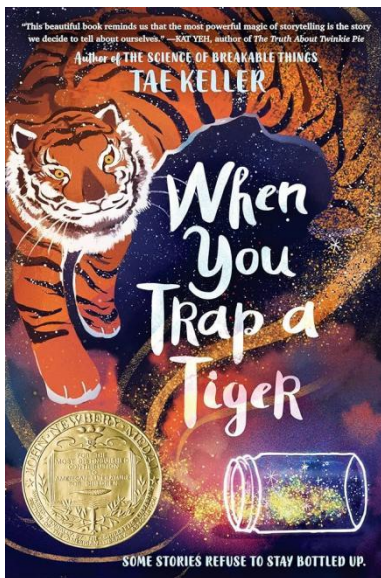


## Review of *When You Trap a Tiger* by Tae Keller

N. Nithila Mary\*  



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\*N. Nithila Mary, MA English Literature, Department of English, Stella Maris College (Autonomous), Affiliated to the University of Madras, Chennai - 600086, Tamil Nadu, India.

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*When You Trap a Tiger*, written by Tae Keller, incorporates Korean mythology and traditions. Keller captures Korean storytelling, legends, mythology, and cultural aspects in the story. The narrative follows the protagonist's quest to discover their ancestry as well as their encounter with a magical tiger. The novel crosses all bounds of time, showing the legends and their impact on the character's psyche. Keller's work also investigates Korean classical elements, where stories of spirits, ancient wisdom, and self-realisation serve as the means for separating the complexities of life and finding fulfillment. The customs and tales that comprise Korean folklore date back thousands of years. These stories have many different roots, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Shamanism, and, more recently, Christianity. Villages and other rural places were the birthplace of many folk traditions. Oral transmission was the primary method used to transmit customs and tales, while written records first surfaced in the fifth century.

Despite the modernization and decline in the practice of many traditions, folklore is still firmly ingrained in Korean culture, as evidenced by their religion, storytelling, art, and customs. In Korean culture, folklore comes in numerous forms, one of which is called Imuldam, and it revolves around supernatural creatures like ghosts, goblins, and monsters. The most prevalent creatures are called Dokkaebi, and they are essentially goblins with Korean characteristics. This term, however, is not the same as the European idea because it does not refer to something demonic or bad. Rather, they are beings endowed with abilities that aim to offer humans both happiness and suffering. These creatures interact with humans in friendly or bothersome ways. These entities' existence is said to be connected to both life's joys and challenges (Toyryla).

In *When You Trap a Tiger*, Tae Keller uses Korean folklore as the source of inspiration and uses elements like Imuldam and Dokkaebi to enhance the storyline. The novel employs supernatural creatures similar to those in Imuldam tales, such as ghosts, goblins, and monsters. The existence of the mystical tiger itself reflects the mythical attributes ascribed to Dokkaebi, with its unique character and transforming powers similar to the spirit world of the Korean goblins. Keller adds cultural authenticity and depth to the story by merging the mythological elements with the storyline, inviting people to explore the realm of Korean folklore while encountering the main character's journey of self-discovery and family connection.

Tae Keller is partially American and Korean. Her mother is also an author, and her grandmother would tell her stories. This novel is based on the stories that Halmoni would tell her. Still residing in America, the author remains intact in her culture. She is part of Lily and can relate to her own experiences. The author employs the genre of magical realism, a major element of the novel, in which a magical tiger visits Lily and communicates with her in a way that only she can perceive. The tiger helps Lily bring back her grandmother's health in exchange for stories that she stole from the tiger. Another part is where the stars are the stories that light up the dark, and they were stolen by Lily's grandmother. The sisters who escape from the tiger, Harris, are the sun and the moon.

The plot of *When You Trap a Tiger* effectively preserves and passes on cultural heritage from one generation to the next by incorporating Korean culture and folktales. A clear example of cultural transmission is Halmoni's habit of telling Lily traditional Korean folktales. Halmoni narrates a traditional story titled "The Tale of the Sun and the Moon" (Keller 37). The spiritual beings in this story are symbolic of the sun and the moon, engaging in conversation about their duties and functions. The narrative delves into the themes of responsibility and selflessness, underscoring the importance of fulfilling one's duties amidst challenges. Lily learns valuable lessons on determination, courage, and the interconnectedness of all things from Halmoni in this story. Halmoni makes sure that the cultural values, beliefs, and wisdom embodied in these stories are maintained and transmitted to upcoming generations by reciting them orally. Through the telling of these folktales, Lily learns more about Korean culture and grows to love her Korean ancestry.

*When You Trap a Tiger* is primarily based on Korean mythology, folktales, and Korean culture. Korean culture and folk literature are closely intertwined. They offer a window to the cultural, spiritual, and historical landscape of Korea, displaying a lively combination of myths, symbols, and cultural beliefs that have persisted through the ages. The Korean folktales draw inspiration from cosmological ideas, gods, and mythical creatures that can be found in Korean mythology, forming an interconnection between Korean mythology and folktales. Tae Keller effectively integrates mythological figures and Korean folklore in *When You Trap a Tiger*, enhancing the story's depth and symbolism. This novel also incorporates a significant amount of Korean vocabulary. For instance, the phrase Halmoni, which signifies grandmother, was used numerous times. Also, the terms Unya, which means older sister, and Eggi, which means younger sister, are used. Bulgogi, a Korean dish, is also mentioned.

The plot centres on Lily seeing a magical tiger. In Korean stories, tigers are magical creatures known for their power to change form and their mystical abilities. In this story, the tiger's proposal to heal Lily's grandmother in exchange for tales reflects the common theme in Korean folklore of making deals with supernatural beings. Tae Keller's description of the tiger effectively explains the magical realism.

This isn't like any tiger I've seen in a zoo. It's huge, as big as our car. The orange in its coat glows, and the black is as dark as moonless night. This tiger belongs in one of Halmoni's stories. I'm only focused on— The tiger lifts its enormous head—and it looks at me. It sees me. The big cat raises an eyebrow like it's daring me to do something. (Keller 12)

The tiger's presence and actions towards Lily reflect the role these guardians play in watching over and safeguarding those under their care. The tiger offering a bargain to Lily resembles motifs found in Korean folktales, where characters deal with supernatural beings. This folkloric motif pays tribute to Korean storytelling traditions and also serves as a catalyst for Lily's journey of self-discovery and

understanding her family's history.

The narration of Halmoni in the novel to Lily is layered with both mythological and historical facts, sharing some secrets from her past that she had kept to herself. The stories that Halmoni narrates often incorporate a large number of myths and personal experiences, which result in the preservation of cultural heritage while simultaneously capturing individual history. For instance, one tale is about a tiger changing its appearance as a man to hurt two sisters, while another is that of a woman who is half-human and half-tiger asking the sky God a question (Keller 37-39). These mythical elements in the novel symbolise a link between personal and cultural stories.

The majority of Korean literature, which focuses on the lives and customs of the Korean people, was passed down orally. Lily's grandmother tells her stories, and she passes them on to the next generation. Lily's grandmother's tales are suggestive of the diverse tales found in Korean folk literature, including folktales, mythologies, and shamanic songs, which offer insights into the lives and customs of the Korean people, capturing the essence of their cultural identity and traditions. Keller highlights the common aspect of Korean oral literature, emphasising its role in promoting connections within families and communities through the retelling of these stories.

Korean folk literature utilises a range of storytelling approaches, including the use of both prose and metrical verse. In *When You Trap a Tiger*, Tae Keller skillfully mixes aspects of Korean folk literature into the story, demonstrating various storytelling methods that reflect Korean cultural heritage. In Lily's grandmother's story about the magical tiger, she combines both everyday language and poetic verses to tell her tale (Song 4-7). The prose language helps create a clear structure, while the poetic verses add rhythm and imagery, making the story more engaging. This combination reflects the complexity of Korean folk literature and enriches the cultural aspects depicted in the novel.

Symbolism also plays a major role in this novel. Tiger, the main character, is used as a symbol in this novel. Traditionally, the tiger stands as a symbol for many different Korean cultural meanings, such as resilience, strength, and transformation, among others. Implying those symbolic meanings, Tae Keller provides a powerful place to discover resilience, coping, and growth. The tiger is not just a mythical creature but an inspiration that helps the characters learn about themselves and their growth process. For instance, when Lily's grandmother narrates stories about the tiger, she frequently underscores the amazing ability of the predator to overcome dangers. She narrates such stories as the tiger killing the hunter, or rather surviving a dangerous situation. These stories serve as the means through which the author can draw comparisons, helping readers feel more at ease when overcoming life's challenges. The tiger in Halmoni's stories represents strength, change, and a cultural legacy. Keller interweaves these themes throughout the story to guide Lily on her path of self-exploration. Lily finds courage within herself since the stories of

the tiger are the only thing her grandmother can speak about when she gets sick (Keller 42–43). Lily gets courage from these tales, which helps her overcome her fears and exhibit strength in the challenging times she and her family go through. Finally, the tiger is portrayed in the text as a defensive guard, as well as a source of strength and power for Lily as she struggles to understand herself. Additionally, the tiger's ability to take on different shapes and transcend boundaries reflects the theme of transformation in the novel (Keller 79). Journeying into her family's history as well as into herself, Lily is forced to face her origins and experience a remarkable transformation. The tiger serves as a necessary impulse for this transformation and helps Lily recognise her true essence and inner potential.

The symbolism of the sisters as the moon and the sun also connects to Carl Jung's theory on archetypes and collective unconsciousness. Jung believed that the collective unconscious manifests through universal archetypes, which are inherited symbols, signs, or behavioural patterns passed down from our ancestors. The sun and moon are archetypal images that stand against like and unlike forces such as lightness and darkness, consciousness, and subconsciousness. Lily, depicted as a younger sister who is connected to the sun, represents determinant qualities like power, fire, and knowledge of life, cementing the meaning of her way of self-understanding and conquering fears. On the other hand, while Sam, Lily's elder sister, falls into the moon category, they reflect aspects of personality traits such as introspection, mystery, unknown emotions, and the subconscious realm. The symbolic interplay has been the major theme of the novel, which not only portrays the archetypal forces but also highlights the way the archetypal forces operate within the relationship dynamics of individuals as the novel tells the story of their experiences.

Tae Keller expertly blends realism and magical realism. Realism is the mirror that represents real life, focusing on normal people's everyday struggles. In contrast, magical realism in a story contains an element of fantasy in a generally ordinary storyline, thus enabling the combination of enchantment and mystery with the familiar. Tae Keller blends these genres together to create a story that is magical, authentic, and relatable. In this novel, realism is seen in the depiction of everyday occurrences and individual connections. For instance, her relationship with her parents and problems with her grandmother's illness, which many young individuals experience, are portrayed in the story.

In addition, the story setting in a small town and the interactions among Lily's family create a sense of realism. On the other hand, magical realism is demonstrated by the appearance of the tiger and the supernatural elements in the plot. Tiger, who secretly appears and vanishes in the story, serves as a starting point for Lily's quest for self-discovery. Also, Halmoni's storytelling skill blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination. For instance, when Lily questions Halmoni about her worries, she responds with a tale of the tiger woman offering her strength to the sky god. This story intertwines the character's concerns with a magical realm of gods, where time bends and seasons change with the hero's

actions. The novel seamlessly integrates these magical moments into the storyline, inviting readers to explore a world of wonder and imagination through Halmoni's storytelling.

**Reference**

Keller, Tae. *When You Trap a Tiger: (Newbery Medal Winner)*. Random House Books for Young Readers, 2020.