

***A Study on the Application of Tiger Metaphors in Diaspora Woman's Growth Narrative
- Focusing on Tae Keller's Novel: When You Trap a Tiger***

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Abstract

Korean-American author Tae Keller applied Korean tiger stories such as *Sister and Brother Who Became the Sun and the Moon* and *A Bear and A Tiger Who Want to Be Human* to the 2021 Newbery Award-winning book *When You Trap a Tiger*. In this growth narrative of diaspora woman, the aspects of tiger metaphors being used can be summarized into four categories: First of all, the tiger symbolizes the destructive energy of shadow. In this novel, Lily, the 9-year-old protagonist, needed the power of shadow to break through the persona of *Quiet Asian Girl*. The tiger also emblemizes death itself or the god of death, something humans fear. In order for the grandmother Ae-Cha to accept the new stage of life's journey of death, and for Lily to realize the secret of life with death, two women must communicate with the tiger as the Grim Reaper. The third is the tiger as the guardian of stories. In the beginning, it performed a mission to guard the star jars full of stories. The reason it appeared before Lily was also to regain the story that Ae-Cha stole and bottled, and eventually it helps two women reconstruct their narratives without ignoring the painful history. Finally, the tiger serves as a guide that leads humans, who rarely understand the world as a whole, to an integrated understanding. The healing that the tiger promised to Lily was not simply a cure for disease, but a reconstruction of one's own story through an integrated understanding.

Keywords: *When you Trap a Tiger*, Tae Keller, Tiger Metaphor, Shadow, God of Death, Guardian of Stories, Integrated Understanding

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Introduction

Tae Keller says in *Author's Note* that the Korean folktales she heard from her halmoni (Korean word for grandmother) when she was growing up in Hawaii became the birthplace of *When You Trap a Tiger* that won 2021 Newberry Award. The 9-year-old protagonist girl and her family members are all Korean-American diaspora women. The author uses tiger metaphors in multiple layers so that they can overcome confusion and pain of life. The purpose of this study is to analyze the aspects of appropriation and re-appropriation of tiger metaphors in this work.

Most Korean folktales start like this : *Long long ago, when tiger smoked his pipe*. This phrase takes the listener to the world of stories immediately. It conjures up a fantastic time and space in which a tiger can communicate freely with humans and anything illogical can happen. This cliché, *When tiger smoked his pipe*, shows the deep relationship between tigers and Koreans although the tiger became extinct in Korea now. We can learn the the substantive danger of the tiger to humans and the fear of humans from *Korea and Her Neighbors*, which contains, “*Koreans spend half a year chasing tigers, and the other half visiting condolences to people who have been eaten by tigers.*”¹ positioned the tiger as a metaphor for the power of harsh politics or kings in the secular world, and as a symbol of expelling evil things or a mountain god in the transcendental world.

Tae Keller changes the typical phrase *long long ago when tiger smoked his pipe* to *long long ago when tigers walked like humans* or *long long ago when people roared like tigers*. She appropriates and re-appropriates classic tiger stories in various ways to effectively convey her message. For example, the siblings in *the Brother and Sister Who Became the Sun and the Moon*, are changed to sisters, their escape to the sky is transformed to immigration across the sea, and the greedy tiger symbolizes the intense desire to destroy status quo and make a leap into another world instead of holding out. And *A Bear and A Tiger Who Want to Be Human*, the founding myth of Korea, was a decisive inspiration to the writer. In this story, the bear could become a female human because she passed the test of patience imposed by the male god while the tiger failed. Tae Keller asks herself. “If the bear represents Korean women-or a version of womanhood that means suffering and silent endurance-what, then, of the tiger? What about the woman who refused to suffer and banished for it? what would happen if she came back? What would she want-and what story would she tell?”²

Shadow

The tiger can be seen as a metaphor of shadow that Carl Gustav Jung said, which motivate Lily to break the shell of *Quiet Asian Girl*. At the beginning of the novel, Lily meets a tiger in heavy rain on the first day of moving to Sunbeam Washington where her halmoni Ae-Cha lives. With this meeting, the entire world of childhood, where Lily had previously settled, loses its boundaries and shakes. The combination of *Sunbeam* and heavy rain, and the appearance of a tiger that is not wet with rain alone, heralds the symbolical birth of a tiger girl who embraces the two worlds.

¹ Bishop, Isabella B. (2000). *Korea and Her Neighbors*. Shin, Bok-Ryong (trans.). Jipmundang: South Korea, 127.

² Keller, Tae. (2020). *When You Trap a Tiger*. New York: Random House Children's Books, 293. When this book is quoted later, only the number of pages is specified in the text.

Ae-Cha is an immigrant woman who came to the United States to find her birth mother from a small island village in Korea. That indicates the birth mother of Ae-Cha or Lily's great-grandmother immigrated to the U.S. alone in an era that is estimated to be shortly after the Korean War, which is impossible without bringing out the destructive power of tiger as much as possible. And this tiger gene is passed down through the maternal blood. It is expressed in mother Joan's old habit of going in and out of the attic window, *a bundle of white hair* of Granma Ae-Cha and older sister Sam, and an exploding trait of Lily's wanting, facing and fighting.

Lily didn't have enough presence to succeed in playing invisibility before encountering the tiger, thus given the nickname *Quiet Asian Girl*, *QAG* for short by her strong and tough sister Sam. Lily seemed to be so quietly patient, but in reality she had long suppressed her anger. In the extreme stress of halmoni's impending death, it is expressed violently to break through the persona of *QAG*.

Some researchers also see the tiger in the story of *The Brother and Sister Who Became the Sun and the Moon* as an expression of a destructive drive that lurks in the mother's unconscious.³ The mother's persona which should devote herself to children, no matter how hard her life is, has collapsed due to the dark shadow of her unconscious. There are many variations but here is the point: A poor mother(or grandmother) meets a tiger on her way home with rice cakes(or fish or meat) obtained by working for other people(or peddling goods). The tiger shows greed to covet the children even after taking away everything the poor mother had, rice cakes and her body, and in order to satisfy that desire, disguised itself as the mother. The children who went up to the sky to escape the tiger became the sun and the moon.

The tiger is a shadow butting up against the bondage of motherly life. The loss of rice cake by the tiger means that the mother filled her empty stomach, which she always put on the back burner for the children, because the only persona for a married woman without a husband is devoted motherhood in the feudal patriarchal society. The greater the gap between the mother's persona and inner desire, the larger tiger's size. When the tiger, which grew out of control, finally eats the persona and roars, the mother forgets herself and even tries to kill her children. Children up in the sky is a metaphor for the brutal reality of being killed by their mother.

The mother in *The Brother and Sister Who Became the Sun and the Moon*, brought out the destructive power of shadow, was overwhelmed by it and lost herself. Whether it is poverty, scarcity, or suppression of ideology, it is necessary to draw out the potential of shadow to be strong enough to break the status quo. But it's important to have a *new relationship* with it, not to be engulfed by that power. It is necessary to take care of the shadow and listen to the inner voice, and follow the unique journey of self-seeking, that is, the individualization process in Jung psychology.

Tigers are wild, out of control. They speak the truth, and swallow the world. They are always wanting more. But human girls, she was told, are not meant for wanting. They are meant for helping. They are meant for quiet.

And Sometimes, the tiger-girl would mix up her lives. She would feel the wrong things

³ Lee, Bu-young. (1995). *An In-depth Analysis of Korean Folklore*. Jipmundang: South Korea, 108-132.

at the wrong time. Too much feeling as a human, too much fear as a tiger. It would be much easier to be only one thing. (151)

When it is determined that the crossing of human and tiger, in other words, persona and shadow, is no longer controlled, the mother has no choice but to leave her baby Ae-Cha. As the old story tells, the uncontrolled shadow could eat herself and even harm the kid. Later, Ae-Cha summarizes what the situation was like when her birth mother left her. "Lily, my life long, long ago is growing up in a small village, so poor. We have no money. We have no food."(240) Ae-Cha who has the tiger gene eventually crosses the sea "tracking the scent of her mother's stories" (188).

The act of Ae-Cha visiting a cave where tigers live and the act of Lily's going down to the basement of halmoni's house at night means entering a world of unconsciousness. This is also linked to the act of Hercules, Odysseus, etc., the heroes of Greek mythology, going to the underworld ruled by Hades. Connection with unconsciousness is a typical rite of passage that a person must go through to become a hero. Heroes experience a process of symbolic death and regeneration while visiting caves, basement or Hades. It is like Lily meets a tiger in the basement, killing QAG and being reborn as a fighter with the power of the tiger.

God of Death

Tiger symbolizes death itself or the god of death, something that any mortal fears. It is also described as *a shadow beast* or *a mess of black scales*(44) who foretells imminent death.

It stands right in front of us, eyes locked on halmoni's. And the weirdest thing-it's like it's not raining around the tiger. The tiger isn't getting wet, as if there's a protective bubble around it, where the rain refuses to fall.

I turn to halmoni, and I can tell she sees it, too.

"Not yet," she mutters, eyes straight ahead. "Not ready yet."
Heart racing, I stuff my hand into my pocket, feeling for the mugwort. (91)

The Grim Reaper in the shape of tiger comes to take Ae-Cha away, but she is not ready yet. Lily, too, is not ready to say goodbye forever to her halmoni. Ae-Cha and Lily must pass each one's share of initiation rite by communicating with the tiger in their quest of self-seeking.

And the belief in mugwort, which can defeat or at least weaken evil spirits, stems from the aforementioned Korean founding myth, and the ordeal imposed by male god was to endure 100 days by eating only mugwort and garlic in the complete darkness of the cave. This is why Lily always carries a bunch of mugwort in her pocket when she goes down to the basement to meet the tiger.

After completing the journey of self-seeking that began with being chased by a tiger, Ae-Cha finally greets the Grim Reaper, saying she is ready. In the dying scene, the tiger is represented by the blink of a machine in the hospital room connected to Ae-Cha's heartbeat. Lily thinks the two little lights are the eyes of a tiger staring at her and understand the secret of life embracing death.

Guardian of Stories

Ae-Cha explains why she is chased by a tiger as follows.

The grandmother, who raised Ae-Cha instead of her birth mother in a small village in Korea, used to cry while telling sad stories. Because the neighbors and her friends got scared or angry when they heard the stories, Ae-Cha thought “*Why do we have to hear bad stories? Isn't it better if bad stories just go 'way?*” (50) So Ae-Cha took jars from her house and went to the mountain caves where tigers live. This is because stories with powerful magic have become stars and tigers are guarding them. So to speak, tiger is the guardian of stories. The guardian wants stories not to be locked up but to be enjoyed widely according to the nature of them, just as the starlight shines on the whole world. This image of a tiger as a guardian is similar to the Big Four (四天王) defending the teachings of Buddha, which we find at the entrance of a Buddhist temple.

Meanwhile, Ae-Cha secretly hid outside the caves and waited until the tigers fell asleep, and then grabbed the story stars in her fists, stuffing them into jars, sealing jars up. And then she ran away across the ocean, across the whole world, to a new place so that she feels safe from the sadness. This is the part where the individual immigrant history of Ae-Cha is fantastically talked about. In other words, in a realistic way, Ae-Cha was fed up with the tragic stories of Korean modern and contemporary history, which was especially harsh on women,⁴ and moved to a far and remote new land without such stories. However, the tiger came all the way to the United States to catch Ae-Cha and retrieve the stolen stories, which means that the stories that have been stuffed at the bottom of mind - personal history, family history, modern and contemporary Korean history - begin to rise to the surface. G. Freud would say: *The return of the oppressed*.

Lily, when I tell my story, I am sad. So much of my family story is sad. And more than that: so much of Korean people story is sad. Long, long ago, Japan and United States people do wrong things to our country. But I don't want to give you sad, angry stories. I don't want to pass you bad feelings. (241)

As the logline on the front cover of the book says, “Some stories refuse to stay bottled up” and cannot be locked up forever. “*when a story is locked away, its magic only grows. Sometimes it grows sour. The magic becomes a kind of poison.*” (98). In addition, the locked story tries to revenge on the person who locked it. “*when I keep it tight-tight, it eat me up.*” (270) The price of locking a sad story was to be eaten by a sad story. Ae-Cha wrote her life as a sad story without seeing the love around her. This is the revenge of the story that she locked away.

Unlike Ae-Cha, Lily thinks that she is glad to hear the tiger's stories because even though they upset her, they made her learn so much of her history and feel like she “*could hear the stars.*” (241) Even when Sam later confessed that she locked their dead father Andy's story inside her, Lily pinpointed the essence of the story that does not belong to anyone and exists to be told.

⁴ Tae Keller's mother, Nora Okja Keller, wrote novels based on her great interest in Korean women's history. *Comfort Women* is about Japanese military sexual slavery and *Fox Girl* depicts U.S. military base women.

As an epic hero, Lily performs a quest to save her halmoni. Lily found three glass jars at her halmoni's house. She already opened two jars and heard two stories of the tiger, and now there's only one left. Lily hopes that Ae-Cha's illness will be cured if she opens the third jar and hears the final story of the tiger, but the tiger suddenly disappears and halmoni says she doesn't want to fight anymore. Lily is taken aback. *"This isn't how stories are supposed to end-right before the hero saves the day"*(239).

But the readers find that Lily's quest is not about saving her grandmother, but about saving her own story. In the hospital where Ae-Cha dies, Lily hears her inner tiger voice. *"Take your story, understand where you came from and who you are - then find your own story. Create the story of who you are yet to be."*(268) So Lily creates and tells her own story, her own secret myth, guiding fiction in Ae-Cha's deathbed with Joan and Sam, and resolutely watches the end of her halmoni's life. When the blink of the machine in the hospital room stops, and the tiger's eyes staring at her close, Lily recognizes a loss, but also a new space inside her, *"An open jar, a release"* (279).

Guide to integrated understanding

The one who sees the tiger in Lily's family is the oldest Ae-Cha and the youngest Lily. In fact, in the literature for children, the elderly and children are often portrayed in a similar way because of their vulnerability to need attention and care. Other than those general traits Ae-Cha and Lily share some special personality traits that Joan and Sam do not have. *"halmoni buys rice and pine nuts and herbs to cast magic, she feeds spirits, she believes in all the things you cannot see."*(210) When Joan and Sam, who try to stay in the world of rationality, criticize such grandmother, Lily trusts and helps her. They think that Joan and Sam's world is only half. At the same time, Lily is anxious to think that halmoni is not normal, and that she herself is not normal to sympathize with such a "witch" who *"lives in a house at the top of a hill, a house covered in vines, with windows that watch like unblinking eyes."*(210). When Lily didn't know she was a tiger girl who embraced the two worlds, she had a stereotype that the boundary between normal and abnormal was clear, so humans could belong to only one world. The source of anxiety is this dichotomous thinking. In this context, from the tiger's point of view, Ae-Cha and Lily are also just humans who hardly understand the world as a whole. *"You humans understand so little of the world, and your halmoni can't see what she's done. She doesn't see what's harming her. I only want to help her. Trust me"*(98).

The tiger, who accepted *"to be everything at once, fierce and kind, soft and strong"* (274), came to help Ae-Cha not make the mistake of harming her whole existence by denying some of her existence. This is the true meaning of the *"healing"* promised by the tiger to Lily.

Lily, I told you I would heal my Ae-Cha, but healing is not always about curing illness. Often it is about understanding. And when you face your whole story, you can understand your whole heart. (267)

Ae-Cha's story is reconstructed through an integrated understanding of personal history, family history, and national history. For example, Ae-Cha finally understands her mother who she thought was a monster leaving her baby and going far away. According to the stereotype that a mother should raise her baby by her own side, a mother who left the baby is a monster. But now Ae-Cha understands that there are times when a mother has to leave her baby behind. Understanding the heart of a mother who had to leave even though she didn't want to leave, Ae-Cha can understand the whole heart of herself. Death is always with the

default value in the story of life as a whole. There are times when you have to leave even if you don't want to. Ae-Cha understands and accepts the stark truth.

Integrated understanding leads to healing in Lily's case. Lily, who has lived as an invisible child or QAG without making her voice heard, went down to the basement in the middle of the night to listen to the story of a tiger, showing that Lily's stress has reached its peak from a psychiatric perspective. Lily, as well as her grandmother, needs to be healed. When Lily thinks her last hope of saving her grandmother is gone, she throws the jars against the wall and said, "*I am thunder and lightning. I am out of control.*"(247) "*Shattering against the wall, the blue jar becomes a supernova.*"(249) Lily's fear and anger explode like a supernova, and the tiger, who was suppressed inside her, growls and releases. This limitless force may devour Lily whole. Now Lily must be able to tame her tiger to be a Super Tiger Girl who can use the tiger power without being swallowed up by the tiger.

Finally, when Ae-Cha falls down, Joan calls 911 urgently and goes to the hospital. The sisters think that they should chase their mother to the hospital if they want to watch deathbed. There is a car that Joan left behind and Sam has a driver's license, but Sam can't drive because of the trauma caused by her father who died in a car accident. Moreover, it is the middle of the night when the rain falls mercilessly. Judging that it is time to call the tiger, Lily remembers that the tiger likes the library, the home of stories, and breaks into the locked library without permission. She finds the scary beast in one corner of the library and asks for help.

Lily decides to trust the tiger as a guide. Until now, she thought the tiger came to hurt halmoni who locked the story, but in fact, she had a hunch that the tiger came to lead halmoni to understand the story properly as a whole. Of course, Sam doesn't see a tiger with his back to the car, wagging his tail low, and guiding the way. Anyway, thanks to Lily's strong faith or the magic of the story, she drives safely to the hospital.

Lily now knows she is not an invisible quiet Asian girl, but a hero with two worlds who can see invisible things, call out the tiger inside her and make an endless story when she needs the courage and ferocity of the tiger.

Conclusion

As discussed above, tiger metaphors in *when you trap a tiger* can be summarized into the following four categories.

First of all, the tiger symbolizes the destructive energy of shadow. The protagonist needed the power of shadow to break through the persona of *Quiet Asian Girl*. The tiger also emblemizes death itself or the god of death, something humans fear. In order for the grandmother to accept the new stage of life's journey of death, and for Lily to realize the secret of life with death, two women must communicate with the tiger as the Grim Reaper. The third is the tiger as the guardian of stories. The guardian wants stories not to be locked up but to be enjoyed widely according to the nature of them, just as the starlight shines on the whole world. Finally, the tiger serves as a guide that leads humans, who rarely understand the world as a whole, to an integrated understanding. The healing that the tiger promised to the protagonist was not simply a cure for disease, but a reconstruction of one's own story through an integrated understanding.

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