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[00:00:00] **Yoon Sun Lee:** I remember looking at your aunt one day when she and I were dressing. I had not noticed before that she had such a protruding melon of a stomach, but I did not think she's pregnant until she began to look like other pregnant women, her shirt pulling and the white tops of her black pants showing .She could not have been pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years.

[00:00:36] **Jim Phelan:** This is Jim Phelan, director of Project Narrative at the Ohio State University, and I'd like to welcome you to the Project Narrative Podcast. In each episode, a narrative theorist selects a short narrative to read and discuss with me or another host. Today I'll be talking with Yoon Sun Lee who has selected the opening narrative from Maxine Hahn Kingston's, the Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts.

[00:01:02] **Jim Phelan:** For the purposes of this podcast, we'll use its first line as its title. You must not tell anyone. This narrative is complete in itself, even as it serves as the beginning of Kingston's book and of its first chapter, which is entitled No Name Woman. Yoon Sun Lee is the Anne Pierce Rogers professor in American literature and chair of the English Department at Wellesley College.

[00:01:27] **Jim Phelan:** Yoon is also the first Vice President of the International Society for study of Narrative, Yoon has offered important research contributions to multiple fields, British romanticism, Asian-American Literature. Theory of the Novel and Narrative Theory is the author of three books, nationalism and Irony in 2004, which established her as an important voice in conversations about romanticism.

[00:01:53] **Jim Phelan:** Modern minority, Asian American literature and everyday life 2013, which makes a case for the everyday as a significant aspect of modernity, especially within Asian American culture. And her third book, natural Laws of Plot, how Things Happen in Realist Novels to 2022. A study that connects the history of the novel and the history of science.

[00:02:18] **Jim Phelan:** You argues that plot in the realist novel is given shape. By the characteristics of the physical world, and that in turn plot functions to enable the realist novel to do its own inquiries into that world. Yoon, is there anything in particular you, you'd like our listeners to pay attention to? As you read Kingston's, you must not tell anyone.

[00:02:42] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Thanks for inviting me on this podcast, Jim. And thank you for that very kind introduction. It's a pleasure to share this opening story of Kingston's narrative, which was so essential to the development of Asian American identity and Asian American studies. Our book, this book, however, was sometimes read as if it were conveying facts about Chinese culture.

[00:03:06] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The one thing that I really want listeners to keep in mind is that in fact this is not a story about China or about Chinese customs. This is a story about Asian American identity at a certain period of American history in the late sixties, early seventies. So it marked in many ways the broader kind of public emergence of this Asian-American movement, which was about asserting the independence of Asian-Americans as what was then called a cultural nation. So in other words, we are not Asians; we are Asian-Americans. So these folks were largely second, third, fifth, sixth generation, American born Asian. So Kingston herself was born in America.

[00:03:52] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The point that she wanted to make was, we have never been to China. We don't have firsthand knowledge about it. We can only guess at what it's like over there. It's far away. We only have our parents unreliable stories and diaspora, customs to go on. So overheard conversations. Bits of stories, things their parents would say that were puzzling or alarming.

[00:04:18] **Yoon Sun Lee:** This is all we have as Asian Americans. That's the point that that Kingston wants to make, and this book, woman Warrior wants to share with the reader what it was like to grow up in that way. Mm-hmm. This piece, the narrator is telling us a story that her mother told her. The narrator's own voice only appears in this, in three words that I'm gonna read, which is, which are my mother said,

[00:04:44] **Jim Phelan:** right.

[00:04:45] **Yoon Sun Lee:** All the other words I'm gonna read are the mother's words, so I'm gonna try to read this in the mother's voice.

[00:04:50] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, terrific. That, that's a great intro. So now here's Yoon Sun Lee reading Maxine Hong Kingston's opening to the woman warrior, which we're calling you must not tell anyone.

[00:05:03] **Yoon Sun Lee:** You must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I am about to tell you in China, your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born. In 1924, just a few days after our village celebrated 17 hurry up weddings to make sure that every young man who went out on the road would responsibly come home. Your father and his brothers, and your grandfather and his brothers, and your aunt's new husband, sailed for America, the gold Mountain. It was your grandfather's last trip. Those lucky enough to get contracts, waved goodbye from the decks. They fed and guarded the stowaways and helped them off in Cuba, New York, Bali, Hawaii.

[00:05:58] **Yoon Sun Lee:** We'll meet in California next year, they said. All of them sent money home. I remember looking at your aunt one day when she and I were dressing. I had not noticed before that she had such a protruding melon of a stomach, but I did not think she's pregnant until she began to look like other pregnant women, her shirt pulling and the white tops of her black pants showing .She could not have been pregnant, you see, because her husband had been gone for years. No one said anything. We did not discuss it in early summer. She was ready to have the child long after the time when it could have been possible. The village had also been counting .On the night the baby was to be born, the villagers raided our house. Some were crying. Like a great saw teeth strung with lights, files of people walked zigzag across our land, tearing the rice. Their lanterns doubled in the disturbed black water, which drained away through the broken buns. As the villagers closed in, we could see that some of them, probably men and women we knew well, wore white masks.

[00:07:17] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The people with long hair hung it over their faces. Women with short hair made it stand up on end. Some had tied white bands around their foreheads, arms, and legs. At first, they threw mud and rocks at the house. Then they threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock. We could hear the animals scream their deaths, the roosters, the pigs, a last great roar from the ox. Familiar wild heads flared in our night windows. The villagers encircled us. Some of the faces stopped to peer at us, their eyes rushing like search lights. The hands flattened against the panes, framed heads and left red prints. The villagers broke in the front and the back doors at the same time, even though we had not locked the doors against them. Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. They smeared blood on the doors and walls. One woman swung a chicken whose throat she had slit spattering blood in red arcs about her. We stood together in the middle of our house, in the family hall with the pictures and tables of the ancestors around us and looked straight ahead.

[00:08:35] **Yoon Sun Lee:** At that time, the house had only two wings. When the men came back, we would build two more to enclose our courtyard, and a third one to begin a second courtyard. The villagers pushed through both wings, even your grandparents' rooms, to find your aunts, which was also mine until the man returned from this room, a new wing for one of the younger families would grow.

[00:09:01] **Yoon Sun Lee:** They ripped up her clothes and shoes and broke her combs, grinding them under foot. They tore her work from the loom. They scattered the cooking fire and rolled the new weaving in it. We could hear them in the kitchen, breaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist- high earthenware jugs, duck eggs, pickled fruits, vegetables, burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. The old woman from the next field swept a broom through the air and loosed the spirits of the broom over our heads. Pig, ghost, pig. They sobbed and scolded while they ruined our house. When they left, they took sugar and oranges to bless themselves. They cut pieces from the dead animals. Some of them took bowls that were not broken and clothes that were not torn.

[00:09:55] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Afterward, we swept up the rice and sewed it back up into sacks, but the smells from the spilled preserves lasted. Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well. Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her.

[00:10:17] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful.

[00:10:33] **Jim Phelan:** Okay, great. Thank you. So that's a very rich text, for what it makes explicit for what it leaves implicit and also for what it leaves open-ended and even unknown.

[00:10:44] **Jim Phelan:** But before we dive into those aspects of the story, maybe it would be helpful if you filled our listeners in about the rest of this chapter, at least you know, which is, has the title No Name Woman.

[00:10:55] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Right. So the story that I read is only nine short paragraphs long, and it's all given within quotation marks, since it's the mother's voice directly quoted.

[00:11:04] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So after this, the daughter then picks up the mic. And she tells us directly the reader, she says, my mother would tell us stories like this. But she tells us that she herself, the daughter, could never ask for more details and she couldn't even refer to this aunt, this relative. The mother would only tell her the quote, necessary bits.

[00:11:24] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So the daughter who is now narrating decides to make up the rest to fill in all the blank spaces with more than one version of what could have happened. And she tries to connect with his aunt and to claim her as an ancestor as a kind of protofeminist role model through this act of kind of sympathetic narration, imaginative narration.

[00:11:49] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Mostly she tries to imagine how the aunt became pregnant, which is very noticeably not mentioned in the mother's story that I just read. So the daughter first imagines that the aunt was raped by someone from the village, but she doesn't like that version. And she then imagines that the aunt took a secret lover and kept his name to herself even, you know, to the very end. But then the daughter starts to wonder whether that could have been possible, which leads her to confront how little she knows about the Chinese, as she calls them, about Chinese culture, about even her own family's history. and this ignorance kind of fills her with fear, which is the dominant emotion in this book.

[00:12:32] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So she imagines and she narrates in a very detailed way, how the aunt must have felt to give birth in the pigsty alone. And how the aunt decides to take the baby along with her to the well. And then the daughter ends by wondering if she's done the right thing and telling the story. You know, on the one hand, by maintaining silence about it up until now, she's participated in the punishment of this aunt the punishment of erasing, of denying her life. But by telling it revealing it, she wonders if she's done something even worse. And if the aunt's ghost is going to be angry with her. And she wonders if she's gonna be punished somehow for having told and having written down this story.

[00:13:15] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So the rest of the woman warrior is a series of similar chapters that each one revolves around the transmission of stories from the mother to the daughter.

[00:13:24] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. That's great. That fills it out nicely. All right, well, why don't we go back then to the, nine paragraphs that you've read and start with that first sentence.

[00:13:32] **Jim Phelan:** Right. So you must not tell anyone, my mother said, and you, you know, highlight the fact that, my mother said is the only phrase that we get in the narrator's own voice. The rest is, you know, the quoted dialogue. So you must not tell anyone, my mother said, what I'm about to tell you. So that gives us a sense, I'm gonna confide a secret in you, right?

[00:13:55] **Jim Phelan:** And then, but I'm also gonna but bind you to keeping the secret. So, what do you make of this narrative situation? What does it start for us as we're, following along.

[00:14:06] **Yoon Sun Lee:** First of all, it really focuses your attention instantly on the narrative that's going to follow, that it kind of, it already frames it in a really strong, really powerful frame as a secret as this kind of self-contained narrative.

[00:14:23] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The power relationship between the narrator, the narrate, and then the narrative itself is a really interesting one because by sharing this secret, this story with her, the mother does not actually bring the daughter into a kind of privileged inner circle.

[00:14:42] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. mm-hmm.

[00:14:43] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Know, and that somehow the mother becomes even more powerful for telling, for sharing this secret story. And the daughter feels somehow less powerful because she has been let in on this secret, on this narrative, which is not the way that you think it would work, right? And then.

[00:15:02] **Jim Phelan:** Right. You think about, okay, I'm gonna share a confidence with you. Now the two of us are gonna be closer because we have this in common, but this is the other, it's like, as you say, all right, I'm, first of all, you know I'm giving you the conditions, right. You must not tell anyone. And then that's right. And we'll talk about the way it ends, too. But it's also like this, you know, kind of now that I've told you this is what I want the takeaway to be, right?

[00:15:29] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. Yeah. And it does kind of make you wonder why more stories don't begin with this kind of stipulation. Like either you may share the story or you may not share the story, but not that many do you know?

[00:15:42] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:15:42] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Which, but it also highlights the position of the narratee and, you know, the, the subtitle of this book could very well be the Memoirs of a narratee because the daughter is always has, you know, grows up on the receiving end of the mother's stories and the mother's stories, frankly feel to the daughter like ,like weapons, you know, that she is at the, they've got a kind of business end as it were. And she is that at that end of it. But then when she decides to take up the role of narrator herself and tells her own versions of what happened to the aunt and what the aunt was like it doesn't seem to empower her even though she's trying very hard to kind of raise herself to that, that status of the narrator, and that it just makes her more confused and more uncertain and she keeps kind of interrupting herself and questioning herself and wondering, is my version of it plausible? Is it culturally plausible? Historically plausible. So as she's trying to tell the story herself, she just ends up with more questions. And then with a kind of final spasm of fear actually at the very, very end of Nona woman.

[00:16:56] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Yeah, yeah. But then maybe we could talk a little bit about the paradox, right. Of, the recording of you must not tell anyone in a book in which is then she's telling, you know, as author, she's telling this story. Right. So she's breaking the injunction. So you think about the temporality of the time of the telling. Right? And that's what we're getting.

[00:17:21] **Jim Phelan:** Okay. Mother to daughter. At a certain point in the daughter's life, right? And now we have author to audience about the mother daughter thing, right? And then of course, the, the author and the daughter, there's a continuity of identity between them. So, you know, do you wanna read certain kind of significance to Kingston as author, you know, breaking the injunction about not telling anyone.

[00:17:52] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. Well, yeah, I, I think that's part of the struggle, the larger story of the woman warrior. Mm-hmm. Which is trying to, to figure out some way to make that transition from being the one who receives the story to the one who tells this story.

[00:18:11] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:18:12] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And it's particularly, I mean, in this case, it's almost as though that injunction not to tell the story, not to share it with anyone kind of gives her in a, in a paradoxical way, it gives her the impetus to actually break it.

[00:18:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:18:28] **Yoon Sun Lee:** You know, so, and, and so its sort of like a launch pad for the entire entire book, but the, but it's an incredibly. Vivid way to begin this book, not with her own voice as a narrator, but with, uh, yeah, the mother as this very problematic I guess monopolizing narrator, who would like to be the only narrator, you know, and, and she doesn't want anyone else. Mm-hmm. To tell the story or to tell any story. She's gonna be the one who tells the story and the daughter's gonna be the one who listens, I guess.

[00:19:04] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Great, great. Yeah, yeah. Well, lemme, let's shift then. I think we'll come back to some of the aspects of the narrative situation, but let's shift to the mother as Teller and her perspective and the kind of story that it is for her, right? So what are some of the things that stand out as when we try to think about, all right, well, what is the story that the mother is telling right?

[00:19:30] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. I mean, it is so, bizarre because it completely leaves out the question that would be on, the mind of any listener of any narrative, which is how did the aunt become pregnant? Yeah. But that it, it's the way, the cause and effect in the mother's story that I read, instead of sex causing pregnancy, it is here, it's out of wedlock pregnancy causes social punishment and ostracism. Mm-hmm. and when we were talking about it earlier, we used this, they came up with this term, auto pregnancy, you know, that, she sort of comes up somehow the aunt manages to get pregnant by herself. But yeah, that, that I think's really the most the most striking thing about the mothers, well, there are a lot of striking things about it, but the fact that the story is the aunt becomes pregnant and therefore the villagers come and punish the family.

[00:20:21] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Right. And that, that, yeah, like from her perspective, that's what counts. And then, and then she builds on that. Right? And then here we can talk about the last paragraph, right? All right. So I, I'm telling you this, you know, here's the cause and effect, the auto pregnancy, the punishment, and then all, you know, the last paragraph , she basically switches from narrating events to, you know, injunction more, right? Don't let your father know I told you right. Right. Now that you've started to menstruate what happened to her, could happen to you. Yes. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten. The villagers are watchful. Yes. Right.

[00:21:08] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Right. And, and that, that phrase, what happened to her is the really extraordinary thing because it's a kind of, it's a phrase that just points back at the entire story that's just been told. Right. But it doesn't it's, it's so unclear what it's referring to exactly, like. What happened to her? Does that mean, I suppose, getting pregnant, but it also seems to involve the villagers coming and and punishing the entire family and destroying the family house. And I mean that sentence is, you know, kind of the moral of the story as it were, the thing that seems to tie that story into the present moment when she's telling it.

[00:21:48] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Mm-hmm. And that is a connection that, you know, that in a sense is what the narrator, the, daughter is going to try to spend the rest of the book trying to figure out. You know, why I, I know that is not, that, it's not literally possible because we are not, you know, in the early 20th century in China. Yeah. But what sense do these stories. How does it. How is it that it can still feel like it's true, you know, that, that there is a real threat behind those words.

[00:22:20] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And then, then also the detail that we get about, a little bit more about the narrative situation or the occasion of the narration and the now that you have started to menstruate, right. So the mother has waited until this moment in the daughter's life to tell this story and to tell it in this way. Right? Yes. And, and that then opens up, you know, other questions about the mother-daughter relationship and about what is it, you know, if, again, if we think about the mother, why, why tell it to the daughter now and then we can think about the daughter. What does it mean to get this story at this point in your life? Huh?

[00:23:02] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yes, exactly. And that, that it's clearly this story or hearing this story was a traumatic event in the daughter's life. It was a major event. But all of the, the circumstances around the telling of this story are very, I mean, they're just completely removed and we don't know, you know when exactly, and where was this story told and what prompted it? What tone of voice did she use? Did she tell it as a bedtime story. Mm-hmm. You know, sitting next to her daughter did she tell her from across the room, did she tell her first thing in the morning? I mean, because in other, in other chapters of this book the circumstances of the storytelling are often given in a lot of detail, uhhuh in a later chapter, the daughter Kingston says sometimes, you know, when in on really hot days when we were in the laundry and we were ironing, my mother would tell us ghost stories mm-hmm. Um, to, you know, to send chills down our spine, for example, so that the kind of, the circumstances of the telling are very important.

[00:24:09] **Yoon Sun Lee:** But in this case, it's very striking that they're not told at all, and that there's only the reference to, you know, that now that you have started to menstruate is the only thing that kind of pins it down to a, a certain kind of situation. And that, of course also has the effect of making it clear that this is a story about and for women Yeah.

[00:24:32] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Somehow. Mm-hmm. which is double-edged.

[00:24:35] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, one of the things that you mentioned during our previous conversation is, you know, picking up on that even though this is a story of punishment and, you know, and, and that leads to all this stuff about secrets, right?

[00:24:51] **Jim Phelan:** There's, there's a also a kind of implicit acknowledgement of the kind of power of womanhood and, you know, women's behavior and you know, what needs to be repressed and, you know, things like that. You have, you know, more to say about that.

[00:25:12] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. That, that, instead of it, it. Like if that story had were made into a movie, let's say that most of it would probably have to do with the aunts whatever it was that led to her pregnancy. So her relationship with the man, whether it is one of sexual violence or whether it's one of a secret love affair. But in the mother's telling of it, the aunt seems to have no relation to any man at all. Right. She's not a, not someone's victim. She's not someone's lover. And that it kind of makes her the standalone protagonist.

[00:25:47] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:25:48] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And, you know, the mother clearly does not intend to to empower the daughter through this story. Quite the opposite. Yeah. She tends to terrify her right. She wants to restrict to fill her daughter with fear and, and inhibition restriction. But it kind of, in a very curious way, it has the opposite effect of possibly of, of offering a route to empowerment. I wouldn't say that the story itself directly does that, but it opens up that possibility of seeing the woman as the center of the story basically. Yeah. And also pointing to the incredible power, the destructive power, the kind of violence that can be brought about as the result of something that a woman has done. Yeah. So I was thinking further about this and maybe this way of turning the story on its side and viewing the aunt as a powerful figure

[00:26:45] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:26:46] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Comes about maybe through, only through that process of dissecting it and interpreting it and retelling it that the daughter initiates. So maybe it's that not so much that she operates now as a narrator herself, but that she also takes up the position of a critic, perhaps.

[00:27:09] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:27:09] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Okay. And that she kind of views it from a distance in the way that a critic would, and maybe that's how she ends up sort of, The possibility that the aunt you know, becomes, or that this story could, could be, a a somewhat empowering one, though. Still tragic obviously.

[00:27:27] **Jim Phelan:** Right, right. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I just, while we're going in this direction, you know, in terms of, turning the story on its side, there's also this occurred to me, you know, over the last couple days the idea that the story is also, even though the, the mother seems to be so much in control, right? And, and is doing this warning and all this kind of assertion of power, but there's some things in the story about the way in which the mother has been affected that she's maybe not fully aware of communicating to the daughter in the sense that, okay, she and the aunt shared the room. Right. And then she's the one who found the aunt after and the baby right after the suicide and infanticide.

[00:28:20] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yes.

[00:28:20] **Jim Phelan:** Right. So that this, this trauma, you know, kind of not called much attention to, but maybe the way in which we could think about the trauma they inflicted on, on the mother. And how that might be playing into her telling.

[00:28:38] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. And that's really interesting, really perceptive. And I agree that one of the sort of shocking things about this story is when the mother says to find your aunt's room, which was also mine and that

[00:28:53] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:28:53] **Yoon Sun Lee:** she, so she lived in that same room that they were she and the aunt. Well, she doesn't say actually what their relationship was.

[00:29:04] **Jim Phelan:** No.

[00:29:04] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And were they, were they friends? I mean, she does say, we did not discuss it. We did not discuss the pregnancy.

[00:29:10] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:29:11] **Yoon Sun Lee:** but that they, you know, they lived in the same room. They were part of the same family. but the, the mother adopts this very, almost exaggeratedly neutral tone, even though she's not only the narrator, she was a character in the story.

[00:29:27] **Jim Phelan:** Exactly right.

[00:29:28] **Yoon Sun Lee:** But that she removes herself from it as if she were just some kind of detached reporter. Yeah. When she was actually, as you pointed out, someone who was in the story and who had to have been affected by it, you know, and especially by this horrible discovery at the very end. And that she is the one who makes it. And I think that that's part of. What propels the daughter to then kind of pick up the mic and start

[00:29:56] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:29:56] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And start telling and retelling the story is a kind of horror, a kind of outrage at how the mother has also erased herself from the story, as well as erasing the aunt from the world, you know, and from even from family history and the daughter's relationship to her mother throughout the woman warrior is extremely complicated.

[00:30:17] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:30:17] **Yoon Sun Lee:** But that there's anger and there's fear, but there's also a, just a, a tremendous amount of love and a kind of desperate longing to be loved by her.

[00:30:28] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah.

[00:30:29] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So, yeah. So the mother's kind of very strange position as not just narrator, but character in the story is also really important.

[00:30:36] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. Good. Good. Now, maybe we can, you know, look at a little bit more at some of the aspects of the technique that stand out. You already, I think, you nicely highlighted the way in which the mother, you know, does sort of tries to take on this role of neutral reporter rather than, you know, doing a lot of well, you know, this is how I felt and this is, you know, the emotions that generated in me or all that. Right? But one of the other things is about the way the time gets handled right. Again, we might think about if it were a movie, there'd be a lot of time and space of the telling given to the pregnancy, the what gave rise to it. And then especially, you know, the final events. But here, you know, the final events only get a couple sentences.

[00:31:24] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yes.

[00:31:24] **Jim Phelan:** And what gets the most is is the villagers, right?

[00:31:28] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah.

[00:31:28] **Jim Phelan:** So do you wanna comment on that at all?

[00:31:32] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. So the way that the story handles duration is one of the most interesting things about one of the most powerful things ways in which it makes its impact.

[00:31:42] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So in the first paragraph, the mother kind of sums it up and says, there was this sister who killed herself and she jumped into the well. But she then kind of pulls back and names this certain year, it's 1924 and the village is par pairing to send all of its men away. So it arranges all of these weddings for these men. And then she actually tells us that about the journeys that these men take, kind of where they get off at, you know where they get off at various places off the ship. We'll meet in California next year. They said all of them sent money home. So that is one scale of time, one scale of story time.

[00:32:17] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:18] **Yoon Sun Lee:** it is moving pretty fast. It's a summary that it goes, you know, we're probably looking at, I don't know five years or many years right after the men leave. But then we kind of move into a completely different time of the everyday, of life inside the house life, in the village, and also the time of pregnancy and

[00:32:40] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:32:41] **Yoon Sun Lee:** That there, the story is very much about the clock that's within the story. And in one paragraph or the next paragraph. The aunt's kind of growing belly is described, so we're looking at several months.

[00:32:55] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:32:56] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Right. That are summarized very quickly as the ons, you know, kind of grows larger and larger. And then she tells us that the villagers are were also counting. And so the story clock then slows down to days. Or two weeks and then somehow today. So I don't really know how the villagers could have, could have been counting unless they knew exactly when she conceived. But that the discourse then slows down and slows down even more as the villagers get closer and closer to the house on the night, that somehow they know that the baby is going to be born that night.

[00:33:32] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And that it feels, I mean, that, that the details start to accumulate. we're told about kind of how they did their hair and how they wore masks on their faces and how the the sounds that the animals are making as they're being killed. And then, you know these details, like they're knives dripped with the blood of our animals, that this is really essentially a descriptive pause.

[00:33:57] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So it's kind of like slow motion, right?

[00:33:59] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:34:00] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And then,

[00:34:00] **Jim Phelan:** Right.

[00:34:01] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The after effects of the violence, the red hand prints that are left on the windows. The smells from the spill preserves in the kitchen. That these are the sensory details that the narrative lingers over. And only after that we have this one sentence -your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night -and the suicide feels almost like it's just an ellipsis, even though we had been told it at the very beginning. but at the end, the suicide happens between sentences.

[00:34:31] **Jim Phelan:** Yes, yes. Right.

[00:34:32] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Gave birth, and then the next morning when I went for water, I found her.

[00:34:37] **Yoon Sun Lee:** So it's extremely artful, you know, the

[00:34:39] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:34:40] **Yoon Sun Lee:** The duration or the, the handling of duration in this narrative is extremely, extremely artful. And it also weirdly comes across as a very natural kind of narrative in a way.

[00:34:52] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. And that, that it's, I mean, that the idea that it's told that it's, this is, you know an oral narrative. Right, right, right. And the fact that we can think just briefly about the, you know, the fact, okay, so we have a kind of double retrospection, right? We have the mother, telling about what happened in the past 1924, et cetera. And then we have Kingston telling about the mother having told her this in the past. Right? But there's something about the fact that it's, a verbatim or it's presented as a verbatim, you know, representation of this oral story.

[00:35:36] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Right, exactly. And, and that the, the difference is really highlighted here between the orality of the original tale and then the daughter's written right telling of it.

[00:35:50] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And even though very shortly after, where I left off reading, the daughter actually apostrophes her readers. And she says in another very famous passage, Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate and then you know, what is peculiar to child poverty and so on.

[00:36:09] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And so, but you're very aware that as a writer she is, addressing an absent hypothetical audience that, that

[00:36:18] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm.

[00:36:18] **Yoon Sun Lee:** You know, of Chinese American readers. Which feels very different from the immediacy of the original story.

[00:36:27] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:36:28] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Whole you know, which is the, the kind of like, it's just told directly into her ears.

[00:36:34] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:36:34] **Yoon Sun Lee:** and that the retrospection is. Not as, I mean that that, the thing that strikes me about this, this story, the mother story, is that it is so vividly present and that it doesn't seem like something that happened long ago in the past. But that it, because it's so set off by this injunction of secrecy and directly quoted that it seems to kind of keep this, preserves this original trauma in a way that's, extremely visceral, right? Like it's not,

[00:37:08] **Jim Phelan:** yeah.

[00:37:09] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Oh, yeah. Like long ago I remember, you know, you had this aunt or something like that more, it's almost like it keeps its own present, you know, that it manages to remain in the present somehow.

[00:37:18] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. And in a way, I mean, you sort of get this double power of story or, well, you have, we have the event, right, the events, but then we have those events, you know, transformed into the mother's story to the daughter, which, you know, then gets transmitted by the daughter to Chinese Americans, to every reader here. Right. And then we, you know, as we've talked about, so we have the mother's meaning for the daughter, and then we have Kingston's meaning for Chinese Americans and, and her readers, right? And we've been trying to practice things.

[00:37:54] **Jim Phelan:** So it's, so much packed into it and, so many things about you know, the mother-daughter relationship, the power of storytelling the ways in which, you know, secrets can be used as weapons, all these things. yeah. so I think we, we've touched on a lot of the, the things that we, hope to get to, but are there others that you'd like to comment on?

[00:38:19] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Yeah. I think both gender and also Asian American identity are equally important.

[00:38:27] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

[00:38:27] **Yoon Sun Lee:** To this and so to, to Kingston, this intersection could best be explored at this extremely problematic in her view intersection could best be explored through the narrative situation that is

[00:38:44] **Jim Phelan:** mm-hmm. Good.

[00:38:45] **Yoon Sun Lee:** These acts of telling stories, of hearing them, of attempting to appropriate them. And then also the kind of kind of sad loss of certainty and focus. And so as I was saying, the mother's story is forever vivid, you know, that is captured within these, quotation marks and it's so clear and unambiguous in its hierarchy of values.

[00:39:10] **Yoon Sun Lee:** But that when the daughter is then kind of retelling these various versions and talking to her, absent and you know, Chinese American readers someday that there's just this, it's it completely changes the, the nature of the, the storytelling. It becomes one of uncertainty and, and anguish really.

[00:39:31] **Jim Phelan:** Mm-hmm.

[00:39:31] **Yoon Sun Lee:** As opposed to a kind of clearly directed and focused storytelling. So she's trying her best to transfer that relationship or to acquire some of that power as a narrator, but, you know, she never manages to, quite do it and she's very, very aware of that fact.

[00:39:51] **Yoon Sun Lee:** And one of the little details in this story that really hits me is the reference to the villagers. And character called the villagers in this story. I think that the daughter at once, Kind of, well, she's terrified of the villagers, obviously, because they're kind of like the avenging furies, but also because they seem to stand as a kind of collective united community.

[00:40:14] **Jim Phelan:** Yes, yes.

[00:40:15] **Yoon Sun Lee:** That like one person and acts like one person. And I think that this is kind of what she realizes she cannot have or will never have herself.

[00:40:26] **Jim Phelan:** Yeah. Yeah. They'll always be watching her. The villagers are watchful, right?

[00:40:30] **Yoon Sun Lee:** That's right, that's right.

[00:40:32] **Jim Phelan:** Excellent. Thank you very much, Yoon. This was really enjoyable. And I want to thank our listeners and say we'd appreciate your feedback. you can send it to us at our email address, projectnarrative@osu.edu, or on our Facebook page, or to our Twitter account, which @PNOhioState. I also want to remind you that you can find 20 additional episodes of the podcast on our website or through Apple Podcasts.

[00:41:00] **Yoon Sun Lee:** Thanks, Jim. It's a pleasure.