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Precarity and Contemporary Korean Theatre in the Post-IMF Era: Voices of the '880 Thousand Won Generation'

Panel: Literature and Drama

Precarity now seems to be an undeniable global socio-cultural phenomenon. Precarity in more specific Korean context, however, immediately connects with the so-called 'IMF financial crisis in 1997' for most of the Korean people. Since 1997, Korea has become more rapidly integrated into the globalization process. By 2013, the so-called 'post-IMF syndrome' seem to characterize our society, namely the bi-polarization of its social brackets along with disruption of the middle-class bracket, that the nation had so laboriously been building up since the 1960's. Now Korean society reveals characteristics of global precarity such as widening gap between high-income and low-income brackets, the aristocratized Jaebol(big business combines) and small-medium businesses, intermittent labor, youth unemployment and the formation and spread of Korean precariat bracket.

In theatre sector, precariousness has been the specter ever haunting modern Korean theatre and theatre practitioners from its beginning in the 1920's to the present times. If the national agenda for liberation from Japanese colonialism characterized modern Korean theatre largely as a socio-cultural movement up until 1945, the year of Liberation, the same impetus continued to upgrade the national standards to match the international ones roughly up until 1997. Then the post-IMF era drastically affected and changed such characteristics of modern Korean theatre to those of theatre industry. Presently Korean theatre sector has become not only generally commercialized but also bi-polarized as well between million-dollar translated western musical productions dominating the market and small-space theatre productions struggling at the periphery.

Against this post-IMF background, this paper examines play productions by younger generation playwrights representing the so-called '880 Thousand Won' generation, focusing on how they address different aspects of precariousness and precariats rather indirectly. This paper explores the potential meaning and significance of such tendency as well.