

**"Since When Does an Individual Choose His Nation?"
: Diaspora, Precarity of Bond Slavery and Stateless
Voices in Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower***

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Abstract

The dominant narratives of history have often failed to acknowledge countless instances of human suffering, pain, and adversity across different times and spaces. One such forgotten corner of history consists of the Korean diaspora in Mexico which started with the perilous journey of 1,033 Koreans who migrated to Mexico in 1905 as indentured labourers. This paper draws on Kim Young-ha's historical fiction titled *Black Flower* (2003/2013), to analyse the long-neglected history of the marginalized Korean labourers who were deceived into being bond slaves and were subjected to exploitation, hunger, wounds and illness in Mexican haciendas under autocratic landowners. Kim uses the mode of fiction to challenge the absence of archival documentation on this part of the Korean diaspora. This research argues that the migrant labourers turned into victims of extreme precarious conditions, both physically and psychologically, as a result of losing access to both national belonging and individual autonomy. Through the critical lens of diaspora and vulnerability studies, this paper attempts to make visible those lives that have been treated as losable and 'ungrievable' by the mainstream historiography. Finally, by a close reading of *Black Flower*, the paper also analyses the unflinching

resilience of the stateless Korean immigrants and their attempts to establish a New Korea, free from the precarities of class, culture and race.

Keywords: *Slavery, Precarity, Korea, Diaspora, Statelessness, Hacienda.*

Introduction

“Still, it seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one’s sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others.”

Regarding the Pain of Others by Susan Sontag.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, diaspora studies have undergone a significant evolution, acknowledging diaspora as a dynamic and metaphorical space rather than adhering to its fixed, traditional connotations. Academicians, social workers, and policymakers have often defined diaspora as the dispersion of certain ethnic communities from their historical homeland. Contemporary postcolonial and diaspora studies increasingly focus on the lived experiences of diasporic communities whose identities are invariably shaped by moral degradation, statelessness, and precarity as a result of their dispersion. Diasporic statelessness becomes one of the root causes of marginalisation and other forms of human rights violation because the lack of legal rights puts the diasporic and marginalized communities in a precarious position within the nation-state (Kingston, 2017). The escalating refugee crisis of today’s globalized world is reshaping and reevaluating the meaning of diaspora and displaced communities which now include, as William Safran (1991) argues, “several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court* – in much the same way

that “ghetto” has come to designate all kinds of crowded, constricted, and disprivileged urban environments. . .” (83). However, official history has orchestrated the strategic obfuscation of innumerable communities who exist at the margins of a nation they perceive as ‘home’ and subsequently fall victim to identity distortion, precarity, and displacement.

Precarity, writes Judith Butler (2009), is a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death.” (25). In their book, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Butler (2004) problematizes the notion of ‘ungrievable’ lives — lives which cannot be grieved and mourned because those are already considered unreal and lost. Vulnerable lives, which are “neither alive nor dead”, are not considered fit enough for being valued by the dominant power structures. The unequal distribution of resources by the state in the face of calamity (natural or man-made) is the root cause behind labelling certain populations more vulnerable than others. Butler (2009) also introduces the concept of precariousness, which they associate with the ontological and existential fragility of human beings (a notion which propagates that humans are inherently vulnerable just by the virtue of their bodily ‘being’). However, they also argue that the bodily injurability of a person is integrated into social and political organizations—which have been developed historically to maximize precariousness for some and minimize for others. In the context of diaspora, precarity arises when the fundamental political and socioeconomic rights of certain communities remain largely unacknowledged and are rendered losable by either their nation of origin or their host nation—or by both. The lifeworlds of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, engaged in any form of forced, unpaid, meagerly paid

or indentured labour in the globally prevailing neoliberal labour market, are characterized by insecurity and instability that aggravate their precarious conditions (Lewis et al., 2015). This study will aim to trace the forgotten history of the Korean contract labourers in Mexico and situate it within the larger framework of a global South Korean diaspora by analysing Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower* through a Butlerian lens of precarity.

A Brief History of the Korean Diaspora in Mexico

Amidst the turbulence of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904, the Korean peninsula suffered the outcome of the military advances made by these two global forces. However, after the Japanese navy overpowered the Russian armada in May, 1905, Japan further infringed on Korean territories (Meyer, 2023). The political exploitations and socioeconomic demands imposed by the Japanese colonization on Korea prepared the ground for an unlikely migration. The mass migration of Korean workers to the sugar plantations of Hawaii had already begun to create a spur since 1902, but after 1905, Japanese imperial power restricted the entrance of Korean workers into Hawaii as a diplomatic move to reserve this place exclusively for Japanese labourers. Rocio Lucero (2025) in her article, "Aenikkaeng: The forgotten story of Mexico's Korean migrants", mentions that during the last years of President Porfirio Diaz's dictatorship, the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico "faced a labour shortage as global demand surged for henequen, an agave plant used to make rope and twine" (para. 3). To overcome this sudden shortage of labour and to divert Korean emigration away from Hawaii, a Japanese firm (the Continental Colonization Company) coordinated with a British labour recruiter named John G. Meyers to export Korean labourers to Yucatán.

Young and able-bodied Koreans were strategically lured by alluring advertisements in newspapers like the *Capital Gazette* which convinced them about the prosperous, picture-perfect dreamland of Mexico—a land, so the Koreans were made to believe, would like nothing better than to magically save them from their broken and empty homeland.

In April, 1905, 1,033 Koreans coming from diverse walks of life boarded the British ship, *Ilford* from the port of Jemulpo and embarked on a transpacific journey to Mexico's Yucatán peninsula (Quintanilla, 2021). The immigrants dreamed of a new land which was filled with promises of employment, financial stability, education and a better livelihood, as Victoria Quintanilla (2021) comments, "Immigrants could labour, save money, and return home with the rewards of their hard work after just a few years." (para. 1). However, what started as a bright and innocuous promise soon turned into rubble as the Koreans realized that they have been deceived into being sold as bond slaves to Mexican haciendas. Thus ensued the decades-long suffering of the Korean contractual labourers in a land that shared no diplomatic relationship with Korea and in a feudal economy that desired utmost profit with little to no ethical responsibilities. Hahkyung Kim (2012), in an extensive study titled, "Korean Immigrants' Place in the Discourse of *Mestizaje*", mentions, "On the other hand, the illegal aspect of the immigration process itself suggests Mexico's disregard for legal and political responsibilities, a consistent attitude that correlates with the Mexican treatment of Korean henequeneros" (245).

One of the noticeable factors of this first wave of Korean diaspora in Mexico is the scarcity of any primary archival documentation that might record the numerical data of the immigrant population. The small sources that arbitrarily record the history of the first-generation Korean

immigrants in Mexico, are restricted to Korean newspaper articles, diplomatic correspondence between hacienda-owners, Japanese diplomats and Korean officials (Kim, 2012). Moreover, the scarcity is even more evident in the absence of relevant documents recording the lived realities and precarious existence of the 1,033 Koreans who were stuck amidst the subhuman living conditions in several Yucatán haciendas. Hea-Jin Park (2006) mentions that fleeting news about the subjugation and plight of the labourers travelled back to Korea when a Chinese whistleblower named Hé Hui reported on the situation in henequen haciendas in a San Francisco-based Chinese newspaper. When the report was republished later in the *Hwangson Shinmun* on 29th July 1905, it caused nation-wide grief and confusion in Korea. Following the circulation of this news of forced slavery, Korean emperor Gojong took special initiatives to inquire about the treatment the labourers were receiving under the Mexican government. He also sponsored the travel of the vice minister of the Foreign Office, Yun Chi-ho to Mexico to have a first-hand investigation done.

However, after the Japanese imperial power forced the Korean emperor into signing the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty in November, 1905, Korea's diplomatic sovereignty was handed over to the Japanese Empire—a political occurrence that reduced emperor Gojong to be a puppet under the imperial power. This treaty also left the exiled immigrant labourers at the mercy of their fate because the issue of their welfare became the least of the concerns the Korean Empire was experiencing. The subsequent Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty in 1907 and the formal annexation of Korean Empire to the Empire of Japan in 1910 turned Korea into a mere colony under Japanese rule (Kim, 2012). This political turmoil annihilated the migrant labourers' dream of returning to their

homeland after the end of their contract, leaving them with no land and rendering them stateless. Academic research on the Korean diaspora to Mexico often relies heavily on oral accounts and secondary resources unlike scholarship on Korean diasporas to Japan or America, where archival records are more readily available and widely studied. Moreover, this history of the Korean diaspora in Mexico “became of academic interest in Korea starting the late 1990s mainly for their participation in the Korean independence movement” (Kim, 2012, 261-262). Originally published in Korean in 2003 and later translated into English by Charles La Shure in 2012, Kim Young-ha’s *Black Flower* is a historical fiction novel that purposefully fills this gap in historical documentation by weaving a fictional tale of suffering of the 1,033 Korean migrants. Kim’s novel, though rooted in history, goes beyond the factual historiography and blurs the line between history and fiction.

Diaspora and Precarity of Bond Slavery in *Black Flower*

In the author’s note of the English-language translation of *Black Flower*, the celebrated South Korean author, Kim Young-ha (2003/2012) writes: “I made up my mind to write this novel and began to research the story in earnest. It was not easy. Sources were scarce, and those that I could find were vague. To add to this difficulty, as soon as the emigrants left Jemulpo, Korea was reduced to a colony of Japan” (304). This scarcity of information prompted the author to write a fictional story that imagines an alternative account of the Korean diasporic history in Mexico that surpasses the spatially and temporally determined nationalist discourses (Lim, 2021). *Black Flower*, in its rich and journalistic style of narration, conjures up a fictional story that humanizes the forgotten and overlooked diaspora of the Korean migrant labourers in Mexico. The story, told through a bunch of

different perspectives, brings forth the horrifying tale of precarity and statelessness that haunted the Korean contract labourers who boarded the ship, *Ilford* from the port of Jemulpo in 1905. Due to the absence of any archival record of the names and whereabouts of the first-generation Korean migrants, Kim introduces various fictional characters in the novel and reimagines what might have happened to those 1,033 nameless people. The tragic journey and star-crossed love between Kim Ijeong and Yi Yeonsu acquire central space in the story which is followed by the misfortune and tragedy of all the other characters. The story begins in the future with a dying Ijeong and then moves back in the past to describe numerous events that led up to it.

Precarity begins to seep through the cracks of the Korean migrants' lives from the moment they boarded the ship to go to Mexico. Kim (2003/2012) portrays, through the young eyes of Ijeong, how the Koreans were deceived into believing in a dream that was futile from the start—"Someone had said that there was gold in Mexico. They said that yellow gold poured forth from the earth, making many suddenly rich" (9). Moreover, the ship's departure continued to be delayed as chickenpox broke out among the passengers and their passports were not issued by the British minister. In a way, the ship became a temporary refugee camp for the passengers, a liminal space for endless waiting. Melanie B. E. Griffiths (2014), in an essay titled, "Out of Time: The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigrant Detainees", observes that the refugee asylum seekers are often troubled by a non-linear temporal tension where time seems to move at a slower pace than the external world. During their elongated state of waiting for the ship's departure, the Koreans started feeling stagnant in time and space. In the author's own words—"As the *Ilford's* departure

continued to be delayed, it began to feel as if the ship had been a permanent part of the scenery at Jemulpo” (Kim, 2003/2012, 23). Even before the ship departed for Mexico, the Korean passengers received a premonition of their impending vulnerability through the rumours that they were all being sold as slaves in some faraway plantations.

As the Korean immigrants embarked on a prolonged transpacific journey, the sea transformed into a witness and participant instead of being a backdrop in their clandestine migration. The sea generated a sense of being trapped in a liminal place where the migrants felt stuck between life and death, hope and fear, misery and faith. Moreover, the bodily vulnerability of the passengers was aggravated even further by the dire living conditions inside the ship – “The *Ilford* was completely lacking in material comforts, and not only were the passengers stored like baggage but they exceeded the optimum capacity of the ship by at least three times, making their suffering that much worse.” (Kim, 2003/2012, 32). The immigrants were tangled together and their bodies tossed against each other each time rough waves crashed against the ship. The voyage thus brings forth the “vulnerability of flesh, bone and breath” (Kaur, 2022, para. 3) through an ensemble of sick, tired, diseased, and dying bodies which were troubled by diarrhoea, fever, overflowing toilets, vomit, excrement and vile stench. The Koreans crowded in the ship were displaced from their homeland but were yet to arrive at their desired destination which rendered them trapped and alienated in the liminal space of the sea and increased their corporeal precariousness.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2009) comments on alternative ways to “bring the human into view in its frailty and precariousness that will allow us. . .to react with outrage when lives are degraded or eviscerated without regard for

their value as lives.” (77). *Black Flower* incorporates a human dimension to the precarities of the Korean labourers-turned-bond slaves who were at the receiving end of a national failure, as Kim (2003/2012) observes: “None of them would have boarded that ship had they had their own land” (72). Bak Jeonghun, a soldier, expresses his disillusionment with his homeland that led him to migrate to a new land – “That pitiful country, what has it done for us that we should go back? Did it not starve us when we were young, beat us when we grew up, and abandon us when life was finally bearable?” (Kim, 2003/2012, 74). In their diasporic existence, the Koreans repeatedly compared themselves with non-human beings like dogs, mice, poultry coop or pigs, signifying the literal lessening of their human attributes. Upon arriving in the Yucatán peninsula, the Korean migrants finally realized the misleading terms of the contract. Kim observes how the owners of the henequen haciendas paid a dear price for the labourers to overcome a severe labour shortage and intentionally chose Korean immigrants as they could not speak Spanish, hence were unable to flee.

The feudal hacendados (owners of the haciendas) turned the Korean labourers into bond-slaves, confiscated their personal belongings and forced them to work ceaselessly alongside the Mayan labourers in exchange of an extremely low wage that was barely enough to satiate their hunger, let alone helping them to return to their homeland after the contract ends. The Koreans were stuck in a no-place, entirely cut-off from the outside world, a situation which enhanced their marginal existence in Mexico. Kim (2003/2012) argues that all the promises of working freely, being able to earn a lot of money and returning home wealthy were mere candy coating. Martha Fineman (2008), in her essay titled “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human

Condition", argues that the embodied vulnerability of an individual or a collective can be mitigated or aggravated based on their different positionality within a structure of economy and institutions. Similarly, in *Black Flower*, the Korean labourers' exposure to vulnerability was not only an embodied or universal phenomenon but their fragility was directly magnified by the Japanese colonization of Korea and the hacienda economy of Mexico that violated and exploited their fundamental human rights. Kim (2003/2012) reflects on the fate of the bond slaves in *Black Flower*: "When the men got drunk they whimpered, wondering whether this was the cost of their nation's sin, the sins of society, their own sins, or simply fate." (127). Their lives, however, were not any better in Korea than their lives in Mexico as droughts, floods and famines were a daily affair in their homeland which left them in an equally precarious position.

Kim extensively narrates how the bond slaves lost authority over their own bodies during the period of their contract in the haciendas. They were made to work with henequen which, unlike rice, was a wild plant with sharp spikes. Henequen, popularly known as the 'green gold' of Mexico for its economic value, was a plant which the Koreans were completely unfamiliar with. As a result, the labourers were repeatedly wounded while cutting the sharp leaves of the plant—"Their bodies were covered with wounds and sweating profusely. . . . Sweat poured down and soaked their filthy clothes and seeped into their wounds, doubling their pain." (Kim, 2003/2012, 94). The way someone responds to pain is culturally stipulated, for example, one population can vocalize cries and another suppresses them. (Scarry, 1985). In *Black Flower*, the Korean labourers' response to physical abuse is differently shaped than the Mayan labourers in the henequen fields. For instance, Koreans, who were not

familiar with the culture of whipping, were shocked with pain and shame when the hacendados whipped them on the field – “If the Mexicans had spit in their faces, they might have brandished their machetes on the spot. But none of them knew how to cope with this; whips used on horses and cows were being used on people.” (Kim, 2003/2012, 95).

Sociopolitical institutions make distinctions between lives that are worthy of protection and lives that are destructible, ungrievable and lose-able because they are already framed as being lost or forfeited. (Butler, 2009). In *Black Flower*, while the feudal land owners stayed at their enormous houses with endless luxuries, the slaves received claustrophobic huts which were barely suitable for a family of four and ate food that was not sufficient to keep them healthy. As a result, they suffered from hunger, illness, skin disease and occasional cases of suicides. They did not receive medicine or proper treatment for their illnesses and survived by working like ants. The diasporic labourers in *Black Flower* were vulnerable against the unyielding topography of the new land in Mexico. Kim observes how the Koreans, who came from a land of abundant rivers and mountains, met with the vast empty lands of the haciendas. For the Korean migrants, Mexico was a land of sparse water and blazing sun that could burn their flesh as they continued to work tirelessly like beasts of burden.

Moreover, the women were differentially exposed to fragility in the diaspora. Women of marriageable age such as Yeonsu were repeatedly met with the predatory eyes of the men around them. Yeonsu, after conceiving a child with Ijeong out of wedlock, had to sacrifice herself to save her honour by becoming a concubine of the interpreter, Gwon Yongjun. Moreover, the women in the haciendas had to work as much as their male partners while also cooking and cleaning for

their families. As Kim (2003/2012) comments, “Even on days above 90 degrees, the women could not take off their skirts or short jackets; their shirtless husbands drank and beat them” (119). If a marriage happened between a Korean man and a Mayan woman before the end of the contract, it meant that the woman and their children would automatically become a property of the hacendado and could not leave the hacienda even if her husband’s contract expires. In another instance, Kim shows that the Korean slaves in a certain hacienda were being forcefully converted into Christianity as the hacendado perceived their idol worship to be a satanic ritual. This incident portrays the deplorable conditions of the bond slaves who were forced into renouncing their religious identities.

In *Black Flower*, Kim challenges the Confucian hierarchies of class, gender and race and argues that such distinctions are meaningless in a diasporic space that is characterized by extreme hostility. The Mexican haciendas became a place where Koreans from various classes of society gathered together and were crammed in pitifully small spaces. Orphans, peasants, retired soldiers, priests, thieves and ruined aristocrats—all were treated as migrant labourers by the landowners and none of them received advantages based on their hierarchical status. As orphaned Ijeong and Yeonsu (the daughter of a royal aristocrat) developed a romantic relationship with each other on the sea, they planned to create a new future for themselves in a new land which supposedly had abundant opportunities for education, freedom and economic prosperity—a promise that could never be fulfilled had they been inside the rigid structures of Korean society. As Kim (2003/2012) himself comments— “The Korean status system, which was now only implicit even in Korea, had disappeared without a trace aboard the *Ilford*.” (28). In another instance, this dissolution of class distinction becomes

evident through Ijeong's remark: "Do you really think the distinction between high and low, old and young, and man and woman will be as severe as it is in Korea? Look at this ship we are on. Aristocrat or commoner, all must line up to eat." (Kim, 2003/2012, 68). Such was the fate of the people who were abandoned by their homeland and were illegally sold into slavery.

Marginalization, Resistance and Alternative Nation in *Black Flower*

In *Black Flower*, Kim introduces a plethora of characters and attributes equal spaces to each one of them signifying a collective nature of diasporic suffering. By blurring the boundaries between history and fiction he recognizes the desire of the stateless Korean migrants to be fully recorded in history. Rachel Haejin Lim (2021), in her essay titled "Ephemeral Nations: Between History and Diaspora in Kim Young-ha's *Black Flower*", comments, "From the margin of the margins, Koreans in Mexico test the convergences of national sovereignty, ethnonation, and diaspora" (197). The story is not only a tale about survival but also about sustainable communities, resistance and home. The author attempts to situate this history of the Korean diaspora in Mexico within the discourse of a global South Korean diaspora by fundamentally critiquing the idea of a Korean ethnic nation (*Minjok*). The characters in the novel, disillusioned by both their home and host nations, attempts to establish a New Korea that complicates the dichotomies of history and fiction, reality and invention. (Lim, 2021, 198). The novel portrays the continued statelessness of the marginalized migrants even after the end of their bond slavery. The Japan-Korea Annexation treaty left the overseas immigrants with no land of their own and the Mexican Revolution used them as mercenaries without recognizing them as citizens of the nation.

Statelessness is not merely a violation of the 'right to nationality', but it is also a violation of human autonomy and a threat to human welfare. (Kingston, 2017). In this regard, Giorgio Agamben's (1998) concept of 'bare life' gains relevance – an idea which argues that a life becomes fractured and 'bare' when it is stripped of its national belonging and remains undocumented. The Korean migrants in *Black Flower* were not only temporally displaced from the flow of national history but also removed from the circulation of political and diplomatic information. In Kim's (2003/2012) own words – "The immigrants in Mexico had known little of affairs in their homeland, and so were shocked to hear that they no longer had a nation to which they could return" (223). After their homeland disappeared in history, the Korean immigrants felt the need for an organization that would unite the Koreans scattered across Mexico. This desire was fuelled primarily as a need to gain back their national dignity by taking part in the Korean independence movement against Japan. However, Kim does not offer a glorified notion of a unified Korean diaspora, rather he brings forth the unequal power dynamics among Korean diasporas in different countries.

In the third part of *Black Flower* Kim uses the mode of fiction to narrate an alternative, imagined scenario where Jo Jangyun, Ijeong and many other former bond labourers join the Mayan revolutionaries in Guatemala and attempt to create their own nation, New Korea amidst the dense jungles and ruined architectures of Tikal. Kim portrays this as an act of active political resistance against historical erasure. The creation of New Korea, though largely fictional, is portrayed to be a last desperate act of the Korean migrants to reclaim their voices and reject the exclusionary modes of nation-states. After they were denied entry in the sugar plantations of Hawaii, Jo Jangyun, the former soldier, was the first person

who proposed to create a newly organized nation with the few dozens of men who still remained in Mexico. However, his nationalist ideals were based on false fantasies and he ended up reiterating the very colonialist ideals he was opposing. On the other hand, Ijeong's nationalist ideals were more liberal and were grounded in the equality of class, religion, race, and gender. Ijeong's desire of founding a New Korea stemmed from his belief that nations-states were the roots of all evil and none of the nations he passed through "was the ultimate form of government he desired." (Kim, 2003/2012, 240). The creation of a new nation was a constant act of rejecting all ideas of nation and nationality. The ultimate failure of New Korea again chronicles a non-sensationalized picture of diasporic existence, as Lim (2021) comments: "Through the distinct temporality of "New Korea", created in the knowledge of its fated destruction, Ijeong argues that the only option for those rendered culturally and politically illegible is to dispense with the universalizing concept of "nation" itself" (215). In a way, the portrayal of resistance in *Black Flower* is manifested through a fervour to create new social and political orders while denouncing the old ones.

Conclusion

In the author's note of *Black Flower*, Kim (2003/2012) mentions that during the process of writing the novel, he thought himself to be a shaman who has been assigned to write the stories of the people who had been completely forgotten by history. As a shaman, he carries the past into the present. As for the name of the novel, Kim comments that black is a colour that combines all the other colours. Similarly, the novel is a combination of many elements, like religion, status, race and gender. However, black flower is something that does not exist in reality; it is only a creation of the imagination. In the same manner, the utopian dreams of the characters

in this novel were conjured up by their imagination which never materialized in reality. Kim recognizes the struggle of the 1,033 Korean migrants to enter the archival records and in that process, he also gives voices to their precarious journey from migration to slavery and ultimately to statelessness. *Black Flower* questions mainstream historiography's claim to empirical reality and challenges the institutionalized narrative that strategically discards the lives of peripheral people who continue to exist in an in-between space, never fully receiving historical consciousness. Despite the vast, epic-like structure of the novel, which at times diffuses the main plot, *Black Flower* remains the first work of fiction that chronicles the lived realities of people in an unknown diaspora. Even in his portrayal of an alternate history, Kim remains truthful to the idea of Koreanness through an authentic portrayal of Korean culture and spirituality that shined through the darkness of their precarious diaspora.

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