

Grotesque Imagination in Kim Dong-in's Novel, *Dr. K's Research* and the Historical Background on Waste*

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I. L'apéritif

In December 1929, the popular literary journal *Sin-oseol* (New Novel) published a short story by Kim Dong-in (1930-1951) entitled “Dr. K's Study.”¹⁾

This story marked a notable departure from Kim's celebrated naturalist and realist literature where he had gained fame through his compelling stories

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1) Kim, Dong-in. (1929). *K baksa ui yeongu* [Dr. K's Study]. Edited by Doseochulpan Fortuna (2020). Seoul: Doseochulpan Fortuna, 1-28.

about ordinary people and their struggles. His new forays into the science fiction genre was by no means a runaway success, but it represented a unique endeavor for its time. After spending all his inheritance, Kim faced financial setbacks and resorted to writing short stories in popular serials to make ends meet, abandoning his earlier commitment to creating “art-for-art’s-sake-literature.”²⁾ Kim Dong-in is known to have actively participated in pro-Japanese activities since 1937. However, one can find critical traces of anti-Japanese sentiments in "Dr. K's Research," which is one of his earlier works in experimental writing.

In “Dr. K’s Study,” Kim marshals grotesque and scatological themes to craft a stomach-churning narrative that employs fecal matter to offer a critical commentary of Korean society under Japanese colonial rule. With one foot in Kim’s familiar genres, the story is grounded in a realist engagement with the historical and cultural context of human waste. By framing the narrative in the context of modern science and technology, the author exposes the contradictions of colonial policies on food shortage and population growth – critical issues in the Malthusian equilibrium and hot topics among his contemporaries at home and in the Japanese metropole. Written in the voice of a semi-detached narrator, the protagonist “na” or “I” recounts a series of episodes involving his friend “C,” who works as an assistant for a scientist, Dr. K. The latter’s goal is to develop an alternative food source for rice using a versatile secret ingredient, which is later revealed to be human excrement.

Koreans have had a long history and paradoxical relationship with their excrement for millennia. Despite this primal emotional aversion to its

2) Yu, Sung-hwan. (2007). A Study of Reality through Kim Dongin’s Literary Works: Focusing on His Critiques and Short Novels until the Early 1930s. *Han-guk hyeon-dae mun-hak yeon-gu*, (22), 101-143.

grotesque appearance and foul-smelling odor, like many human cultures, Korean farmers have harnessed it as a valuable resource in farming while others have resorted to unscrupulous behavior to hoard or steal it from people's privies for their own financial gain. As a popular Korean saying goes, "One's crap is another person's gold." Employing grotesque humor, Kim articulates one of the earliest scientific explanations of human shit and its value as a commodity. At a time when modern discourses on hygiene and public health took center stage, his critique of the politics of "civilization" and "enlightenment" under Japanese rule puts the imperial experiments of social engineering under the microscope. As a result of the hygiene policies implemented by the Japanese government during the colonial era and the subsequent modern sanitation discourse, Koreans came to view excrement as an object of disgust and shame.

While literary critics and writers have long employed human excreta for shock value, satire, and humor, South Korean scholarship has curiously lagged behind in this area. This taboo and often misunderstood topic has only recently received more nuanced attention to varying degrees on scatological themes from different socio-historical periods. Most notably, the Walden Science Humanities and Social Science group at Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology (UNIST) edited volume, *Ttong ui inmunkak* (The Humanities of Poop), represents one of the first serious interdisciplinary efforts by scholars in the humanities and social sciences to examine a wide range of socio-cultural and ecological issues related to human waste and its relationship to Korean society and culture. Among literary scholars, Lee Kyoung-hoon's article "Smelling Human, the Smelly Text: Modern Korean Literature in Smell" offers fascinating insight into how authors drew on scatological satire during the Japanese colonial period "to sniff out the odiferous elements of Korean

culture” and to sanitize them through “scientific deodorizing” under the guise of modern civilization. Lee illustrates how colonial appropriation operated through irony, rendering nature as “malodorous” while also demonstrating how feelings and categories could cross spatial boundaries, inscribing themselves on denizens in modern cities. Here, the typical stench from the unsanitary conditions in the alleys could now signify “the smell of poverty,” evoking fear and creating new hierarchies.³⁾

This essay, which is part of a larger book project, delves into the socio-cultural and historical meanings of human excrement in pre-modern Korea and its transformations during Japanese colonial rule. The first part will explore the evolving cultural understanding and practical utility of human waste in agricultural practices. The latter part will focus on Kim Dong-in’s fictional excursus on shit to illustrate the shifts in attitudes and practices. Specifically, it examines colonial appropriations juxtaposed with divergent logics of modernity and urbanization alongside a new health regime that became preoccupied with the problem of excrement. Similar observations have been made by anthropologists like Mary Douglas, who discerned ambiguity in human perceptions of dirt as a “matter out of place” and identified strategies of different societies to create particular meanings of pollution and taboo, police social boundaries, and in turn, reframe attitudes towards excrement as either valuable or dirty, that is, an object of disgust and shame.⁴⁾

Likewise, Dominique Laporte’s study profoundly illustrates how excrement could occupy the site of disgust at one moment in history but be tolerated in

3) Kim, Seong-won, et al. (2021). *The Humanities of Excrement: Awakening the Sharing of Ecology and Cycle*. Seoul: Yeoksa bipyeong; Lee, Kyonug-hoon. (2019). “Smelling Human, the Smelly Text: Modern Korean Literature in Smell” *Gubo hakbo*, (23), 173-231.

4) Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge and Kegan Pal, 44.

the subsequent era.⁵⁾ This study analyzes Kim's story to identify the author's spirit of resistance and satire in the literature concerning the hygiene discourse imposed by Japanese imperialism. It also reveals his literary imagination regarding ecology. This discussion aims to explore the Korean perception of excrement, which has been considered taboo in Korean academia, and to examine the social-historical background surrounding it."

II. *L'entrée*

Until the Japanese colonial era, Korea's perception of excrement was similar to that of other agricultural cultures. The ideograph for feces (屎) combines the "rice" radical with a "squatting human body." For as long as humans have lived on the Korean peninsula, they have had to forage for food and find places to discard their bodily fluids and excrement. Streams or rainwater provided the most efficient means to wash away the feces or fallen leaves to help decompose waste naturally; however, among larger sedentary populations, the villages required its inhabitants to transport and dispose of their wastes in places situated at a distance from their residences. In the absence of a sewer system, villagers relieved themselves in the hills or near streams. Recognizing that human excrement decomposes more efficiently when buried underground, they began to dig holes to establish latrines to dispose of their wastes.⁶⁾

5) Laporte, D. (2002). *History of Shit*. Benabid, N. & El-Khoury, R. trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 32.

6) In medieval Europe, urban dwellers often tossed their chamber pots out of their windows onto the streets below. The stench wafting from the latrines and excrement in the streams contributed to airborne diseases and high mortality rates. For more see: Horan, J. L. (1997).

One approach to addressing sanitation involved the collection of human waste as fertilizer. As early as the tenth century, Koreans, like their Chinese and Japanese counterparts, began to value human excrement as an agronomic resource.⁷⁾ While farmers had long recognized the value of livestock manure, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, intellectuals like Go Sang-an began to compile various farming manuals like the *Nongga wollyeong* (Farming Calendar). These manuals provided guidance on mixing human urine and feces with ash or dried vegetation and storing them in dug pits or buried jars for future use in fertilizing the fields.⁸⁾

Most villages on the peninsula lacked an adequate sewer system, leading to daily struggles with the foul stench emanating from backyard privies. The health hazards were significant, especially during the rainy seasons when excrement and urine seeped into the ground, becoming a breeding ground for parasites and diseases.⁹⁾ Yet, unbearable odor did little to discourage families from storing their wastes in open sheds to sell or use in the fields as fertilizer. As one proverb weighed in: “Fertilizing a field is better than buying it”. During the seventeenth century, as the population of Hanyang (Seoul) doubled in size to 200,000, farmers sought more manure to meet the growing demand for vegetables such as radish and cabbage, as well as other staple crops like rice and barley.¹⁰⁾ It became common practice together theash from the home

The Porcelain God: A Social History of the Toilet. New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 43-64.

7) Choe, Deok-gyeong. (2016). The Ecology of Excrement in the Agricultural History of East Asia. Seoul: Sechang chulpansa, 40.

8) Nam, Mi-hye. (2009). Research on Sericulture during the Joseon Dynasty. Seoul: Jisiksaneopsa, 177.

9) Hwang, Gyeong-sang. (2012. 10. 10). The Streets of Hanyang during the Joseon Dynasty Were ‘Full of Shit.’ Gyeonghyang sinmun. Available:

<https://www.khan.co.kr/culture/scholarship-heritage/article/201210102105475>

furnace (*ondol*) to make lye for washing clothes and to scatter over the heaps of human feces. The ash's strong alkalinity absorbed moisture, preventing maggot infestation, repelling the stench from decay and making the waste easier to store and handle during the cultivation season.¹¹⁾

By the late eighteenth century, popular works by *Sirhak* (Practical studies) scholars began to feature professional human waste disposal businesses. For example, Bak Jiwon's (1737-1805) collected works, *Yeonamjip* (Collection of the Rock of Swallow) includes a short story entitled "Yedeok seonsaengjeon" (The Biography of Teacher Yedeok), whose main character, Eom Haengsu and his son, thrive on collecting human and animal excrement as wealthy *bunyocheorieopja* (manure collectors). Mocking the *yangban* (literati) who prefer to starve in poverty rather than compromise their honor, Bak illustrates how dung sellers like Eom could earn a handsome salary of 600 *nyang* (6,000 *jeon*) annually, enabling him to purchase a large house and land.¹²⁾ Employing scatological themes, Bak intentionally promotes commercial and economic activities involving human feces, challenging the notion that such work was vulgar or violated Confucian norms. In fact, he offers meticulous details of the dung dealer's operations, normalizing the work as legitimate labor. He describes how the tavern owner mixes the ashes from the furnace with feces to create *dongjae* (dung-ash), a compost that Eom sells to vegetable farmers in the city's outskirts.¹³⁾ He carries a *ttong janggum*, either an earthenware

10) Choe, Deok-gyeong, 42.

11) The reformist *Sirhak* (practical studies) scholar Bak Jiwon observed in his writings of seeing homes with latrines built above pig pens where villagers creatively used human waste as feed for pigs for hundreds of years.

12) *Ttong ui inmunhak*, 84.

13) *Jawon sunhwan sahoe yeonguso* (2020. 12. 12). *Teacher, Yedeok: The Management of Excrement in Joseon.* Available: <https://blog.naver.com/waterheat/222171389255>; Choe, Deok-gyeong, 42.

barrel baked with soil or wooden boards reinforced with roots of pine or bamboo trees with a wide snout. He shows that these barrels, often carried on an A-frame, were used to store the fermented excreta collected from the latrines in the spring to remove the toxins. In Korea, farmers preferred these wooden barrels over baked jars for their sturdiness and ease of transport to the fields.¹⁴⁾



<Picture 1> A ddong-jangsu with a ddong-jangun, a device for carrying manure

Human excrement and its collectors became ubiquitous in Korean culture. The artist Kim Jun-geun (Gisan), whose work appeared in the markets after the opening of Korean ports in 1876 following the Ganghwa Treaty with Japan, captured various aspects of daily life, including the dung collector, in his more than 1,500 paintings.¹⁵⁾

New latrine words and proverbs seeped into the Korean language:

14) Choe, Deok-gyeong., 40.

15) Kim, Gwang-con. (2002). *The Outhouses of East Asia*. Seoul: Minsokwon, 259.

byeonseo was the place to relieve oneself while *haeuso* (literally “a place to relieve worries”) referred to the outhouse at a temple. People in different regions referred to cesspits as a “room in the back,” giving rise to a popular saying “the farther away [one is from] the house of the in-laws and the outhouse, the better.”¹⁶⁾ Superstition and religious myths were also entwined with excrement: commoners and elites especially feared the vengeful young virgin goddess, Cheuksin, who was banished to the outhouse by the supreme deity Cheonjiwang and the kitchen goddess Jowangsin and spent her exile counting each of her 150-centimeter-long hair. To appease this malevolent goddess, villagers fearfully avoided the latrines on the three days of the month, including the number six, and performed a *jesa* (ritual) during those days.¹⁷⁾

III. *L'entrée*

The monopoly of the *ttong jangsu* (night soil collectors) came to an end when the city took control of sewage collection under the fledgling Daehan Empire as it embarked on the Gabo Reforms (1894-1896).¹⁸⁾ These reforms

16) Monks often refer to the outhouse as *haeuso*, or a place to relieve worries. Other common words include, *cheukgan* (a building placed in a corner of the yard), *jaetgan* or *hwagan* (ashes or ash bins), *dwitgan* (a place in the back yard where feces and urine can be placed), *jeongbang* (a room that cleanses the body), and *ttongsi*, a portmanteau referring to the sound of pooping and peeing. See: Cultural Heritage Administration. (2015. 11. 12). Korean outhouses. Gukga munhwacheong. Available:

https://www.cha.go.kr/cop/bbs/selectBoardArticle.do?nttlId=28269&bbsId=BBSMSTR_1008&mn=NS_01_09_01

17) “Cheuksin,” Encyclopedia of Korean culture. Available:
<https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0058336>

18) Jo, Jong-eop. (2016. 4. 28). Buying and selling of excrement was once a big profitable business under Japanese colonial rule. Donga ilbo. Available:

aimed to modernize society and address the growing sanitation problem, particularly concerning human and animal waste. The new government established the Wisaengguk (Sanitary Bureau), which commissioned the national police bureau in 1898 to issue zoning permits to all night soil merchants, assigning each collector a specific area of the city. By regulating the disposal of excrement and trash, the state aimed to improve hygiene conditions and reduce outbreaks of epidemics like cholera, a water-and-insect-borne disease. By 1904, night soil disposal began to be municipalized.¹⁹⁾

In 1907, the Hanseong Hygiene Association, led by a group of Japanese expatriates, campaigned to ratify the Hanseong Sanitation Law. This law required residents to pay a monthly fee for waste collection and disposal through a bidding process, effectively depriving the *ttong jangsu* of their businesses.²⁰⁾ By 1909, the association and a few licensed private companies, such as the Namsan Sanghoe (Commercial Association), monopolized the trade, with exclusive control over the sale of all fecal waste, urine, and blood from slaughterhouses through auctions to farmers. Urban residents had to pay a monthly fee for waste removal and delivery to disposal sites near Dongdaemun, Yongsan, and Bamseom Island or to temporary locations such as in Sindang-ri outside the Gwanghuidun Gate.²¹⁾

Residents clashed with the municipal authorities as the *ttong jangsu*, whose livelihoods depended on this business, could not provide their daily services. Japanese-owned sanitation companies only collected waste once every ten or

<https://www.donga.com/news/Society/article/all/20160428/77821944/1>

19) Seo, Ho-cheol. (2016). The Formation of a Human Waste Disposal System in Seoul during the Colonial Period. *Seoul-gwa-yeoksa*, (93), 187-190.

20) *Ibid.*, 191-193.

21) *Ibid.*, 201-206.

twenty days, causing mounds of human waste to accumulate around people's houses. Whereas local merchants did not charge residents for this service, the new municipal ordinance now levied a sanitation fee of two *jeon* per room (*kan*), which was onerous for the city's poor, who often refused to pay, exacerbating sanitary conditions and the risk of disease outbreaks.²²⁾ Rumors of police demanding food instead of sanitation fees further fueled Korean resentment towards the colonial authorities. The municipal monopolization of the human waste business meant a loss of the dung merchants' livelihoods and a disruption to the local supply chain to farmers, increasing the costs of human fertilizer outside the city gates.²³⁾

Following the annexation of Korea in 1910, the office of the Governor-General replaced the Residency-General with judicial oversight of the police, which assumed the primary responsibility of managing the state's sanitation projects and controlling acute infectious diseases.²⁴⁾ By 1914, the city took over the expensive task of human waste disposal under a new colonial urban policy.

The Koreans rejected the municipality's framing of the problem as merely an urban sanitation issue, perceiving the reforms instead as ethnic discrimination and a systematic attempt by the colonial state to usurp local businesses. Historian Warwick Anderson describes this kind of discourse as "excremental colonialism," where the colonizers construct a binary between the "clean" colonizer and the "dirty" natives, represented by "filthy" spaces filled with noxious vapors.²⁵⁾ Dominique Laportein *A History of Shit* aptly notes that

22) *Ibid.*, 194.

23) *Ibid.*, 206-211.

24) Yi, Hyeong-sik. (2012). The Hygiene Policies of the Japanese Empires in the 1910s and the Local Communities. *Hallym ilbonhak*, 20, 5-28.

25) Anderson, W. (1995). Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution.

the modern state identifies itself as “the Grand Collector, the cloaca maxima that reigns over all that shit, channeling and purifying it . . . hiding its places of business from sight.”²⁶⁾ The Board of Sanitation enacted the Laws to Prevent Infectious Diseases of Korea to assert greater control over human waste in June 1915. These new ordinances aimed to enforce everyday hygienic practices by installing public toilets, punishing public defecators, and establishing human waste collection centers at specific locations, all under the banner of its civilizing mission. Through punitive measures, the colonial state insisted on imposing a new latrine culture on its subjects.²⁷⁾

By the 1920s, Koreans realized that they had received the shitty end of the stick: not only were they paying exorbitant *sinयोगeupchwi* (feces and urine collection fees) without adequate public infrastructure and sanitation services, Japanese intermediaries were also purchasing human waste cheaply and selling it to farmers at much higher prices. The grievances permeated the literary terrain, exemplified in Bak Taewon’s short story “Back Alleys” (*Golmok an*, 1939) where he employs the pungent stench of excrement to depict the everyday realities of the urban lower classes.²⁸⁾ As Bak vividly describes, “the moment you stepped into that alley, a pungent smell hits your nose [in the most unpleasant way] . . . as feces and urine flowed all year round from the uncovered rotting gutter.”²⁹⁾ In his other short story, “Cheonbyeonpunggyeong” (Cheonbyeon Landscape, 1936-1937), set in the

Critical Inquiry, 21(3), 640-669.

26) Laporte, D. (2002). *History of Shit*. Benabid, N. & El-Khoury, R. trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 66.

27) Kim, J. (2016). Malaria and Colonialism in Korea, c.1876-1945. *Social History of Medicine*, 29(2), 367.

28) Aikawa, T. (2016). Time in the alleys of Keijo: Everyday life and total mobilization in Bak Tae-won’s ‘Back Alleys.’ *Gubo hakbo*, (14), 39-65.

29) *Ibid.*, 43.

urban slums, Bak vividly describes the poor defecating in the streets, further offering visualization of the stench.³⁰⁾ Dominique Laporte observes, “That which occupies the site of disgust at one moment in history is not necessarily disgusting at the preceding moment or the subsequent one.”³¹⁾ Korean literary projects associated excrement with disgust but also linked it to the colonial state, amplifying the symbolic potency of shit. It was in this context that Kim Dong-In published his speculative short story, “Dr. K’s Study.”

IV. *Le plat*

Kim Dong-in (1900-1951) was born in Pyeongyang, South Pyeongan Province, and was the son of a wealthy landowner. Like many intellectuals of his time, Kim studied abroad in Japan, attending the Meiji Academy in Tokyo before gaining admission to the Kawabata School of Fine Arts. However, drawn to realism and naturalism, he dropped out to pursue a writing career, gravitating toward the approach of “art-for-art’s sake-literature,” which he believed carried a powerful social message of change.³²⁾

Although it is unclear whether Kim read the translated works of Jules Verne in Japanese, such as *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, or his other popular works, some scholars argue that his “The Research of Dr. K” (1929) fits the science fiction genre of this era. This story engages with science and

30) Ttong ui inmunhak, 99.

31) Laporte, D. (2002). *History of Shit*. Benabid, N. & El-Khoury, R. trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 33.

32) Kim, Gyeong-ae. (2019. 10. 19). Kim Dongin's autobiography, Hanryang Kei' is his father, Kim Chanyeong. Hankyoreh. Available: https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/791434.html

technology (elements that have been overlooked in its reception), embedding social and political commentary on the Malthusian food crisis and the modern world's possibilities in its scatological humor.³³⁾ Kim's fascination with science and its radical potential to solve local and global problems such as food production, reflects the profound impact of his Western education and Japanese colonialism. At the same time, Kim's storytelling, which combines his unique aesthetic sensibilities and prose style that resembles his earlier realist stories, avoids simple didactic frameworks. Instead, through the mundane actions and thoughts of his characters, he provocatively critiques the status quo and conservative racial and subjective politics of Japanese colonialism. Kim's use of the obscene, grotesque, and satire triggers visceral responses, challenging readers to think critically about food shortages and class through scientific imagination and textuality. Moreover, the dialogical—scientific (futuristic/speculative) and fictional—imagination and carnivalesque inversion transforms human waste from a taboo to worthy topic of scientific examination by emphasizing its potential progressive and utopian utility.

Written in the first person (like so many of his realist novels), Kim introduces the reader to the narrator, “I,” who encounters his friend, “C,” an assistant for Dr. K. The narrator inquires about Dr. K's current research and learns that he has abandoned his work after his major project failed to solve the Malthusian Trap” in Korea. “C” describes how he got involved in Dr. K's infamous project, citing Malthus' famous dictum that population increases exponentially while food supply only increases arithmetically. “C” informs the

33) Pak Yeonghui translated Jules Verne's text in 1907 and it appeared in the journal *Taegeuk hakbo*. For more see: Yi, Ji-yong. (2017. 12. 12). Why was the first SF in Korea Jules Verne? Huffington Post. Available: <https://www.huffingtonpost.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=61963>

narrator that the doctor had instructed him to collect human excrement one day. Unaware of the scope of Dr. K's project, "C" dutifully collected the feces from the outhouse. After analyzing the samples, Dr. K ordered "C" to collect his own, claiming that the previous samples were unusable; he went further to request that C bring samples from his own family members to his lab so that he could begin his research.

Kim's depiction of human waste in this initial episode assaults the reader's olfactory senses, triggering a visceral response simply from the description of the feces and its smell. "C" explains that the doctor was obsessively dedicated to his research, often locking himself in the lab, working sleepless nights, and even eating there. "C" claims that he has no idea what the doctor was doing in the lab. In a shocking twist, Kim advances the narrative forward several months to keep the reader engaged. After attending his grandmother's funeral in the countryside, "C" returns to the lab where the doctor asks him to try out a dish with a particular odor but a taste reminiscent of rice cakes in beef broth. Dr. K inquires about the taste and whether the peculiar smell bothers him. While "C" does not find the dish off-putting, he attributes the strange smell to the lab where the doctor had been conducting his experiments; He assumes that the space simply needs ventilation. When Dr. K reveals the dish's main ingredient, "C" and the other servants who have been offered this dish all vomit on the spot.

Through the narrator, Kim scientifically explains how undigested nutrients found in human excrement can be reprocessed as food if properly extracted. This narrative of a doctor seeking an alternative food source might even be interpreted as a satire of the Japanese colonial state's rice aggrandizement policy, which aimed to transform the colony into an exporter of rice. By improving farming techniques, the state also sought to address concerns about

Korea's growing population which had reached a Malthusian crisis in the process; it was clear to Korean intellectuals that the agricultural output could no longer keep up with increase in the mouths of feed. To placate the farmers in the metropole, the Government General initiated a thirty-year plan known as the "Sanmai zōshoku keikaku" (Rice Production Development Program) that replaced traditional low-yield yet drought-resistant seeds with higher-yielding seed varieties and introduced new fertilizers and better irrigation techniques. As a result, paddy yields increased substantially in Korea between 1910 and 1920.³⁴⁾

Improvements in paddy yields, however, did not save Korean farmers. The state's Cadastral Survey (1910-1918) severely affected rural families, causing wages to drop below subsistence levels. The intensification of labor and rising household debt drove many independent farmers into tenancy under exploitative landlords who engaged in unscrupulous extraction of crop surpluses.³⁵⁾ These untenable rural conditions led to the first mass rural migration. With more than 75 percent of Korea's population still engaged in farming and most of the arable land dedicated to rice production, the Rice Aggrandizement Campaign of 1920 transformed Korea into Japan's rice basket, increasing production by over 250 percent and accounting for more than 98 percent of Japan's rice imports. To feed the local population, the colonial state imported large amounts of cereal grains such as millet, corn, and

34) The Japanese sought to increase the planting of higher-yielding Japanese seeds which were found suited to the climate. By 1923, the Japanese seeds increased by more than 50% and the yields also increased by twofold. See: Nakamura, J. (1999). Incentives, Productivity Gaps, and Agricultural Growth Rates in Prewar Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. Silberman, B. & Harootunian, H. D. ed. *Japan in Crisis: Essays on Taishō Democracy*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 332.

35) Yoo, T. J., 102-103.

sorghum from China to supplement the barley for local consumption.³⁶⁾

Kim's story can be read as a parody of Japan's policies: Dr. K quest to find an alternative food source to feed a starving population without relying on local rice echoes Japan's cruel policy. It is worth noting that historically, Koreans consumed a lot of rice in the past, as meat was scarce. During the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910), Koreans ate up to five or six meals a day or roughly 420 cubic centimeters of rice (336 grams) for an adult man and 300 ccs for an adult woman - that is, approximately three times as much as what adults eat today.³⁷⁾ Thus because of the Government-General's rice policy, Koreans were inevitably forced to suffer from food shortages. Under these particular circumstances, Dr. K's idea to present the research results on processing excrement into food overseas stems from his ignorance that developed countries will suffer from food shortages like colonial Joseon. In an advanced country where gourmet or healthy eating is considered a modern style of well-being, Dr. K's invention is futile and incompatible. Kim Dong-in satirically describes Dr. K's imagination as a colonial idea. In Kim's story, Dr. K's research to solve the food shortage is glorified as a contribution to human society, but in reality, it is closely related to deprivation and the material conditions of Joseon at the time.

It is also uncertain that Kim read Kyūnō Ken'ichi's influential treatise on human excrement, *Funbengaku* (Stoolology, 1918).³⁸⁾ Yet it is notable that Kyūnō's extensive research on the properties of feces, which included details about "amount, length of time in the gut, shape, color, smell, food remnants,

36) Ibid. See also: Sin, Yong-ha. (2019). *The Truth of Exploitation of the Cadastral Survey Project of Joseon under Japanese Colonial Rule*. Seoul: Nanam.

37) Ibid. See also: Sin, Yong-ha. (2019). *The Truth of Exploitation of the Cadastral Survey Project of Joseon under Japanese Colonial Rule*. Seoul: Nanam.

38) Bay, A. R. (2019). *Disciplining Shit*. *Japan Forum*, 31(2), 1-27.

parasites, white and red blood cells, irregularities, and its water, protein and fat content,” closely mirrors Kim’s description of Dr. K’s research. Like Dr. Kyūno’s work, which was predicated on scientific advancements and the discovery of how to use undigested nutrients, Kim describes how human excrement is composed in the digestive tract, noting the presence of fiber, connective tissues, angular substances, starch, and fat and fatty acids from intestinal secretions.³⁹⁾ Dr. K’s key finding is that 30 to 70 percent of human feces can be recycled daily, depending on the individual’s diet. Driven by fears of a Malthusian population crisis, Dr. K is convinced that traditional food production methods cannot sustain the exponential growth of the population.⁴⁰⁾ Therefore, he attempts to reprocess human excrement into food, viewing wars, hygiene programs, and birth control movements as insufficient long-term solutions.

In contrast to Pierre Leroux, a nineteenth-century French utopian socialist who developed the “circulus theory” to stave off the Malthusian crisis, Dr. K had a more revolutionary idea. According to Leroux, individuals should gather their own excrement to offer to the state “in place of tax or personal levy.”⁴¹⁾

Returning human excrement to farmers would balance soil fertility (enhancing agricultural productivity) and population growth so that “poverty

39) For a more detailed discussion on the human digestive system see: Keeton, W. T & Circus, W. (2005. 6. 15). Human digestive system. Britannica. Available: <https://www.britannica.com/science/human-digestive-system/additional-info#contributors>

40) Thomas Malthus, the author of *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), observed the links between poverty and population, as producing more food would not alleviate hunger but rather impoverishment because of the lack of food and resources. See: Sachs, J. D. (2008. 9. 1). Are Malthus’s predicted 1798 food shortages coming true? *Scientific American*. Available: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/are-malthus-predicted-1798-food-shortages/>

41) Alexander, C. & Reno, J. O. (2014). From Biopower to Energopolitics in England’s Modern Waste Technology. *Anthropology Faculty Scholarship*, 4, 355.

would disappear from the face of the earth.” But this circuitous process seemed like a waste of time to Dr. K. He envisioned a scientific leap that entailed collecting, cleaning, and sterilizing the undigested nutrients for *direct* consumption. This alternative circulus would create a limitless food supply and would not require social measures such as birth control, a solution that Korean social investigators advocated.⁴²⁾ The *Dong-a ilbo*, for example, called for a two-year national moratorium on births, inspired by the remarkable success of Margaret Sanger’s birth control clinic in New York City. The newspaper emphasized the urgent need to distribute contraceptives universally regardless of class or health conditions.⁴³⁾

Doctor K explains to “C” that his research involves extracting the undigested food from excrement, storing it in test tubes, examining it thoroughly with a microscope, and sanitizing it for processing—hallmarks of scientific research. “C” describes Dr. K’s product as resembling *konnyaku*, a gelatinous yam cake made from the starchy tuber of the konjac taro plant, which is pulverized into powder and often used in *sukiyaki* or *oden* (beef or fish) stews. The doctor notes that the human stomach can digest only so much so the rest should be recycled to alleviate global hunger. He offers a nutritional breakdown of the ingredients: 63% protein, 25% carbohydrate, 3% lipid, and 9% mineral. Despite his optimism, Dr. K tells “C” that to consider his research success; he must test his product on human subjects, experimenting with various condiments like soy sauce to mask the excrement’s smell.

Convinced that human feces raw can be repurposed as protein-rich material rather than reduced to fertilizer, Dr. K. decides to brand his product as “○○ Bottle” and invites 50 men and women for a tasting event. “C” is struck by

42) Yoo, 81, 89.

43) *Ibid*, 190.

Dr. K's enthusiasm at the tasting party and is delighted at the excitement about tasting something novel and strange. Dr. K plans to unveil the star ingredient of the “○○ bottle” in a formal statement but first enjoys observing the reception of his invention. The dish resembles a pastry such as a biscuit, cookie, or flat pancake, yet most guests concur that it tastes like beef. Yet the product's success teeters precariously on the doctor's ability to eliminate the odor caused by indole (3-methylindole) and skatole, compounds resulting from bacterial action on undigested food.⁴⁴) Despite his efforts to mask the odor with electric ventilation, a slight odor lingers, troubling the doctor. Although “C” has become accustomed to the smell, he sprays some perfume near the food to help mask the smell.

Dr. K's unwavering faith in science blinds him to the power of human senses and emotions. Confident that his groundbreaking research has created a nutritious, refined, scientifically ingenious, and cleaner product than most restaurant food, he is excited about the future. His discovery will solve the food crisis because recycling human excrement will create endless abundance. He compares his discovery to the ancient use of human excrement as fertilizer and believes that the “○○ bottle” can alleviate overpopulation without resorting to draconian measures like sending people to die in wars, coercing them to have fewer children, or importing alternative grains like barley or millet for food. Dr. K is eager to shatter the taboos through the facts of science. He is certainly an expert as Kim illustrates: he informs “C” that the composition of human feces is 75% water, coated with mucus secreted from

44) Foods that are rich in sulfur, especially meat and cruciferous vegetables that are hard to digest, triggers the body to release more gases, which can have an offensive stench. For more see: Anthony, K. (2023. 6. 9). Why do my farts smell so bad? Smelly farts explained. Healthline. Available: <https://www.healthline.com/health/smelly-farts>

the colon. The food that remains in the intestine through digestion is decomposed by microorganisms in the intestines, giving feces its color.⁴⁵⁾ By extracting roughly a quarter of the undigested food materials from freshly discharged feces, he will guarantee humanity's survival.⁴⁶⁾

Despite the fanfare and soaring expectations, the tasting event turns into a horror show after Dr. K discloses the secret ingredients of the “○○ bottle” to his guests. To his shock and dismay, the guests are stunned, squeezing their noses, gagging, covering their mouths with handkerchiefs, and darting off in all directions in utter chaos.⁴⁷⁾ Some guests scream for a doctor, believing that they have been poisoned. Whereas just a minute before, they hardly reacted to the odors, the identification of excrement awakes their senses. Laporte suggests that “civilization despises odor and will oust it with increased ferocity as power strives to close the gap between itself and divine purity” as revolting smells have “no place in the constitutive triad of civilization: hygiene, order, and beauty.⁴⁸⁾ Kim highlights a major contradiction: humans do not react negatively to farm products fertilized by human excrement since they have a specific value, unlike excrement itself which is an object of disgust. As David

45) The 150 grams of daily feces include on average 10 - 12 grams of nitrogen, 2 grams of phosphorus and 3 grams of potassium. Our excrement also includes eight percent of fiber and five percent fat. See: Walter-Toews, D. (2013). *The Origins of Feces: What Excrement Tells Us About Evolution, Ecology, and a Sustainable Society*. Toronto: ECW Press, 54.

46) *Ibid.* An average person defecates once a day or roughly 120 to 150 grams of feces and 1.2 liters of urine.

47) Donald Lateiner and Dimos Spartharas keenly observes “affect responses” to loathsome objects or substances in the “expressive face” as “the nose wrinkles or is held shut, the eyes blink, the lips purse, and the digestive apparatus in extremis vomits up the gorge’s contents.” See: Lateiner, D. & Spartharas, D. (2017). *The Ancient Emotion of Disgust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 8.

48) Laporte, D. (2002). *History of Shit*. Benabid, N. & El-Khoury, R. trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Inglis observes that the dominant attitude towards the excretory in a culture can be shaped by new practices such as public hygiene and new moral order.⁴⁹⁾ The German sociologist Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process* (1939) also elaborates on changes in social behavior in early modern European society as the modern bourgeoisie began associating dirt with the proletariat and their unhygienic and excretory practices as savage.⁵⁰⁾

While not entirely carnivalesque nor polyphonic, Kim incorporates many elements of the grotesque, which Istvan Czachesz describes as the “combination of two components a playful, attention-grabbing, and often humorous component, on the one hand, and a confusing, repulsive, and often fearful component, on the other hand.”⁵¹⁾ Referencing the sixteenth-century writer François Rabelais’ *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Mikhael Bakhtin suggests how the grotesque, such as excrement, can parody self-conscious reactions to unclean excretory practices.⁵²⁾ In Kim’s story, the “civilizing process” is depicted through urban colonial hygienic practices, which equate cleanliness with offense at the sight and smell of excrement. Kim effectively conveys this offense through specific words and images depicting feces, evoking discomfort and excretory experience for the readers.

To avoid further embarrassment, the two abscond to the countryside, fearing repercussions after the botched tasting event. Dr. K, who hails from a wealthy family and owns some property in the countryside, decides to keep

49) Inglis, D. (2001). *A Sociological History of Excretory Experience: Defecatory Manners and Toiletry Technologies*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 42-44.

50) Elias, N. (2000). *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishing, 43, 116, 131,148.

51) Czachesz, I. (2014). *The Grotesque Body in Early Christian Discourse: Hell, Scatology, and Metamorphosis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-2.

52) Persels, J. & Ganim, R. (2004). *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*. London and New York: Routledge, xiv.

a low profile while he recoup from his shock. On their way to Dr. K's home, "C" encounters a mutt eating excrement. The dog follows him with his dirty mouth wide open and stares at the doctor. That evening, as the two dine on a delectable dish of dog meat soup for dinner, Dr. K, who is enjoying his meal, suddenly realizes that he is eating the same mutt they had encountered earlier that day. At that moment, Dr. K's face turns white. He tosses his chopsticks to the ground and immediately begins to vomit. In this final episode, Kim reveals the irony and double standard in the doctor's attitude through this absurd coincidence: this nobleman who had once dreamed of feeding people excrement, cannot consume it himself.

The presence of foul-smelling excrement lingers throughout the story, almost like an invisible but powerful protagonist. Mary Douglas observes that every culture categorizes things so that its members know to perceive them as in or out of place.⁵³⁾ As mentioned above, Dr. K recognizes that it is repulsive that dogs eat their own poop, but it is okay for them to process their feces in a "laboratory." The author uses this grotesque scene to parody the modern way of thinking highlighting the difference between processed feces located in the field of modern way of thinking that there is a difference between processed feces located in the field of modern science and dogs eating feces in natural states. Yet, at the same time, Dr. K's ironic attitude is interpreted as a self-conscious reaction to disgust and mockery of the act itself. It can be said that he vomited because he projected his position as a colonial Korean through the wild dog.

53) Douglas, M., 1-6, 30-41.

V. *Le dessert*

In traditional Confucian society, the combined ideograms of “tasting” and “feces” or “sangbun” (嘗糞) did not refer to coprophagia but a symbolic act of a devoted filial son who tasted his parents’ excrement to monitor their health. From a moral perspective, eating human feces did not provoke disgust and shock but conveyed dignity and respect. Kim Dong-in eschews such moralistic clichés and instead explores an altruistic endeavor to address humanity’s food precarity by presenting “shit” but in a different context – replacing Confucian discourse with scientific discovery and facts.⁵⁴⁾ On a deeper level, Kim engages with controversies of Japanese colonial modernity and the potential for science and technology to advance humanity. Yet, his short story highlights the limitations of science, drawing a line between the natural and artificial and illustrating that science can only adhere to a particular formula. It cannot account for randomness, coincidence, uncertainty, or unpredictability. Through his caricature of Dr. K, Kim cleverly critiques the colonial state by contrasting the alleged rationality, control, and predictability of the governor-general’s ordinances with the random reactions of the 100 people who refuse to eat excrement even if the good intentions will solve the problems of humanity.

Kim’s work reflects a healthy skepticism, even among intellectuals, toward science in the context of colonialism. Yet, there is something very contemporary about Kim’s themes about the futurity, genetic manipulation, and the creation of artificial food out of nature through the advancement of science.

54) Oh, Y. (2022). *Books for the Illiterate: The Haengsil-to (Illustrated Guide for Moral Deeds) of Chosŏn Korea*. The Routledge Companion to Korean Literature. edited by Cho, H. New York and London: Routledge, 70.

The doctor's futile attempts to make human waste edible must have appeared absurd to the readers in Kim's day and ultimately ended in vain. However, Dr. K's actions might also be read as resisting the inhibiting effects of Japanese colonialism, pushing readers to envision a future where scientific innovation might occur freely despite seeming absurd or unrealistic. Scientific advancements - from the discovery of penicillin to the invention of electricity - have propelled humanity forward, but they have required a free environment for creativity and invention to flourish. Despite the pure fantasy and conjecture of the story, Kim poses a broader philosophical question about the uses of human waste, which is good to think about. Throughout the text, Kim links mundane excrement to modern hygiene, sanitation, civilization, and modernity; it is no longer just an object of disgust or utility but also a barometer for measuring the place of Koreans in the empire.⁵⁵⁾

Kim's exploration of human excrement and scientific discovery illuminates the omnipresence of human waste and its significant role in politics, culture, the economy, and everyday life in post-liberation and divided Korea. In the South, excrement became a powerful tool of state surveillance and control. President Pak Chung-hee's regime used mandatory stool and administered anthelmintics to children as part of his anti-parasite campaign, framed as public health measures that were critical to his export-driven industry.⁵⁶⁾ In terms of the economy, despite being primarily an agricultural nation after its independence, South Korea still lacked access to chemical fertilizer after being cut off from the North. Farmers continued to rely on "night soil." Even during

55) Shannon, K. (2023). Reinventing 'Hygiene': The Sanitary Society of Japan and Public Health Reform During the Mid-Meiji Period. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal*, 17(3), 285-306.

56) Yoo, T. J. (2022). *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided*. Oakland: University of California Press, 69-70.

the mid-1960s, farmers in Seoul suburbs like Apgujeong paid dung collectors to gather feces and urine early in the morning for fertilizer. Dung wagons were parked on main roads as collectors urged residents in the alleys to offer their waste.⁵⁷⁾

After three decades of dictatorship, excrement transformed from a tool of oppression to a commodity under democracy and capitalism. It is now considered “cute” in various contexts, such as “shit” cafes selling *eunga* (poop) cakes, the Shit Museum in Suwon, the *chic tongmeori* (shit hair) styles, a contemporary version of the Gibson tuck, or the recent viral children’s animation “Poten Dogs” on YouTube, which lampoons people stepping on shit. The neoliberal economy that has commodified poop as an object of cuteness rather than of disgust.⁵⁸⁾ These products are consumed in a modified form from actual excrement: Excrement is still an object of immediate disgust. However, this kind of indulgence in poop as “cute” can be read as part and parcel of South Korea’s maturation through democratization in modern times which has contributed to enhancing children’s human rights. Sigmund Freud has noted elsewhere through his theory of psychological development of children in infancy play with excrement-like toys during anal phase that

57) Han, Do-seuk. (2014. 6. 15). The Excrement Seller’s Excuse. Hanguk nongjeong. Available: <https://www.ikpnews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=21296>

58) Song, Ye-in. (2020. 6. 30). The Secret of Irene’s Bun? The Mistake She Made when Tying Her Hair 5. Allure , Available: <https://www.allurekorea.com/2020/06/30/%EC%95%84%EC%9D%B4%EB%A6%B0-%EB%98%A5%EB%A8%B8%EB%A6%AC%9D%98-%EB%B9%84%EB%B0%80-%EB%A0%88%EB%93%9C%EB%B2%A8%EB%B2%B3-%ED%97%A4%EC%96%B4%EB%8B%B4%EB%8B%B9%EC%9D%B4%EC%95%8C%EB%A0%A4%EC%A4%80/>; Gwon, Yeong-bok. (2021. 3. 21). I Saw it in a Picture: The Only Place in Korea is Called Haewoojae in Suwon.. Jungang sinmun. Available: <http://www.joongang.tv/news/articleView.html?idxno=53274>; PotendokTV, (2021. 6. 26). Stepped on Poop, a phenomenal K-pop song? Kidding me? YouTube. Available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZcXW_xE4A

children gain confidence through playing with the grotesque, learning a sense of order and control and about authority and independence from their interactions with their parents. Therefore, excrement is often cast in fairy tales for children, and their perception of it has changed in modern times⁵⁹⁾ This shift to cuteness also reflects the private experiences of defecation, with modern comforts like fancy bidets. Seoul now boasts one of the world's most advanced and "smart" sewage systems, investing billions of won to purify waste and eliminate biosolids.⁶⁰⁾

Slavoj Žižek's inquiry into the hermeneutics of lavatories illustrates how toilet bowl designs reflect cultural attitudes toward excrement and political ideologies.⁶¹⁾ Unlike the reflective Germans or pragmatic British who allow their feces to float, the Koreans have also adopted the French design of flushing waste away from sight, reflecting their *ppalippali* (hasty) mindset. This approach aligns Koreans with Americans who seek minimal responsibilities when managing their shit, a far cry from Kim Dong-in's Dr. K, who wished to make food out of it.

In conclusion, Kim Dong-in's story, as discussed above, does not merely view excrement as unsanitary and taboo. Instead, it embodies an ecological imagination that envisions its regeneration for future benefit. While it can be interpreted as a grotesque satire of the sanitation discourse during Japanese colonial rule, Kim's work also prompts us to reflect on our current situation and the future of life in the 21st century. His story offers a future-oriented

59) Freud, S. (1905). The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. v. 7, 1901-1905, A Case of Hysteria, Three essays on Sexuality, and Other Works. Translated by Strachey et al. (2001). London: Vintage Books: Hogarth Press, 115-137.

60) Park, S. (2021. 7. 7). S. Korea Launches Project to Establish AI-based Smart Sewer System. AJU PRES. Available: <https://www.ajupress.com/view/20210707140642914>

61) Žižek, S. (2009). The Plague of Fantasies. London: Verso, 3-5.

ecological perspective on excrement, rather than a modern hygienic one." One can appreciate the prescient vision of futurity in his short story about human excrement, which brings together disparate issues from agriculture to public health, food production, population control, and global ecosystems. Through the grotesque, Kim allows reader to experience the powerful effects of modernity and science on society, culture, and history as their meanings and values have evolved over time.

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[국문초록]

이 논문은 근대 이전 한국에서 인간의 분노에 대한 사회문화적, 역사적 의미가 일제강점기를 거치면서 변화되는 과정에 대해 탐구한다. 근대 이전, 농경사회가 중심이었던 한국사회에서 분노는 중요한 자원 중 하나였다. 이에 본 논문의 전반부에서는 이러한 배설물에 내포된 문화적 의미와 실질적 유용성에 대한 역사를 검토함으로써 배설물에 대한 한국인들의 인식을 탐구한다. 나아가 후반부에서는 김동인의 소설에서 구현되는 배설물에 관한 문화적 상상력에 내포된 생태학적 태도와 실천의 변화를 설명한다. 구체적으로 본 연구는 해당 텍스트를 일제강점기 당시에 이루어진 위생 정책에 반하는 저항적 태도의 표출인 동시에 식민지적 인식의 전유물이라고 분석한다. 그리고 위의 주요 작업들을 바탕으로 본 연구는 김동인이 그로테스크한 상상력을 통해 제시한 오물에 대한 조선인의 수치심과 혐오감의 과잉, 주변성, 그리고 문화적 감정을 면밀히 분석함으로써 근대 식민지 사회와 정체성의 모순을 규명하고자 한다.

[Abstract]

Grotesque Imagination in Kim Dong-in's Novel, *Dr. K's Research* and the Historical Background on Waste

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This essay delves into the socio-cultural and historical meanings of human excrement in premodern Korea and its transformations during Japanese colonial rule. Before modern times, manure was one of the important resources in Korean society, centered on agriculture. Thus, this paper explores the evolving cultural understanding and practical utility of human waste in agricultural practices. The latter part examines Kim Dong-in's fictional excursus on excrement to illustrate the shifts in attitudes and practices. Specifically, it analyzes the novel as an expression of resistance against the hygiene policy made during the Japanese colonial era and at the same time as a colonial appropriation juxtaposed with divergent logics of modernity and urbanization alongside a new health regime that became preoccupied with the problem of excrement. This study draws on the significant aforementioned studies to analyze Kim's use of the grotesque and scientific discovery to scrutinize excess, marginality, and cultural feelings of shame and disgust, exposing the contradictions of modern colonial society and identity.

[Keywords] Kim Dong-in, Excrement, Sanitation Discourse, Shame, Grotesque

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