

Ex-Lover's Gift Bazaar: Critique

Reporting the unvarnished, honest truth

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After her debut in 2004, Kim Mi-wol began by producing works that considered the harsh daily life of young people with a warm gaze. The characters in the her works, now that she is middle-aged, are no longer young, too, but the author's attitude of looking at people's reality positively and calmly is still there.

Kim Mi-Wol: "I want to accept events as they are, without interpreting them with a happy ending or a bad ending."

There are works of fiction that try to seize and dominate reality, while there are others that pursue reality and try to be faithful to it. Every writer has an ambition to create their own universe as a writer, but even so, the material of the universe they want to create is bound to be the reality that actually exists in front of their eyes. In such cases, some artists twist, transform, or distort that reality to fit the shape of the universe they are thinking of, while others closely observe existing reality and then choose to reproduce it as closely as possible. Kim Mi-wol belongs to the latter category. Rather than build her own world in her own style, she seeks to relive reality as accurately as possible and extract meaning from it. She is distinguished by humble writing, far removed from any ambition to leave her mark on the history of literature with her own personality and originality.

Kim Mi-wol, who made her debut in 2004 by winning a newspaper's spring literary award, published her first collection of stories, "Seoul Cave Guide," in 2007. After that, her first full-length novel, "The Eighth Room" (2010) and her second collection of stories, "A Book No One Opens" (2011) show her early literary world; the solitude and despair which the young generation, people in their 20s and early 30s, feel. are the key words running through these works. The spaces where the main characters in her first stories live, such as gosiwon, PC cafes, small rooms, semi-basement studios, or rooftop rooms, are narrow and dark, just like the 'cave' in the title-story of her first collection. The first full novel depicts the wanderings of the young people who move in such spaces. The characters go through a time of wandering and so grow. In this novel, an older friend, who was the main character's first love, asks, "What is your dream?" However, for young people who are struggling in the face of immediate hardship and suffering, dreams may be a luxury, as can be seen in the self-awareness of the

unsuccessful editor Jinsu, who is the protagonist of the title-story of the second collection.

“It was a book that no one opened, tucked away in the back corner of the bookstore’s bestseller shelf. It definitely existed, but it was clothes that no one wore, it was a song that no one sang. From the moment she realized it, she stopped dreaming. The dream was not dreamed.”

The relative poverty and anxiety about the future that plagued many young people in Korea in the early 2000s is reflected in the young protagonists of the stories. However, what is interesting is the fact that Kim Mi-Wol's fictional world is not as dark and hopeless as that. In 2011, when she received the Shin Dong-yup Award for Creative Writing, designed to encourage promising young writers, the judges’ report said that she “presents a cheerful and positive worldview that does not get caught up in despair while offering in-depth exploration of the hard life and anguish of the young generation.” That speaks volumes about the characteristics of her novels. The positive sublimation of despair can be said to be a principle inherent in her fiction and the author's thoughts can be glimpsed directly in an interview conducted after the publication of her second collection.

“This world is too complicated and varied to be cut up and portrayed as one. Because I think of the world as an organism that changes and moves from moment to moment, I think there is a lot of room for different interpretations of a situation that seems to have an unfortunate ending right now but may be interpreted differently later. I want to accept events as they are without interpreting them with a happy ending or a bad ending.”

Here, too, we can see the artist's attitude in taking the world as it is without transforming or manipulating it according to her plans.

It took a long time for her third collection of stories, “Ex-Lover's Gift Bazaar” (2019), to be published after her three early works. It can be termed as a kind of slump, and presumably, as the writer herself reached an age that is no longer considered youthful, existential and literary worries and choices continued to develop.

The characters in the works writers create often reflect the author's own age, as do the works in this collection of novels. Written in her mid-30s to early 40s, these short stories depict the reality of society for people in that age group. After passing through the period of youth, where anxiety and hope intersect, the protagonists, who have now established themselves as members of society, are sometimes caught in an unexpected time of shaking and alienation even though they have to some degree reached a more stable reality. The pressure to recheck whether the direction they are going in is correct, and if it is wrong to correct it before it is too late, torments them.

The main character in the title-story “Ex-Lover's Gift Bazaar” suddenly becomes unemployed when the company he works for goes out of business, but there is something more important and serious for him in the story. The problem of disposing of a packet of 48-color crayons, which he had forgotten in the drawer of his office desk, is his current main issue. The crayons were given to him as a gift by Hee-soo, his girlfriend in college, whom he had met by chance after a long time, and there was a story

behind it. In elementary school, the main character was forced to lend crayons to a poor friend who had no money to buy them at the direction of his homeroom teacher. He told this anecdote to Hee-soo, who misunderstood the poor friend in the story to have been the main character and presented him with crayons. The main character does not readily correct the misunderstanding but hesitates. This indecisive attitude is paired with his ambiguous feelings towards Hee-soo. The phrase “Time would pass like that” suggests that he is somewhat resigned either way.

It is possible to read this story in another way. In college, the man wrote amateur fantasy novels, and Hee-soo, who enjoyed reading them, had encouraged him. At the end of the story, the man wonders whether to write the story of the crayons, and even if Hee-soo cannot read the story he writes, readers know that the story will have very important ethical and aesthetic significance to the man himself. If so, couldn't this short story also be considered as a literary mid-term examination for the author herself, who has now passed through youth and is at the entrance to middle age?