The Representation and Overcoming of Human Alienation in Zainichi Korean Literature: Focusing on *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* and *Tokyo Ueno Station*

So-Jeong Shin & Bo-Hyun Kim

Abstract: This paper compares Hoe-sung Lee's *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* with Miri Yu's *Tokyo Ueno Station* to examine how Zainichi Korean literature represents human alienation and explores the recovery of humanity through the senses. Both works transform structural exclusion into sensory experience. *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* restores colonial memory through the rhythmic acts of lament and cloth-beating, while *Tokyo Ueno Station* redefines existence through listening amid urban invisibility. By depicting sound, touch, and repetition as sites of ethical response, these texts reveal how sensory practice enables the marginalized to reconnect with the world. This study argues that Zainichi Korean literature articulates an ethics of sensation that resists the mechanized vision of modernity and the dehumanizing logic of the data age.

Keywords: Zainichi Korean Literature; *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes*; *Tokyo Ueno Station*; sensory ethics; human alienation

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标题：在日朝鲜人文学中人的异化之再现与克服：以《捣衣的女人》与《东京上野车站》为中心

内容摘要：本文通过比较李恢成的《捣衣的女人》与柳美里的《东京上野车

站》，旨在探讨在日朝鲜人文学中人类异化的再现机制，并审视通过感官经验重构人性的潜在路径。两部作品均将结构性排斥转化为感官实践：《捣衣的女人》通过哀叹与捣衣的节奏性行为唤醒殖民记忆，而《东京上野车站》则在都市空间的不可见性中，借助“倾听”这一行为重新界定存在方式。本文认为，在日朝鲜人文学由此建构出一种“感官伦理”，以此回应现代性进程中的机械化趋势，并抵抗数据时代所引发的非人化逻辑。

关键词：在日朝鲜人文学；《捣衣的女人》；《东京上野车站》；感官伦理；人的异化

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of modernity, humanity has shifted its focus from God to man, positioning humanism as the core value of modern civilization. Human reason, emotion, and free will have come to be regarded as sources of truth and meaning, and this humanistic worldview has propelled the development of capitalism and liberalism. However, as Marx points out, modern capitalism reduces human labor and life to exchange value, while the logic of industrialization and rationality degrades human beings into machines of efficiency.[1]

As Yuval Harari foresees in Homo Deus, Dataism emerges as the ultimate consequence of humanism’s internal contradictions. Dataism no longer recognizes human emotion or consciousness as a source of meaning; instead, it reduces life and society to the efficiency of data flow. Through biotechnology and artificial intelligence, this ideology grants godlike power to a small elite, while the majority are relegated to a “useless class” that contributes little to data production, thereby deepening social inequality.[2] If modern capitalism produced the inequality of labor, Dataism produces the inequality of existence.

Both humanism and Dataism originate from the belief that “human beings are at the center,” yet paradoxically share the same structure of human alienation that turns individuals into mere components of a system. While modern capitalism reduces human beings to instruments of production and Dataism to units of

1 See Tae-Keon Rhee, “Marx’s View of Humanity and the Theory of Human Alienation,” *Journal of Ethics Studies* 45 (2009) : 27-28.

2 See Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, translated by Myung-joo Kim, Seoul: Kim Young-sa, 2017, 511-552.

information, these processes, although technologically distinct, lie on a continuum that erodes human dignity and sensory experience. As artificial intelligence replaces human language and emotion and technology automates sensory perception, can literature still serve as a sensory and imaginative medium through which we reflect on and recover the conditions of human life?

One possible answer lies in Zainichi Korean literature, which has long remained on the margins of society. The works of Zainichi writers closely trace how those excluded from the social center establish relationships with the world and recover meaning through memory and sensation.[1] Their literary practice reveals how those marginalized from the centers of nation, technology, and capital respond to the voices of others and strive to exist through living, embodied sensibility within the space of literature. This study moves beyond analyzing memory structures and emotional regulation in postwar Japan to critically examine the reconfiguration of human dignity and ethical relations in an era of accelerating datafication and dehumanization.

Previous studies of Zainichi Korean literature began by attempting to reconstruct its position within the history of modern Japanese literature. These studies expanded their focus to issues such as Korean language writing, postcolonial linguistic conflict, and women's narratives and identities. Subsequent research has further developed the themes of diaspora, publicness, and the ethics of memory, thereby moving beyond the male- and Japanese-language-centered framework of literary history to establish a more multilayered and inclusive field of inquiry.[2] Within this scholarly trajectory, studies on Hoe-sung Lee's *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* and Miri Yu's *Tokyo Ueno Station* have deepened the exploration of complex identities as Zainichi Koreans, examining issues of language, space, memory, and migration. Detailed discussions of prior scholarship on *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* and *Tokyo Ueno Station* will be presented in the respective chapters.

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1 See Hwan-Gi Kim, "The Historical and Literary Significance of Korean Diaspora Literature," *Showa Bungaku Kenkyu* 84 (2022) : 239-240.

2 See Jeon-hye Im, *The History of Korean Literature in Japan: Until 1945*, Tokyo: Hosei University Press, 1994; Jiro Isogai, *The Transformation and Inheritance of "Zainichi" Literature*, Tokyo: Shinkansha, 2015; Elise Foxworth, "Jeju Massacre, National Allegory and Cultural Revolution in Kim Sok Pom's *Karasu No Shi* (1957)," *Border Crossings: The Journal of Japanese-Language Literature Studies* 1 (2023): 129-157; Young-ho Lee, "An Analysis of Works in *Quarterly Madang*, a Magazine for Korean Residents in Japan," *Border Crossings: The Journal of Japanese-Language Literature Studies* 1 (2017): 60-70. For detailed discussion, see So-Jeong Shin, *A Study of the Narrative of Zainichi Koreans in Japanese Social Conscience Films*, 2021, Korea University, PhD dissertation, 7-9.

Building on the valuable achievements of previous studies, this study seeks to extend the discussion from the perspective of aural-centered sensory ethics. By re-examining Hoe-sung Lee's *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* (1971) and Miri Yu's *Tokyo Ueno Station* (2014), this study aims to contribute to earlier research, which primarily focused on visual narratives or sociostructural contexts.

In an era when artificial intelligence is increasingly replacing human perception and judgment, the Zainichi Korean literary imagination of relational recovery and sustainability of sensation offers crucial insights into the essence of humanity. This paper comparatively analyzes how the two texts restore the dignity of existence through "sensation" within the colonial and modern structures of alienation. Through this analysis, it reconsiders the problem of human alienation that runs through both modernity and the data society, and explores the ethical imagination of "sensory restoration of the invisible" as envisioned in Zainichi Korean literature.[1]

2. Audible History, Invisible Existence in *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes*

2.1. "Shinse-taryeong (身世打鈴 =songs of suffering)" and the Ethics of Sensation

Hoe-sung Lee, the first Zainichi Korean writer to receive the Akutagawa Prize, gained recognition for *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes.* Published in 1972, The *Woman Who Fulled Clothes* is structured as a retrospective narrative in which the first-person narrator ("I") recollects the life of his mother, Jang Suri, who endured both the colonial period and the turbulent years following liberation.

Previous scholarship on *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* has been conducted primarily in Korea and Japan, focusing on themes such as motherhood, national identity, and the spatial experiences of Zainichi Korean women. In contrast to these dominant approaches, some studies have attempted to interpret the work from the father's perspective.[2] Additionally, a strand of research has emerged that foregrounds the musical and auditory dimensions of the text, most notably in the work of Jeong-ae Kim (2003).[3] Kim's study systematically demonstrates how the

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1 This paper employs a literary-critical approach that reads ethical relations through sensory experience, see Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 191-192. For a more detailed discussion, see Nie Zhenzhao, *Ethical Literary Criticism*, translated by Kim Soon-jin, Yoon Seok-min and Dae-geun Lim, Seoul: Hankuk University of Foreign Studies Knowledge Publishing Content Center, 2022.

2 See Sang-min Lim, "Life (生) 'out of neccesity': KAISEI LEE *A Woman Who Beats a Kinuta*," *Social and Cultural Studies* 19 (2006) :145-156.

3 See Jeong-ae Kim, "The Spread of 'Shin Se Ta Ryong': The Reception of Korean Culture as Seen in Lee Hoe Song's *Kinuta wo Utsu Onna*," *Proceedings of International Conference on Japanese Literature* 26 (2003) :141-162.

song "Shinse Taryeong," as depicted in the narrative, transcends its original function as a form of lament and comes to circulate within Zainichi Korean society as an artistic form and a newly constituted cultural practice. The study further emphasizes that *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* itself serves as a crucial medium that catalyzed this transformation, and argues that the literary significance of this role should not be underestimated.[1] This line of inquiry has been extended in subsequent studies, contributing to a broader research trajectory that reexamines the transformation of "Shinse Taryeong" in relation to the reconstruction of Zainichi Korean women's life histories and the cultivation of ethical sensibility.[2]

Building on these discussions, the present chapter analyzes the auditory and bodily rhythms of "Shinse Taryeong" and the act of cloth fulling, in order to examine how sensory memory participates in the reconstruction of women's life narratives, and to elucidate the sensory and ethical implications of this process.

The novel opens with the line, "It was on a winter's day, about ten months before Japan's long war was finally to end, that Jang Suli passed away" (*The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* 307). This sentence situates the narrative around October 1944 and also foreshadows the story as a retrospective account of Jang Suli's life. In the work, Jang Suli's life is evoked through various sensory impressions, of which hearing is the most prominent. *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* contains no explicit depictions of Jang Suli experience of direct discrimination in Hokkaido or Karafuto. Instead, through the narrator's childhood recollections, she is portrayed as a mother with strong devotion and endurance who dedicates herself entirely to her child. At the same time, Jang Suli's life, as recalled through the grandmother's voice, resonates with profound auditory depth, as shown in the following passage:

> The grandmother, like a woman lamenting the dead, sinks into memories of her daughter. As if trying to persuade someone, she begins to recount her daughter's life—her beloved child's story—shaking with sobs and striking her knees as she weeps.
>
> It was only later that I came to know such lamentations are what people call Shinse-taryeong, a "song of suffering." Even now, I can recall its rhythm on

1 See Jeong-ae Kim, "The Spread of 'Shin Se Ta Ryong': The Reception of Korean Culture as Seen in Lee Hoe Song's *Kinuta wo Utsu Onna*," *Proceedings of International Conference on Japanese Literature* 26 (2003) :162.

2 See Han Jung Lee, "Self-Narratives of Zainichi Korean Women," *Korean Studies* 40 (2016): 245-276; Bo-hyun Kim, "Transmission and Liberation of 'Shinse-taryeong' in Tanka: Focusing on Park Chong-Fua's Tanka Anthology Shinse-taryeong," *Japanese Studies* 58 (2022): 83-103.

> my lips. There was something mournful in it, like a requiem, like the lonely sound of a reed flute drifting in the air. Yet within that rhythm lay the dignity of a great river's flow, the softness of willow branches swaying in the wind—interwoven with surging anger and resentment, producing a melody found in no written score. (*The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* 318)[1]

The grandmother in this novel mourns her daughter's death like a woman performing a lament and, as if trying to persuade someone, begins recounting the life of her daughter Jang Suli to her grandson, the narrator. Her speech unfolds in the form of sinse-taryeong, a blend of tears, lamentation, and bodily gestures. The term Shinsae-taryeong originally refers to "words or songs expressing one's misfortunes,"[2] a type of oral folk rhythm characterized by repetitive, chant-like patterns. Emerging from the vernacular language of the people, Shinsae-taryeong functions as an oral mode of expression that transforms individual tragedy into a shared rhythm of social emotions.

In Japan, a similar form exists in the expression mi no ue banashi (身の上話). The writer Furuyama Komao (古山高麗雄), a native of Sinuiju (新義州), noted in his novel *Shinse-taryeong* (1980) "Shinse-taryeong is a Korean word. It seems to mean lamenting one's unfortunate circumstances. I first learned this expression from Hoe-sung Lee's *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes*."[3] This demonstrates that Shinsae-taryeong functions not merely as a language of lamentation, but also as a cultural sign representing the emotional ethos of the Korean people and the lived identity of Zainichi Koreans.

In *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes*, the narrator ("I") receives the grandmother's Shinsae-taryeong as a requiem for the mother. Through this auditory recollection, the novel reconstructs maternal and feminine life history embedded in personal memory. Yet, within the rhythm of that requiem, the tragedies of colonialism and war intersect, revealing the historical scars that surround Jang Suli's life. This sentiment is articulated most vividly articulated in the grandmother's lamentation:

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1 See Lee Hoe-sung, *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes*, Seoul: Jeongeumsa Publishing, 1972. All references are to this edition and will be cited here after.

2 See Institute of Korean Studies, Korea University, Compilation Office of the Korean Language Dictionary, ed., *Korea University Korean Language Dictionary*, Seoul: Institute of Korean Studies, Korea University, 2009, 560.

3 See Komao Furuyama, *Sinse-taryeong*, Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1980, 3.

> "What is fate, after all? All this happened because our country was ruined. Ah, I must have been possessed by spirits. Why did I ever think of going to that thieving country? Our nation was taken from us, and now even my daughter has been taken… I should have stayed a slash-and-burn farmer instead! Ah, my fate, Suli [...]" (*The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* 319)

The Woman Who Fulled Clothes contains words such as "war," "forced labor," "blackout drills," "fire prevention training," and "the Association for Harmonization," which implicitly suggest the condition of colonial subjects. However, as noted in the quotation above, this paper focuses not on the direct representation of discrimination, but on the indirect and internalized experiences revealed through the life trajectory of the female subject. This historical context becomes most evident in the grandmother's lament, the Shinsae-taryeong. In this passage, the Shinsae-taryeong transcends a mere expression of personal misfortune; it articulates a colonial self-consciousness that perceives the "ruin of the nation" as inseparable from the tragedy of mother and daughter. Moreover, the grandmother's auditory Shinsae-taryeong functions as a device that restores Jang Suli not simply as an individual but also as a historical subject—a colonial woman whose life embodies the silenced realities of her era.

The auditory Shinsae-taryeong in *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* thus serves more than the language of mourning for an individual's sorrow. It restores the life and sensory experiences of a colonial woman, demonstrating the possibility of making those erased from history audible through the ethics of sensibility. The rhythm of the Shinsae-taryeong does not merely express emotion; it vibrates with the pain, alienation, and silenced time of an existence that could not speak, functioning as an ethical act of recovering female subjectivity. The grandmother's voice—an intertwining of cries, appeals, and bodily rhythms—thus becomes a sonic embodiment of repressed memory, recovering the unheard voices of women from the interstices of the historical narrative.

2.2 Memory and Resistance in Invisible Spaces: Reconstructing Sensory Identity

In *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes,* spatial composition operates in multiple layers. Moving beyond the perspective of narrative development, when one views the life trajectory of the protagonist, Jang Suli, her movements trace a path from Joseon → Japan (Hokkaido) → Karafuto → Joseon → and back to Karafuto. Jang Suli spent her life in Joseon until the age of 18, after which she moved to Japan in search of work. She later marries a man she meets at a coal mine and moves to

Karafuto. Approximately ten years later, she visits Joseon with her six-year-old child, the narrator, for about a month. Persuading her parents to accompany her, she returns to Karafuto, where she gives birth to her sixth child and eventually dies. The following passage illustrates this idea.

> The mother had promised to return home within three years. Her parents had urged their daughter, who was leaving for Japan to earn a living, to make sure she came back by that time. Yet, even after three years had passed, she did not return. The letter her parents received around that time said that she had met a man at a coal mine and gone with him to Hokkaido. Instead of coming back to her homeland, she had gone further north—to Japan's northernmost island. Her parents could not even imagine where this "Hokkaido" was. The mere word "north" filled them with dread.
> "She ran off with some man from who-knows-where..." the grandmother would curse, resentful of her daughter's journey to Hokkaido. A few more years passed, and another letter arrived. This time, it said she had gone even farther north, to Japan's northern tip—Karafuto. Her parents could not picture where this "Karafuto" was. Hearing that it was the farthest north made their hearts sink into darkness. (*The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* 320-321)

The cited passage recounts Jang Suli's trajectory from Korea to Hokkaido, and finally to Karafuto, as remembered from the perspective of the narrator's grandparents. For them, the spaces beyond Korea—Hokkaido, and Karafuto—are imagined as remote and unknowable territories. These northern lands, though geographically existent, remain perceptually absent: spaces of the Other that elude visual recognition. Such spatial invisibility exposes the geographical and social distance imposed on colonial Koreans and functions as a narrative mechanism that articulates the ontological anxiety of Koreans residing in Japan.

Eventually, Jang Suli persuades the narrator's grandparents to migrate to Karafuto. This narrative turn marks a momentary visualization of the previously invisible space. However, the fact that their dwelling is described as a "cave" suggests that they continue to inhabit the social periphery, leading to an enclosed and isolated existence. Their adherence to a distinctly Korean way of life—wearing Hanbok (韓服) and making Kimchi, despite social pressure—underscores that movement into a visible space does not guarantee social integration. On the contrary, it reveals the persistence of the Korean diaspora's condition as invisible and marginalized.

In contrast, Korea—the homeland of both Jang Suli and her grandparents—is rendered through vivid sensory imagery, sharply opposing the dim, subdued atmosphere of Karafuto. In these depictions, the rhythmic sound of cloth-beating (Dadumijil), which lends its name to the title of the work, is intricately intertwined with the representation of the homeland.

> It was a day of radiant clarity. In the distance, the hills shimmered with green, and the poplar trees stood drowsily in line along the brook. On the path by the village waterside, dried cow dung rolled idly in the sun. The stream, dissolving the sunlight, leapt and glittered as it flowed, and from somewhere came the steady rhythm of cloth-beating. Then the boundary of time opened, and before me spread a wide stream. I was weary. When we reached the water, my mother paused at the foot of the bridge and began to tell me something—perhaps the tale of a young woman who once crossed this stream barefoot. The water moved slowly, yet droplets of sunlight ceaselessly sprang upward. I seemed to see women in white beating cloth along the bank. When my mother did the laundry at home, she would fold the dried clothes and strike them with her batten—thud, thud—just like that.
> Perhaps I said to her then, "It looks the same," recalling that sound. (*The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* 321)

In a scene where the mother recalls the stream in Korea, auditory (the sound of cloth-beating) and visual (sunlight, white garments, flowing water) images operate in concert to construct the sensory memory of Joseon as the original homeland. Even in the foreign land of Karafuto, Jang Suli continues the act of cloth-beating, which can be read as a symbol of the labor and survival of Korean women in Japan. At the same time, as an act that sensorially and symbolically reconnects her to a physically severed homeland, the repetitive motion of cloth-beating carries a deeper meaning.

This act is not merely a form of labor but functions as a medium of memory, identity, and motherhood. Although spatially separated, Jang Suli continuously reproduces Korea's everyday life and identity through the embodied rhythm of cloth-beating. This sensory re-enactment within an invisible space becomes both a narrative of inner return and a mechanism for recovering sensory memory beyond the ruptures of colonial history.

In the same context, the grandparents—who insist on wearing Hanbok in Karafuto—are eventually forbidden from doing so under political pressure, and the grandmother is forced to wear monpe, the work trousers associated with wartime

Japan. This episode represents a scene of violent assimilation in which the colonial gaze seeks to erase the visible presence of Koreans. In contrast, Jang Suli, after a fierce quarrel with her husband, decides to leave home, tearing her Japanese clothes and taking out her old Hanbok. This gesture transcends a simple matter of dress and becomes a bodily act of resistance to reclaim her suppressed identity.

At a visible level, the cultural coercion of the Japanese Empire erased Korean identity. However, at a deeper level, it persists and remains stored within memory. In this sense, the auditory and visual dimensions of "cloth-beating" reconstruct the space of Korea, while the narratives of wearing and being prohibited from wearing Hanbok reveal the dialectic of visibility and invisibility of identity in visual terms.

Through these dynamics, *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* depicts how the life of a Korean woman pushed to the colonial periphery transforms the invisible space from one of absence to one of sensory memory and resistance. The motifs of "cloth-beating" and Hanbok function as auditory and visual devices that restore a repressed identity, serving as mediums that sustain the connection with a physically severed homeland at the sensory level. This sensory practice not only attests to the persistence of colonial women's existence, but also expands into an ethical mode of resistance—an effort to assert selfhood even within spaces of marginalization and silence. Thus, the auditory and visual dimensions in *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* operate not merely as a means of representation, but as an ethical aesthetic of being that restores the memory of invisible existence and subverts colonial oppression through the realm of the senses.

3. At the Boundaries of Space and Time: Tokyo Ueno Station

3.1 The Center of Tokyo: "Invisible Humans" and the Ethics of Sensibility

While Hoe-sung Lee restores invisible voices through auditory rhythm, Miri Yu, half a century later, reconfigures the persistence of invisibility at the sensory level in the urban core.

As a second-generation Korean resident in Japan, Miri Yu has consistently depicted the structures of ethnic and social exclusion that define modern Japan, grounded in her own lived experience as an "invisible Other." The core of her literary endeavor lies in capturing the sensations and traces of those expelled from Japan's logic of homogeneity: undocumented migrants, the poor, women, the sick, and the dead. The culmination of this pursuit is *Tokyo Ueno Station*, which most powerfully condenses her aesthetic and ethical vision.

Previous scholarship has read *Tokyo Ueno Station* through social-structural, spatial-political, national, and sensory frameworks, interpreting Ueno as a site

where urban power, historical violence, migrant labor, public memory, and sonic experience intersect to critique modern Japan's spatial and political order.[1]

While prior studies have clarified Ueno Park's political significance as a space of exclusion and order, they overlook hearing as a primary sensory interface, a gap this article addresses by showing how Tokyo Ueno Station renders visually erased lives perceptible through auditory experience.

Ueno Park, the main stage of the novel, is simultaneously the symbolic center of Japan's modernization and a space of social marginality. It houses the Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo University of the Arts, and the National Museum of Western Art—institutions where the state's memory is institutionalized. However, just beyond their walls, homeless people dwell in blue tarpaulin tents. By day, the park teems with tourists and students; by night, the dazzling center transforms into a habitat for "invisible humans." Within this coexistence, the novel anatomizes the spatial order of modern Japan.

> Outside the Park Exit gates of JR Ueno Station, the stone wall encircling the ginkgo trees across the crosswalk is always lined with homeless men. [...] Time passed. I was there, sitting alone. Growing old—. (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 7-8)

This quoted passage reveals Kazu's spatial position as a homeless protagonist. He sits before JR Ueno Station, the gateway to Tokyo and a symbol of Japan's modernization. His existence, though situated at the very center of the city, remains completely erased from sight: he is an "invisible human." He exists within the urban structure, but this remains unacknowledged. This condition is not merely a matter of spatial exclusion, but also a sensory state of invisibility.

Michel Foucault defined modern space as a "mechanism through which the visual order of power is arranged,"[2] while Henri Lefebvre conceived space as "a product that reproduces social relations."[3] From these perspectives, Ueno Park emerges as a locus of visual power, in which the center of the nation's gaze and

1 See Eunhee Park and Pil Gyogyo, "Alterity in Yu Miri's *JR Ueno Station Park Exit*: Based on Theories of Space and Memory," *Korean Studies Research* 63 (2021): 181-202; Masazumi Yamazaki, "The Emperor, the Homeless, and Jōdo Shinshū," *Shōwa Literature Studies* 78 (2019): 83-97 ; Naotake Yajima, "*JR Ueno Station Park Exit* and Yu Miri," *Democratic Literature* 682 (2022): 98-103; Izumi Sato, "The Olympics of a 'Sacrificial Zone': Yu Miri's *JR Ueno Station Park Exit* (2014)," *Narrative Theory, Series* 3*: Literary Criticism*, 19 (2021): 30-38.

2 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* Seoul: Nanam, 2003, 376-390.

3 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Seoul: Eco-Livre, 2011, 77.

its peripheral shadows coexist. The spot where Kazu sits is precisely the boundary where the state's memory halts and human existence is erased. He becomes a transparent presence within Tokyo's landscape—an embodiment of visual deprivation—that exists through invisibility.

Previous scholarship shows that Kazu's "invisibility" is not a personal condition but a form of social death produced by Japan's postwar structural exclusion and the state's imperial visual regime, revealing it as a consequence of modern Japan's visual order.[1]

The novel focuses on the sensory residue that continues to operate within this invisibility. Kazu's monologue unfolds as an extension of auditory perception in the absence of vision. He lives attuned to the city's sounds—the vibrations of passing trains, murmurs of crowds, and faint echoes of radios— that persist within the sonic pulses of urban life.

> Again, that sound comes. That sound—
> I am listening.
> But I do not know whether I am feeling it or thinking it.
> I do not know whether it is inside or outside of me.
> I do not know when, or when it was; who, or who it was.
> Does that matter? Did it ever matter—who it was? (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 3)

This auditory monologue reveals that spatial alienation ultimately leads to the dissolution of one's sense of being. Although Kazu exists in the very heart of the city, he cannot perceive where or at what time he exists. His listening is not a mere auditory act, but a form of response through the senses through which a human being—cut off from the world—continues to react. In this sense, listening becomes both an ethics of sensation and the performativity of existence.[2]

Kazu loses the ability to speak yet remains in the world through listening. His hearing becomes a channel through which he remembers the voices of the

1 See Junyue Sun, "'You Have/Exist. We don't.': The meanings of 'Home' in Yu Mili's Novel *Tokyo Ueno Station*," *Ritsumeikan Journal of International Studies* 37 (2024): 17-18; See Masazumi Yamazaki, "The Emperor, the Homeless, and Jōdo Shinshū," *Shōwa Literature Studies* 78 (2019): 87-88.

2 The notion of performativity of existence here is grounded in Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which rejects the idea of being or identity as a fixed essence. Instead, it understands them as constructed through the repetitive performances of linguistic and bodily acts. In other words, the human subject is not a pre-given, essential being, but one that continually forms and represents itself through the reiteration of social norms and discourses. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Seoul: Munhakdongne, 2008, 131.

vanished Others while confirming that he has not been completely severed from the world. In this sense, Ueno Park is not merely an urban space, but a site where the senses disintegrate and are reborn—a space of sensory residue where, even within invisibility, human beings can still perceive the world. Kazu's existence, erased from the visual order, is restored through auditory resonance. By saying, "I am listening," he remains a human being who still lives within the reverberations of the world.

This auditory ethics constitutes the final sensory resistance of the invisible human against the visual centrality that governs modern space. At the extreme point of spatial exclusion, the novel gestures toward the possibility of recovering the sense of being through literature's sensory potential. Ultimately, the space of Tokyo Ueno Station is not merely a stage of social exclusion but a locus where human existence is redefined through the sensory state of "invisibility." In Ueno Park—both the center and the periphery of the city—Kazu vanishes from the world, yet continues to exist as one who listens to its echoes. His silence and listening stand as the remaining ethics of sensibility that literature can recover, a performative space that testifies to the human capacity to retain feeling, even within a world of sensory disconnection.

3.2 The Individual Excluded from the Time of the Nation and the Performativity of Existence

While Tokyo Ueno Station exposes spatial alienation that renders marginal lives invisible within the metropolitan center, it also foregrounds temporal alienation—exclusion from the modern nation-state's historical and progressive temporality. The problem of temporal exclusion is most concretely manifested in the Tokyo Olympics narrative. The following recollection scene is set in 1963, one year before the opening of the Olympic Games.

> It was a cold morning on December 27, 1963, a year before the Tokyo Olympics. I left home in the dark before dawn and went to Kashima Station to take the first train of the Jōban Line, departing at 5:33. I arrived at Ueno Station around noon. After passing through countless tunnels, my face was blackened with the soot of the steam locomotive. Feeling embarrassed, I remember lifting and lowering the brim of my cap several times, glancing at my reflection in the train window as I walked along the platform. (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 26)

For Kazu, the Tokyo Olympics did not mark a turning point in life, but rather a choice for survival—to support his family. Like many others from rural Tokyo,

he moved to Tokyo in search of employment. His participation in the city's construction labor was therefore not as a symbol of the nation's "modernization" or "revival," but as an individual's economic migration to sustain his household. The sentence, "I left home in the dark before dawn," stands in stark contrast to Japan's national aspiration to move from "postwar recovery" to the "completion of modernization." Instead, it signifies the rhythm of non-commemorative time, that is, the pre-dawn hours, in which a solitary individual departs for a site of labor. While the nation constructs a temporal narrative of "progress toward the future," Kazu's time exists as one of consumption and repetition in the present, the very temporality that makes such national progress possible.

The labor he performs consists of "civil engineering work for athletic facilities such as the track-and-field stadium, baseball field, tennis courts, and volleyball gymnasium to be used for the Tokyo Olympics" (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 27).

However, he is unable to witness or commemorate the completion of the stadium he helped to build. His labor constitutes the foundation of the national celebration, yet he himself is excluded from that memory. The description—"my face was blackened with the soot of the steam locomotive, and I felt ashamed"—reveals his paradoxical position: he remains in darkness while producing the light of modernity.

Kazu's daily labor, described as "all done by hand—digging the ground with picks and shovels and hauling the earth away by handcart," is intermittent and repetitive (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 27). He says that he "worked even on Sundays and holidays" (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 27), yet his time never moves toward the future. While the nation's time unfolds linearly toward the goal of the "Olympic opening," his time remains a stagnant present, caught within the repetition of the same acts of survival. This contrast clearly exposes the temporal inequality produced by Japan's modernization, a structure that divides those who enjoy the time of progress at the center from those confined to the time of exhaustion at the periphery.

Moreover, the figures—one thousand yen per day, a twenty-five percent overtime allowance, and a monthly wage of twenty thousand yen—demonstrate how his life is quantified in monetary terms. Time is converted into an exchange value for subsistence and an individual's life is divided into a cycle of economic repetition rather than a narrative of development. The Tokyo Olympics symbolize the nation's "future time," but for Kazu, it is the time of others—a time forever beyond his reach.

At this juncture, *Tokyo Ueno Station* dismantles the fiction of the "progressive

time" presupposed by the modern nation-state.[1] Kazu's temporality does not move toward the future; it unfolds as a fragmentary, non-linear time in which past and present, life and death, memory and oblivion intersect. Time no longer flows toward the "future" but instead repeats a motionless cycle within the "erased present."

In Kazu's life, temporal alienation extends beyond the "time of progress" embodied by the Tokyo Olympics and deepens further through the imperial narrative. The novel juxtaposes the nation's "time of commemoration" with the individual's "non-commemorative time" in a recollection scene that begins with the radio broadcast announcing the birth of Crown Prince Naruhito on February 23, 1960.

> ① "At 4:15 p.m. today, Her Imperial Highness the Crown Princess gave birth at the Imperial Household Hospital. A prince has been born. Both mother and child are in good health." On February 23, 1960, the radio announcer delivered the news in a cheerful voice. Soon after, the broadcast carried the sounds of crowds gathered before Nijūbashi Bridge and the temporary residence of the Crown Prince, holding red-and-white lanterns, beating drums, singing the national anthem, and shouting banzaiin unison. Outside, the sound of fireworks bursting—dozens of them—could be heard. Even from the direction of the Kashima Town Office, the fireworks went off, one after another—bang, bang. That morning, Setsuko had shown signs of labor. Unlike two years earlier, when Yoko was born, it was a difficult delivery; Setsuko struggled in agony for a full day. (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 37-38)
>
> ② His Majesty the Emperor will soon turn seventy-three. His Imperial Highness the Crown Prince, born on February 23, 1960, is now forty-six—Koichi, too, would have been forty-six if he were alive. My eldest son, born on the same day as Crown Prince Naruhito, was given the name Koichi, taking one character from Hiro-no-miya. Only a single rope separates me from Their Majesties, the Emperor and Empress. If I were to rush forward, I would be restrained by the police, but still—they would see me. And if I were to say something, they might listen. Something—something—My voice was hollow.

1 Walter Benjamin critiqued the modern conception of linear time and the ideology of progress, dismantling the causal continuity of past, present, and future to propose a non-linear temporality. He understood time as operating through ruptures and interruptions—moments of dialectical awakening in which the repressed truths of the past collide with the present and emerge anew. See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings V: On the Concept of History, Critique of Violence, Surrealism, and Others*, Seoul: Gil Publishing, 2008, 373-374.

> I was waving toward the car receding in a straight line. I heard a voice—. (*Tokyo Ueno Station* 166-167)

This scene reveals the stark contrast between the language of commemoration transmitted through radio broadcasts and the desperate language of survival within which Kazu's family exists. The birth of the Crown Prince represents "a life commemorated by the nation," whereas Kazu's son Koichi—born on the same day—is "a life unremembered."

Years later, the aging Kazu watches the imperial couple's motorcade and recalls that he and the Emperor were born in the same year. "His Majesty the Emperor will soon turn seventy-three. His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince, born on February 23, 1960, is now forty-six—Koichi, too, would have been forty-six if he were alive." The Emperor's life continues within a time of perpetuity, whereas Koichi's ends unrecorded. The line, "Only a single rope separates me from Their Majesties, the Emperor and Empress," marks both a physical distance and an existential boundary. Beyond that rope are those who belong to the nation's time; on this side, they remain those who have been forgotten. Kazu waves his hand, yet "his voice was hollow."

Here, the rupture of time translates into a rupture of language and sensation. Kazu continues to hear radio voices from the past, even after his son's death. His consciousness drifts into a state of ontological instability, where "the I who lives in the present," "the I who remembers the past," and "the I who has already died" converge. He is still "listening," yet the subject of listening has vanished. The radio voice, as the language of the state, replaces individual perception; time no longer flows linearly, but overlaps in the form of auditory flashbacks.

However, even with this collapse of perception, Kazu does not entirely disappear. The line "I heard a voice" reveals the residual ethics of sensibility—the final impulse of a human being, cut off from the world, to sense the presence of another. Here, listening is not merely hearing; it is the minimal act of response through which one excluded from society remains connected to the world—a performative act of existence. Although he does not speak, Kazu remains in the world by listening. This constitutes the ethics of resonance that arise at the intersection of temporal and existential instabilities.

The temporal alienation depicted in *Tokyo Ueno Station* is thus not merely the plight of an individual trapped in the past; it reveals a condition in which the instability of time becomes a condition of human existence. The nation's linear time collapses within the individual's non-commemorative temporality, and within that

rupture, the human persists as a remnant of sensibility, a form of ethics.

4. Conclusion

This study examines how Hoe-sung Lee's *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* and Miri Yu's *Tokyo Ueno Station* represent human alienation while simultaneously exploring the possibility of restoring humanity through the medium of sensory experience. While both modern humanism and data-driven society reduce human beings to functional units, data alienation can be understood as a form in which modern alienation is reconfigured under contemporary technological and ideological conditions. These two works render the historical continuity and transformation of such alienation through sensory layers, thereby exploring the possibility for erased subjects to reestablish relations with the world.

Specifically, *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* reconstructs the life of a colonial woman through the auditory motifs of the Shinsae-taryeong and cloth-beating. This lament transforms personal misfortune into a bodily rhythm that resonates with the historical loss of the "nation's ruin," while the act of cloth-beating reactivates the memory and temporality of the homeland across diasporic spaces. Thus, auditory rhythms and repetitive bodily acts function as devices that restore those excluded from official records to a sphere of sensory and narrative presence.

Tokyo Ueno Station, set in Ueno Park at the very heart of Tokyo, reveals the modes of existence of the "invisible human" produced by modern Japan's spatial and temporal orders. The protagonist, Kazu, occupies the nation's center yet remains erased from its gaze, excluded from the "commemorative time" structured by the Olympics and the imperial system. Nevertheless, through the residual act of listening, he reestablishes a relation with the world.

The implications of this comparison can be summarized in three points. First, the representation of human alienation does not remain at the level of social indictment; rather, through the evocation of sensory scenes, it forms ethical conditions under which others' lives become perceptible and intelligible. Second, the recovery of humanity is presented not as the result of institutional inclusion but as something that emerges from the relational potential inherent in sensory practices. Third, such literary practice opens a fissure in the visual automatism operating within AI and data-centered systems, positioning sensory acts—such as listening, touching, and repetition—as an ethical horizon through which being human can be thought today.

In conclusion, *The Woman Who Fulled Clothes* and *Tokyo Ueno Station* stand as representative examples of how Zainichi Korean literature re-imagines the

problem of human alienation through sensory mediation and simultaneously seeks the restoration of human dignity through the ethics of the senses. The rhythm of cloth-beating, the reverberations of Ueno, the torn fabric, and the lingering voice all testify to literature's power to make us perceive those whom the system has erased. Even in a world dominated by data, the human being remains a body that feels and responds. Thus, the sensory narratives of Zainichi Korean literature serve as ethical records that bear witness to this enduring potential of humanity.

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