

**HAE Yisoo**

## **Space and Creativity**

Ancient Greek philosophers believed that the height of the ceiling determined the capacity of the human consciousness. The columns of their temples and academies were particularly grandiose and gracious. The gambrel roof sustained by such columns created more space to be filled with the statues of gods. The height of the columns was not only the geometric height of their architectural structure but the height of their philosophical pursuit and of what Plato called 'idea.' The Greeks had a keen sense of space and its effect on human consciousness.

The activation of human inspiration requires certain spatial limitations. Unlimited imagination and creativity ironically depend on limited space. In other words, space invites and activates inspiration. A new space brings new inspiration, and exceptional inspiration often needs unusual space.

Strange spaces talk to me. When I was traveling in Nepal in January 2007, I didn't expect to write a piece related to the trip. Then, when I saw the ice-capped mountains of the Himalayas, the Lukla Airport paralyzed by heavy snow, and the plains of Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace, unexpected stories ran into my mind. It was as if I had been embraced by a woman who'd waited for me at her doorstep for a long while. She came running to me as soon as she saw me from afar. Upon returning to Korea, I pinned three pictures of those three places to my wall and wrote my Nepal Trilogy without difficulty.

In a new environment, the "boiling point" for my writing—or the threshold for creativity—is significantly lower than when I am in my day to day routine. Strange spaces offer me stories, without any serious effort on my part. Even when they do not offer stories, experiences such as carsickness, jetlag, indigestion, insomnia, and optical illusions on the road, bring me unexpected prose. Writers from Goethe to Haruki Murakami have gained inspiration and strengthened their literary talent through travel, and I am not different from them.

Martin Heidegger said that "anxiety" is instrumental in a human's journey to find himself and his unique capacity. In my works, the protagonist's overseas travel is often an attempt to unveil the hidden self and its capacity through a confrontation with his own anxiety. Africa in Hemingway's *The Snow of Kilimanjaro* serves as a literary apparatus to accentuate the protagonist's pursuit of self. Likewise, unusual spaces in my stories provide a character a stage that reflects the interior and desire of *Der Einzelne* or single person.

Space can also create characters as well as offer stories. The Swiss writer, Henry-Frederic Amiel said "A landscape is a state of mind," and this captures the relationship between an environment and an individual therein. Space is more than a backdrop of fiction; it is a symbolic apparatus that exposes the inner side of a character. A writer cares about the environment in which the protagonist exists because the convergence of the character and the environment generates explosive vitality.

This past August I published a short story called "Eand va Tend," in the literary magazine *Contemporary Literature*. Meaning 'here and there' in Mongolian, it is set in the Gobi desert of Mongolia. A 37-year-old single man PhD candidate goes on a trip to Mongolia funded by Korea's scholarly institute. There he falls in love with a woman in his group. The Gobi is a vast land and a desert with no boundaries. The words, here and there, lose their meanings because, in the Mongolian desert, it is the same everywhere. You drive eight hours to the horizon, and you realize that you are still in the same place; the horizon is still eight hours away. In this landscape, the protagonist and the woman share cigarettes, drink vodka by an

animal skeleton, and pee together on the ground—through these events, they deeply interact with each other.

When they return to Seoul, Korea, the reality of the protagonist is radically different. Though he still misses the woman and is thrilled to see her again at a party, he cannot even come close to her. She is the wife of a highly successful man, and they live in the “Tower Palace,” the iconic high-rise apartment of the upper class. These facts become barriers he cannot overcome. Standing only seven steps away from her at the party, he feels as if the distance between them is wider than the distance of the Gobi. The man and the woman, who felt connected to each other in the Gobi, become separated, here and there, in Seoul, because of the difference in their socio-economic status. The spatial transition in this story is the determinant to establish the characters’ perception of reality.

To sum up, the creative relationship with a landscape is one of things writers must strive for in their works. Dull stories come from ill-constructed relationships with their landscapes. When you forge a creative bond with a space, there’s no room for dullness; at least no room for boredom. I want to emphasize the importance of the relationship that you create with a space, not the space itself. Therefore, we do not need to become travelers or explorers to find meaningful places. Before searching for an unknown landscape, what we need to find first is, perhaps, the unique creative eyes within ourselves.