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A Narrative of Carnivorous Desire

Chŏn Un -yŏng's *The Needle*

Every New Year's morning, the major newspapers announce the names of the creative writers and critics for the annual literary contest. To have their names listed is every writer and critic's dream. The contest judges hope to find something fresh in terms of the writer's theme, structure, and style. This is because every author has his or her own particular literary flavor.

Chŏn Un-yŏng has published a number of novellas since her work *The Needle* was first published in the *Donga Daily* in 2000. Chŏn's debut work shows intensity and originality in style with the theme of desire. Park Wan-so (Pak Wan-sŏ) and Kim Hwa-yŏng, the contest judges, evaluate Chŏn's literary sensibility and descriptive ability highly. For these judges, Chŏn's writing combines a sensual gaze with an attack posture.

In *The Needle*, the first person narrator, Pak Yŏng-sŏk, is a tattoo artist. Because of her ugly appearance, she cannot become an object of the male gaze. Even though her tattooing technique is perfect, her appearance makes people reluctant to use her services. Nobody wants her except for her abilities as a tattoo artist. She herself is satisfied with the glimpse she gets of masculinity while she is at work. In this sense, the first person narrator allows Chŏn to present to the reader an instance of a female gaze. While she is tattooing someone, the narrator experiences a sense of power and fulfillment. She takes pride in drawing the tattoo just as each customer requests.

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This story of the tattoo artist is paralleled in Chŏn's narrative with the narrator's story of the murder of a monk by her mother. The adultery that first takes place between her mother and the murdered monk, however, is not described lucidly but instead suggested marginally. Chŏn focuses on a concrete description of a dramatic situation rather than the event itself. The narrator neither explains the reason why Kim Hyŏng-Ja, her mother, kills the monk nor even properly clarifies the relation that exists between them. The narrator simply narrates in a language of carnivorous desire. By means of this process, the cause of her mother's murder is delineated.

The novel begins when the narrator is asked by a strange man to draw the biggest spider in the world on his body. In this way, he intends to fulfill his own desire, with the narrator also deriving satisfaction from the art of tattooing the spider on him. Through the image of the spider tattoo, Chŏn is able to show the internal style of the language of body and the language of the idea. For her, writing and the body are not separated. By drawing a tattoo, the narrator is able to experience a kind of sexual pleasure:

The first stitch on the flesh. I love this moment best. Holding my breath at the moment of the first stitch, I can see the blood gather. We call it the first dew. With this first dew, the ink in the silk thread slowly flows along the needle and the red ink at needle's end soon permeates the tiny gap in the flesh. It is as if I am speaking out the words that whirl in my brain. I am no longer a stutterer. (14)

In this passage, the needle becomes a symbol of desire. The tattoo is not only a medium connecting the desire of the tattoo artist to the body of the other, it is also a signifier of the subject who desires its physical form. The body is not suppressed by silence and secrecy but rather released as an object of desire.

This symbolic allusion to a sexual game is also suggested in the subplot of her mother and the monk. This is partly because the narrator identifies her own story with the story of her mother's murder of the monk. All her life, her mother has had to sew. By murdering the monk with her sewing needles, her mother intends to obtain the monk's power. In other words, her mother wants to fulfill her desire with the power of blood and an act of murder. The carnivorous narrative resounds as the narrator writes of her she eats "raw meat with no spice" (17) and of how she enjoys the taste of bloody meat.

There is another man who lives in the same floor apartment as the narrator and wants to get a tattoo done. Just as the narrator feels a kind of strength from the arms exhibited behind the glass at the War Memorial Hall, so too does the man, who happens to work at the War Memorial Hall. When the narrator accepts the man's request to have a tattoo drawn, the narrator is satisfying his desire as well as her own to be strong:

I drew a needle the size of a pinkie finger across his chest. The titanium needle has the most tiny hole. A tiny hole like a little girl's vagina. It is as if the whole universe is being sucked down into this tiny hole. Now he has the strongest coat of arms on his chest. The thinnest, the strongest, and the warmest needle. (33)

Chõn expresses desire not so much as a lack or need but rather as the production or eruption of energy. In expressing the theme of her novella, Chõn's language is vivid and elastic, sensual and aesthetic in expressing the desire of the tattoo artist.

Of course, there are some minor flaws in her otherwise impressive work. For example, contrasting sharply with her elaborate aestheticism and minute descriptive power, her establishment of the apartment setting where desire is fulfilled is simply a 'dead space.' Likewise, the ending part of the novel is deficient in illuminating her theme. The tattoo artist and the man from the War Memorial Hall see each other regularly in the elevator before going in opposite directions. However, after he receives a tattoo from her, he comes to live with her. This trite ending degrades the overall quality of the novella. Through this ending, the narrator becomes confined within the world of the sensual and no longer shows herself as a writing subject. With this easy coupling of the tattoo artist and the man with the tiny needle tattoo on his arm, the narrator may well vivify her desire but she also obscures its source. This is because the man wanted to receive power through a tattoo rather than through her. The sudden intimate relationship established between these two people at the end of the novel succeeds only in making the author's theme of desire ambiguous, causing the reader to be a little confused as to what Chõn really wants to say. By placing two people in an empty apartment in a big city, Chõn herself limits this narrative of desire.

The narrator did not give people tattoos to make up for her lack of desire. And yet when she comes to live with a man, her desire becomes fixed to this one object and she loses her sense of self. This is because desire that is fulfilled is no longer truly desire. To persist, desire must

be free of any one particular object. Earlier in the novel, Chŏn had said just this when she describes the narrator's desire as something that could not be confined. However, in the end, Pak's desire realizes the Freudian dream through the man who draws the needle. Her desire is that of a carnivore who has just consumed its prey; it is not that of an herbivore feeding on an expansive prairie. In addition, the spatial context in which her Freudian dream is realized is a closed-off interior setting where desire cannot be liberated. In the light of this, the reader might well be left wondering what it is that the author ultimately wants to convey through her narrator, Pak Yŏng-suk.