Ethical Narratives and Criticism in Premodern Korean and Japanese Societal Novels: Focusing on the Motifs of Hwejeol and Shinjū

Seong-Yoon Yang & Tae-Ung Eom

Abstract: This study examines the narrative strategies in Korean *Se-tae so-seol* and Japanese *ukiyo-zōshi*, focusing on the *Hwe-jeol* motif in Korean tales and the *shinjū* motif in Japanese stories. Set in the late Joseon period (17th-19th centuries), *Se-tae so-seol* portrays regional *Gisaeng'*s seduction and Seoul men's fascination, exposing socio-cultural tensions between Seoul and the provinces while humorously fostering broader perspectives and harmony. The *Hwe-jeol* motif recalibrates entrenched viewpoints and promotes regional exchange and communication. Similarly, Japanese *ukiyo-zōshi* utilize the *shinjū* motif, where clients doubt the inner feelings of *yūjo*, test their sincerity, and determine their fate—whether through ruin, downfall, or redemption—after her sincerity is judged. However, in "*If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword*," the *yūjo's* "falsity" is not rendered comical or objectified. Instead, the narrative frustrates readers' "penetrative desire," highlighting the *yūjo's* struggle to survive within a competitive environment. Both traditions critique hierarchical societies by granting marginalized individuals—those without a voice—a platform in literary expression, thereby amplifying their voices and highlighting questions about "relationship-building" between people.
Keywords: Se-tae so-seol; Ukiyo-zōsh; Gisaeng of the Joseon Dynasty; Yūjo of the Edo Period; Hwejeol; Shinjū; Deception
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标题：前近代韩日社会小说中的伦理叙事与批评——以“毁节”和“殉情”主题为中心

内容摘要：本研究考察了朝鲜的世态小说和日本的浮世草子中的叙事策略，重点关注朝鲜故事中的“毁节”主题以及日本故事中的“殉情”主题。朝鲜世态小说以朝鲜王朝后期（17 世纪至 19 世纪）为背景，描绘了地方艺伎的媚态以及汉城男子的痴迷状态，在幽默地展现广阔视角与营造和谐氛围的同时，也揭示了汉城与地方之间的社会文化张力。“毁节”主题重新校准了根深蒂固的观点，促进了地方间的交流与沟通。同样，日本的浮世草子常采用“殉情”主题，在故事中，嫖客会质疑游女的内心感受，考验她们的真诚，在对其真诚做出评判后决定她们的命运——是走向毁灭、落魄还是获得救赎。然而，在《若要死，就持木剑而去》中，游女的“虚伪”并未被处理成滑稽可笑或被物化的样子。相反，叙事挫败了读者的“探究欲”，揭示了游女在竞争环境中求生存的艰难挣扎。这两种文学传统都通过为那些被边缘化、没有话语权的个体提供文学表达平台，批判等级森严的社会，从而引发对人与人之间“关系构建”等问题的探讨。

关键词：世态小说；浮世草子；朝鲜王朝妓生；江户时期游女；毁节；殉情；欺骗

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Introduction

In the late Joseon period (17th-19th centuries) of Korea and the Edo period (1603-1868) of Japan, a number of novels based on the customs of the time and mainly on the love between men and women, emerged. In Korean academia, these works are referred to as *Se-tae so-seol* (世態小說) or Ae-jeong *se-tae so-seol* (愛情世態小說) (novels of love and social customs), whereas in Japanese academia, they are termed "*Ukiyo-zōshi* (浮世草子) or *Fūzoku seitai shōsetsu* (風俗世態小說)." Although there is a slight difference in terminology, both genres share many fundamental characteristics that make their commonalities particularly interesting.

One of the most notable features in both Korean and Japanese *se-tae so-seol* is the recurring presence of women from the pleasure districts who act as the seductive figures for the male protagonists. In Korean works, these women are referred to as *Gisaeng* (妓生), while in Japanese works, they are called *Yūjo* (遊女). These women go to great lengths to seduce men or make them believe their affections are genuine. They employ every possible means, including lies, to deceive and

manipulate the men. Through these efforts, the *Gisaeng* in Korean works and the Yūjo in Japanese works succeed in seducing the male protagonists. The process through which these women achieve their goals unfolds in an intriguing manner in both countries' literary traditions, which is why scholars from both Korea and Japan refer to these motifs as the "Hwe-jeol (毀節)" motif and the "Shinjū (心中)" motif, respectively. Hwe-jeol literally means the breaking of one's integrity or moral resolve. In Korean *se-tae so-seol*, the hwe-jeol motif refers to the process in which a *Gisaeng*, either alone or in collusion with others, deceives the male protagonist, leading him to fall into her seduction. This results in the male protagonist allowing himself to be mentally and physically involved with the *Gisaeng*, often suffering financial losses. On the other hand, the Shinjū motif in Japanese *se-tae so-seol* involves an act of proving one's sincerity or a symbol of love between a Yūjo and a male customer. In the Edo-period *se-tae so-seol*, the Shinjū motif describes a sequence of events in which the male customer, enchanted by the Yūjo, ends up spending vast sums of money. The narrative structure of the hwe-jeol and Shinjū motifs in the *se-tae so-seol* of both countries is remarkably similar.

The main characters and motifs in both countries' *se-tae so-seol* seem so strikingly similar that they provoke the question of whether there might have been some form of interaction or communication between the literary scenes of the late Joseon and the Edo period. Thus, why did women from the pleasure districts appear in both countries' *se-tae so-seol*, seducing the male protagonists? What was the purpose behind leading these men into mental, physical, and economic ruin? While it is likely that the general purpose of these motifs was similar, the specific developments in the stories might have differed.

This paper aims to explore the narrative developments of the hwe-jeol and Shinjū motifs in late Joseon *se-tae so-seol* and Edo-period *se-tae so-seol*, focusing on the relationship between the male protagonists and the *Gisaeng*/Yūjo. Through the antagonistic male-female character dynamics, the paper will examine what these works sought to convey and how they connect with the ethical issues of their respective times. In particular, it will explore in depth how these gendered conflicts relate to the ethical awareness of the era. Se-tae (世態) refers to the prevailing social conditions or circumstances of the time. Thus, *se-tae so-seol* is likely to reflect the reality of the time more faithfully than other fictional genres that may prioritize imaginative features. In this context, the developments surrounding ethical reformation within these works are especially intriguing. While it is commonly assumed that pre-modern ethical instruction was transmitted in a linear manner, from upper-class men to lower classes and women, these works challenge such a simplistic,

doctrinal approach, suggesting that this was not the case.

Both the *se-tae so-seol* of Korea and Japan, by introducing the male protagonists and *Gisaeng* /Yūjo as key figures, use seduction as a medium to drive the plot, thereby increasing the narrative's appeal while also offering a vivid depiction of the social customs of the time. Moreover, by posing ethical questions within the context of a socially stratified relationship between men and women, these works suggest that our preconceived notions of pre-modern ethical consciousness should be reconsidered. The paper will sequentially explore the *se-tae so-seol* of both countries.

The Love between a Provincial *Gisaeng* and a Yangban (兩班) from Seoul

In discussions of sexuality, the term *hwejeol* (毀節), signifying the violation of chastity or integrity, has historically been applied predominantly to women. During the Joseon Dynasty, the concept of *hwejeol* was not employed in reference to men, even when men engaged in sexual relationships with women. This is because chastity or sexual integrity was not considered a moral imperative or personal virtue for men in the same way it was for women.

Within this context, male *hwejeol* would not have been regarded as a significant event. Why, then, do instances of male *hwejeol* arise in *Se-tae so-seol*? It seems plausible that these events served as narrative devices to induce a transformation in the male characters—whether a shift in perspective, attitude, or emotional state. This suggests that the *Se-tae so-seol* place less emphasis on *hwejeol* itself and more on its function as a catalyst for change in the male protagonists.

Thus, the narrative importance lies not in the act of *hwejeol* but in understanding why it was orchestrated, where it occurred, who instigated it, and how it impacted the protagonist's development. This emphasis on contextual elements surrounding *hwejeol* reveals its role as a critical storytelling mechanism, inviting readers to focus on the broader implications rather than the act itself.

In *Ji-bong-jeon* (지봉전), *Jeong-hyang-jeon* (정향전), *O-eyu-ran-jeon* (오유란전), *Jong-ok-jeonv* (종옥전), and *Bae-bi-jang-jeonv* (배비장전), a common motif emerges: upper-class men from Seoul travel to provincial regions, staying there for a time. These locations—Pyong-yangv (평양) (*Ji-bong-jeon*, *Jeong-hyang-jeon*, *O-eyu-ran-jeon*), Won-juv (원주) (*Jong-ok-jeon*), and Jeju (제주) (*Bae-bi-jang-jeon*) please provide the English translation of these terms—are portrayed as hubs of "hwa-ryu-gye" (demimonde culture). In these stories, the local women with whom these men fall in love are invariably *Gisaeng*.

This narrative choice is striking for two reasons. First, the male protagonists' romantic counterparts are uniformly *Gisaeng*. While this aligns with the thematic

focus on *hwejeol*, it raises questions: why are these local figures, who play pivotal roles, always *Gisaeng*? Second, there is a stark contrast between the protagonists: the male protagonist is an upper-class Seoulite, while the female counterpart is a lower-class provincial woman. Specifically, the Seoul men are often portrayed as unsuccessful individuals in comparison to their peers, while the provincial women exhibit exceptional abilities or virtues.

Among the hierarchical distinctions of region, class, and gender, which is the most fundamental? Since the narrative is triggered by the protagonist's visit to the provinces, regional disparity emerges as the primary axis of hierarchy. Social status and gender are secondary, constructed in response to the narrative demands of *hwejeol*. Thus, Seoul becomes emblematic of upper-class masculinity, while the provinces symbolize lower-class femininity. This rigid hierarchy parallels Western colonial discourse, which often feminized and exoticized the East.

The dichotomy between Seoul, representing upper-class men, and the provinces, representing lower-class women, implies an inherent separation. Male protagonists from Seoul are depicted as aloof, avoiding interactions with local people despite their extended stays. Historically, *Gisaeng*, particularly those in official capacities (gwan-gi, 官妓), were integral to gatherings involving officials. Therefore, the protagonists' refusal to engage with *Gisaeng* reflects not only disinterest in romance but also a broader disdain for social interaction with the local populace.

The problematic nature of the upper-class Seoul man, stemming from his arrogance, becomes evident through the reactions of local officials and *Gisaeng*. In *Jibong-jeon*, the *Gisaeng* Baeg-ok (백옥) attempts to seduce the male protagonist, Lee Su-gwang (이수광). Baeg-ok, who had retired from her role as a *Gisaeng* after marrying Seon-u-saeng (선우생), takes it upon herself to initiate *hwejeol* when Lee Su-gwang resolutely distances himself from women. The reason behind Baeg-ok's decision to seduce Lee Su-gwang is revealed in her request for her husband's permission.

Baeg-ok justifies her actions by stating that the Pyongyang government office will lose face because of this. She interprets Lee Su-gwang's abstention from romantic or sexual involvement as an insult to the reputation of Pyong-yang. In other words, Baeg-ok perceives his disinterest as a slight against Pyong-yang, believing that the failure of Pyong-yang's *Gisaeng* to properly entertain Lee Su-gwang reflects poorly on the region. This perspective is echoed in the behavior of *Gisaeng* in other works as well.

In this context, the *Gisaeng* initiate *hwejeol* to challenge the discourteous and dismissive attitudes of upper-class Seoul men toward the provinces and their people.

Hwejeol is not merely an act of seduction but a narrative device employed to induce a transformation in the male protagonist's attitude. This interpretation is evident from the methods used by the *gisaeng* to entice the male protagonists. With the exception of *Bae-bi-jang-jeon*, where a bathing scene is used to immediately provoke sexual desire, *Gisaeng* in other works are portrayed as paragons of virtue and erudition.

For example, in *Jeong-hyang-jeon* and *O-eyu-ran-jeon*, the *Gisaeng* Jeong-hyang (정향) and O-eyu-ran (오유란) introduce themselves as individuals from noble families who were married but became widowed and have since maintained their chastity. While the male protagonists are undoubtedly captivated by these women's exceptional beauty, their allure is equally rooted in their integrity and resilience, as they remain virtuous and steadfast despite their economic hardship following their husbands' deaths.

This raises the question of why these narratives consistently pair upper-class Seoul men with lower-class provincial women, specifically *Gisaeng*, as counterparts. Traditional critiques of these social novels often attribute the central theme to female seduction, focusing on the recurring motif of *Gisaeng* approaching the male protagonists in a sexual context. However, this reductive view overlooks the more nuanced role of *Gisaeng* in these narratives.

In *Se-tae so-seol*, the female protagonist who is a *Gisaeng* rarely presents herself to the male protagonist in her authentic role as a *Gisaeng*. The sole exception is *Jong-ok-jeon*, where even then, the *Gisaeng* is depicted as a figure of unwavering virtue. In other narratives, *Gisaeng* are portrayed as impoverished women living in rural areas, approaching the male protagonists under the guise of hardship. This raises the question: why, among the diverse types of characters in the provinces, are *Gisaeng* or women living in destitution consistently chosen as counterparts to the male protagonists?

As previously discussed, the male protagonists harbor deep-seated prejudices against provincial life, effectively isolating themselves from the local people. Despite being surrounded by provincial officials and administrators—figures with whom they could potentially interact—they deliberately avoid forming close relationships. This self-imposed isolation shuts down any avenues through which the male protagonists might come to understand the provinces.

In contrast, women, particularly *Gisaeng*, represent a more approachable category for these men. By their profession, *Gisaeng* are accustomed to interacting with upper-class men. In works like *Jeong-hyang-jeon* and *O-eyu-ran-jeon*, the female protagonists are introduced as impoverished women, creating plausible scenarios

for their encounters with the male protagonists.

Initially, the male protagonists perceive these women merely as pitiable figures of lower status or unfortunate circumstances. However, as they engage in conversation and spend time together, the women's exceptional qualities become increasingly evident, eliciting admiration from the male protagonists. This admiration is distinct from the respect they might feel for another elite male's virtues; it is heightened by the fact that they had no prior expectations of these women. Indeed, in these texts, the male protagonists describe their counterparts disparagingly as a "lowly *Gisaeng* from a remote village" (*Ji-bong-jeon*) or a "countrywoman" (*Jeong-hyang-jeon*). When the women surpass these modest expectations, the male protagonists cannot help but be profoundly impressed.

Perhaps this explains why the male protagonists' love for these women is portrayed as remarkably deep and sincere, especially considering the transient and unfamiliar settings in which these romances occur. The men become entirely absorbed in their affection, to the extent that they seem to forget they are merely visitors to the provinces.

Falling in love with these provincial women signifies more than a personal relationship; it marks the opening of the male protagonists' closed minds toward the provinces. Their newfound affection for the women serves as a catalyst for a broader change in attitude, contrasting sharply with their previous indifference to local culture, gatherings, or interactions with provincial people.

The male protagonist falls deeply in love with a woman from the province where he resides. This love stems from an emotional connection, distinguishing it from fleeting physical desire. This distinction becomes evident during the moments of their separation. In *Jong-ok-jeon* and *O-eyu-ran-jeon*, similar events unfold: during the peak of their romance, the male protagonist is deceived into returning to Seoul by a false letter claiming his father is gravely ill. On his journey back, he receives another letter stating his father's recovery, prompting his return to the province. During his absence, the provincial characters stage the deaths of Hyang-ran (향란) and O-eyu-ran, constructing false graves along the protagonist's return route to create the illusion of their demise.

From the perspective of *hwejeol*, the male protagonist's grief at the supposed graves of his beloved might be interpreted humorously. However, from his viewpoint, this sorrow signifies the sincerity of his love, evoking a poignant reaction. The fan and skirt inscribed with poetry are tokens of disgrace in one interpretation, but for the male protagonist, they symbolize tokens of love, while the false graves embody the despair of separation from a true love. Although some might view the

male protagonist as bewitched, his love was, from his perspective, profoundly genuine.

While the text does not heavily emphasize this point, the male protagonist's transformation cannot be reduced to merely a change in perception of a single woman. Earlier in the narratives, it was established that Seoul's upper-class men tend to associate provincial life with lower-class women. Thus, the protagonist's shift in perception of the woman naturally extends to a broader shift in attitude toward the province itself. As his love for the woman deepens, it is likely that his prejudices against the province diminish as well.

This inference is supported by the conclusions of these works. Broadly summarized, they share two key elements: first, even after the conspiracies surrounding disgrace are revealed, the male protagonists continue their relationships with the provincial women. Second, the rigid and morally inflexible male protagonists alter their attitudes. These endings dismantle prejudices related to region and social status, emphasizing instead the futility of such biases. The narratives ultimately embrace the female protagonists, underscoring the insignificance of preconceived notions about regional or class differences.

Upon reflection, the disgraceful schemes in these stories were orchestrated by figures of authority such as kings or uncles. This suggests that the stories do not intend to satirize social hierarchies based on status but rather encourage broader perspectives and more generous standards. This intention manifests as a narrative of love between Seoul's upper-class men and the province's lower-class women, advocating for the unity and harmony between the capital and the provinces.

The conclusion of *O-eyu-ran-jeon* vividly illustrates this message. The male protagonist, Yi-saeng (이생), who had been humiliated before his close friend, Kim-saeng (김생), the magistrate of Pyong-yang, seeks revenge. After returning to Seoul, Yi-saeng dedicates himself to his studies, passes the state examinations, and is appointed as a secret royal inspector (*amhaeng-eosa,* 암행어사). He is then dispatched to Pyong-yang, where he confronts Kim-saeng. However, when Kim-saeng reaches out for reconciliation, Yi-saeng forgives him, marking a resolution. In a gesture of goodwill, Yi-saeng orders wine and reminisces with Kim-saeng, sharing drinks and camaraderie.

This reconciliation contrasts with Yi-saeng's earlier disdain for regional gatherings. Upon his arrival in Pyong-yang, Kim-saeng had prepared an elaborate banquet for his birthday, inviting local officials and *Gisaeng*. Yi-saeng, however, vehemently rejected the invitation and avoided mingling with either officials or *Gisaeng*. By the story's conclusion, Yi-saeng takes the initiative to host a banquet himself, indicating

not only a newfound interest in the region but also a sense of camaraderie with its people.

Thus, these works carry an implicit message advocating for unity and harmony, urging readers to transcend the divide between the capital and the provinces. They champion interregional exchange and the breaking down of prejudices, fostering a vision of mutual understanding and cooperation.

Immoral Plot Development and Ethical Resolution

In *Se-tae so-seol*, the dichotomy between the spaces of "Seoul" and the "provinces" comes into sharp focus. These locations serve not merely as backdrops but are intricately tied to the characterization of the figures in the narratives. In other words, the relationships among the characters subtly reveal underlying perceptions of regional identities. Seoulites are depicted as rude and dismissive of provincial people. This regional bias intersects with and amplifies discrimination based on lower social status and gender, specifically against women. As a result, individuals who are both provincial and of lower status, or women, are subjected to even harsher prejudices.

The societal worldview places Seoul, the upper class, and men at the center while relegating the provinces, lower classes, and women to the margins. This discriminatory perspective extends beyond a hierarchical distinction between center and periphery. It evolves into a binary opposition of truth versus falsehood, wherein the center is deemed "right" and the periphery "wrong." Consequently, Seoul, the upper class, and men are perceived as ethical, while the provinces, the lower class, and women are seen as unethical.

What makes *Se-tae so-seol* particularly compelling from the perspective of ethical messaging is their challenge to these general prejudices. They not only subvert the preconceived notion that Seoul's upper-class men are inherently ethical but also position the very individuals who starkly contrast with them—provincial, lower-class women—as agents of moral enlightenment. Moreover, these women employ immoral means to place the Seoulite protagonists in difficult situations, compelling them to reflect on their own behavior. Although these methods are ethically questionable, they effectively bring the ethical shortcomings of Seoul's upper-class men into public discourse.

Through this process, *Se-tae so-seol* portray the moral reformation of the rude and arrogant Seoulite. They provide opportunities for self-reflection and demand that these figures evolve into ethical beings. Significantly, these novels commonly employ the immoral method of seduction by *Gisaeng* to achieve this moral reform.

The *Gisaeng*, concealing her ethical identity[1] and conspiring with other provincial characters, subjects the male protagonist to intense tribulations. If the purpose were purely moral enlightenment, one might expect a more ethical approach to the reformation. Why, then, do these novels opt for immoral methods? Perhaps it is to underscore for the Seoulite protagonists the inappropriateness and repercussions of their own unethical behaviors.

Despite the harsh trials they impose, provincial characters ultimately extend hospitality to the Seoulites. They graciously overlook the Seoulites' initial contempt and discrimination and accept them into the community. These provincial characters, who drive the ethical resolutions of these works, adhere to the premise that respect for universal values enables the formation of inclusive communities, transcending differences in status or region.

In *Se-tae so-seol*, an intriguing dynamic emerges: the male upper-class figure from Seoul, who should embody ethical norms, comes to learn the value of morality from a provincial lower-class woman. The individuals typically viewed through the lens of prejudice as "immoral" become instruments for ethically re-educating the ostensibly moral Seoulites, employing immoral means to achieve this end. This paradoxical interplay highlights the unique and thought-provoking narrative strategies of these works.

Deception as a Strategy: The "Shinjū" Motif in Edo-Period Yūjo and Client Relationships

Here, we turn our attention to an examination of Japanese social novels. The third story of *Shōen-Okagami* (諸艶大鑑 , 1684), titled "*If you die, let's go with the wooden sword*" (死ば諸共の木刀), was written by Ihara Saikaku (井原西鶴), the founder of Japanese popular literature (ukiyo-zōshi). Published in 1684, this work vividly portrays the customs, social conditions, and human sentiments of the pleasure quarters (*yūkaku,* 遊郭) of the time. In particular, "If you die, let's go with the wooden sword" employs the motif of *shinjū* (心中 , double suicide) as a unique form of deception. This study examines how the narrative raises ethical questions regarding the nature of relationships between *yūjo* and their clients. The plot is summarized as follows:

The narrative follows a wealthy patron known as Hanru (半留), who becomes a devoted customer of Wakayama (若山), a high-ranking courtesan (*tayū*, 太夫)

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

of the Miuraya (三浦屋) in Yoshiwara (吉原). The two develop a deep emotional bond, and Hanru even promises to take Wakayama as his wife. However, Hanru suddenly ceases his visits, cutting off contact entirely. Despite Wakayama's persistent letters, Hanru responds with a false message claiming he has gone bankrupt. Moved by his plight, Wakayama sends him a letter, including money and clothing, requesting to meet. When they meet, Hanru appears in shabby attire, lamenting his misfortune, and suggests a *shinjū* . Wakayama agrees. On the appointed day, the two meet in a private room, ready to fulfill their pact by aiming daggers at each other. In a poignant moment, Wakayama exclaims, "Ah, how sorrowful!" just as the brothel staff intervene and stop them. During an immediate inquiry, Hanru reveals that the dagger is not real but a wooden sword covered in silver foil. He also admits to having sufficient funds to cover her release from the brothel and explains that the entire scenario was orchestrated to test Wakayama's sincerity. For Wakayama, her sorrowful exclamation reflected her heartbreak at the thought of killing the man she loved. In response, she tries to take her own life with a razor, declaring, "What is there to live for?" However, she is stopped by the brothel staff. After some reflection, Hanru uses a large sum of money to secure Wakayama's freedom from the brothel and sends her back to her hometown. He then begins a relationship with another courtesan, Akashi (明石), telling her that he was displeased with Wakayama's final words and has no intention of meeting her again.

This story has been regarded as a masterpiece, yet it presents significant challenges for interpretation and appreciation. Until now, the relationship between Wakayama and Hanru has often been read as a "tragedy of human relationships" (Teruoka 178), driven by the fundamental dynamics between a *yūjo* and a *yūkyaku* within the confines of the pleasure quarters, where monetary transactions govern all interactions. In this context, Hanru's suspicions remain unresolved, while Wakayama's sincerity is left unaccepted. Alternatively, it has been interpreted as "a barren love within the dazzling world of the pleasure quarters" (Asano 265). At the same time, this tale provokes deeper questions about the characters' true intentions. Was Hanru an extreme skeptic, or did he never truly intend to marry a courtesan, instead devoting his life solely to indulgence in the pleasure quarters? What were Hanru's genuine feelings, and how should Wakayama's inner thoughts be understood? These unresolved ambiguities make the story one that "leaves room for interpretation" (Emoto 31), exposing its interpretive challenges while inviting readers to contemplate its emotional and moral dimensions.

The difficulty in interpreting this story, I argue, stems from a lack of consideration for the discursive environment of the time, including knowledge of pleasure

quarter customs, entertainment conventions, and the lived experiences of courtesans. These historical and cultural contexts serve as the coordinates for interpreting the text, and without them, the narrative's full meaning cannot be decoded. The absence of a framework to situate the text within its contemporary socio-cultural milieu—the interpretive axis of reading—has left the story shrouded in ambiguity.

To understand the circumstances that lead Hanru to doubt the sincerity of courtesans, it is essential to focus on the *yūjo hyōbanki* (遊女評判記). The pleasure quarters, alongside kabuki theaters, were considered one of the "two great vices" (akusho, 悪所) of the Edo period due to their hedonistic and decadent image, as well as the economic burdens they imposed on the common people. The *yūjo hyōbanki* served as guidebooks that provided information on courtesans, presenting them as cultural commodities and offering explanations of the contemporary pleasure quarters. As practical manuals for the pleasure quarters and courtesans during the formation and development of *yūkaku* culture from the mid-17th to early 18th century, these guides demand further consideration regarding their relationship with *Ukiyo-zōshi*, particularly the discourses represented and constructed in Societal Novels. Regarding the suspicions of *yūkyaku* , or clients, the discourse surrounding *shinjū*—the act of proving sincerity in the relationship between *yūjo* and clients—deserves attention. To address this, I refer to the statements in *Shikidō Ōkagami* (色道大鏡), a monumental encyclopedic work on *yūkaku* culture authored by Fujimoto Kizan (藤本箕山) and established as a manuscript around 1678. In particular, I examine the discourse in volume 6, titled "Section on *Shinjū*" (心中部).

> ① *Shinjū* refers to a token that demonstrates the unwavering bond between a man and a woman in a sincere relationship. From this, the terms "to perform shinjū" and "to make someone perform shinjū" arise. ② This token is used exclusively by *yūjo* and not by other women. The reason is that *yūjo*, who entrust themselves to many men, never disclose the depth or shallowness of their feelings toward their clients (*yūkyaku*, 遊客). ③ Most men, wishing to confirm whether the *yūjo* truly harbors deep feelings for them (or whether her intentions are genuine), repeatedly visit the pleasure quarters, bring gifts, and devise various schemes. However, determining the depth or shallowness, the sincerity or falsity of her heart is exceedingly difficult. Since such knowledge is elusive, it is natural for men to harbor doubts about a *yūjo*'s true feelings. ④ In order to dispel men's doubts, *yūjo* must live a life where they feign sincerity, making men believe their words and bringing them to a state of acceptance. ⑤ In doing so, *yūjo* display tokens that leave men in confusion. One might ask,

> then, whether *yūjo* ever show these tokens to men without sincerity. The answer is that *shinjū* can be both genuine and false. Sincerely giving one's heart to a man is rare, happening only in one out of ten cases. ⑥ In eight or nine out of ten cases, *shinjū* is not driven by true feelings of devotion but rather employed as a calculated strategy to ensure a man becomes a regular patron and provides for the *yūjo's* livelihood. (Shinpan Shikidō Ōkagami Kankōkai 207-208) [1]

The act of *shinjū* (心中), not performed by ordinary women(②) but by yūjo (courtesans), serves as a symbol of their sincerity toward the other party (①). In response, the *yūjo* attempts to dispel the client's doubts (④), often performing "performed earnestness" (⑥) for multiple clients without genuine sincerity. The tokens of affection displayed by the *yūjo*—ranging from writing an oath (*kishōmon*, 起請文) to the deities of heaven and earth, affirming her true feelings for the client, to offering her hair, nails, or fingers—ironically lead the man into even greater confusion (⑤). From the *yūjo's* perspective, attracting, managing, and maintaining multiple clients as regular patrons is essential for shortening the time needed to leave the pleasure quarters. To sustain these pseudo-romantic intimate relationships with numerous men, the *yūjo's* emotional opacity must be consistently upheld. This "opacity of the *yūjo's* heart" becomes a driving force (③) that encourages the client's spending on leisure, directly linking the psychology and relationships between client and *yūjo* to the consumer structure of the pleasure quarter system. Consequently, a fundamental skepticism arises between the client, who seeks to discern the *yūjo's* sincerity and pierce through her emotional ambiguity, and the *yūjo*, who employs "performed earnestness" to further confuse and control her clients.

To explore the suspicions clients harbor toward *yūjo*, let us refer to the descriptions in *Takitsukegusa, Moekui, Keshizumi* (たきつけ草・もえくゐ・けしずみ), published in 1677. This text, structured as a trilogy, unfolds in a question-and-answer format where a young man with a skeptical and critical perspective on *yūjo* behavior and pleasure quarter culture poses questions to an elderly man who responds. The narrative reveals the sharp tensions between clients and *yūjo* through the debates between the young and the elderly, illustrating the precarious dynamics of their relationship. For instance, the text refers to a "refined connoisseur of pleasure" (*suijin*, 粋人), or "an adversary well-versed in the ways of pleasure" (分知りの敵), highlighting the strained interplay between the roles of client and *yūjo*. The young man poses the following challenge to the elder: "It is widely known that *yūjo*

1 The underlined sections and numbering in the cited text were added by the author for explanation and emphasis. The same applies to other citations as well.

are adept at cleverly responding on the surface, embellishing their words with lies, and leading clients astray. Why is it that you alone take the side of *yūjo*?" (Taniwaki, *Takitsukegusa* 370) He further questions the elder: "Even when a *kishōmon* is written falsely, or hair is cut, nails pulled, or fingers severed, it is rare for these acts to demonstrate genuine sincerity. How, then, can you explain the behavior of a *yūjo* who seems deeply devoted, only to completely ignore her client once he falls into ruin or poverty?" (Taniwaki, *Moekui* 390) In response, the elder acknowledges the falsity in the behavior of *yūjo*, yet counters by pointing out the deceitfulness of clients as well. To address the young man's fundamental mistrust, the elder elaborates on the "principles of the erotic way" (shikidō, 色道), explaining the inherent dynamics of *yūjo* entertainment and seeking to guide him toward a broader understanding.

> That is a one-sided argument. If deceit existed only on the part of the *yūjo* and not on the part of the client, then your claim would be valid. However, ① it is the client, far more than the *yūjo*, who engages in deceit. No matter how confident a *yūjo* may seem in her strategies to captivate the heart of a client, if the client decides to deceive her, he will succeed in doing so. (Taniwaki, *Takitsukegusa* 371)
> When discussing the fundamental principles of the world of play, ② the greatest mistake is to think of a *yūjo* as belonging solely to oneself. [...] When you meet her, enjoy the time you spend together. When you cannot meet her, simply think of it as not being able to meet and avoid dwelling on it. (Taniwaki, *Takitsukegusa* 377)
> ③ Without wandering through the ways of *shikidō* (色道), one cannot truly understand the heart of a person or the spirit of refinement. Therefore, it is said that one who neither abandons nor becomes too immersed in the ways of *shikidō* is the true *suijin* (粋人). Do not think rigidly of only one side. (Taniwaki, *Moekui* 385)

The elder points out that the client can also deceive the yūjo if he so desires (①), emphasizing that the client's possessive desire toward the yūjo is the root of all issues (②). The "performed earnestness" that is inevitably part of the *yūjo's* livelihood renders her emotions opaque, functioning as a mechanism that transforms the desire for possession into the desire for penetration. True *yūjo* entertainment, wherein the client does not become obsessed with the *yūjo* but remains detached and composed, constitutes the ideal form of refined pleasure sought by the *suijin* (③). From this per-

spective, the discussion naturally transitions into the realm of *shikidō-ron* (色道論 , the theory of the erotic way). In this context, narratives emerge that can be seen as a form of male counteraction, testing the sincerity of *yūjo*. For example, I introduce a folk tale from the Sakai (堺) region recorded in volume 15, *Zoudanbu* (雑談部), of *Shikidō Ōkagami*. In this story, a client persuades a *yūjo* to perform a double suicide to confirm her sincerity. Agreeing to the proposal, they prepare to ingest a poison known as "Chōjien" (丁子圓). The man drinks it and collapses, prompting the terrified *yūjo* to flee to the brothel owner for help. The *yūjo* is subsequently branded as insincere and given the nickname "Chōjien," which makes it impossible for her to continue her career as a *yūjo*. Ultimately, she is sold to a pleasure quarter in the western region (Shinpan Shikidō Ōkagami Kankōkai 513-514). When compared to the story "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword," the narrative differs not only in its use of poison as the method of attempted suicide but also in the outcome, where the *yūjo*'s escape leads to her being branded insincere and unable to continue her profession. This is distinct from Wakayama's case, where the *yūjo*'s actions do not prevent her from continuing her career. Furthermore, the man's apparent willingness to trust the *yūjo*'s words and attempt suicide contrasts entirely with Hanru's calculated deception in orchestrating the event. While the premise of a client suggesting a double suicide to gauge a *yūjo*'s sincerity is shared, this narrative is not unique to this particular folk tale but reflects a broader storytelling motif.

Let us point to another example. Of particular note are the *ukiyo-zōshi* by authors influenced by "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword." These include *Fūryū Yamato Sōji* (風流日本荘子), authored by Miyako no Nishiki (都の錦) and published in 1702, specifically volume 2, "*The Great Patron of Nagasaki*" (長崎の大尽), and *Keisei Iro Jamisen* (けいせい色三味線), authored by Ejima Kiseki (江島其磧) and published in 1701, specifically the provincial volume (鄙の巻), "*Viewing the Sincerity of Courtesans in Shumokumachi*" (女郎の心中をついて見る鐘木町). The story "The Great Patron of Nagasaki" shares a nearly identical narrative structure with "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword." Much like Wakayama, the *tayū* Yoshino (よし野) develops a deep relationship with a wealthy merchant, Shinrokua (新六) from Nagasaki. However, Shinroku suddenly cuts off contact, reappearing in shabby clothing to meet Yoshino. The plot unfolds as Shinroku proposes a double suicide, to which Yoshino agrees. The most dramatic final scene, however, diverges from "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword" despite mimicking its structure. At the critical moment, Yoshino stops the act, exclaiming, "Wait a moment! It really looks like you intend to die. If so, give me a little time to prepare for my last moments." She then hurriedly gets up, pretending to ready herself, muttering, "Where

is the west? Where is the north?" Seizing an opportunity, she kicks over a folding screen and shouts, "Here's a murderer!"[1] prompting individuals armed with wooden clubs to rush in, apprehending Shinroku. This humorous escape scene contrasts starkly with Wakayama's composed demeanor. Despite sharing similar elements—such as the prearranged redemption fee and a silver-foil-covered wooden sword—the story differs in its conclusion. Shinroku, disillusioned by Yoshino's insincerity, renounces his indulgence in the pleasure quarters. Meanwhile, Yoshino's fall from grace, from a *tayū* to a destitute prostitute resembling a *yodaka* (夜鷹), represents an even steeper decline than the *yūjo* in the Sakai (堺) folk tale. Similarly, the story "Viewing the Sincerity of Courtesans in Shumokumachi," borrows phrases from "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword" but reverses the narrative framework. This tale features a wealthy patron, Nisan (二三), who frequents the Shimabara courtesan Chitose (千歳) in Kyoto. After breaking off contact, Nisan reappears wearing a straw hat and shabby clothing, lamenting his financial ruin caused by excessive indulgence in pleasure. Chitose consoles him in a manner reminiscent of Yoshino. However, in a reversal of expectation, Chitose, moved by Nisan's pretense of bankruptcy, treats him with even greater care than usual. Deeply touched by her sincerity, Nisan immediately redeems her.[2]

These examples reveal recurring patterns of narrative structure—what could be termed "shared narrative logic." The core motif centers on a client testing a *yūjo's* sincerity toward him, with the plot structured to determine the truth or falsehood of her affections. While the degree of malice in the client's testing methods varies, the narratives consistently expose the sincerity or insincerity of the *yūjo*. There exists a *shared narrative* that objectifies the *yūjo*, driven by the client's "penetrative desire" to uncover her inner thoughts, alongside a clear portrayal of the *yūjo's* ultimate fate.

The Frustrated Reader's Penetrative Desire and Ethical Critique in *Ukiyo-zōshi*

The inner thoughts of a *yūjo* are difficult to discern, and her sincerity remains perpetually opaque. Relationships between clients and *yūjo* are always situated on the boundary between truth and falsehood, a condition largely driven by the *yūjo's* "performed earnestness." Returning to "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword," how does Hanru's deceptive strategy to test the *yūjo's* sincerity exhibit a

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1 The citation of the text from *Fūryū Yamato Sōji* is based on the *Kokusho Database* of the National Institute of Japanese Literature (https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp). Original image source: Frames 27-30. Holding institution: Osaka Prefectural Nakanoshima Library (Catalog No. 66-9-3).

2 See Tsuyoshi Hasegawa ed, *Shin Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei Volume 78: Keisei Iro Jamisen, Keisei Tenjuga Miko, Seken Musume Katagi*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1989, 189-192.

unique characteristic when viewed in light of popular *shared narratives*?

In *Takitsukegusa*, the elder mentions that if a client sets out to deceive a *yūjo*, he is capable of doing so, yet no examples are provided. However, if the act of deceiving a *yūjo* evolves into a game that transforms into an aesthetic ideal, what kind of play might emerge? To explore this, attention should be given to *Shikidō Ōkagami*, volume 5, "28 Stages" (28 品). Of particular note is how it mirrors the structure of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokkekyō*, 法華經), dividing the levels of play into 28 stages. One especially intriguing stage is the "Great Falsehood Stage" (大偽品) and its concept of "*Kengisō*" (顕偽相). At this level, the client employs sophisticated and creative deceptions against the *yūjo*. Let us examine this in detail.

> ① Presenting oneself as a beggar while one's actual circumstances remain secure, in order to test the *yūjo's* intentions; ② appearing in the guise of a vagabond; ③ suddenly ending meetings under the pretense of needing time apart; ④ brandishing a blade and proposing a double suicide; or even interfering in a *yūjo's* plans to secure her redemption by disrupting her relationship with a wealthy client—these are all examples of such strategies. ⑤ *Kengisō* (顕偽相), involves exposing deceit through deceit itself. Few are able to master this level of sophistication. (Shinpan Shikidō Ōkagami Kankōkai 186-187)

Feigning destitution to test a *yūjo's* sincerity (①), suddenly cutting off contact (③), appearing in shabby, impoverished attire (②), or proposing a false double suicide with a blade (④)—these deceptive acts bear a striking resemblance to Hanru's strategy of deceit against Wakayama. Here, I do not assert that Saikaku directly referenced the descriptions found in *Shikidō Ōkagami*, specifically in the section on *Kengisō*. What is significant is that the client's desire to penetrate the *yūjo's* inner feelings has reached its apex as a form of "play," where deceptive schemes are systematized and shared as knowledge and information within the framework of *shikidō*.

This analysis further clarifies the specific characteristics of "If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword." In the stage of *Kengisō*, *yūjo* are described as "unaware of the deceit and merely waiting" (Shinpan Shikidō Ōkagami Kankōkai 187), ultimately being manipulated by the client's schemes. Similarly, Yoshino in "The Great Patron of Nagasaki" and Chitose in "Viewing the Sincerity of Courtesans in Shumokumachi" are both led by men, concluding their stories with either insincerity (symbolized by their downfall) or sincerity (symbolized by their redemption). In this way, the reader's *penetrative desire* is fulfilled alongside the protagonists' resolution. Within this shared narrative structure, the *yūjo's* emotions are objectified, and

the client's deceptive schemes manipulate her from beginning to end until her true feelings are fully revealed. Throughout this process, the narrator and the reader of the story establish a form of *collusion*, aligning themselves with the client's manipulative perspective. In contrast, Wakayama's actions and responses are not entirely passive toward Hanru's strategies, nor does she ultimately face ruin. While Hanru ends their relationship after Wakayama utters the single word "how sorrowful" at the climax of their staged suicide, he still redeems her, allowing her to leave the pleasure quarters. Additionally, Wakayama's actions and the narrator's commentary warrant closer attention. For example, Wakayama's act of writing letters to Hanru when he fails to visit is described. From Hanru's perspective, as someone harboring doubts and initiating the first stage of his strategy under the *Kengisō* approach to expose the *yūjo's* falsity through falsity, the letter—an archetypal sales tactic for retaining clients—fails to elicit any emotional response.

Subsequent actions by Wakayama include sending clothes and money to Hanru and secretly requesting a meeting, followed by a scene where she hosts him, paying for the entertainment herself when he arrives without funds. However, to better understand these behaviors, we must refer to the accounts of *mabu* (間夫 , a person truly loved by the *yūjo* among her clients) in contemporary *yūjo hyōbanki*. For instance, in *Shikidō Showake, Naniwa Dora* (色道諸分　難波鉦 , 1680), sections such as "*Morotazuna*" (諸手縄) and "*Nando*" (納戸) symbolize the *yūjo's* multiple clients (represented by reins) and their storage (represented by a cabinet). These accounts illustrate how *yūjo* sometimes secretly meet with impoverished men, using them to inflate their popularity by increasing the number of clients associated with their peak fame. These men could also serve as tools to spread positive rumors about the *yūjo* or incite jealousy among wealthier clients, thereby enhancing her allure.[1]

Thus, even figures referred to as *mabu*, ostensibly intimate lovers, become strategic tools and objects of management within the *yūjo's* professional activities, maintaining the inherent opacity of her feelings.Regarding Wakayama's actions, the narrator remarks, "Having seen such an undoubtedly sincere heart, can it be that there exists a man in this world as severe as this one?" (Taizō Ebara et al 378) However, Wakayama's behaviors align closely with the strategies described in contemporary *yūjo hyōbanki* regarding tactics employed toward clients. This creates a psychological distance between the reader and the narrator, making it impossible for the reader to entirely align with the narrator's perspective. As a result, readers cannot simply dismiss Hanru as an extreme skeptic or eccentric, nor can they defin-

1 See Mitsutoshi Nakano ed, *Shikidō Showake Naniwadora*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1991, 163-164, 50-51.

itively conclude that Wakayama's intentions are sincere. Rather, Wakayama's series of responses to Hanru can be interpreted as a form of "performed earnestness," representing her best attempt to engage with him strategically.

In the progression toward the story's climax, Hanru's application of the maliciously deceptive strategies described in *Kengisō* and Wakayama's responses are deeply embedded within the discursive network of strategies, tactics, and reciprocal interactions between *yūjo* and clients as evoked by contemporary knowledge of pleasure quarters. Wakayama's actions, far from being entirely passive, counterbalance Hanru's deceptive maneuvers, creating a narrative dynamic of mutual antagonism between the two characters. This structure enhances the narrative by generating tension and engaging the reader's desire to penetrate the *yūjo's* inner feelings, a process that achieves the effect of *narrative activation*.

This raises the question: what is Wakayama's true intention in the final, decisive scene? In the original text (not the corrected version), the distinction between Wakayama's dialogue and the narrator's commentary is ambiguous. The narration shifts from an omniscient perspective—"The *tayū* did not regret throwing away her life even in the critical moment, but when she thought of killing the man she loved, she naturally let out a sound"—to Wakayama's direct speech: "What is there to regret about life?" [1] (Taizō Ebara et al 378)

The narrator defends Wakayama's sincerity, yet readers familiar with the contemporary cultural context of pleasure quarters and the behavioral norms of *yūjo* may remain psychologically distanced from this perspective. Furthermore, the interpretation of Wakayama's utterance, "How sorrowful," remains ambiguous. Was she genuinely lamenting the act of dying? Was it the sorrow of killing the man she loved? Or could it reflect the melancholy of realizing she must go so far as to respond to Hanru's test with such intense "performed earnestness"? The story concludes without resolving these interpretive ambiguities. In the subsequent scene, as Wakayama faces the crisis of interrogation, her exclamation, "What is there to regret about life?" and her renewed attempt at suicide before the crowd could equally be interpreted as either a genuine act of despair or the ultimate "performed

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1 In the modern corrected text, the entire quoted passage is treated as Wakayama's direct speech, serving as both self-referential justification and a form of defense. This narrative structure and stylistic feature demonstrate the effectiveness of Saikaku's distinctive prose style, *kyokuryū-bun* (曲流文). Saikaku's *kyokuryū-bun* is characterized by the frequent mingling of elements from subsequent sentences within a single sentence, creating a convoluted flow. It often involves shifts in the subject within the same context (*nejire-bun*, 捩れ文) or the continuation of phrases by linking the end of one segment to the next (*shiritori-bun*, 尻取り文). These features necessitate careful interpretation due to their intricate nature.

earnestness," executed to navigate a precarious moment where her reputation hangs in the balance. In this extreme situation, pushed to the limit by Hanru's malevolent test, Wakayama performs at her best, leaving Hanru unable to find any logical or moral flaw in her actions—even if he later tells Akashi (明石) that her final words did not sit well with him. Rather than recognizing Wakayama's sincerity, Hanru's acceptance of her actions suggests his intellectual and practical acknowledgment of her position as a *yūjo* who executed her "performed earnestness" to perfection. This explains why Hanru, having rationally "accepted" the situation, declares, "Given all this, grant me the *tayū*" (Taizō Ebara et al 378) and pays a large sum to redeem Wakayama.

Ultimately, the question of Wakayama's sincerity remains unresolved. In the final exchange and the scene of her suicide attempt, the *collusive perspective* of the narrative fails to fulfill the *reader's penetrative desire*. While the story does not conclude with marital union or harmony, it offers a piercing critique of the intense emotional dynamics and calculated strategies within the pleasure quarters. This critique vividly illuminates the realities of *yūjo* life, where personal passions intertwine with the intricate negotiations of survival, blending entertainment with profound critical insight into the nature of human relationships in this context.

Conclusion

The ethical critique inherent in literature is often realized by bringing individuals who have traditionally been marginalized—those without a voice or considered incapable—onto the public stage of literary expression, thereby granting them a voice and highlighting questions about "relationship-building" between people. As confirmed in the above discussion, in Korean *Se-tae so-seol*, the contextual framework of "discriminatory perspectives between Seoul and the provinces" and "regional narratives" reveals that the elements of provincial *Gisaengs*' seduction and Seoul men's fascination served as narrative strategies toward the eventual reconciliation of the characters. The motif of *Hwe-jeol* functioned as a means to humorously broaden Seoulites' narrow perspectives of the provinces, recalibrating entrenched viewpoints and facilitating harmony, exchange, and communication between Seoul and the regions. Similarly, in Japanese *ukiyo-zōshi*, a *shared narrative* emerges, structured around the motif of *shinjū*. This narrative involves clients doubting the inner feelings of *yūjo*, seeking to penetrate their true intentions, and resolving the *yūjo's* fate—whether through ruin, downfall, or redemption—after her sincerity is ultimately judged. However, in "*If You Die, Let's Go with the Wooden Sword*," the portrayal of the *yūjo*'s "falsity" is not rendered comical or objectified within the

contemporary discursive context provided to male readers. Instead, the narrative frustrates the reader's penetrative desire, thereby foregrounding a clear recognition of the *yūjo's* struggle to live within a fiercely competitive environment.

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