Considering the surge in popularity of Korean gadgetry, cars, music, film, and television, along with unprecedented international media coverage of Korean news, both North and South, there is, conversely, a considerable deficit of attention paid to contemporary Korean literature abroad. This is changing. The recent success of a very few writers and poets indicate that there is no better time than the present for Korean literature to appeal to a wider audience. If forms for us not only an introduction to Korean society as something more than a producer of affordable cars, phones, televisions, K-Pop, plastic-surgery clinics and fermented foods, but also the deeply human insight into another society, culture, and ourselves that only literature can offer.

Less we regress into some kind of post-colonial orientalism, the recent success of Adam Johnson’s *The Orphan Master’s Son* only adds to the urgency for contemporary Korean life to be introduced through the lens of its native literature. With that in mind, the potential importance of the English translation of Han Yujoo’s *The Impossible Fairytale* cannot be overstated.

Han Yujoo is a writer and translator who has lived and studied in France, and her own writing reverberates with the influence of French literary theory and philosophy, most notably that of Maurice Blanchot. Her novel, *The Impossible Fairytale*, illustrates how the most fundamental structures that govern society – such as a language that aims to govern thought – can break down and fracture. In the story Mia, a child described as lucky, who seems to receive everything she desires, is later murdered by The Child, who is described as neither lucky nor unlucky, but simply luck-less; Mia’s negation by The Child is a reflection of bourgeois society’s inability to cultivate an identity outside of materialism.

Mia is lucky only to the extent that she can manipulate her two fathers into giving her whatever she wants. The Child, purposefully nameless, represents an entire culture that neglects children who grow up in unfortunate circumstances. The tragedy is not that Mia is murdered by The Child, but that Mia never had a childhood to begin with: her family situation could be considered dubious at best, with a mostly absent mother and two peripheral fathers. The Child, on the other hand, represents everything Mia would be if she weren’t affluent. If stripped of possessions, The Child and Mia represent the same impossibility of a fairytale childhood in a bourgeois world.

There has yet to be a major breakthrough for a contemporary Korean novel of such style and literary merit. *The Impossible Fairytale* has all the narrative flair to overcome this but, more importantly, it offers the promise of introducing the English-speaking world to a novel of intellectual richness and complexity that is representative of a sophisticated culture both influenced by and influential to the West. As a point of comparison, Kim Young Ha’s novels (translated by Chi-Young Kim) have gained a readership through a mix of shock (*I Have the
Right to Destroy Myself, published in 1996) and sensationalism (Your Republic Is Calling You, published in 2006). Kyung Sook Shin’s Please Look after Mom (also translated by Chi-Young Kim, first published in 2008) offers audiences a packaged glimpse into Korean family culture that has long since – and notably – gone out of date. While these books broke through in Western markets, none of them reverberate with the intellectual complexity of Han’s book, and they represent a Korea which was either simplified or which is now outdated.

As with Yeon Sang-ho’s 2011 animated film King of Pigs or Kim Ki-duk’s 2012 film Pieta, violence in The Impossible Fairytale represents the psychological state of a culture and society constantly undergoing rapid transition. Between its miraculously post-war economy, newfound Christian religiosity and a suicide rate second only to Lithuania, it is difficult to make even the most superficial judgement on what is typically ‘Korean’ in contemporary Korea. Traditional systems of value that had dictated notions of community are constantly being replaced with celebrity worship and the relentless promotion of materialism as the new ideal. In the wake of the continual death and rebirth of this country lays a residue of psychological trauma that is continually covered up by market forces. It is in this residue where the conscience of a country lives, where its art comes from, and as much as K-Pop is the fetishized kitsch of teenage dreams, Korean literature and high art show that reality is much closer to the nightmare.

In that respect, perhaps it is better to compare Han Yujoo’s novel to the work of Kim Hyesoon, whose books of poetry, excellently translated by Don Mee Choi, are included in the conversation of everything avante-garde in contemporary poetry. Generally speaking, the reception of Kim Hyesoon in America has escaped the cultural voyeurism often common to works in translation when introduced to foreign markets. It is not that Kim’s poetry is not Korean, but that her innovative style and transcendent content are of such a high standard that her work in translation receives the same kind of reading it would receive in its native tongue. And partly because of this reception, the violence in Kim’s work has come to be regarded as a reflection of not only contemporary Korean life, but of contemporary life in a globalised world. Like the Marcel Proust adage that all great works of literature are written in a foreign language, great novels come to represent a milieu, transcending national and linguistic identity. In that sense, The Impossible Fairytale, a work of meta-fiction that questions the nature of subjectivity itself, should also be included in that quality of conversation. It is a book that holds the promise of achieving distinction for its great literary merit, and of elevating all contemporary Korean literature to something greater in the eyes of foreign readers.