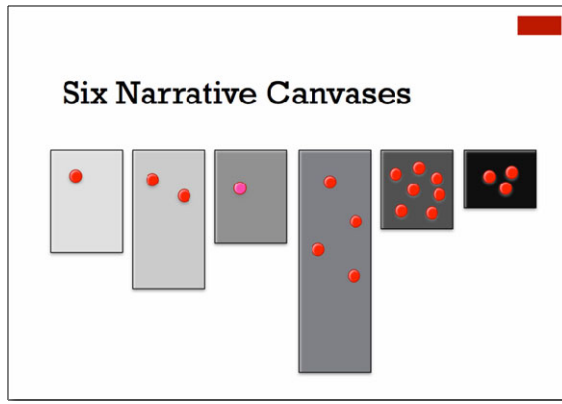
The intricate narrative structure of "Akai mi" is indeed the literary shape with which the author represents On-nyo's otherwise amorphous consciousness. This third-person narration is comprised of the protagonist's episodic memories stored in different layers of her consciousness. Such memories are tied to a set of critical events in her life, and when recalled voluntarily or involuntarily, they still draw out On-nyo's intense emotional, psychical, and physiological responses. To portray the interiority of On-nyo on that one particular evening, the author utilizes the color red at two levels of the narration: (1) the third-person narrator's language of red as a tool to build the narrative structure of the story, mirroring how On-nyo's consciousness itself unfolds, and (2) On-nyo's own language of red as her personal tool to structure her private life and the world around her.

In "Akai mi," the third-person narrator puts in high relief the relationship between On-nyo and the color red as a fundamental narrative building block of the story. This story is comprised of six parts of varying lengths, which function as six narrative canvases.



(Figure 1)

Temporally speaking, these canvases form a linear progression, tracing On-nyo's physical activities from early evening to nightfall. This time span represents the story's narrative present. Against this increasingly darkening backdrop, the color red emerges, among many others colors used in the story, as a chromatic beacon that links all six canvases, making them reflect against one another. Figure 2 represents what will be referred to as "the chromatic structure" of "Akai mi." The color red becomes intensified in Canvases 4 and 5, the latter being most intensely red.



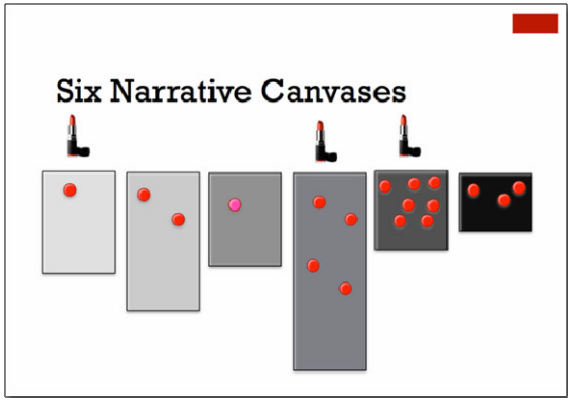
(Figure 2)

As the story unfolds, the chromatic progression of the color red parallels the narrative progression that circles into the deeper layers of On-nyo's consciousness. More specifically, from Canvas 1 to Canvas 2, On-nyo moves from a public space, a coffee shop where she works, to a private domestic space, her apartment. She spends her evening hours here, taking care of her daughter after having found her in the neighborhood. From Canvases 3 to 6, On-nyo physically remains in her apartment, but the time and location shift frequently in her active, recollecting mind. From

Canvas 3 to Canvas 4, for example, On-nyo's mind moves from her childhood fantasies, a relatively safe space in her memory to revisit, to ever deeply embedded and more painful recent memories of her adult life associated with her unhappy marriage of over five years. On-nyo then finally revisits the most painful memories of her marriage in Canvas 5, the most intensely red canvas, after recalling a nightmare from which she has just woken up. In the final Canvas 6, On-nyo's thoughts are now brought back to the present and turn toward the uncertain future of her young daughter, as she stands leaning against a kitchen windowsill in her apartment and gazes out at the pitch darkness below. In this way, the author uses the narrator's language of red to set up a synaptic network, as it were, in different regions of On-nyo's consciousness.

On-nyo's own personal language of red allows the reader to take a closer look at the synaptic connectors themselves. Different from the narrator's language of red, hers is comprised of the unique association between the color red and emotion that has become solidified through her own life experience. The significance of this association is, in turn, tied to specific items in red that have come to color On-nyo's conscious and subconscious minds. The relationship between the number of references to the color red and that of the items bearing this hue becomes increasingly varied and complex as the story unfolds. This study focuses on a single item that dominates On-nyo's consciousness; namely, a red tube of lipstick—a metonym for female desirability and sexuality.

The red lipstick appears in Canvas 1 and reappears in Canvases 4 and 5, indicating that On-nyo is drawn to this particular item at a perceptual level, as well as at the conscious and subconscious levels (Figure 3). The nature of On-nyo's relationship with the wearer of the red lipstick charges this quintessential feminine item with a personal emotional significance. In fact, the strength of this emotional significance corresponds to the location in which On-nyo's relationship with a particular red lipstick wearer appears in her consciousness.



(Figure 3)

Noriko, for example, is On-nyo's co-worker at the coffee shop. The image of Noriko's aged face, colorfully made up with her deep-crimson painted lips (真っ赤に塗りつぶした唇 *makka ni nuritsubushita kuchibiru*, the lips completely covered with an intense rouge), in Canvas 1 remains only at the periphery of On-nyo's perceptual consciousness. In fact, the narrator explicitly points out: "To On-nyo, Noriko appeared like a hen decked out in fanciful colors, parading the store restlessly. Sometimes On-nyo found her tiresome, but at the same time entertaining ("Crimson Fruit," 146)."[2] On-nyo thus has neither a vested interest in her relationship with Noriko, nor a shared personal history that binds her to Noriko emotionally or psychologically.

By contrast, the second lipstick wearer to enter into On-yo's consciousness on this particular evening is none other than the image of her former self. The personal nature of this relationship and the emotional significance On-nyo attaches to her former self are reflected in the location itself: Canvas 4, the second most intensely red narrative Canvas, filled with such painful memories as the shamanistic ritual arranged by her mother-in-law to pray for On-nyo's second pregnancy, her awkward honeymoon period, her unhappy first pregnancy with Chi-na, her marital rape at the hands of her husband, Yan-ho, and their daughter Chi-na's psychosomatic reactions to the growing tension between the couple. Sandwiched among such memories is On-nyo's recalled former self, wearing the red lipstick—an image tied to her entry into matrimony:

> They [On-nyo and Yan-ho] got married three months after the marriage interview, in large part because both sets of parents had urged them to do so. Yan-ho had his reservations about On-nyo's youthfulness—she was just twenty. When she appeared at the initial meeting, On-nyo wore no makeup other than lipstick. She had purity, like freshly washed fruit, but she was not womanly yet. She still exuded an air of girlishness ("Crimson Fruit," 159).

The image of On-nyo's innocent and hopeful younger self, wearing no makeup other than the lipstick (素顔に口紅だけを塗ってあらわれた玉子 *sugao ni kuchibeni dake o nutte arawareta On-nyo*, On-nyo who showed up wearing only the lipstick on her face without any makeup on) at the initial interview heightens her emerging fresh female sexuality, while hinting at her reproductive potential. Seemingly, this image of On-nyo's former self is in great contrast to Noriko's heavily made-up face with excessively rouged lips, which accentuates all the more her old age and her unfulfilled sexual desire. Not unlike Noriko, however, the female gender has turned out to be a burden On-nyo has to bear all her life as a woman. Under growing pressure from her husband and her mother-in-law to bear an heir, On-nyo finally chose to get a divorce to figure out for herself what she desires in life. In other words, the red lipstick that On-

[2] All excerpts from "Crimson Fruit" included in this study are from my English translation of this work: Kim, Ch'ang-Saeng, "Crimson Fruit," trans. Catherine Ryu, in *Into the Light: An Anthology of Literature by Koreans in Japan*, ed. Melissa L. Wender (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 142-171. The page numbers of excerpts from this work are given in parentheses. This translation is based on the Japanese original, Kim, Ch'ang-Saeng (1995) "Akai mi," in *Kim Ch'ang-Saeng sakuhinshū* (Kyoto: Kōrosha, 1995), 1-47.

nyo wore at the defining moment of her adult life has come to embody retroactively her problems with her own reproductive body and female sexuality that later surfaced in both her unhappy marriage and her solitary singlehood.

The magnitude of On-nyo's emotional and psychological energies tied to the image of red lipstick becomes most apparent in Canvas 5. All seven references to the color red here cluster around her former mother-in-law's appearance, and four of them point specifically to the red lipstick the old woman wears. What makes this image the most telling sign of On-nyo's psychical preoccupation with red lipstick is again the location—On-nyo's immediate recall of a nightmare. She sees the old woman with her grey hair and her face "tinged a deep red" getting ready to go to her husband, who has left her for another woman capable of bearing more children for him:

> She [On-nyo's former mother-in-law] forcibly pushed up the lipstick and applied it heavily all over her lips. The lipstick broke and fell to the floor. Not having used a lip-liner, she ended up coloring outside her lips as well. She then took out her Chosen rubber shoes and was about to put them on her feet. That was when On-nyo realized that her mother-in-law's *chima chogori* was for a funeral.
>
> "Wait, Omoni!"
>
> On-nyo tugged at one of her sleeves, and it came right off in her hand. Her mother-in-law's arm inside the sleeve was ripped off as well, and On-nyo saw folds of flesh, red as the lipstick, peering out at her.
>
> Then she awoke ("Crimson Fruit," 167).

This recalled scene of the nightmare marks the psychological, physical, and emotional climax of the narrative. Even though On-nyo herself has never encountered or even imagined this old woman wearing red lipstick, this incongruous association takes concrete form from the previous images of Noriko at work and On-nyo's former self recalled moments prior to falling asleep. The manner in which this old woman liberally applies the lipstick (グイと唇に塗りつけた *gui to kuchibiru ni nuritsuketa*, applied [the lipstick] to her lips with abandon), overlaps with the image of Noriko's painted lips similarly described (真っ赤に塗りつぶした *makka ni nuritsubushita*, [the lips] completed covered in intense red). Similar to the redness of the lipstick that On-nyo's former self was wearing, accentuated by her face otherwise unadorned, the color of her in-law's reddened face with the smeared lipstick stands out even more against the whiteness of her traditional Korean funeral dress. The color of the lipstick then quickly takes on the redness of raw bloody flesh when On-nyo accidentally tears off her in-law's sleeve and her arm within. This morphed image is so visually shocking and disturbing that On-nyo wakes herself up. What is heightened in the scene is then the frighteningly vivid, tactile intensity of the color red itself—red that far exceeds the cultural association between red lipstick and female desirability.

While the world of nightmares does not follow the logic of everyday, this is where On-nyo's conscious mind intersects with her sub-consciousness in her effort to recall the content of the nightmare. The figure of On-nyo's former mother-in-law

marked by crimson redness is indeed what activates On-nyo's recall of the most painful memory, indicating a strong emotional and psychological current that connects these two women via the color red. Only after seeing her former in-law in the nightmare does On-nyo become finally able to tap into her most painful memory: "At that time . . . On-nyo felt nauseous even trying to recall it. She had put a firm lid on her memories, and it would take courage to pry it open again ("Crimson Fruit," 168)." What she finds there is her memory of the very last meeting with her former mother-in-law. That is when On-nyo informed her about her final decision to get a divorce, despite the older woman's heart-wrenching plea to On-nyo to stay in the marriage. On-nyo knowingly hurt her former mother-in-law—a most kind, gentle, loving woman who has suffered all her life and for whom On-nyo tried the hardest to make her marriage work.

When viewed together, the significance of the red lipstick that dominates On-nyo's consciousness can be most productively linked with the weight of the female gender itself. All the female characters known to On-nyo in "Akai mi" have a problematic relationship with their female gender in one way or another, even including Chi-na. Only a first grader, Chi-na visibly wears her female gender, for now, in the form of her red book bag on her back, but this child's mind is already deeply scarred ever since she witnessed her father raping her mother. Just as On-nyo's most painful memory of the past is laden with her guilt toward her former mother-in-law, On-nyo's utmost concern lies in the present with the uncertain future of her child for whose well-being she feels most responsible. Significantly, the very last item in red that enters into On-nyo's consciousness on this particular evening is the image of ripe red apples that On-nyo hopes Chi-na will one day bite into. Here again, in On-nyo's mind, the color red is closely associated with the lips of a female character. As such, the color red permeates On-nyo's consciousness, shaped by her life experience with the female gender.

As this study has demonstrated, the author Kim portrays On-nyo's interiority through her purposeful use of the color red as a literary device to build the narrative structure of the story and to portray how different layers of On-nyo's consciousness are connected and activated by the color red. Not unlike a patient suffering from post-traumatic syndrome, On-nyo moves gingerly and circuitously toward where her deepest pain lies, in the most remote recesses of her memory, activated by the color red. By using "Akai mi," a relative unknown piece of *zainichi* writing as a sample, and approaching it via the language of color, this study has demonstrated potentially a new critical space in which to expand the conventional interpretative framework of this "minor" literature in Japanese national literature.[3]

[3] For another reading of "Crimson Fruit" from a different critical perspective, see Catherine Ryu, "Listening in: The Languages of the Body in Kim Ch'ang-Saeng's 'Crimson Fruit,'" in *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese Literature*, ed. Rachel Hutchinson and Leith D. Morton (London: Routledge, 2016), Forthcoming.