

Ethical Literary Criticism and Korean Literature: An Introduction

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Ethical literary criticism suggests the task of analyzing, deciphering and evaluating literary works from the ethical perspectives. Recently, ethical literary criticism is expanding the academic field in two directions. One is the tendency to explore the interaction between literature and other disciplines. Discussions have already begun on the relationship between ethical literary criticism and social sciences such as political science, media studies, and cultural studies as well as humanities such as philosophy, aesthetics, and history. In 2019, in the 3rd issue of Volume 11 of *Forum for World Literature Studies*, it featured a special issue of academic papers focusing on ethical literary criticism. Through the list of this paper, we can examine the achievements of academic discussions on the correlations with other disciplines mentioned earlier. Another is the tendency to apply the methodology of ethical literary criticism to national literature. Chinese scholars have been striving for a long time to study ethical literary criticism and starting to show a meaningful outcome. In 2020, a group of scholars including Xu Bin, Su Hui, Li Exian, and Huang Hui wrote academic books published by Peking University Press, which explores the relationship among British literature, American literature, Japanese literature, and Chinese literature.

This special issue was inspired by such academic trends. The process in which ethical literary criticism and various world literatures encounter means that ethical literary criticism is not just a kind of abstract methodology for studying literature, but a very specific text analysis process. This means a synchronic expansion of ethical literary criticism. In addition, the text analysis of national literature conducted from the perspective of ethical literary criticism naturally has no choice but to deal with the classics, modern and contemporary literature that the related literature has dealt with in the history of literature. Therefore, this means a diachronic expansion of ethical literary criticism. Thus this expansion into synchronic and diachronic context shows that ethical literary criticism is establishing its status as a universal theoretical system and methodology.

Ethical literary criticism can also be claimed as a useful methodology in analyzing, deciphering, and evaluating Korean literature. Korean literature has traditionally created its identity written in Chinese and Korean characters. After the modern era, during the Japanese occupation period, some writers practiced their writings in Japanese. However, as writing in Korean soon became a universal way, it was possible to express Korean's own ideas, emotions, and ethics. Korean modern and contemporary literature have also dealt with issues of ethical choices and ethical conflicts that permeate people's lives through various sanctions. It goes without saying that the academic work dealing with the ethical agenda in Korean literature can also use the methodology of ethical literary criticism. In this special issue, we introduce five papers on analyzing and deciphering Korean literature texts citing the methodology of ethical literary criticism.

Lim Dae Geun discusses the academic meaning of ethical literary criticism in the article "The Academic Value of 'Chinese School' Ethical Literary Criticism." He regards literary ethics as a complex concept in which the three terms "literature," "ethics," and "criticism" are combined, and tries to discuss its fundamental meaning through the process of combining these terms. In addition, "ethics" is regarded as the central concept among three, and the historical conceptualization process of the term 'ethics' is examined from the etymological aspect. He defines human being as "placed in the net of ethical standards, ethical environment, and ethical selection, human subjects always become a being in conflict with values that cannot be attained." He examines meaning and achievements of Professor Nie Zhenzhao's academic discourse, who laid the foundation for this discussion, naming it "Chinese School Ethical Literary Criticism." In particular, he introduces the situation in which this discourse is being practiced as a concrete methodology for analyzing and deciphering world literary texts. Through these discussions, he provides theoretical evidences to show that ethical literary criticism can be applied to the process of analyzing and deciphering Korean literature.

Kim Soon Jin analyzes the text of modern Korean literature from the perspective of ethical literary criticism in "The Ethical Choices of 'New Women' in Korean: A Comparative Study of Two New Women in *Kyeong-hee* by Na Hye-seok and *Biography of Kim Yeon-sil* by Kim Dong-in." She pays attention to the representation of women in modern literature, and the literature text chosen for her specific discussion is Na Hye-seok's "Kyung-hee" and Kim Dong-in's "Biography of Kim Yeon-sil." Na Hye-seok (1896-1948) was a novelist, poet, painter, sculptor, and women's activist in modern Korea, more precisely, during the Japanese colonial period. Kim Dong-in (1900-1951) was a male novelist who lived in the same era

with Na Hye-seok, and is one of the leading writers in the history of modern Korean literature. Their era was called the “Enlightenment Period,” and the emergence of “New Women” was a phenomenon that symbolized the characteristics of that time. This study shows how the society at that time ethically accepted or rejected these “new women” through the representative works of the two writers. The acceptance of “new women” is closely related to admiration for the modern era. However, men at the time showed an ambivalent attitude toward these “new women.” They emphasize the male-centered traditional ethic that gives importance to the female chastity, and there lies criticism and vigilance toward women emerging as consumer subjects.

Wu Juan’s “Women’s Trans-identity and Ethical Predicament in *The Vegetarian*” focuses on contemporary Korean literature text. *The Vegetarian* is a short story written by Han Kang (1970-). Han Kang is one of the representative female writers of contemporary Korean literature. Her work, *The Vegetarian*, won the Man Booker Award in 2016, making her even more internationally known. Wu Juan’s study interprets the *The Vegetarian* as a story in which a woman resists the banality of evil, the most overlooked animal factor. The attempt to explain the ethical agenda through the keyword animal factor originated from the theory of Prof. Nie Zhenzhao. The concept of “banality of evil” created by Hannah Arendt is considered to exist not only in the political domain, but also in the domain of private assumptions. However, this banality of evil is not easy to distinguish when obscured by various ethical identities in families. The protagonist of the novel carries out her identity transformation into her vegetarian through the process of transposing the oppression (evil) she suffered from her family with “meat.” Wu attempts to clarify the literary logic through the combination of the concept of transidentity claimed by Lim Dae Geun and ethical literary criticism. Identity transformation is a means of resistance, which turns out to fail. The ethical predicament faced by the protagonist is a problem that transcends nationality and gender, thus revealing that evil is not a work of the devil, but an issue of ordinary individual’s ethical choice.

Oh So Jeong’s work, “The Ethics of Empathy: subversion of the gaze and performativity in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and *It’s Okay, That’s Love*,” also deals with women issues in contemporary Korean literature. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a novel published in 2018 by Cho Nam-joo (1978-), and was evaluated as bringing the social problems faced by today’s young Korean women into literary agenda. It also has received a lot of attention overseas as it has been translated into several languages. It was also recreated into a movie thanks to the favorable responses. *It’s Okay, That’s Love* is a novel published 2016 by Roh Hee-kyung (1966-). This study

emphasizes the importance of “empathy,” which goes one step further from ethical lessons while analyzing the narratives of the two texts. After setting up a framework for discussion through the methodology of ethical literary criticism claimed by Prof. Nie Zhenzhao, she explores the need for changes in gender prejudice prevalent in Korean society by adding discussions between Jean Paul Sartre and Judith Butler. And she concludes that the two texts pursue the ethics of empathy through the process of overthrowing the gaze and the reader’s performance.

Shin In Seop and Yoon Seok Min open a discourse on the education of Korean literature through their work, “On the Feasibility of Applying Ethical Literary Criticism to Korean Literary Education.” In particular, this study focuses on Korean diaspora literature and multicultural literature. First of all, they hope that the ethical literary criticism theory will be able to bear the responsibility of ethics education through the awareness that ethics education is gradually shrinking in middle and high school education in Korea. Furthermore, they examine the possibility that various basic concepts of ethical literary criticism can be applied in the field of Korean literature education. For specific practice, cases are studied in these works such as Korean Japanese author Lee Hoe-seong’s (1935-) novel *Basin* (1992), Son Hong-gyu’s (1975-) novel *Islamic Butcher Shop* (2004), and Ha Jong-oh’s (1954-) poem, “One Asian” (2004). This study deals with the issues of ethical environment, ethical identity, ethical value, and ethical discourse contained in these texts, and argues that ethical values should be more respected through literary ethics education in Korean institutional education.

Therefore, this special issue is composed of studies on the theory, practice, and application of ethical literary criticism. The first article confirms the theoretical meaning and status of ethical literary criticism. The second to fourth articles analyze and decipher important agendas of modern and contemporary Korean literature, such as women’s issues and gender issues from the perspective of ethical literary criticism. The fifth article examines the means and meanings of ethical literary criticism that can be used in the field of middle and high school education. In conclusion, this special issue shows that ethical literary criticism can be applied from the practical level of criticism of Korean literature to applicative level of education, based on the theoretical level. Furthermore, it confirms that ethical literary criticism can be extended to various interdisciplinary studies ranging from ethics to philosophy, gender, and cultural studies.