



## Re-visioning Gendered Folktales in Novels by Mia Yun and Nora Okja Keller

When contemporary Korean-American authors Mia Yun and Nora Okja Keller incorporate and retell folktales within their novels, they at once draw on the cultural assumptions conserved and disseminated through these tales and engage critically with their gendered discourses. As a store of cultural meanings that offer models for interpreting experience, folktales function as a form of cultural memory, but because they do so within a patriarchal culture, the type and range of meanings possible are challenged by focusing attention on women's perspectives. This study considers three novels which relate traditional stories to gender issues, and especially mother-daughter relations: Mia YUN's *House of the Winds* (1998), and two novels by Nora Okja KELLER, *Comfort Woman* (1997) and *Fox Girl* (2002). By retelling the tales, but with substantive changes, and emphasizing that a retelling is an interpretation, the novels challenge the inherited cultural and literary tradition and suggest ways in which history and tradition can be reread.

KEYWORDS: folktale retelling—gender hierarchy—diaspora—Korean-American fiction—women's stories—memory

THE reading and retelling of folk and fairy tales as an element of the modern cultural debate over gender and sexual politics has been actively pursued by scholars and authors of Western narratives since the 1970s. More recently, in what Young-Hee Shim describes as a “delayed re-play” of Western experiences (SHIM 2001, 140), sexuality discourses have become public discourses in Korean society, opening a pathway for comparable rereadings of folktales. Hence the well-known arguments of Marcia R. Lieberman in the 1970s that fairy tales were a male-dominated genre that reinforced patriarchal constructions of femininity (for example, HAASE 2004, 2–3) resonate with a reading of the Confucian underpinnings of Korean folktales, in that “Confucianism stresses women’s domestic roles as daughters, wives, or mothers and denies them their being as subject” (SHIM 2001, 146). Novels written in English by Korean/Korean-American authors Mia Yun and Nora Okja Keller have retold or alluded to folktales to focus attention on the operation of male and female power and to explore attitudes and transitions in Korean culture both in the Korean homeland during the 1940s to 1960s and within consequent diasporan communities within the United States. To place a story in an intertextual and dialogical relationship with other stories can draw attention to the processes of constructing a narrative, and hence to the possibility of reconstructing outcomes and significances.

In order to challenge the propensity for androcentric assumptions to be naturalized in male-dominated, traditional stories, the authors employ narrative strategies which resonate with an important writing agenda expressed by Adrienne Rich:

We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. (RICH 1979, 35)

In this discussion, I will consider how such an agenda is pursued through the re-visioning of folktales in three novels framed by the theme of mother-daughter relations: Mia YUN’s debut novel *House of the Winds* (1998) and Nora Okja KELLER’s two novels, *Comfort Woman* (1997) and *Fox Girl* (2002).<sup>1</sup> Of particular concern are the relationships of the folktales to the narratives within which they are embedded, and some of the functions of retelling and reinterpreting, particularly the role

of traditional stories in shaping possibilities of meaning for the lives of the principal characters.

WOMEN AND FOLKTALES IN THE NOVELS OF  
MIA YUN AND NORA OKJA KELLER

The novels of both Mia Yun and Nora Okja Keller have received wide critical acclaim, and all three discussed here have been translated into Korean. Yun (1998) was a finalist for the 1999 Independent Publisher Book Awards, and was selected as one of the best books about Asia published in 1998 by The Asia Pacific Media Network. Both writers were born in Korea. Keller's family moved to Hawai'i when she was three. She was raised by her Korean mother and later graduated from the University of Hawai'i and the University of California, Santa Cruz. As a child, her older siblings told her many folktales and stories so she grew up "with those types of stories in my mind" (LEE 2003, 146), and developed a renewed interest in Koreanness as an adult. In an interview with Robert Birbaum she commented that as an adult and a mother, she reached a point "where reclaiming or re-understanding what it meant to be a Korean-American woman became very important." The relationship between Keller's use of the Korean legend of the fox girl and her "continued interest in the silenced status of women" has been remarked upon by Young-Oak Lee in the prelude to an interview with KELLER (2003, 145). Mia Yun, in contrast, was raised in South Korea and moved to the USA as a graduate student, completing a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the City College of New York. She recalls that at a young age she became aware of Korean women's profoundly disadvantageous position under Confucian culture, but also of the richness of women's storytelling—"folktales, Korean myths, fables, and old yarns"—which surrounded her (YUN 2000).

THE CULTURAL FUNCTIONS OF TRADITIONAL STORIES

As these memories affirm, traditional folktales have a place in cultural heritage and contemporary everyday culture: for many years *KoreAm Journal*, a monthly magazine and forum for Korean-American experiences (popular culture, historical narratives, book and film reviews, community information, and so on) ran as its final page a segment called "folkwinds," which took the form of a folktale, reproduced (at times in abridged form) from ZÖNG's classic collection (1982).<sup>2</sup> As STEPHENS and MCCALLUM argue (1998, 3-4), traditional stories and folktales have important cultural functions. They serve to initiate audiences into aspects of a social heritage, transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of its shared allusions and experiences. They thus contribute to the formation of subjectivity by promoting the internalization of cultural models. The choice of Zöng's collection from amongst numerous possibilities in itself seems a significant cultural move, since these stories are not contemporary retellings but were gathered from oral tradition between 1925 and 1950, and record the

name of the informant and the date of collection. This framing affirms the cultural authenticity of the stories, and hence their function as cultural conservation within diaspora. Traditional stories impart concrete images and symbolic forms to the existential concerns of a society, but they are also open to modification through the process of retellings that draw attention to how cultural inheritance is subject to social conditioning. STEPHENS and MCCALLUM thus further argue (1998, 5) that the processes of retelling are subject to the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience—that is, they comprise a metanarrative, a perspective or abstract “story” from which particular narratives derive shape and meaning. In the case of Korean folktales, these shaping ideas constitute a patriarchal metanarrative, characteristically assigning female characters either passive roles as victim and/or prize, or active roles as evildoers. For example, “The Young Gentleman and the Tiger” (KOREAM 2005) relates how a young gentleman sets out on a journey and, having collected several improbable companions (the “helpers” germane to the fabric of folktales), comes to a house in which a young woman cowers in fear of a tiger which has already eaten the rest of her family. The helpers work together to despatch the tiger, whereupon the young man marries the young woman and they all live together in the house. The young woman has a small role to play in the action, but her principal function is thematic, as she occupies the important positions of victim and prize. Her role precludes initiative. The young man, in contrast, is the receiver of benefits. Such conservative gender structures are not characteristic of the general thrust of the components of *KoreAm*, but contribute to a conservative image of readers’ forebears and are potentially one means of imparting the kind of intertextual cultural knowledge assumed by Keller and Yun.

Folktales locate meaning in events and outcomes, so their characters are not complex and do not develop; interactions between participants are likewise limited and formulaic; and action is often stereotyped and repetitive (ORING 1986, 127–29). As STEPHENS and MCCALLUM state (1998), this formulaic discourse can have the effect of depicting human experiences and social structures as fixed and generally homogeneous. Social formations are mapped onto the everyday social world inhabited by audiences: that is, they are apt to coincide in some way with other constructions of experience in everyday culture. Thus, while story components will differ from tale to tale, motifs and social schemata are repeated across a multiplicity of texts, and particular gendered behaviors thereby become naturalized. When Keller and Yun incorporate and retell folktales within their novels, they at once draw on the cultural knowledge conserved and disseminated through such popular forums as *KoreAm* and engage interrogatively with the gendered discourses of those tales.

#### FEMALE CHARACTERS AND A SCHEMA FOR FEMININITY

Female characters in Korean folktales are frequently depicted through the gender schemata of victim and prize, of beneficiary to a male character, or of monstrous evil and/or licentiousness (with monstrosity often a symbol of

licentiousness). Schemata represent the ways knowledge is organized as structures of interrelated components which constitute, for example, situations, events, actions, character types, and patterns of behavior (see RUMELHART 1980, 33), and in folktales (and other narrative forms) shape how characters interact, how cause and effect processes function, and how stories unfold to a satisfying closure. Most importantly, a schema also configures gendered elements so that their interconnection appears to constitute a coherent unity. Schemata for gender and for story are closely intertwined in folktale and other traditional literary genres, although this may be more or less invisible because an audience will infer a complete schema on the basis of a few key components. For instance, if a traveler encounters a beautiful young woman who offers him food and lodging, it will be inferred that these are key components of a story schema involving a fox woman, who is an evil seductress who will seek to destroy the traveler. More components of the schema will become explicit as the story unfolds (preparation of a banquet and/or an offer of sex, for example), but the ideology underpinning the schema—that female power (expressed as dangerous sexuality) needs to be curbed—will remain implicit. The expectation that a reader will in such a way instantiate a schema richer and more complex than the actual data seems to underlie, for example, Mia YUN’s (1998) inclusion of multiple, brief folktale summaries.

Underpinning Korean folktales are schemata for masculinity and femininity which are grounded in Confucian assumptions of patriarchy, privileging sons over daughters, and misogyny. The components of these schemata are equivalent but opposite traits:

Schema for Masculinity	Schema for Femininity
high esteem in family	low esteem in family
authoritarian	submissive, compliant
strong	beautiful
violent	nonviolent
transgressive	obedient, pleasing
protective	vulnerable
“hunter”/powerful	“victim”/powerless
quester	prize
receiver	giver
initiating	self-effacing
independent	dependent
active	passive (active=evil)

The attributes within the male schema are always deemed superior to their binary opposite in the female schema; the “good” woman conforms to the attributes of the schema for femininity, whereas the undesirable woman transgresses them.

This schema for femininity is clearly visible in Beg-Nam YUN’s tale, “The Centipede Girl” (1982, 97–100), a variant of the “heavenly bride”-type tale. This tale is of particular interest here, as “heavenly bride” variants play quite a central role in YUN (1998). In “The Centipede Girl” an indigent young man, after unsuccessfully attempting to drown himself, is rescued and taken home by a beautiful young woman, who ultimately turns out to be “a daughter of the Heavenly King” (100), temporarily exiled to earth for failing to preserve her chastity. The man lives with her for several months in idleness and luxury (the transgressive-obedient/pleasing binary), but eventually remembers his wife and family and he returns, to find them also living in luxury because of money sent by the heavenly bride in his name (receiver-giver binary). After several more months he desires to see the heavenly bride again. While travelling to see her, a voice purporting to be that of his grandfather warns him she is a centipede monster and instructs him to destroy her by spitting tobacco juice in her face. At the last moment he decides to spare her (active-passive binary), and the woman discloses her identity and explains that her exile is now over. They spend one last night together, and in the morning the woman, her house, and all her possessions have disappeared. Although similar to some other heavenly brides the woman still possesses a degree of superhuman power, her role is entirely devoid of agency and cannot be said to demonstrate the intelligence, initiative, or courage we might expect as attributes of a positively represented folktale heroine not subject to the femininity schema. Rather, in taking the man to her house she follows the trajectory from victim to prize or helper/benefactor. The story allows her no action whereby she can save herself, apart from a return to submissive victim, which in turn enhances beauty and desirability:

He was on the point of spitting the poisonous tobacco juice in her face, when she suddenly gave a sob. She bowed her head and wept. He stared at her, undecided, and it seemed that she became twice as beautiful as before. (ZÖNG 1982, 100)

The alternative possible roles for the woman at this point—passive victim or monster—reflect how folktale heroines are usually powerless unless they possess a power aligned with monstrosity and evil.<sup>3</sup>

A variation of the schema is found in the “Princess Pari” story, which appears in both YUN’s *House of the Winds* and KELLER’s *Comfort Woman*. “Princess Pari” incorporates most attributes of the femininity schema, but, importantly, omits dependency and passivity and includes an element of female enterprise, in that the princess successfully completes a dangerous quest in order to save the lives of her parents. As Kun Jong Lee points out, “The moral of the narrative is filial piety, the cardinal virtue in Confucianism” (LEE 2004, 435). Pari completes her quest by performing designated female roles for nine years (drawing water, tending the fire, cutting firewood) followed by marriage and the bearing of seven sons.

### “FOX GIRL” TALES

The second major type of female character in folktales—inversion of the schema to designate female monstrosity—is exemplified by the Korean “Fox Girl” tales which are drawn upon by Nora Okja KELLER for “Fox Girl” (2002): the frequently retold “The Fox-Girl and Her Brother” (ZÖNG 1982, 171–74), and the lesser-known “The Jewel of the Fox’s Tongue” (18–20).<sup>4</sup> In the former, the fox girl overtly supplants the true feminine by eating the daughter of the house and taking her form. Her gender attributes are then drawn principally from the masculinity schema. Most notably, in relation to the Confucian patriarchal practice of privileging sons over daughters, the parents of the tale’s two-child family are besotted with their daughter, the younger child, and even drive their son away when he attempts to inform them that his sister is really a fox. Their “unnatural” behavior results in their own deaths at the fox’s hands. The girl also displays the attributes of authoritarianism, strength, violence, and transgressiveness. When the brother returns home after several years he finds his parents dead and the whole village deserted and “haunted by the spirits of the dead” (ZÖNG 1982, 173). His long sojourn with a Buddhist priest, with whom he had studied “the laws of magic which governed the laws of spirits” (173), had prepared him for combat with the fox and the restitution of order, but he first becomes the weaker party in a hunter-prey binary, and is only able to escape and destroy the fox with the aid of three magic bottles given to him by the priest.

Female characters whose attributes are grounded in the femininity schema lead happy lives if their behavior revolves around beauty, passivity, and dependence on outside forces. This is so implicated in the narrative that it constitutes a cause and effect relationship, and the drastic consequences of breaching this formula in “The Fox-Girl and Her Brother” imply a misogynistic view of women. Is it then possible to produce a retelling that does not reproduce this outcome? A 1997 Korean picture book version (LEE and PARK) mitigates the tale’s daughter preference by retelling a variant in which the family has three older sons, instead of one, but nevertheless entirely reproduces a version of the monstrous feminine. This is especially evident in the scene in which brother and sister meet on his return: the fox-girl’s face is depicted as semi-human, with sharp pointed teeth and a hungry expression, thus restating the “hungry female” significance of the story. More recently, however, KIM (2005) has attempted to modify the significance of the story by varying more of its components. There are again three brothers, not one, and each is set in turn to watch the livestock when animals begin to die mysteriously. Only the youngest remains awake to discover the truth about their sister, but is banished from home when he attempts to reveal it. The story thus introduces the motif of the good-hearted younger brother as achiever of a quest. Next, the Buddhist priest is omitted, and the brother’s first helper is a turtle he rescues from some boys (after giving them all of his money), and which turns out to be a son of the Dragon King.<sup>5</sup> The turtle rewards his kindness with the gift of a magic wishing-box that enables him to gain a home and a wife, who becomes his second helper

as the donor of the three bottles that enable him to deal with his sister. The new version does nothing to mitigate the parents' folly in their preferential treatment of the sister, but does change the tale's significance somewhat by substituting the good female for the priest, and balancing her against the bad female. Nonetheless, the good female is in the familiar role of helper and benefactor, so the outcome ultimately reconfirms the female gender schema.

Such retellings encourage readers to internalize a patriarchal construction of female functions and the notion that conforming to this construction assures well-being. Rowe suggests that to sustain a schema for femininity based on passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice suggests "that culture's very survival depends upon a woman's acceptance of roles which relegate her to motherhood and domesticity" (ROWE 1991, 348).

#### STORYTELLING AS A CHALLENGE TO GENDER INEQUALITY

Given that the conservation of traditional stories implies the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, and since the discourse of a society bears the imprint of its power structure, it makes sense, as both Keller and Yun have affirmed, to attempt to transform folktales with the hope of making a difference to social practice. This transformation will highlight the social foundations of gender inequality in Korean culture and affirm the need for women's stories to be told, and for the articulation of a women's history that recognizes the presence of abuse, both physical and mental, in the lives of women and their relegation to second-class status. The writing that attempts these things tends to be textually adventurous, because the conventionalized forms of folktales—for example, the formulaic beginnings and endings, the general recourse to character stereotypes, the recurrent patterns of action—commonly reinforce existing metanarratives and so make it difficult to reshape the stories without recourse to more drastic processes of revision, such as parody, metafiction, and frame-breaking.

The three novels exhibit how Korean women's lives—repressed sexually (by traditional patriarchy) and racially (by colonization)—are changed by the protagonists' urge to recuperate and transform lost and buried stories so as to challenge their gendered metanarratives. Two procedures—recuperation of women's stories and rectification of social structures—emerge from these retellings.

Women's creativity is represented by both the storytelling of the primary authors and that of female protagonists who tell stories of women's history and experiences erased by a tradition whose written stories are "mostly those of men" (YUN 1998, 172). In striving to excavate their suppressed pasts, the characters assert the progression of both women's history and individual women from silence to voice:

The names and stories we found in history books that taught us about Korea's thousand tumultuous years were mostly those of men. The stories of Korean women—those who died anonymously, those who paid with their lives each time a disaster struck, a tragedy occurred, an invasion intruded upon the land—were not there. We heard their stories from women. They told us how women were

violated and scarred repeatedly by the hostile outsiders and later even by men who came in friendly masks. As we listened, Korea seemed to become a bloodied Eden full of the voiceless souls of women. (YUN 1998, 172)

*House of the Winds* uses many types of stories as well as folktales: dreams, anecdotes, moral fables, histories, and religious stories. While it is about the life of the narrator, Kyung-a, from infancy to young womanhood, the narrative focus is on the life of her mother and the fragmentary knowledge of her father's life. Kyung-a also emphasizes that all lives are experienced in fragments, not as wholes. She begins to understand this as she listens to the life stories compulsively retold by a neighbor known as the Pumpkin Wife: her story about the son she lost to the Korean War is never the same, but, as she asserts, such experiences are common across time and place: "All my stories are old stories" (YUN 1998, 19). Stories about Kyung-a's mother's life are known imperfectly because of gaps in knowledge and the misperceptions of the narrator as a child, and at the end of the novel the narrator expresses a hope "to piece them [the memories] back together as one brilliant stone" (YUN 1998, 219). That process of reconstruction further invokes a metonymic link between an individual life and the life of the country. One cannot be told separately from the other.

The principle that folktales permeate being and enter the unconscious is established at the beginning of *House of the Winds*, when the narrator remarks on the impact of her mother's stories: "Often in dreams, the stories were reincarnated.... I was the dweller of the huts and caves. I was the lonely roamer who crossed mountains and woods, rivers and sea, and flew to heaven. I was a man, a woman, a boy, a girl, a child, a hare, a bird, and a heavenly creature" (YUN 1998, 4). The principle is extended to other forms of formulaic narrative when the children become fascinated with the murder of the local doctor's adulterous wife by her jilted lover. They can only imagine that event as a retold story, and when, years later, the narrator retells the story (YUN 1998, 7-8), she utilizes familiar motifs and clichés not only to reconstruct it but also to attribute it with significance. The conventions of romance, from "pulp women's magazines" to classic novels, offer a gendered schema for a murder of passion that covers characterization, setting, a sequence of events and a climax. In speculating on the meaning of the event for the "women who lived on the quiet streets behind the shady gardens" (YUN 1998, 8), the narrator offers contrasting female-nuanced significances: "just something to gossip about... [or] a warning. Bridle unfulfilled passions and longings. Life had to be contained" (YUN 1998, 8). This is typical of how various story types are used throughout the novel, so that the story of the doctor's wife can be read as an exemplary narrative, demonstrating how life stories are told and understood through the forms, motifs, and even clichés, that previously told stories have made possible.

In Kyung-a's understanding, the inferior status of women is enforced by other systems of belief in addition to Confucianism. In particular, a reworking of Hermann HESSE's *Siddhartha* (1954) is used to suggest that male self-fulfilment may be

reached at women's expense, and that women are excluded from narratives about history (YUN 1998, 59–60). Kyung-a thus transforms Siddhartha into another example of a story told by men about men and thereby implicated in a patriarchal metanarrative: “Later people read the tales of the wise man—concoctions of fiction and nonfiction, of myth and fantasies—and learn lessons about living” (YUN 1998, 59). But she instead interprets the tales as stories about a man's failures and betrayals, abandoning home and family and never looking back, institutionalizing the exclusion of women's stories or women's perspectives from the stories about men. She thought her father was a “wise man” on the road looking for his kind of nirvana, but he returned an ordinary man, always failing. Rereading the story of *Siddhartha*, she comments, “When I grew up I understood daddy has no more control of his fate than any other man” (YUN 1998, 60).

In all three novels, traditional tales are used to allude to the narrator's own life and lives of others and function as a way to understand the meaning of their lives. As analogies and reference points, they frame life in orientation toward the past. They naturalize the concept that human nature, particular human experiences and particular knowledge, are essential. For example, the bear-woman creation myth (from “Dangun, First King of Korea,” ZÖNG 1982, 3–4) is presented in both YUN (1998, 56) and KELLER (2002, 8, 19, and 124) as a role model for Korean women, enjoining the virtue of endurance to reach a certain standard because, being descended from an animal whose patience was rewarded with transformation to human form, women are regarded as lesser beings, inferior to men, but may aspire to transcend their essential animal natures. In order to interrogate the androcentric assumptions of the she-bear story, Yun quite closely follows the version in, for example, Zöng, but recontextualizes it by embedding it within the narrator's experience of journeying within a shamanistic dream, and instead of being the prelude to the story of Dangun, Korea's first king, it is a prelude to a women's history of Korea: “I saw how Korean women, the descendants of the she-bear and the son of the king of heaven, lived in the folds of history.... Their lives sweeping through, season after season, flowers after snow, rain after drought” (YUN 1998, 56–57). In a briefer reference in *Fox Girl*, the story is grouped with those of “The Centipede Girl” and the “Fox Girl” as “stories of transformation, of ugliness turning into beauty” (KELLER 2002, 9), and while this has immediate reference to the large birthmark deforming the narrator's face, its larger resonance is with the novel's exploration of the exploitation of women in the aftermath of the Korean War, and, narratively, with the re-visioning of traditional stories in order to challenge their androcentrism. In different ways, then, these novelists address the role of popular folk narratives as behavioral models.

#### KELLER'S RETELLING OF FOX SPIRIT TALES: “FOX GIRL”

While an extensive range of folktales is interwoven dialogically in *House of the Winds*, Keller uses a smaller number of stories. For example, the “Princess Pari” story first told on page forty-nine of *Comfort Woman*—a radical reversion of

the androcentrism that informs any known version of this story—becomes a recurrent motif in the mother-daughter dyad which frames the novel. The fox spirit tales retold recurrently in Keller’s “Fox Girl” are intertwined and inverted to disclose and resist the schema of female monstrosity. Telling the story of two sisters, Sookie and Hyun Jin (the narrator, and principal fox girl of the narrative), the novel is set in America Town on the fringe of Pusan in the late nineteen-sixties. Sons and daughters of GIs and prostitutes, and hence victims of national history and circumstances, are unwanted because of their mixed race or social position, and dream of leaving Korea and going to America. The gender implications of the fox girl stories—fox as hungry devourer and fox as possessor of a jewel of knowledge—are a shaping theme for this novel, especially in the way they are transformed. The theme reaches its culmination at the end of the novel, after the two sisters have gone to Hawai‘i and separated, and Sookie, who regards Hyun Jin as a fox girl who eats up other members of her family as well as other people, has abandoned her baby (Myu Myu) to Hyun Jin’s care. At the close of the second-last chapter, Hyun Jin, apparently having run out of options and disguises, becomes a simulacrum of a fox:

Eyes rolling up into my head, I dropped to all fours, ear pressed to earth, and heard the world singing like the crickets, with that in-and-out beat of the tides, of the blood in our veins, of the panting of the fox. Then everything stopped, went dead, and I knew that it was all over. I had nowhere else to go. I was run to the ground. (KELLER 2002, 285)

The conventional outcome of Korean fox spirit stories is that the metamorphosis of the demon from human back to fox form marks its overthrow or even demise. Such is the fate of the foxes in classic versions of the tales Keller reworks. At this moment in the novel, however, Keller evokes the schema in order to overthrow it. As Hyun Jin becomes isomorphic with the fox demon of the first of the two retold “fox girl” stories which underlie the narrative, the event is transformed in two ways. As a first person narration, it aligns reader sympathy with the “fox” in a way that a folktale does not; and the specific fox attributes (“I dropped to all fours,”<sup>6</sup> “the panting of the fox,” and “I was run to [the] ground”<sup>7</sup>) are blended briefly with the rhythms of existence in nature, an awareness of the thisness (haecceity) of things, which initiates the reinscription of many key motifs in the novel’s close. Earlier in the same chapter, Hyun Jin’s half-sister, Sookie, has repudiated her by telling a greatly modified version of “The Fox Girl and Her Brother.” In Sookie’s version, the fox girl’s desire to take on human form is inspired by envy and greed, wanting the “warm house and clothes and shoes on feet” of the humans. So she took human form and was adopted by a farmer, but unable to resist “animal hunger” she ate up all the livestock and eventually the farmer himself. Sookie’s retelling varies the classical version reproduced in ZÖNG’s collection by substituting the adoption for an element in the pre-text whereby the fox kills and possesses the body of the farmer’s daughter. The change more precisely fits her relationship with Hyun Jin and enables the moral that Sookie attaches to her retelling: “You’re the fox, Hyun Jin. Making yourself what you’re not to get more than you need. In

the end, you'll destroy yourself and everyone around you" (KELLER 2002, 278). Having set this up, climaxing with Hyun Jin's figurative transformation into the fox, Keller shapes the story yet another way. Exploiting the adoption motif from the second story, and the earlier reworking of "The Jewel of the Fox's Tongue" in chapter 2, she bestows on Hyun Jin a transformed life that not only overthrows the narrative pattern determined by the "fox girl" stories, but is also far different from the exploitation and prostitution which had been her earlier lot. This is not, however, an arbitrary ending, but a weaving of numerous motifs from earlier parts of the narrative into a new relationship.

By drawing attention to the structures and functions of story and to the tension between having choices and being bound by circumstance, Keller's reworkings of the "fox girl" stories emphasize the social assumptions underpinning stories about women. Folktales are thus seen to subscribe to a narrative teleology that accords with the assumption that women have little or no agency, and that any actions they take destroy themselves and everyone around them. As the narrator muses at the end of chapter 7, looking back at the moment she is driven away by her stepmother, other choices are possible, even if limited to the interpretations placed upon events, or else "the maps of our lives are etched into vein and muscle and bone" and "mere words... don't have the power to change anything" (KELLER 2002, 126). Where Sookie's "fox girl" story had accused Hyun Jin of desires shaped only by self-interest, the close of the novel suggests that the kind of altruistic gesture made by Gerry, a complete stranger, in "adopting" Hyun Jin and Sookie's baby Myu Myu, brings a fox girl into the domain of intersubjective selfhood. Until her encounter with Gerry, the women Hyun Jin has dealt with have been ruthless exploiters within a patriarchal system. Gerry offers altruistic support within a small all-female community.

Any telling of a folktale is oriented toward models and ideologies already present in culture, and these are reinforced and refracted back to the culture when they are given narrative form. A retelling may also seek to challenge or subvert such models and ideologies, and will often do this by substantive changes to the familiar story and by self-consciously drawing attention to these changes, often in a way that challenges the inherited cultural and literary tradition. Thus, for example, Hyun Jin's comment after Duk Hee's telling of the first folktale in "Fox Girl," "I never heard that ending before" (KELLER 2002, 27), may alert readers to the possibility of other narrative patterns. To draw attention to the conventions of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behavior, to reveal how such codes have been constructed and how they can therefore be changed (HUTCHEON 1984, 1, 6-7; WAUGH 1984, 2, 34).

Duk Hee's modification of the ending—the fox spirit is not destroyed, but borrows human form to roam the world seeking the jewel of knowledge stolen from her—points to a possibility of verbal agency, but is ironically counterpointed with another story, the story of how Korean women use makeup as a disguise, just as the fox "wraps herself in the skin of a dead girl" (KELLER 2002, 25), to move safely through the bars and brothels of America Town. The counterpointing

precludes actualization at this point of the possibilities inherent in the retelling, but the changed ending foreshadows the change effected at the level of the framing narrative at the novel's close.

#### A CONFLUENCE OF DISPARATE STORIES: KELLER'S COMFORT WOMAN

Keller's refashioning and interrogation of traditional stories in her earlier novel, *Comfort Woman*, is the most complex and challenging of the three novels discussed here. In this work she focused mainly on traditional stories of a different kind—myth and folk beliefs about female life transitions and rites of passage such as “birth, puberty, childbirth, and death” (KELLER 1997a, 185), as well as including some familiar folktales. The retelling of one of these, “The Toad-Bridegroom” (KELLER 1997a, 156–59), functions as a quintessence of the novel's combination of disparate belief systems and hence of second generation diasporan relationships with traditional Korean culture. *Comfort Woman* is structured dialogically, told from the different perspectives and life experiences of Akiko/Soon Hyo and her Korean-American daughter Beccah (Soon Hyo was renamed “Akiko” by the Japanese military who forced her into sexual slavery towards the end of World War II, and bears this name throughout her life; I will refer to her here as Soon Hyo). Lisa YONEYAMA (2003, 71), reading the novel within the framework of “a politics of redress,” observes that it is possible to understand the novel “as simply pointing to an inter-generational transmission of historical memories among Korean Americans,” but suggests it also explores “the possibility of a collective subject of historical justice even in the absence of the stability of experiential truth and the apriority of identity.” That is certainly a strongly present theme, but it is of course grounded in gender issues, and the refashioning of traditional story materials plays a key part in developing a discourse of femininity grounded in cognitive instability and fractured subjectivity. Soon Hyo is haunted by her past and by the spirits of those who died in the camps and were denied appropriate burial rites. Her daily life is marked by numerous rituals, which Beccah does not comprehend and which embarrass her when her mother seeks to perform them more publicly, as when she seeks to purify Beccah's school. Periodically, Soon Hyo succumbs to protracted trances which, in a distinctively magical realist turn, are either psychosis or shamanistic spirit journeys. While leaning towards the former interpretation, Beccah is never sure, and does not begin to comprehend Soon Hyo until after she has died.

Beccah is almost thirty when she narrates her sections of the novel, but most of her story is related through the fallible perspective of childhood. Her ignorance of and bewilderment at her mother's folk beliefs imply both a general reader position and the subject position of second generation diasporan readers in terms of their knowledge of their culture of ethnic origin and of gendered behavior across cultures and generations. The retelling of “The Toad-Bridegroom” poses questions such as, What does a reader need to know about Korean folk materials to understand the novel? Do readers grow into understanding Beccah, as she eventually progresses beyond the fabricated icons of Hollywood popular culture to

an awareness of her maternal cultural traditions? The novel persistently privileges traditional story over experiential models (principally romantic stories) projected through popular culture narratives: the pattern is flagged early in the novel when Beccah recognizes that one of Soon Hyo's (false) versions of how she met her missionary husband was adapted from *The Sound of Music* (KELLER 1997a, 32).

Keller's retelling of "The Toad-Bridegroom" is derived from the version in ZÖNG (with some sentences reproduced exactly). There are some significant variations, but the main difference is that Keller's version, embedded within a reminiscence about Beccah's childhood notions of angels, is enmeshed in a web of misinterpretation. The tale tells of a childless couple who adopt a toad and come to love it as if it were their son. When fully grown, the toad asks his parents to seek him a wife amongst the daughters of a rich neighbor. When the neighbor refuses, the toad tricks him into thinking a voice from Heaven commands the marriage, rebukes him, and threatens him with the destruction of his family.<sup>8</sup> The youngest daughter consents to a marriage, and on the wedding night the toad asks her (as in ZÖNG) to take scissors and cut open his skin, from which a handsome young man emerges. Shortly afterwards, the young man ascends to heaven, taking his wife and adoptive parents with him. Soon Hyo invokes the story whenever Beccah is inclined to doubt her wisdom or disobey an order. Although in adulthood Beccah realizes that the toad is a benevolent character who rewards the compassionate and obedient (KELLER 1997a, 159), as a child she fears his aptitude for transformation. Further, in redescribing him as "the toad angel" and situating him within a corrupted version of her missionary husband's angelology, Soon Hyo transforms him into an agent of both reward and punishment. Beccah could thus never decide what the story meant, but lived in constant fear that she would be married, killed, or carried off to heaven by a frog or toad. Her fear penetrates to the possible significances of the story.

Like other beast-groom stories (Aarne-Thompson tale type 425C, in UThER, 2004), "The Toad-Bridegroom" probably originated as a story about obedience, but, in so far as it pivots on the ownership and disposal of women, it has specific application to arranged marriages and hence affirms the "rightness" of patriarchy. A girl entering such an arrangement may well feel frightened, but she is reassured that, if carefully obeyed, the "beast" could turn out to be an angel. In the ZÖNG version, the toad instructs his wife to cut open his skin with scissors; in Soon Hyo's telling, "the toad told his wife to plunge a knife into his back" (KELLER 1997a, 158–59). This more violent (and less domestic) touch, probably borrowed from the Western folktale motif of killing a creature in order to disenchant it (for example the Grimm tale, "The Frog King or Iron Henry"), is the ultimate test of obedience. Understood in this way, the story affirms the patriarchal domination over women.

A further implication of Keller's change here is that it foregrounds a rite of passage which is a figure of death and resurrection. From her first narrated section, Soon Hyo represents her life as a story of repeated deaths and rebirths:

The baby I could keep came when I was already dead. I was twelve when I was murdered, fourteen when I looked into the Yalu river and, finding no face looking back at me, knew that I was dead. I wanted to let the Yalu's currents carry my body to where it might find my spirit again, but the Japanese soldiers hurried me across the bridge before I could jump. (KELLER 1997a, 15)

These are metaphoric deaths, of course—being sold at twelve; being generically and numerically renamed “Akiko 41” (when forced to replace her murdered predecessor, Akiko 40), raped and then given a crude abortion at fourteen; being taken as a wife by the missionary shortly afterwards. These multiple erasures of identity, denials of subjective agency, are epitomised in the moment Soon Hyo becomes “Akiko 41,” taking the place of Induk (“Akiko 40”) who had asserted her own subjectivity and found agency in bringing about her own death by shouting assertions of self and nation at her Japanese abusers: “I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive. I am seventeen, I had a family just like you do, I am a daughter. I am a sister” (KELLER 1997a, 20). As Kandice Chuh notes, the narrative of death and resurrection “brings together the seemingly incommensurable systems of an unregulated form of paganism and Christianity” (KELLER 1997a, 17–18). This mingling of beliefs is evident in the retelling of “The Toad-Bridegroom,” where the voice of the father is the authority for the belief that angels carry the dead to heaven or hell, but Soon Hyo’s animism also envisages angels as spirits eager to “jump into the skin of humans” (KELLER 1997a, 156). The belief in the ability of spirits to enter human bodies is the origin of Soon Hyo’s rebirthing, especially in her shamanistic possession by the murdered “comfort woman,” Induk, now merged with Samsin halmeoni, the Birth Grandmother, “the spirit assigned to protect and nurture the children of the world” (KELLER 1997a, 49). Soon Hyo’s other tutelary spirit is Princess Pari, whose story is syncretized with that of the Birth Grandmother when Pari is said to be “offered... to the Birth Grandmother spirit” (KELLER 1997a, 49) rather than being exposed at birth as in other versions. The Pari story is here interrupted to include an explanation about the Birth Grandmother and Soon Hyo’s identification of her with Induk. Hence two strong female spirit figures, signifying birth and rebirth, are brought into conjunction, setting a vibrant female spirituality in opposition to patriarchal social formations and systems of belief. As CHUH argues (2003, 18), masculinist gendering of female bodies critiques a Christianity consisting of hypocrisy and empty forms, as metonymically embodied in Richard, Soon Hyo’s husband. Soon Hyo’s experience of a religious service at the mission takes this further, however, when she sees the ceremony but hears the noises of the comfort camps: “Each time I saw him slap the pulpit for emphasis, I heard the sounds of women’s naked buttocks being slapped as they were paraded in front of a new arrival of troops” (KELLER 1997a, 70). Soon Hyo’s liminal state gathers up and critiques all forms of gender imperialism: Japanese militarism, patriarchal Christianity, or “the justificatory rationale underwriting U.S. intervention in Korea” (CHUH 2003, 18).

## CONCLUSION

Looked at in this way, “The Toad-Bridegroom” shows how the embedding and retelling of a traditional story may function as a map of reading, and spiral out through the rest of the novel. By foregrounding how a retelling is an interpretation, and how a response may stem from indeterminacy, the embedded tale links to various themes and motifs in the novel and suggests how history and tradition can be reread by contemporary diasporan subjects. This principle applies to all three novels discussed here. The embedding of traditional stories and folktales enables a polyphony of voices and cultural traditions, and the rereading of these stories enables a women’s point of view of the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War, and the subsequent neo-colonization by America. The dialogue between tradition and individual subjectivity affirmed through the strategy of first-person narration allows protagonists agency and means to change (FRYE 1986, 79), and attributes subversive powers to the first-person narrative as the protagonist looks to the literary tradition for answers about the present, speculates about the relation of “the forms” to her life and her writing, seeks “an ending of her own” which differs from the marriage or death to which she is traditionally consigned, and seeks “freedom” from the plots of the past (GREENE 1991, 7). At the end of *House of the Winds*, Kyung-a stands with “life... made up only of memories” (YUN 1998, 219), retrieving the past as “the past was suddenly retrievable only through my own dim memories” (208); Hyun Jin in *Fox Girl* is left with her adopted baby, who is a symbol of knowledge lost and regained; and Beccah in *Comfort Woman*, finally beginning to understand the trauma and legacy of Soon Hyo’s life, lies sleeping in bed, “coiled tight around a small seed planted by my mother, waiting to be born” (KELLER 1997a, 213).

Subjectivity is the product of experience and of intersubjective relationships with the experiences and memories of other people. Hence how they interpret and retell their stories offers readers new subject positions. The uses and interrogations of folktales in these novels are an important component of this process. As a store of cultural meanings which offer models for interpreting experience, folktales function as a form of cultural memory; when a multiplicity of folktales is used as a motif in a narrative, it invokes the “remembered” ways of interpreting experience and hence perpetuates, among other social practices, traditional gender roles. A traditional story may function as a map of reading, but Yun and Keller both demonstrate that although the power structure of a society is imprinted upon the stories it tells, every retelling is an interpretation, and when a novelist self-consciously refashions a familiar story it gains the potential to change the type and range of meanings possible in a culture. By reclaiming these stories as women’s stories, the novels show contemporary diasporan audiences how history and tradition can be reread.

## NOTES

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1. Each novel retells a bundle of traditional tales, which are listed below. Full texts of most of these may be consulted in ZÖNG (1982; Keller's principal source). Stories not included in Zöng may be found in HA (1970), HAN (1991), or CARPENTER (1973).

*House of the Winds*: "The Green Frog" (ZÖNG 1982, 34–35); "Dangun, First King of Korea" (ZÖNG 1982, 3–4); "The Man Who Became an Ox" (HAN 1991, 161–66); "The Hare's Liver" (HA 1970, 50–57); "Sim Chung, the Dutiful Daughter" (HA 1970, 40–46); "The Bell of Emileh" (HA 1970, 82–88).

*Comfort Woman*: "The Jewel of the Fox's Tongue" (Zöng 1982, 18–20); "Princess Pari" (CARPENTER 1973, 203–10, as "The King's Seventh Daughter"); "The Toad-Bridegroom" (ZÖNG 1982, 175–78); "The Green Frog" (ZÖNG 1982, 34–35).

*Fox Girl*: "Dangun, First King of Korea" (ZÖNG 1982, 3–4); "The Centipede Girl" (ZÖNG 1982, 97–100); "The Fox Girl and her Brother" (ZÖNG 1982, 171–74); "The Jewel of the Fox's Tongue" (ZÖNG 1982, 18–20).

*Folk Tales from Korea* is the most authoritative source for the diaspora's many non-Korean speakers (such as Keller). The collection was, indeed, never published in Korean: some of the stories first appeared in Japanese, under the title 温突夜話 (Jp. *Ondoruyawa*, 1927 [Korean Nights]), but the whole collection only exists in English.

2. As the history of modern Korean society has been one of aggressive physical and cultural colonization, fracture, and diaspora, persistent efforts have been made since the end of World War II to conserve and disseminate many kinds of traditional stories. This has been done through scholarly collections, such as ZÖNG's frequently reprinted work (1982), and HA (1970); through more popular collections, such as KIM (1954), and HAN (1991); through collections for children, such as CARPENTER (1973), and CURRY (1999); and through numerous retellings of individual tales in picture book form for younger audiences. *KoreAm* has now discontinued its "folkwinds" page, printing the last story, "The Old Tiger and the Hare, Part 2," in Volume 19, Number 9, 2008.

3. A variant of the tale, "The Rooster and the Centipede," retold for children in CARPENTER (1973, 261–65), depicts the male hero as a widower employed by a silk merchant, and the centipede woman as a rich widow. It is after they are married that the hero hears the patriarchal injunction to kill her, now represented as the voice of the father and directly invoking the appeal to filial piety, as he was "a good son who had always obeyed the words of his parents" (264). While the wife is still depicted as under punishment by the Jade Emperor of Heaven ("for some misdoing"), she is no longer a heavenly bride and thus may stay with her husband now that her period of punishment has come to an end. This change, along with the other variations in the retelling for a young audience, only underscores the gender convention shaping the tale: that is, the character's lack of agency and dual function as victim and benefactress.

4. Keller had included a brief reference to this tale in *Comfort Woman*: "And now, said Induk, there is only the dead to guide us. Here, she said, giving me the image of a woman. I saw a fox spirit who haunted the cemeteries of deserted villages, sucking at the mouths of the newly dead in order to taste their otherworld knowledge" (KELLER 1997a, 38). The cryptic allusion to the fox spirit's quest for knowledge anticipates Keller's subsequent recasting of the tale in *Fox Girl*.

5. The incident is borrowed from an unrelated tale, "The Mountain Witch and the Dragon-King" (ZÖNG 1982, 169).

6. The phrase is recalled by Hyun Jin from a childhood dream in which Sookie becomes a fox girl (KELLER 2002, 51–52).

7. Keller's "run to the ground" blends two idioms into an expressive double meaning: *run into the ground*, "destroy" (pushing something so far that it is, in effect, buried); and *run to ground*, "to chase or hunt (an animal) to its den or hiding-place."

8. Keller makes an important change here. Where, in ZŎNG, the neighbor is warned, "I advise you to accept the toad's proposal, for if you do not, you, your brothers, and your children shall be utterly destroyed," Keller's toad threatens, "I advise you to accept the toad's proposal, for if you do not, you, your brothers, and your sons will be killed. Your family name will be destroyed and you and your ancestors condemned to an afterlife as *yongson* [ghosts of people deprived of proper burial rituals]." The specification of male relatives and the impact on family name and ancestors make explicit the Confucian gender beliefs underpinning the story: the idea of the preference for sons is rooted deeply in the Confucian patriarchal system. A male heir was essential to ensure the continuance of a man's bloodline and for the continuity of ancestor veneration.

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