
A Literary Earthquake in South Korea since the Movement of Sexual Assault Disclosure

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Abstract

Since the rise of the movement of sexual assault disclosure, the publishing world has changed dramatically. Several authors have vanished from the market, and feminist books sales soared. This article aims to identify the impacts of this anti-sexual assault movement in the literary world by observing the arguments, sales and consumer activity. In particular, the case of South Korea shows way how assaulters abused their power and provides clues about how people make positive changes.

Key Words

Authorship; consumer activism; femvertising; meaning-out; #Metoo; South Korea

Introduction

‘When we keep these men’s secrets, we allow their predatory behaviour to thrive.’
- Roxane Gay (2017)

Since the serial disclosure about Harvey Weinstein’s sexual abuse in 2017, #Metoo, a movement against sexual assault, has spread worldwide and provided an umbrella of solidarity for millions of people to come forward with their stories (Zacharek et al. 2017). However, #Metoo was not invented overnight. From the common rape theme in ancient Greek mythology to Bill Cosby cases in the mid-1960s, violence against women has a long history. That is one of the reasons why #Metoo brought the new wave of feminism. The art and cultural industries, including publishing, have reacted sensitively, because they have not only reflected their ‘uneven playing field’ and male-dominated culture, but also wanted to exploit the new market of feminism (Oelze 2018).

As a result of these rapid changes, the traditional literature field has been challenged by many questions. One of the most problematic issues is: ‘Are the works written by assaulters

also evil?’ (Kang et al. 2016). The well-known writer, William Burroughs killed his wife and was a drug addict, but *Junkie* and *The Naked Lunch* have been read as classics widely. Pablo Neruda, a Nobel laureate, also describes raping a maid in his memoir. On the other hand, many established creators who were accused by the #Metoo movement are still in the centre of the social criticism, and the boycott movement against them is also strong (Williams 2018). In South Korea, there have been countless sexual assault disclosures on social media since 2016. This was called the ‘XXX 내 성폭력 (sexual assaults in the XXX field)’ hashtag movement. Literary writers were no exception with over 20 authors suspected. As criticism arose, major literary publishers stopped printing controversial books and increased female writers’ publicity. This article aims to identify impacts of this disclosure movement in the Korean literary field by observing the arguments, sales and consumer activity.

Where is the Place of Author?

First of all, it seems necessary to note the place of author in literary works. Roland Barthes states in ‘The Death of the Author’, ‘the voice of a single person (author)’ is just illusion and criticizes the conventional approach of literature which is detecting the creators’ intention in their works. He insists that the modern author can be only a scripiter who cannot ‘being preceding or exceeding the writing’. Thus, ‘the text is a tissue of quotations’ (1967, 143-46). Barthes defines the reader as ‘the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost’ and emphasizes the infinite possibility of readership.

Michel Foucault also implies the powerless author in ‘What Is an Author?’ and cites Beckett ‘What does it matter who is speaking?’ However, Foucault points out Barthes’s notions of ‘work’ and ‘writing’ contradictory preserve the author’s privilege which already faced their extinction (1998, 207). He argues that ‘we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the opening this disappearance uncover,’ so the role of reader is more important than the death of author (1998, 209). Although Foucault partly agrees with the function of author as an ownership, he predicts that author’s function will eventually be useless as society changes (1998, 222).

On the other hand, Juliet Gardiner states the recuperation of the author with an analysis of the relationship between the author brand and publishing business. Even though she acknowledges the historical context which is not to think of the author as the expressive subject of their text, she argues that author is still involved in reading activities internally and externally. One of the internal aspects is paratext. In ‘Recuperating the Author’ (2000b), Gardiner cites the theory of Gérard Genette: Paratext is ‘a fringe of the printed text which in

reality controls one's whole reading of the text' (2000b, 257). She provides several examples of book jackets which work for branding authors as well as book protection. As an external element, she describes how the conglomeration causes a competitive market and brings a flourishing of author marketing. In 'What is an Author?' (2000a), she mentions that

Publisher's marketing departments need to be able to point to a high profile promotional budget that will give a book pre-publication visibility, and that means author visibility since an author can be the subject of interviews or profiles and participant in a variety of events that will mobilize interest across a far wider field.

This trend brings the shift from author production to author promotion (2000a, 66).

Although modern literature has not concentrated on author's original intention, literary works usually published as physical books which are under the real industry. Thus, for the discoverability, author and publishers need to participate in author marketing, and 'authorial intention is "re-biographized", not as a cue to an interpretive textual practice but as genre branding, promotional supplement, and marketing strategy' (Gardiner 2000a, 274). In this process, a well-branded author becomes a celebrity and thereby, they obtain symbolic and social power.

Global #MeToo Movement and Its Impacts on the International Literary World

The movement of sexual assault disclosure has not only been seen in South Korea, but all around the world. Last year, the Nobel literature prize was scrapped for the first time in almost 70 years due to Jean-Claude Arnault, the husband of academy member Katarina Frostenson. He was accused by 18 women claiming to have been raped, sexually assaulted or harassed by him. As disagreements over how to handle the scandal increased, six academy members resigned. This scandal showed how serious the literary associations have taken this issue (Samuel 2018; Henley 2018).

This is not the only case; it turned out that poet and Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, who died in 2017, repeatedly pressed his students to have sex while he was a visiting professor at Harvard (Saramandi 2018). In addition, four women disclosed that the Pulitzer Prize winner, Junot Díaz, committed verbal and sexual misconduct (Morgan 2018).

In February 2018, there were two cases in which literary agencies decided not to represent assaulters even though they were bestselling authors. *The Maze Runner* author James Dashner has been dropped by his literary agent after a series of anonymous accusations of sexual harassment were made against him online. His former agent Michael Bourret says, 'I

couldn't in good conscience continue working with James, and I let him go' (Flood 2018c). *Thirteen Reasons Why* author Jay Asher, who was also named by anonymous commenters on the *School Library Journal* article as an alleged sexual harasser, has also been dropped by his literary agency, Andrea Brown. The agency announces that 'we have counselled Jay to take a step back from the industry and he's doing so. He is no longer working with the agency' (Flood 2018c).

It is interesting to look at the effect of these cases on authors' book sales. In the case of Dashner, the sales of three major titles, *The Maze Runner*, *The Scorch Trials* and *The Death Cure*, seems stable since 2016. However, when the first and second films of *The Maze Runner* series were released in 2014 and 2015, sales soared rapidly. In contrast, when the third episode *The Death Cure* was released on January 2018, there were no dramatic increase of book sales (Chart 1). The sales figures might be related to author marketing. The publisher of *The Maze Runner* series, Delacorte Press, stopped posting any news about the film, books and author on their social media since 31 January 2018. Dashner could not join any promotion event after the issue (Delacorte Press 2018). Similarly, Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* also peaked in April 2017, when the first season of the web television series was launched on Netflix, but the sales did not increase in 2018 in the month of the next season's release (Chart 2). Razorbill, the publisher of this title, also did not mention anything about the TV series and book at that time (Razorbill 2018). According to this data, it might be hard to have predicted that the sexual scandal would make an absolute decline in sales, however, at least it might be an obstacle for future opportunity.

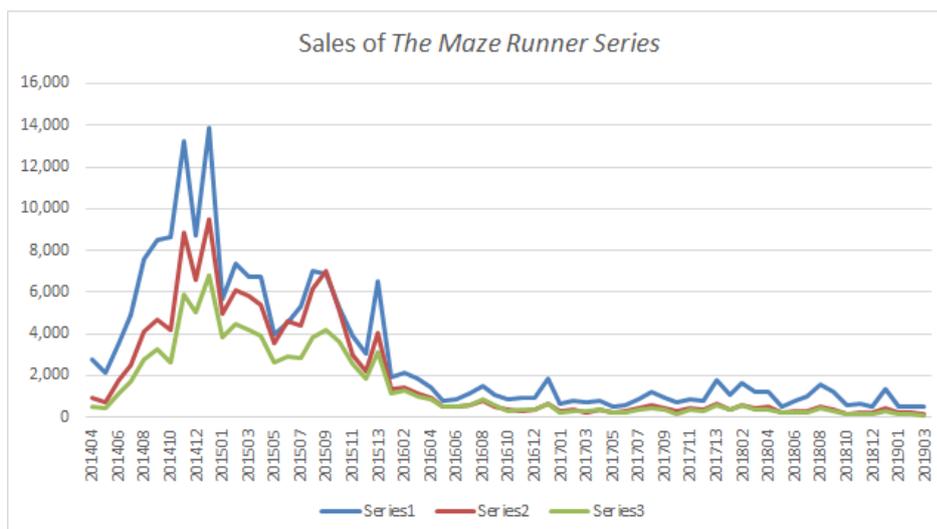


Chart 1 (Nielsen 2019)

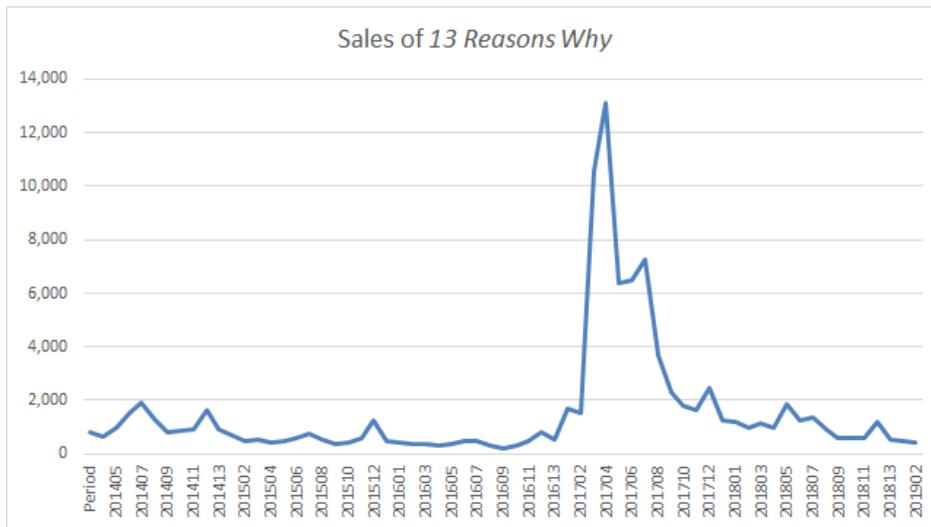


Chart 2 (Nielsen 2019)

In contrast to the position of these male authors, one of the impacts of the #MeToo movement is Feminism Wave. For instance, sales of Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* (2014) and Rebecca Solnit’s *Men Explain Things To Me* (2015) soared when the movement started rising and peaked in the Christmas season of 2017 (Chart 3). Furthermore, last year, *Feminists Don’t Wear Pink* was published and about 46,500 copies were sold in only three months in the UK (Nielsen 2019).

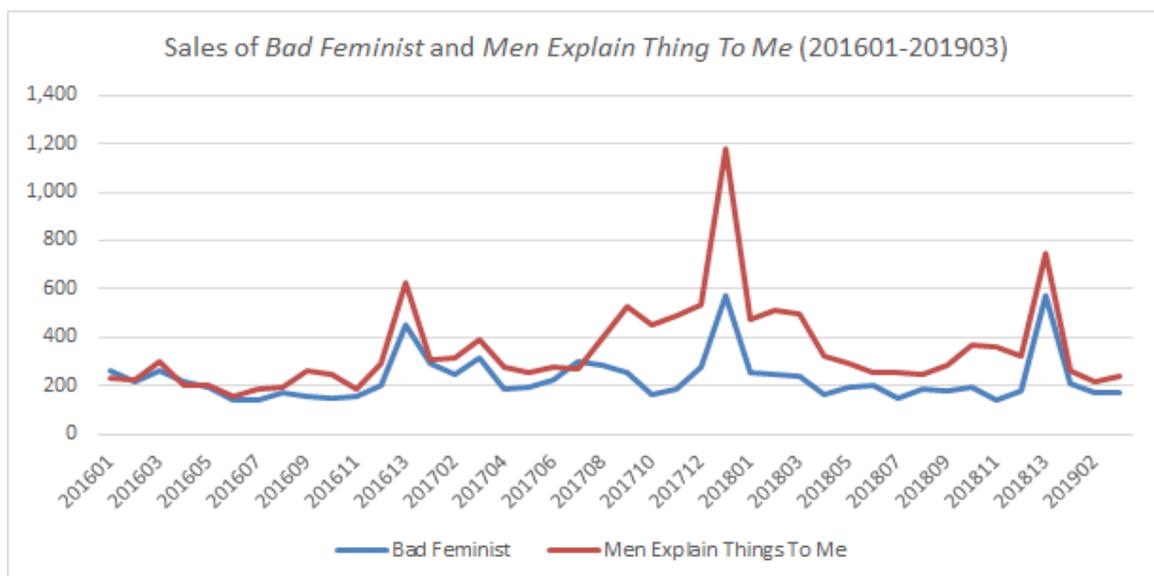


Chart 3 (Nielsen 2019)

The Milestones in the #문단_내_성폭력 Anti-Sexual Assault Movement in Korea

In South Korea, since 2015, a 'feminism reboot' phenomenon has started.¹ In May 2016, when a woman was killed in the centre of Seoul by a stranger without reason, the feminist sensibilities were quickly inflamed (S.C.S. 2016). The murderer confessed that hatred for women motivated him. People called it 'femicide'. Numerous demonstrations against misogyny arose and became a stepping-stone for the sexual harassment disclosure movement starting in autumn 2016.

October - December 2016: The explosion of serial disclosures

Over 10 writers were accused on social media in the first month. The accusers were students, aspiring writers and employees of publishing houses. From verbal and physical harassment to rape and drug use, shocking cases were posted every day. When someone disclosed sexual harassment by a writer, the perpetrator usually apologized in public and then disappeared. Culture critic Hye-jin Oh (2015) warns that 'the process of accuse - interrogation - hunt - apology is too fast'. She points out that an assaulter's 'apology' could not be a compensation for victims and only remained as a 'moral-alibi'.

One of the most serious cases was Yong-je Bae. He was a poet and led creative writing classes in Koyang High School of Art from 2012 to 2015. The 6 accusers, who were his students, disclosed his sexual assault on Twitter. According to the testimonies, Bae verbally harassed ('let's sex before you get a boyfriend') his victims as well as physical abuse. One victim was raped and a photograph was taken of her naked body without consent. To justify all the violence, Bae said 'the reason why you face a wall of literature is you could not break a rule. You need to deviate'. Bae threatened that he was a powerful person in the literary field and it was possible for him to bury anyone with just a word (Hwang 2016). In response to this, the alumni group '탈선 Deviation', which aimed to support victims, held a press interview to encourage public discourse and call for urgent systematic changes in November.

Several authors set up an organization 'Femi-writer' on 30 October. They campaigned for 'A Pledge to Prevent Sexual Assault and Power Abuse in the Literary Publishing World' and 671 writers joined this campaign in a month (Cho 2016). In November, the Writers Association in Korea (WAK) organized a disciplinary committee and announced that seven assaulters would be struck off the member list in private to avoid defamation. However, due to the

¹ 'Feminism reboot' means the recent surge of interest in feminism. In February 2015, a pop columnist published an article 'Brainless Feminism Is More Dangerous than IS', and people participated in the #lamafeminist movement on social media. This was a starting point of feminism reboot in Korea (Kim 2015).

disagreements in the committee, before WAK decided on any disciplinary action, all assaulters left WAK voluntarily (M. Lee 2018).

2017: Lawsuits and endless defamation backlashes

After the disclosures on social media, several cases transited into court cases. Poet Yo-il Kim, who committed rape and sexual harassment, was sentenced to 4 years in jail and 1 year probation in February (K. Lee 2017). Yong-je Bae was also sentenced to eight years in prison in September (Hong 2017).

On the other hand, at the conference of <#Sexual_Assault_in_Litcircle, Literature and Women> on 17 February, it came out that some writers, who had already admitted their sexual assault in public, sued (or threatened to sue) almost 50 accuser for defamation.² Yo-il Kim and Yong-je Bae sued the accusers, but the court acquitted them due to the public interest. However, accusers who were adult and were conscious at that time of the crime, had difficulty in proving the sexual assault in the legal system. Korean criminal law is conservative and it acknowledged solely the violence and power abuse (S. Lee 2017).

2018: A nuclear bomb of #Metoo, Un Ko

In December 2017, after #Metoo spread globally, poet Youngmi Choi published her poem '괴물 Monster' which describes the sexual harassment and abuse by the old poet Un Ko. This poem with six stanzas (twenty-seven lines) is about Ko's old 'bad habit': 'Don't sit next to En / The poet 'K' advised me, a literary novice / He touches young women whenever he sees one [...] Me too / The silk blouse borrowed from my sister got ruffled' (emphasis added; Choi 2017).³ Via a broadcast news, she mentioned she had experienced countless sexual harassments by numerous writers including poet 'K'. Choi insisted that she had been disadvantaged due to resistance against inappropriate sexual demands. This was a huge bomb in the literary society in Korea. Un Ko is one of the most famous poets, who is often named as a frontrunner for the Nobel prize in Literature. Almost all government support for him has stopped. He had to leave from his residence which was provided from the government, and a library in his name was shuttered. His poems were removed from textbooks (Anh 2018). Ko sued journalists and Choi as defamation, but finally lost (Ko 2019).

² In South Korea, even if the disclosure is true, defamation can be acknowledged when defendant does not show enough contributions for public interest. 'If the court finds defamatory intent using "facts," that is, truthful information, a person can still face as many as three years in prison or a fine up to 20 million won' (Human Rights Watch 2014).

³ When Choi published this poem, she wrote his name as alphabet 'En'. However, in his translated poetry book, his name was attributed as 'Un Ko' in the UK. In this journal, the name follows the British version.

A key feature of the sexual assault disclosure movement from 2016 is the hashtag (#). The main functions of hashtag is 'archiving' and 'association'. The individual stories were accumulated and built this powerful movement. When people clicked the hashtag, they could see thousands of posts. This made people recognize the 'rape culture' in Korea and encourage other to join this movement to change the violent environment. In particular, the Femi-writer group focused on 'memory' which can prevent to dissipate this campaign. They collected the testimonies of victims and a solidarity declaration from authors for the anthology, *참고문헌없음* *Nothing for bibliography* which was published by crowdfunding. On 20 February 2017, when their project was launched, they achieved the goal for only 8 hours. People funded about £41,500 that was more than 3 times their goal (Femiwiki 2019).

Active Consumers: Boycott and 'Meaning-out'

Since the disclosure movement, numerous people have declared they would support victims on social media. They also encouraged sending complaint calls and messages to publishers to stop printing assaulters' titles. ⁴

Consumers not only boycotted the problematic books, but also increased their attention on feminist books as well. This consuming pattern is called 'Meaning-out' which means consumers express themselves by buying meaningful products (Nam et al. 2018). According to Seul-gi Lee's journal article (2018), with the continuing focus on #Metoo, feminist book sales increased. Especially, when prosecutor Ji-hyun Seo disclosed the sexual abuse culture in the legal field on broadcast news, the sales soared 138.9% (from on 1 February to 12 March 2018). When it came out that politician Hee-jung Ahn committed sex abuse on his aid, the sales rose 197.4% for a week in March. The main audiences were women, specifically in their 20s (43.15%) and 30s (14.81%). Thus, general sales of feminist books have increased rapidly since 2016 (Chart 4 and 5).

The most prominent example of successful feminism fiction is Nam-joo Cho's *82년생 김지영* Kim Ji-young, Born 1982, published in 2016. This was the first million-selling fiction title since 2009. The name of the protagonist, Ji-young Kim, became an icon for Korean

⁴ On Twitter, there are several examples: 'Victims are the last audience of Korean literature. If they leave, Korean literature will become extinct' (<https://twitter.com/wdfrog/status/789365443454570496>); 'I boycott all the A's works, and these must not be sold due to the possibility of secondary violence. A abused the power of his status and works' (<https://twitter.com/thefoxsayhoooi/status/78912637753858867>); 'I made a phone call to B. They said they would announce their opinion soon' (<https://twitter.com/feminist34686/status/789341340223967232>); [Anonymity of A (an author) and B (a publisher) added].

women. A progressive politician gave this book to the president as a gift and said ‘please embrace Ji-young Kim’. When an idol singer, Irene, posted the picture of this book on her social media account, some male fans criticized her aggressively. As these happened, sales were commonly boosted.

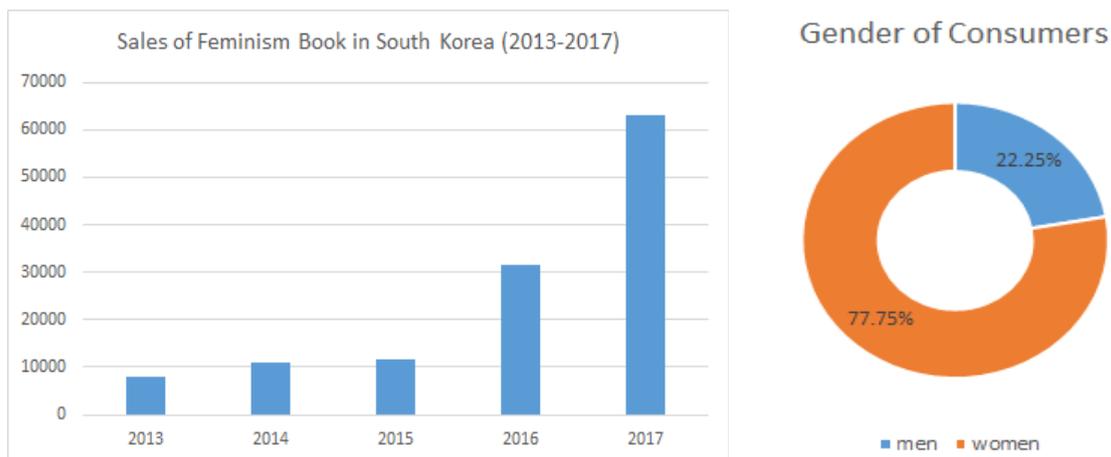


Chart 4 and 5 (Nam et al. 2018)

Effects on the Attitude of Publishers

In 2016, after the disclosure movement, several traditional literary publishers, which worked with assaulters and suspects, expressed regret about the sexual abuse cases. To show their corporate responsibility, each publishing house suggested gender agendas in their literary magazines. Moonji Publishing Company also published victims' essays in the quarterly *문학과사회 Literature and Society*. Changbi Publishers states in the preface of *창작과비평 Quarterly Changbi*, 'as literates and living witnesses, we need to prove ourselves'. *문예중앙 Munyejoongang* highlighted misogyny as their feature story as well.

These were not the only initiatives. Several publishers stopped printing and replaced controversial works. The fastest decision was made by Minumsa publishing group. When an illustrator, who drew a front cover illustration for the magazine *Littor*, was accused of conspiring rape, Minumsa withdrew the covers and re-printed all copies (Y. Kim 2016). A poetry book written by Yo-il Kim has also been out of print by Minumsa. Three of Yong-je Bae's poetry books, published by Moonji and Minumsa, also have not been available in the market. However, the censorship issue arose at the same time. In symposium 'What Are We Doing Next?' (2016), critic Ji-hee Kang has concerns of whether we can 'restrict the artistic works of assaulters?' As an individual reader, she or he has a right to boycott their works,

but Kang disagrees with publishers cutting off their works. She stresses ‘we cannot break the ‘artistic liberty’ (2016, 96). In addition, Hye-jin Oh (2017) warns that as publishers discard the works, they take advantage of moral excuses and neglect the system which contributed to this situation. She points out that the ‘removal for punishment’ can be overused as well. This could erase the result of someone’s hard work (255). In the tension between the controversy of censorship and the boycott movement, publishers chose only convicted authors to make out of print, or stopped distributing the books of authors who already agreed with a retail holding.

Moreover, publishers start changing the author contract form. According to a 2016 survey conducted by the Publishing Labor-Union of Seoul and Gyeonggi Province, 44.6% of female workers have experienced sexual harassment by authors and translators (Hah 2016). Therefore, it seemed necessary for publishers to protect their employees. As a result, each publisher aligned their company regulations, and Moonji and Changbi announced they changed the contract form (Kwon 2017).

Finally, the discourse about sexual violence and feminism wave has affected acquisition and marketing trends. First of all, literary publishers have shed new light on female authors from previous ages. A wide range of early modern female writers’ works has been published from biography fiction, *나혜석 글 쓰는 여자의 탄생 Nah Hyeseok, Birth of Female Writer* (image 1: 2018) to their anthologies, *신여성 Modern Girl* (image 2: 2019), *경희, 순애 그리고 탄실이 Kyunghye, Sunae and Tansiry* (image 3: 2018). Publishers have focused on ‘Femvertising’ which emphasises pro-female talent for advertising a product (Skey 2015). The biggest bookshop in Korea, Kyobo Book Centre (image 4), presented an event of Korean female writers in 2018. Munhakdongne (image 5) promoted a special display of women writers in their foreign literature classic series on four main online bookshops.



Image 1, 2 and 3 (Naver 2019)



Image 4 and 5 (Kyobo 2019)

Conclusion

This anti-sexual assault movement, #MeToo, changed the answers of 3 questions:

Firstly, what does reading consist of? Think about the common phrase: ‘I am a huge fan of writer X’. Although the authority of an author has been dismissed, the author still works as a hallmark. Reading is not dominated by an author’s intention anymore but affected by the brand of the author. Eventually, the combination of audience reaction determines the quality and value of literature and influence on actual sales. Due to the power of reading, literary publishers made an attempt to build an ideal image of author to make readers be attracted. Literary works, published as a physical book in the market, are the combination of promotion as well as content.

The second question: are the literary works written by problematic authors innocent? Korean critic Hyun Kim says ‘usefulness suppress people. Literature do not oppress people and show why the suppression works negatively. That is the reason why useless literature can be usefulness’ (H. Kim 1977). However, the Korean sexual assault disclosure movement has shown how authors obtained symbolic power to work as a well-branded product. Obviously, some of them abused their power sexually and suppressed people who are under them by their ‘useful’ products. If their literary works were used as a weapon to harm someone, people would have to think about how they dismiss the corrupted power.

Finally, who can change this ugly situation into a positive one? We need to focus on the reason why the attitude of publishers has changed. The key is also the reader. Publishing is just a business industry which is driven by the consumer. The reader is a fundamental condition of their existence. More 'Meaning-out' makes more difference. Because of these reasons, we still have a chance to fix the uneven playground in the literary world.

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