

The Force of Disquiet in Useless Things

By Heekyung Eun

From time to time, some readers will complain to me, “Your novels make me uncomfortable. You make me confront pain and scars that I didn’t really want to know about. Reality is tough as it is, why do you have to portray such a world in your novels too? Now I have all these doubts about the world that surrounds me.” To be honest, I like such readers.

These are people that fought to preserve their lives using the conservative ways that they know. They haven’t realized that they themselves lead scarred existences. This is because of all of the mass media and self-help books that pour out, offering irresponsible, excessively optimistic comfort, causing them to continue to misjudge the world, and familiarizing them with irrational, incorrect answers. But what if they say that they identify with the protagonists of a novel and become uncomfortable through that identification? I describe that discomfort as “the pain of life.” Literature allows others to understand suffering through that pain. And that is when your own healing begins.

Other readers tell me this: “I really like your novels. But I never want to show them to people I love.” Among the people who say such things are people in love, people who have just made a new beginning, and middle-class housewives. Their own anxiety and fear help them relate to the disturbing elements in my novels. But they don’t want their loved ones to feel that disturbance. These people are enlightened enough to disagree with personal or social ideologies that marginalize them, but they do not have the courage to escape that system; they are just ordinary people. They cover their scars and endure their double lives. I know these people very well. Because I was one of them.

I grew up as an exemplary student in a middle-class family; my parents had incredibly high expectations for me. I feel as if I’ve been doing homework for my entire life and that the stress has never stopped. I graduated from college, got married, had a child, saved up, took out a loan, bought a house and a car. It is the standard course required of a model Korean citizen. But my heart and mind were in discord with such a pro-social ideology, and that plagued me to no end.

Other readers ask me, “Why did you become a writer so late?” Ever since I was young, I wrote. I won many awards, and everyone thought I would become a writer. I majored in Korean Literature in college and in graduate school. For a long time I had one dream and that was to become a writer. But why couldn’t I become a writer until my mid-30s? Why? It’s because I had nothing to say. I had no creative thought that I could call my own. I was someone who stayed in the frame given to me and tried to get the right answers to the questions that were being asked of me. But I didn’t have any questions of my own. There is no way that a person like that could have a unique perspective of the world. But of course, literature is an act of creation and without a creative perspective, it cannot stand on its own. Writing skill, the study of literature, a constant dream, and even some type of pain does not make us into writers. It was through doubt that I realized people were the source of my wounds and only then did questions arise inside of me. I made those questions into stories and changed from a 35-year-old housewife into a novelist. I declared, “I am going to cast off this system that bred me and live, knowing who I am.” My novel started from the strength I gained from disquiet.

Through my novels, I exposed my double life to my readers and confessed in a cowardly way. I

WRITING AS RECOVERY

did so in sentences like this, “I split myself into two. One is ‘the I that is seen’ and the other is ‘the I that sees.’ I can step outside of my body and act through the ‘I that is seen,’ and I watch that from inside my body through ‘the I that sees.’ Because it is the ‘I that is seen’ that is forced and humiliated, ‘the I that sees’ is hurt less as a result.” I have also suggested to my readers that they become familiar with disillusionment. I told them that, instead of avoiding dirty things and what they hate the most, they should indulge them. I advised them to ask whether taboos are in place because the ruling class benefits from them. I warned them that we could be indifferently controlled inside the framework of a wrong ideology that we thought was safe. All the while, unbeknownst to ourselves, we have become part of the constituency that upholds that ideology.

Critics have called me a writer with a cynical smile who spews venom. But I also heard from my readers, “When I was in pain, tender and beautiful words of consolation sounded like meaningless lies and made me sadder and angrier. But the poison in your novels was like a vaccine. It hurt a little but I feel as if it made me stronger.” That’s when I became certain. The songs that I sing are not tender love songs but cold and depressing confessions. Sometimes, however, cold reality can captivate a lover far more than fantasy. And recovery can begin from questions and doubt.

Some people say that literature is useless. It’s most likely because they mean that one cannot make a living off of it. In some sense, that’s true. From the perspective of the system, literature has no productive value and no utility. That’s the way it should be. That is because literature does not serve the system nor does it comply with it. Literature fights all conservatism. Literature does not make money. It creates something new. I like a writer who once said, “Literature that is not new is unethical.” The force of disquiet renews the world and that is how people get closer to happiness. The way I see it, literature must break the patterns that oppress people and help find the individual’s uniqueness.

Unfortunately, I feel as if I was born too late and others have already said everything that I think. “Through literary works, you make an existence that has cast off what you previously understood. That is the beginning of a new understanding. That understanding might have protected you up until now, but this is the opportunity to exceed the limits that have closed you off. That is the recovery of life.” This is something that Deleuze said. How wonderfully disquieting is that?

The Iowa City Book Festival (www.iowacitybookfestival.org) and the International Writing Program (www.iwp.uiowa.edu). October 2014