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Decolonizing the future

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In Lee Eung-il (Lee Eung-il)’s film *The Uninvited* (*Pulch’ŏnggaek*, 2010), three unemployed young Korean men are abducted and taken to space by a mysterious alien entity who speaks only English and announces its name to be “Pointman.” As the self-proclaimed president of the Galactic Federation’s “Lonely Star Bank of Life,” Pointman wants to purchase whole years from the “surplus” (*ingyŏ*) men’s lives to then sell them at a premium to his rich clients. With the rest of the film mostly riffing on the battle between Pointman and the three youths, the film as a whole can be seen as an absurd comedy of a heartless cosmic capitalist economy. At the same time, in its choice of symbols and tropes, the film integrates some interesting references to real-life events that concern South Korea as well as the postcolonial condition. The fantastic name of the bank is a pun on that of Lone Star Funds, a Dallas-based US private equity firm. In 2008, Lone Star was accused of having manipulated the stock market price of the Korean Exchange Bank (KEB) before acquiring it at the peak of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The ensuing legal battle prevented the firm from reselling its stake in KEB to another foreign bank; it was eventually allowed to sell that stake to Hana Bank, a domestic financial institution, at a lower price. Through this multiyear legal controversy, Lone Star became notorious in South Korea, and its name still evokes the painful memory of a whole country’s hapless subjection to international speculative capital.¹

Postcolonial studies has for over two decades now decisively shaped scholars’ approach to modern Korean history and culture. Notably, its critical intervention has led to the replacement of the conventional nationalist opposition between the colonizer and the colonized with a new paradigm that emphasizes their entanglements and interdependency.² In recent years, postcolonial theory has been applied to speculative fiction and to the interpretation of genres such as science fiction (henceforth SF), fantasy, horror, mystery, and their varying combinations. Yi’s *The Uninvited* is a prime example of a science fictional narrative that covers themes such as imperialism and (de)colonization in a genre fictional mode. This is all a relatively new development. It was only in the early 2000s that genre fictional works began to attract the attention of postcolonial critics, and the change has been even slower in Korean studies, where any study of genre fiction was generally received with a form of suspicion mixed with dismissal.³

The postcolonial reading of SF has already borne theoretical fruit. One of its contributions has been the innovative concept of techno-orientalism, which is currently used to describe the
futuristic, hypertechnological reification of a quintessentially “Asian” or “Oriental” other in Western SF. An example of techno-orientalism is the representation of South Korea in the film Cloud Atlas, an American and German coproduction, where a dystopian Neo-Seoul in the year 2144 teems with beautiful female replicants designed for slave labor. It is arguably in response to an Asia that is overimagined and recolonized in influential Western cultural products that many Korean authors have set out to “write back” through an SF of their own making.

How have SF writers contributed to the making (and remaking) of representations of South Korean nationhood? What synergic or conflicting visions of decolonization are conveyed in their works? And in what ways have Korean SF stories interrogated racial and ethnic stereotypes and their socially constructed nature? In reading works of South Korean SF through a postcolonial lens, this chapter will focus on two interrelated themes that are historically at the heart of postcolonial theory: the discursive construction of nationhood and the equally discursive negotiation of racial and ethnic identities. The chapter is accordingly organized in three sections. Following a brief and general theoretical review of the intersections between postcolonial theory and the study of SF, the two main sections will be given to the survey and analysis of some of the most distinctive works of South Korean SF from the past few decades. As the first part of the analysis will show, from the developmentalist fantasies of a cosmopolitan techno-utopia to the dystopian imagination of an apocalyptic or postapocalyptic society, the genre of SF has long been a site of contention among competing visions of South Korea as a nation. Moreover, as will be apparent in the second part of the analysis, through the biopolitics of cyborgs, creolized aliens, and transhuman subjects, the genre has also come to play a central role in the contestation of racial and ethnic discrimination both globally and in the local setting of South Korea.

The empire speculates back: postcolonialism and science fiction

At first sight, postcolonialism and SF seem to have little in common. The former reflects critically on the history of imperialism and colonialism and its present consequences, while the latter typically points to the future, imagining alternate worlds that are both speculatively estranged from our own and cognitively linked to it. Their mutual relevance becomes readily apparent, however, once we realize their historical convergence around the themes of empire, colonialism, and imperialism. Noting that some of the traditional strongholds of SF—Britain, France, Germany, Japan, Russia, and the United States—are countries with an imperial past, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has proposed to reconceptualize the genre as “an expression of the political-cultural transformation that originated in European imperialism and was inspired by the ideal of a single global technological regime.” As he suggests, the imperial enterprises of the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries were driven and enabled by the development of modern science and technology, which brought us not only the steam engine but also, at an ideological level, an idea of progress fueled by supposedly objective and universal Western-centric criteria. In this vision, SF legitimated the imperial project by celebrating modern science and technology and by popularizing them through its vernacular interpretation of new discoveries and the knowledge that brought them forth.

SF thus often exhibits a certain thematic and formal homology with the empire-building project. The fantasy of a unified technoscientific empire is ubiquitous in works in the genre, from Isaac Asimov’s Foundation series to George Lukas’s Star Wars, and so is the idea of a world government ruling the future Earth. One of the classic plots of SF is that of a human protagonist (typically white and male) who travels to another planet, a future world, or an underworld to encounter aliens or monsters. The fictional representations of these creatures—in works from Jules Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth (1864) to James Cameron’s Avatar (2009)—routinely
bear resemblance to the people of colonized societies or, in some cases, to the ethnic and gender minorities in the author’s own society. One of the natural consequences of such travel, genetic hybridization/mutation, is another frequent theme of SF. Indeed, the concept of linear and progressive temporality, which is fundamental (but not essential) to a futuristic imagination, acquired its claim to universal truth during the age of global discovery and exploration through the discursive reordering of different parts of the world into stages in the supposed civilizational progress of human societies.

This intimate historical connection between SF and imperialism, however, does not necessarily mean that the genre is inherently imperialist. SF can be critical of the status quo, such as when it objects to a totalitarian social order that suppresses the spirit of experimentalism and innovation necessary for the advancement of science. Furthermore and more to our interest here, the homology of SF and imperialism opens an intriguing opportunity for writers to deploy SF tropes and conventions to perform subversive strategies of mimicry, parody, and irony— together constituting a critique of imperialism. Michelle Reid thus observes that postcolonialism “enables a nuanced examination of sf’s complicity in and criticism of colonial discourses.” It is at this juncture that postcolonialism as a critique of imperialist epistemologies can meet fruitfully with SF to form a potentially subversive and critical genre. And it is right here that the practice of a “postcolonial SF” can take place.

If we accept the premise that SF generically has embodied the worldwide expansion of imperialism in its narrative form, one of the questions that we might naturally ask in reading South Korean works in the genre is whether they reproduce that imperialist viewpoint or whether they “speculate back” by returning the imperial gaze with an effect of critical mimicry. What narrative strategies, if any, did South Korean writers employ to imagine themselves out of the default perception of them and their nation as the alien and conquerable other? And how did their speculative endeavors contribute to the evolving definition of an idea of South Korean nationhood? By raising such questions concerning identity and nationhood, we begin the task of taking a postcolonial perspective on South Korean SF. At least until the country’s democratization in the late 1980s, SF occupied a special place in Korean culture, not only as a genre engaged with science and technology but also as a genre displaying a definite global/planetary orientation, within a milieu that tended to be intensely ethnocentric. The analysis of SF works thus provides us with a unique opportunity to probe into South Korea’s cultural and geopolitical imaginations, both present and future, and into the country’s place in such narratives.

Speculating alternate nationhood: from UN fantasies to postnational dystopias

In the earliest examples of SF in South Korea, dating back to the 1960s, a rather common plot was a South Korean scientist both collaborating and competing with other international scientists on a globally important mission in the setting of a cosmopolitan and technocratic future world. Two novels, A Lost Boy (Irŏbŏrin sonyŏn, 1959–60) and The Venus Expedition (Kŭmsŏng t’anhŏmdae, 1962–4) by Han Nagwŏn, one of the most prolific SF writers of the period, feature this plotline. Both center on a male Korean scientist who joins the scientists of “advanced” Western countries in a project of space travel or other scientific experiments for the common good of humanity in the face of alien threats, at times in rivalry with evil forces from the Soviet Union or Japan. Another example of this so-called UN fantasy—a term coined by Susan Sontag to describe 1950s and 1960s war movies from Hollywood—is Mun Yunsŏng’s now-celebrated novel Perfect Society (Wanjong sahoe, 1965). In it, a Korean man is selected as the world’s most perfect human specimen for a United Nations experiment in cryogenic hibernation. The UN
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fantasy, which was pervasive in South Korean children’s SF stories, comics, and animations up through the 1970s, was in many ways expressive of the country’s developmentalist nationalism, an ideal widely shared between the government and the citizens during the postwar recovery and industrialization. This speculative imagination was decolonizing to some extent, especially for its celebration of a Korean as a savior of the world, an unlikely bearer of “the white man’s burden.” It was also a typical case of mimicry of Western values, however, which suggests that the mainstream nationalism of 1960s SF in South Korea may have been ultimately derivative from, rather than subversive of, Western imperialism.

Indeed, a deeper critique of imperialism tends to be put forth by later works that to varying degrees take a position that can be regarded as postnational. Here the term *postnational* denotes a critical stance at odds with the generic, salad-bowl model of multicultural cosmopolitanism that largely characterized 1960s South Korean SF. A postnational speculation would attenuate, rather than highlight, one’s national identity through a positive critique of nationalism for its imperial legacies, condemning in particular the militarist and racist streak in much nationalist doctrine. In this sense, postnationalism converges with postcolonial thought. Illustrative of this strand of SF are Ch’oe Inhun’s (Choi In-hun’s) alternate history novels *The Voice of the Governor-General* (*Ch’ongdok ŭi sori*, 1967–76) and *Typhoon* (*T’aep’ung*, 1972). Written in the voice of the Japanese governor-general and that of a diasporic Korean man, respectively, these novels can be read as critical indictments of contemporary South Korean society that, in the discerning eyes of the writer, was still ruled by former elites of the colonial regime.

*Typhoon*, a representative example of the postnational outlook, imagines an alternate history of the Asia–Pacific War within a fantastic setting. While the story is said to unfold in “the region called East Asia,” the speculative element is signaled by the author’s deliberate inversion of the names of countries, so that China becomes “Anich,” Korea is “Aerok,” Japan is “Napaj,” and Indonesia is “Aisenodin.” The protagonist Otomenak (an inversion of the Japanese surname Kanemoto) is a lieutenant in Japan (Napaj)’s imperial army who is of Korean ethnicity. In the beginning, he appears fully committed to the cause of Japan’s imperial war in East and Southeast Asia, serving in Singapore and Indonesia. However, as he learns of the atrocities previously committed by Britain (Nibrita) in Indonesia and witnesses the Japanese massacre of Indonesian independence fighters, Otomenak awakens to his own colonial subjectivity. At the end of the war, he tries to take his own life as a way of repenting for having betrayed his own people, but one of his former prisoners, Karnosu (an anagram of “Sukarno”), persuades him to live and join Indonesia in its nation-building endeavors. As Karnosu tells Kanemoto, “A man is born only once, but as a social subject, he can be born many times over,” a theme echoed by the epilogue of the novel. After many years have passed, a Korean diplomat visits Otomenak, now a local dignitary known as Banya Kim, to thank him for his decisive contribution to the cause of Korea’s reunification. Otomenak is dressed in traditional Indonesian attire, and the diplomat cannot detect his erstwhile ethnicity. As the man notes, “Even Aisenodin natives would have taken him as one of them.”

*Typhoon* is a rare modern South Korean fiction in that its critique of Japanese imperialism does not quite result in a reinforcement of Korean identity but rather in the postnational unmooring of the protagonist from his ethnonational being through a form of hybridization. This dissociation happens partly through Otomenak’s emigration and partly through his marriage with a white British woman. Indeed, informing *Typhoon*’s unusually liberal postcolonial imagination was the author’s disillusionment with the increasingly dictatorial regime of President Park Chung Hee. As a member of the so-called 4.19 generation, Ch’oe had as a young man witnessed the student uprising of April 19, 1960, that ousted the regime of President Syngman Rhee. In 1973, barely a year after President Park’s “Yusin” (restorative) constitutional
reform cleared the way for his lifetime presidency, Ch’oe serialized *Typhoon* in *Chungang ilbo*. Instead of hewing to the nationalist agenda of the renewed dictatorship, the writer drew his inspiration from the legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, to speculate an alternate post–World War II future within it.19

Whereas postnationalism could provide a liberational social critique during the Cold War era, when the South Korean government wielded nationalism as a tool to regulate the citizenry, that possibility seems much reduced in the current age of globalization, when crossing national borders has become a fact of everyday life driven by migration as well as the capital flows of multinational corporations. Under the advanced, so-called late capitalist system marked by the diminished role of the nation-state and the concomitant expansion of global capital, what was once a utopian globalist aspiration has rather turned, for some people, into a dystopian reality. It is this sentiment that is expressed by a rising wave of postapocalyptic and dystopian SF in South Korean film and literature. From Bong Joon-ho’s film *Snowpiercer* (Sŏlguk yŏlch’a, 2013) to Kim Chunghyŏk’s [Kim Jung-hyuk’s] “Where the Boats Go” (Potŭ ka kanŭn got, 2015), the postnational dystopia serves as a critical analogy of the nation—and the world—in its advanced neoliberal transformation.20

An emblematic text of dystopian postnationalism is Pak Min’gyu’s “Roadkill” (Rodŭk’iŭl, 2011), whose subject matter is the nightmarish imagined human condition in a hyperadvanced postindustrial capitalist world.21 In a world that has eliminated nation-states, “Roadkill” projects the East Asian region as divided into Asia, a megacorporate state, and the peripheral wasteland of nonplaces like Yangnan outside of Asia’s walls. Located somewhere in today’s territories of China and Vietnam, Yangnan is “a hell on earth,” a slum inhabited by a population of trash who may once have been productive workers but are today underemployed or unemployed.22 These extraliminal subjects, the narrative tells us, “do not even qualify as members of the proletariat.” Living a life of exile with no promise of return to the productive world of employment, they resort to gambling and drugs to numb the pain of a meaningless, primitive existence. Watching a game of Russian roulette, the crowd cheers “Xuănju, xuănju,” meaning “election” in Chinese, in a mockery of the democratic system that has left them the freedom only to die by suicide.23 Occasionally, some of Yangnan’s inhabitants still dare to attempt an illegal passage into Asia. The broad border zone is heavily surveilled, however, and crossing is rendered nearly impossible by the frequent passings of high-speed trains.

The story of “Roadkill” takes place in the border zone. It is told alternately by Maksi, a sympathetic robot guard who patrols the air along with his robot partner Mao, and by an omniscient narrator who unusually addresses a nameless male refugee in the second person. Through this unorthodox, experimental use of “you,” the narrator interpellates the reader into the precarious position of a refugee, along with his female companion and their newborn child, who is about to attempt an impossible crossing. The family’s journey predictably ends in a fatal crash, but the baby, thrown aside at the last moment, survives and is picked up by Maksi and Mao. As the two try to save the fragile human life in violation of the commands of their human supervisors in Asia, Mao is “rebooted” and Maksi, with the baby in his arms, is gradually turned off, with Asia looming over him like a hi-tech mirage.

The futuristic vision of “Roadkill” is reminiscent of the grim dystopias of cyberpunk, where wealth and technology are typically the prerogatives of global corporations, and the disenfranchised masses lead dangerous and violent outlaw lives. The dystopia of “Roadkill,” however, also has its specific local referent in what has come to be known as “post-IMF” South Korean society. In 1997, the Asian financial crisis dealt a hard blow to the national economy of South Korea, relegating a large swath of the middle class to bankruptcy and destitution during an initial shockwave and the subsequent tides of economic restructuring under the supervision
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of the International Monetary Fund. Despite the early-2000s economic recovery, many of the laid-off workers and their families never regained their lost status. In this specific local context, the parody of electoral democracy in the Russian roulette scene acquires particular poignancy, as the 1997 crisis was in essence a moment when chance seemed to rule over individual destinies in a recently democratized country at the mercy of speculative capital.

While class is a clear category of interpretation of “Roadkill,” some aspects of the story also function as a critique of South Korea’s newly acquired subimperialist status. By the 2011 publication of “Roadkill,” the country had emerged as a regional economic powerhouse and a major destination for migrant workers from China as well as Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, other real-world referents from within the story are the frequent news reports of North Koreans risking their lives to defect. Struggling along with these underprivileged groups of people, underclass South Koreans can be symbolically represented as being on both sides of the border of Asia in “Roadkill,” with the employed living in a walled cosmopolitan techno-utopia and the jobless struggling for survival in a multiethnic ghetto outside.

By projecting a dismal future in a corporatized Asia, “Roadkill” offers both a dark, closed vision of humanity trapped in a neoliberal capitalist world and the belief that a way out exists. Reinforcing this sense of a closed horizon is the sad fate of the two robot guards, who are sardonically named after Karl Marx and Mao Zedong. The bleak dystopian vision of “Roadkill,” however, is not necessarily antithetical to an aspiration for the overcoming of the status quo. As critics such as Lyman Tower Sargent and Tom Moylan have observed, a dystopian vision does not necessarily reject a utopian yearning; rather, it can be an expression of an “inverted utopianism” that strategically represents the terror of the status quo rather than a hopeful vision of its overcoming. Utopia and dystopia can thus be different expressions of a more generalized utopian spirit. Although the narrative of “Roadkill” does not allow any glimpse of its future, I suggest that its sympathetic portrayal of the human tragedy of the Trashes can be interpreted as implying the need for a critical reconsideration of the status quo, if not for an outright call to resistance.

In spite of their themes of alternate nationhood and cosmopolitan worldbuilding, neither Typhoon nor “Roadkill” raise many questions about racism among South Koreans. As noted earlier, the utopian future of Typhoon has among its limitations an uncritical subscription to the racially biased stereotyping of Southeast Asians. For its part, “Roadkill” features multiple ethnicities, but their class status in the bipolarized state of Asia tends to cancel out any racial hierarchy, thereby rendering its dystopian world essentially color-blind. Beginning in the 1990s, a new generation of Korean writers started to produce more poignant postcolonial critiques of racism amid the globalization of their country’s economy and labor force. In this more advanced stage of the decolonizing national consciousness, SF writers have been making vanguard contributions by taking advantage of the speculative nature of the genre to contest and subvert South Korea’s subimperial reiteration of the established racial hierarchy and its discriminatory practices. I turn now to an examination of such literary performances.

Estranging racial and ethnic identities: postnational cyborgs and creolized aliens

If we agree with Jessica Langer’s assessment that “a mutual central focus of SF and (post)colonialism is that of otherness,” the issue of race and ethnicity cannot but be vitally relevant to both postcolonial studies and SF. In spite of its original centrality to Edward Said’s Orientalism, however, the theme of race has in more recent times tended to be downplayed in favor of that of the nation within mainstream postcolonial studies. This is arguably a mistake. The construction of racial stereotypes and racist knowledges was and is essential to legitimating the imperial
enterprise, as it enabled the empire to culturally imagine native people as colonizable before it proceeded to colonize them. With the trope of the alien often superimposed onto images of people of color, SF has historically been a major carrier of racist ideology. Precisely for that reason, however, the genre also has a unique potential for interrogating racism and its impacts. This is due in no small measure to SF’s worldbuilding imagination and its thematic emphasis on alienation. In engaging critically with the representations of race and ethnicity in Korean SF, we may thus examine their racist biases, both conscious and unconscious, and also analyze any critiques of racism embedded in them.

As illustrated by the examples of 1960s and 1970s works discussed earlier, SF has served in South Korea as a major vehicle for the expression of racial hierarchy. This was especially pronounced when the genre was wedded to a developmentalist ideology that imagined Korea as a country in competition with others for civilizational advancement. Later on, the anticolonialist discourse of the 1980s democratization movement was able to provide an alternative, but it too tended to level the differences between diverse postcolonial subjects, neglecting South Koreans’ own complicity in American or Japanese imperial ventures in the process. More-sensitive portrayals of other races in South Korean SF had to wait until the 1990s, when the advancement of globalization enabled economic and cultural interactions between South Korea and other postcolonial societies such as those of Southeast Asia.

I will focus my discussion here on two notable examples of critical SF representations of racial minorities. The first example concerns the postnational and postracial representation of the cyborg by the writer called Djuna. Known only by the pseudonym, Djuna is an established genre author whose surrealist, grotesque stories were emblematic of 1990s experimental Korean SF. This writer pioneered the integration of themes of race and racism in SF narratives in short stories such as “Pentagon” (P’ent’agon) and “Children All Leave” (Aidŭl ŭn modu trŏnanda). The plot of “Pentagon” features a hybridized Vietnamese female cyborg as its protagonist. In the story, the “Information Bureau” (chŏngbo’guk) of the world government arranges for the mind of a deceased person to be downloaded into five brain-dead bodies, in an experimental application of the mind-uploading method called Pentagon. The original mind belonged to Kim ŭnsu, a Korean executive who had done shady work for a global economic cartel. The bureau’s plan is to retrieve Kim’s memories—and the secret information that they contain—from the five cyborgs. The plan is thwarted when one of the cyborgs, a pregnant Vietnamese woman named Nguyen Tu Le, escapes from the hospital. Horrified at her transplanted memory of Kim’s crimes, which include “fraud, rape, murder, and arson,” Nguyen turns her newly acquired criminal know-how to the deadly mission of assassinating the other four cloned cyborgs. The narrative, told from the perspective of Yun Yŏnggyu, the last surviving male clone, ends with him dying under the razor blade of “self-hating” Nguyen, while admiring the beauty of the femme fatale, who, as he says, is “my own clone.”

In this and other stories from the period, such as “Mimesis” (Mimesis, 1995), Djuna used the liminal subjectivity of a cyborg—at once Korean and foreign, human and posthuman, gendered and transgender—to expose South Korea’s ingrained racism and patriarchy and their manifestations in the country’s subimperial expansion into Southeast Asia. Read in the context of the mid 1990s, Nguyen’s vengeance delivered a haunting critique of labor exploitation and the human rights abuses committed in Vietnam by South Korean corporations that were making headlines at the time. Djuna’s vengeful postethnic cyborg thus performs its critical discursive function on both deconstructive and analogical levels: on the one hand, its hybrid identity transgresses ethnic essentialism, and on the other, its fictional indignation has a real-life referent.

Another distinctive representation of estranged racial and ethnic identities is the alien protagonist of Im T’aeun’s [Im Taewoon’s] “Storm Between My Teeth” (Ippal e kkin tolgae param).
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In the story, Im mixes the SF theme of alien bodysnatching with the tropes of martial art fiction to create an original hybrid at the crossroads between Eastern and Western popular culture. The protagonist is a 220-year-old alien from faraway planet R.17 who is genetically disguised as a human. He is also a warrior whose mission on Earth is to find and destroy the other fighters who are vying for the throne of R.17. In Im’s narrative, the alien is portrayed more as a fantastic amalgam of various cultures of the Global South than an individual with a fixed ethnic identity: his alien name, Remitolppoiawi, resonates with Remiñawi, a legendary Inca warrior, while he inhabits the body of Jamui, an earthing born in Kenya. The odd-sounding translation of the character’s alien name is “Storm Between My Teeth,” which vaguely recalls a Native American name in the style of “Dances With Wolves.” When this hypercosmopolitan protagonist travels to Seoul in search of his last enemy, the narrative registers his experiences of racial and class discrimination at the hands of the Koreans, to whose eyes he appears as a dark-skinned immigrant doing menial work in a pork BBQ restaurant.

As does Typhoon, Im’s story has its brush with racist stereotyping, most signally when Jamui is depicted as a “lion-hunting” boy while growing up in Kenya. Still, the story acquires critical significance for its rare depiction of a minority male protagonist as a superhero with superior intelligence and might. We may resort to the concept of creolization to characterize Im’s intervention through “Storm Between My Teeth.” Jamui’s creolized persona is the result of a process of creating a new identity through the mixture of multiple languages and cultures. As critics such as Edouard Glissant and Dominique Chance have argued, the term creolization can serve as a better alternative to comparable terms such as transculturation, hybridization, or acculturation for describing the increasingly fluid ethnic and cultural identities in the age of globalization and mass migration, since it gives a greater emphasis to the creation of the new rather than the sources of origination.

These cases of antiracist SF tropes in the forms of a postracial cyborg and a creolized alien showcase the potential of SF to destabilize racial stereotypes and expose discriminatory social practices. Other recent examples of texts that use cultural hybridity to tackle prejudice include Chang Yunch’ŏl’s film Muhammad the Diving King (Chamsuwang Muhamadû, 2006), which tells the story of a Thai migrant worker’s superhuman survival in a poisonous Korean gas factory; Pak Min’gyu’s antisuperhero novel Tales of the Justice League of America (Chigu yŏngung chŏnsŏl, 2003), in which a Korean prep school dropout joins DC Comics heroes under the guise of “Banana Man”; and Chŏng Soyŏn’s [Jeong Soyeon’s] short story “My Neighbor Yonghŭi” (Yŏpjip ŏi Yŏnghŭi ssı, 2007), which portrays a friendship between a young earthing artist and her alien neighbor ostracized by society for its radically different appearance. All of these recent cultural texts advance novel, alternative speculations on racial identity and interracial relations. They all offer a rewarding field of research for critics versed in postcolonialism and critical race theory.

Conclusion

The foregoing has attempted to showcase some of the potential benefits of reading Korean SF through the analytical lens of postcolonial studies. South Korea and its culture make an interesting case study for postcolonial theorists. On the one hand, like other former developing countries, Korea modernized mostly under colonial rule, and its national division is a reminder of its still-incomplete decolonization. On the other hand, the country itself has attained subimperial status in its own region, being an exporter of technology and industrial capital and an importer of migrant labor. South Korea’s shifting, layered status within the history of global technoscientific imperialism has found a range of representations in the country’s SF, and a postcolonial
approach to that genre promises to yield new insights while allowing its integration into the more accepted pedigree of postcolonial literature.

While sharing some tropes and an anticolonial theme, the stories that I have discussed diverge importantly in their discursive functions. Owing to its forward-looking, futuristic vision, the SF genre gained mass popularity during the postwar nation-building period of the 1960s, when it frequently lent itself to the cosmopolitan utopias of the so-called UN fantasies. After the 1972 authoritarian turn of Park Chung Hee’s regime, however, many writers of SF took to making a counterhegemonic use of the genre. Resistance to developmental dictatorship and the status quo of Cold War South Korea found expression, during the 1970s, in postnational texts such as Ch’oe Inhun’s Typhoon. The postnational theme, developed in a utopian direction in Typhoon, came to acquire a dystopian outlook in later years, as in Pak Min’gyu’s “Roadkill.” More examples could be cited of the variability of discursive forms that has characterized the genre of SF in South Korea through the decades. The perspective of postcolonial studies is thus a promising one with regard to attempting an overarching account of South Korean SF. It is not the only angle, however, since alternative, not to say competing, narratives can be developed through an analytical lens grounded in Marxism, feminism and queer studies, or ecocriticism and ecology, for example.

Still, although the postcolonial is but one possible means of access to a fascinatingly under-explored cultural field, its theoretical direction offers great opportunities for future development. A plethora of textual, cultural, and political phenomena have been barely touched on in the space of this chapter—from the constructed nature of history to the legacy of technorientalism to hybridity, globalization, and more. These are all topics ripe for examination in SF from South Korea, and they are what makes the postcolonial perspective so valuable for contemporary scholars.

Notes

1 Pulch’ŏnggaek, directed by Yi Ŭngil. I thank the director for sharing with me the subtitled international festival version of this independently produced film. For a further account of the Lone Star controversy, see Ch’oe Sanghun, “Lone Star Executive Sentenced.”
2 See, for instance, Robinson and Shin, eds., Colonial Modernity in Korea; Kwon, Intimate Empire; Suh, Treacherous Translation.
3 For postcolonial critics’ engagement with SF outside of Korean studies, see Batty and Markley, “Writing Back”; within Korean studies, see Martin-Jones, “Decompressing Modernity”; Sellar, “Another Undiscovered Country”; Canavan, “If the Engine Ever Stops.”
4 See Roh, Huang, and Niu, eds., Techno- Orientalism, 7.
5 For Darko Suvin’s seminal definition of science fiction as a literature of cognitive estrangement, see his Metamorphoses of Science Fiction, 3–10.
6 Csicsery-Ronay, “Science Fiction and Empire,” 231.
7 For a further account of the formative influence of colonialism on Western science fiction, see Rieder, Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction.
8 Csicsery-Ronay, “Science Fiction and Empire,” 241.
9 Reid, “Postcolonialism,” 257.
10 See Jessica Langer’s critical conception of postcolonial science fiction in Postcolonialism and Science Fiction, 4.
11 Both novels have been collected in Han Nagwŏn, Han Nagwŏn sosŏl chŏnjip.
12 Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster.”
13 Along with its utopian aspiration for national modernization, Mun’s Perfect Society was marked by a dystopian fear of the future technologized society, which was encoded in its envisioning of the future world as a lesbian totalitarian technocracy. See Mun Yunsŏng, Wanjŏn saboc.
14 On the conceptual convergence of postnationalism and postcolonialism in the study of science fiction, see Raja and Ellis, eds., The Postnational Fantasy, 9–10.
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15 Ch’oe Inhun, Ch’ongdok ū sori and T’aep’ung. Ever since Philip K. Dick’s The Man in the High Castle (1961), the genre of alternate history has been widely regarded as a form of science fiction in which the novum, the defining SF element, is the imagined existence of an alternate reality. Sometimes, but not always, this alternate world is connected to ours via time travel or a metaphysical back door in a book like Dick’s novel The Grasshopper Lies Heavy.

16 Ch’oe Inhun, T’aep’ung, 7.

17 Ibid., 492.

18 Ibid., 481.

19 On the aspiration of Ch’oe and his contemporary Korean intellectuals for a third path of political neutrality and autonomy amid the consolidating Manichean order of the Cold War, see Kwon and Cheon, 1960-yŏn ūl mutta, 221–76.

20 See the English translations of Pak Min’gyu’s “Roadkill” and Kim Junghyo’k’s “Where the Boats Go” in Park and Park, eds. Readymade Bodhisattva, 295–324 and 325–53, respectively.

21 Pak Min’gyu, “Roadkill.”

22 Ibid., 144.

23 Ibid., 141.

24 See Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism,” 3; Moylan, Scraps of the Untainted.

25 Ch’oe Inhun, T’aep’ung, 209. See also the discussion of the novel’s orientalist gaze directed at Southeast Asia in Park, “Dissident Dreams,” 172–73.

26 Langer, Postcolonialism and Science Fiction, 82.

27 For instance, see Bhabha, Nation and Narration; Chatterjee, The Nation and Its Fragments.


29 For an account of 1980s nationalism and the decade’s movement for South Korean democratization, see Lee, The Making of Minjung, 40–44.

30 The name Djuna was likely inspired by the lesbian American writer and artist Djuna Barnes (1892–1982).

31 Both works were included in Djuna’s first short story collection The Butterfly War (Nabi chŏnjaeng, 1997). “Children All Leave” is an SF parable of colonial conquest set in a distant future. In a plot that is reminiscent of Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild,” the earthlings occupy an alien planet inhabited by three-eyed and “brown-skinned” (chŏkkalsaek) natives. Here, they cultivate a new society that sees the natives “voluntarily” retreating to reserves in a quarter of the planet. Mysteriously, however, the earthlings’ children begin to disappear, leaving only their skins behind and no explanation for the terrorized families. In a reversal, the ending reveals that it was actually the native aliens who had colonized the earthlings by adopting their children’s bodies as incubators for their own offspring. The story joins a critique of colonialism with a contestation of South Korea’s parental control over young people’s lives. In a provoking irony, the leader of the aliens announces to the earthlings that “children are not parents’ possessions.”

32 Djuna, Nabi chŏnjaeng, 51.

33 See Djuna, “Mimesis” in ibid., 53–64.

34 See Bhatnagar et al., “Nike in Vietnam.”

35 Im T’aeun, “Ippal e kkin tolgae param.”


37 See Chance, “Creolization.”

38 Chang Yunch’ŏl, “Chamsuwang”; Pak Min’gyu, Chegu yŏngung chŏnsŏl; Chŏng Soyŏn, “Yŏpjip ūi Yŏnghŭi.”

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