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# Women and Korean Literature

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Helen Koh

In South Korea today, women writers are as numerous as their male counterparts, frequently winning top literary prizes and publishing best sellers. Several women are well-known public figures widely sought for interviews, lectures, and opinion pieces. Professional women writers appeared in Korea at the turn of the century, but only since the late 1960s have they noticeably grown in visibility and numbers. In fact, the number of women writing professionally has increased so sharply that by the 1990s conservative male literary critics and writers were complaining that Korean literature was inundated with young women eager to publish. This complaint reflects a changing literary landscape in which women, who had been marginalized by the literary establishment as in other public forums, became highly active. The right to publish and engage in social criticism are essential pillars of the public sphere and in Korea, as elsewhere, had long been the exclusive realm of male writers, poets and critics. To understand the significance of women being able to fully participate in Korean literature, we must first understand what it means for women to write.

## The Possibility of Writing for Women in Chosŏn Korea

Korean women had long been excluded from public participation, and similar to Europe, were considered domestic representatives of the family and home. Unlike Western Europe, however, the basis for the oppositional relationship between public and private did not originate in the bourgeois ethos, but in Confucian ethics. According to

Confucian cosmology, the split between the domestic or inner sphere and the public or outer sphere was personified by the separation of women and men into distinct orders. Women were restricted to the inner sanctum of domestic life and family care, while men properly occupied the outer realm that governed the life of the family – politics, ethics, and the ownership of property. Ideally, these two realms were considered complementary and were not necessarily hierarchical, but in fact women's exclusion from the outer realm meant the denial of formal education, legal rights, and economic means. The Chosŏn Period (1392-1910) was founded on Confucian principles. Confucianism places heavy emphasis on learning as a means of improving oneself, but education meant different things for men and women. For the elite class of men (*yangban*) virtue was obtained in book learning based on a Chinese-based classical education, which was necessary for self-cultivation and political participation. The purpose of education for *yangban* women was to prepare them for the domestic sphere, providers of the family's physical and psychic needs. Upper-class women were taught *han'gŭl*, the phonetic Korean script, since it was believed that women could benefit from reading simple rule books designed to convey complicated ideas. Women were taught proper conduct, speech, appearance and chastity, obedience, and duty were emphasized as the supreme female virtues. Reading biographies of virtuous women was also encouraged in the hopes that these self-sacrificing models would be emulated.

Even if a woman were educated, in an environment that discouraged them from expressing their opinions the possibilities for women to write were

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restricted. It was common, however, for women to circulate their poetry and written observations to other women. Thousands of private poems, *kyubang kasa* (lyrical verse of the inner room), written by women of privilege have been preserved. They record advice and thoughts on domestic life handed down to daughters and other female members of her family.<sup>1</sup> There also existed a class of public women known as *kisaeng* (professional courtesans) who were often literate. Considered low in the social strata, they were trained to entertain nobleman and poetry composition was part of their professional training in the arts. Famous *kisaeng* such as the celebrated Hwang Chini (16<sup>th</sup> century) were known for their skillful writing of *shijo* (3-line verse).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the work of talented mothers, sisters and wives to famous men, such as Shin Saimdang, Hō Nansōrhōn and Lady Hyegyōng have been preserved by their male kin and serve as shining examples of women's creative ability in an age when few women received an education.

Shin Saimdang (1504-1541) was and continues to be celebrated in South Korea as an exemplary woman of virtue – ideal daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, wife and homemaker.<sup>3</sup> Her fame is contingent on having been mother to an illustrious Confucian scholar, Yi I (known as Yulgok), and her female virtues were thought to have nurtured his scholarly success. More tangible than her maternal attributes for us today are the poetry and paintings she left behind. Saimdang was highly educated and wrote *shijo* poetry in both *han'gŭl* and classical Chinese, which few women had the opportunity to learn. Her exquisite paintings of plants, insects and pets precede the famous nature paintings by Japanese court ladies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by a decade. Even today her legacy is preserved in a shrine and ceremony in which Saimdang is honored as a paragon of motherhood and for her skill in poetry and painting. Another talented 16<sup>th</sup> century noblewoman, Hō Nansōrhōn (1563-1589), is recognized

as one of the foremost female poets in Chosōn Korea and as an exceptional Taoist poet as well. Along with her famous brother Hō Kyun, who is known to have written the first vernacular novel in Korea, Nansōrhōn was tutored along with her brother by a famous scholar and poet, Yi Tal. After her marriage, she wrote many *kyubang kasa* lamenting her solitary existence as a wife and mother. But Nansōrhōn also wrote poems that explore Taoist themes of immortality and fantastic journeys through nature in a collection called *Wandering Immortals*.<sup>4</sup> Upon Nansōrhōn's death at the age of 26, her famous brother compiled a volume of her poetry that had been collected by family members, ensuring the survival of her written legacy.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Lady Hyegyōng (1735-1815) recorded the tragic events of the royal family in four separate memoirs.<sup>5</sup> Born to an illustrious royal minister, Lady Hyegyōng was chosen as consort to Crown Prince Sado. Unfortunately the Crown Prince was plagued by mental illness and killed by the order of his own father, King Yōngjo, who ordered his son sealed in a rice chest until he expired. After the death of her husband, Hyegyōng was left powerless as Sado's disgraced widow. Yet she struggled to ensure that her eldest son, the new heir to the throne, would survive court intrigue seeking to prevent him from becoming king. Despite numerous hardships, Hyegyōng lived to see her son become King Chōngjo and her grandson also ascend the throne. Her memoirs offer a fascinating account of court life in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and record the intrigue and turmoil that plagued her natal and marital families. By reading them, we are afforded a glimpse into the mind of a woman who felt that it was important to record her own version of state, familial and personal events. Since women's writing at this time focused on the domestic sphere, Hyegyōng's memoirs are unique as a woman's account of court power struggles. Furthermore, her first-person narrative defies the standard convention

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of biographies, histories and memorials at the time, which were written for the purpose of transmitting Confucian moral principles through carefully prescribed themes while excising personal details. Lady Hyegyŏng clearly meant her memoirs to be a supplement to the official court records which she felt misrepresented the tragic events she had lived through. Each memoir was written with a purpose, either as an injunction to her maternal family or addressed to her son and grandson after they ascended the throne, respectively, in order to clear what she believed to be falsehoods in the official records. Through her memoirs, Lady Hyegyŏng transmitted her personal memory to recompose history and used her writing to inform public history.

### **Women in the Public Sphere: The New Woman**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chosŏn Period had proven itself unable to respond to the need for reform and modernization being forced upon East Asian countries by Western economic and military demands. The end of the Confucian social and political order was superseded by early modernization, called the New Age. In literature the appearance of the New Novel, the Modern Novel, and Modern Poetry opened up exciting possibilities for male and female writers. No longer was writing the official prerogative of scholars and historians who drafted court records, official biographies, moral treatises and political arguments according to Confucian rules of propriety. Appearing for the first time was the professional writer who attempted to earn a living publishing creative fiction, journalistic pieces, personal essays and social commentary. Perhaps more controversial than any other symbol of change in this era was the phenomenon of the New Woman, an educated and free-thinking individual who did not abide by traditional female virtues.

Her education alone made her unique since over 90% of Korean women were illiterate. The emergence of the New Woman was made possible by the work of early male reformers who considered the advancement of women coequal with modernization. In the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, nationalist reformers argued that the elevation of women's status was absolutely necessary if Korea was to be counted as one of the civilized nations of the world and, thus more importantly, earn the right to national sovereignty. To prove to the imperialist Western powers that Korea was a modern nation, reformers denounced Confucian patriarchy and advocated women's education and rights. The nationalists' support for the elevation of women's status shifted the paradigm from the chaste, obedient woman to the educated woman who was better able to serve her nation as a wise mother and good wife.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the phenomenon of the New Woman took hold of the public imagination and she appeared the subject of novels, short stories and movies.<sup>6</sup> In concrete terms the New Woman was usually a female student, teacher or writer, a graduate of one of the new girls' schools that had been established by Christian missionaries or royal patronage. The acceptance of education for women helped make legitimate social roles for women outside the home. The inception of the New Woman is perhaps most synonymous with the rise of the first professional women writers in Korea – Na Hyesŏk, Kim Myŏngsun and Kim Wŏnju. All three attended elite girls' high schools in Korea and Na Hyesŏk and Kim Wŏnju traveled to Japan to receive higher education. They were talented writers, essayists and artists who were initially hailed by the literary establishment for their talents. Their lives were subject to great public scrutiny, however, and eventually they would be censured for advocating free love and defying the conventions of monogamous marriage. Their male colleagues would also

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denounce them for immorality and blindly pursuing Western bourgeois values. The tragic lives of these women expose the incompatibility of the New Woman ideal with the limits of social tolerance. The belief that women's self-determination must be subsumed to the greater interests of the family and the nation prevailed, even among the most reform-minded male intellectuals, writers and artists in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Among the pioneer novelists, Kim Myöngsun (1896-1951) is acknowledged as the first woman to have been published.<sup>7</sup> Her short story, "Suspicious Girl," won second prize in 1917 in a contest sponsored by *Youth* (Ch'öngch'un), one of the first and most influential literary journals founded in Korea in the 1910s.<sup>8</sup> She was endorsed by the most influential modern writers of the time, Yi Kwangsu and Cho Namsön, the founder of *Youth*. For the contest, Kim's short story was praised as truly modern, in that it was absent the didacticism that characterized Confucian writing and which was considered a negative influence on the development of modern fiction. Briefly, the story is about a teenage girl who has run away from her father, a government official. The girl of the title is suspicious to those in the village in which she has briefly settled with her grandfather and is equally suspicious of others. The reader learns the reason for the girl's unhappiness. Her mother, a former *kisaeng*, had killed herself due to her husband's mistreatment. At the close of the story her father's diligent pursuit seems to be gaining ground and the girl is forced to flee again. The characters in "Suspicious Girl" are similar to Kim's own family. Her mother, a former *kisaeng* turned concubine, died when she was a child and she grew up unhappily in her father's wealthy household. Her father's wealth, however, enabled her to attend the elite Chinmyöng's Girl's School. Throughout her life, Kim Myöngsun's fiction and poetry would contain reflections on her difficult existence. Kim never married and struggled to support her creative writ-

ing through the few jobs available to women, as a journalist, actress and peddler. Although she initially benefited from Yi Kwangsu's patronage, years later he accused Kim of plagiarizing a Japanese work in her first debut story. Other male writers who had initially praised her work also denounced Kim Myöngsun as a foolish and willful New Woman. Even though Yi's charges were never proven, it was enough to ruin Kim's reputation and she stopped publishing. Little is known of her later years when she moved to Japan and supported herself as an itinerant peddler, but she is reputed to have died destitute in a mental asylum. The rapid decline of Kim Myöngsun's career shows how absolutely critical it was for women who were so few in number to maintain the endorsement of the male literary establishment.

Na Hyesök (1896-1948) was a pioneering writer and the first women oil painter in Korea. Na attended the same high school as Kim Myöngsun and she had the support of her family to pursue higher education in Japan, where she attended the Tokyo Arts College. Upon her return to Korea, Na became active in literary circles. She wrote creative fiction and personal essays and helped to found several important literary journals, such as *Ruins* (P'yeho) and *New Woman* (Shin yöja). A short story written in 1918, "Kyunghee" is remarkable among early works of modern fiction for the interiority given the female protagonist.<sup>9</sup> The story is about a young woman educated in Japan who returns to Korea and is confronted with the necessity to marry. In the author's own life, Na married a diplomat, which put her in the enviable position of being able to travel widely in Europe and the U.S. Na's early success seemed to affirm the possibility of a woman being able to follow her own literary and artistic pursuits, while still satisfying the social obligation to marry and bear children. What eventually destroyed Na's life and career, however, was her outspoken support of free love and her well-publicized love

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affairs. From an early age, Na had been used to expressing her thoughts freely and fully drew upon her personal life in her writing. Her glamorous life and active writing career brought great public scrutiny to bear upon her private affairs. Her husband eventually divorced her and she was disowned by her family. Na died destitute in a charity ward. Despite all the privileges accorded her, Na Hyesök was unable to withstand the condemnation of a society that might admire the New Woman in the abstract but was unable to tolerate a woman's provocative rejection of traditional morality.

More than any of the women discussed, it was Kim Wönju (1896-1971) who most clearly defined the New Woman. Kim is considered one of the most outspoken and controversial feminist critics of her day.<sup>10</sup> Politically active and ideologically feminist, Kim wrote numerous essays on education, reforming the family system, gender-equality and self-realization for women. While a student at Ehwa Girl's School, she participated in the March 1, 1919 Independence Movement. Kim was the daughter of a devout Protestant minister and an enlightened mother who enabled her to study in Japan for several years. Like Na Hyesök, Kim was prominent in literary circles upon her return to Korea. She wrote and published in major newspapers and helped to found several literary journals that were an important forum for public discussion and literary experimentation. In addition, Kim Wönju was the first founding editor of *New Woman* (Shin yöja). *New Woman* gave women of the day a forum to publish their thoughts and ideas on social and personal issues, and included the creative writing and artistic work of Kim's friends.

As an example of the feminist agenda made explicit in Kim's short stories, the "Awakening" (1926) takes as its protagonist, a so-called traditional woman who through a twist of fate becomes a

New Woman.<sup>11</sup> Written as an epistolary short story, the protagonist explains why she, once a devoted wife and mother, decides to divorce her unfaithful husband and give up her son to pursue an education and, thereby, establish her independence. The idea of a woman initiating divorce and especially renouncing motherhood shocked her audience at the time and even today remains a controversial act. In Kim Wönju's own life, the public condemnation against her had less to do with her writing than the scandals surrounding her own divorce and love affairs with prominent men. Kim found refuge in Buddhism. From 1927, she became an editor of a Buddhist journal. Her increasing commitment to a Buddhist way of life culminated in her becoming a nun and entering a temple in 1933. Although Kim would continue to write, by the 1940s she no longer expressed her opinion on women's issues and published only articles on Buddhism. Kim Wönju perhaps best survived the calamities suffered by the pioneering female writers, but at the cost of no longer writing as a New Woman.

### **Professional Women Writers in the Industrial Age**

The 1960s and 1970s is known as the age of industrialization in South Korea, a period in which the authoritarian government declared a mandate for economic growth through rapid industrialization and increased exports. In order to achieve its economic goals, the state suspended civil liberties, supported the exploitation of labor and condoned rural destruction as necessary for the national good. Increased economic inequity and the gross violation of human rights gave rise to powerful anti-state nationalist movements that were critical of capitalist modernization. An important vanguard against the authoritarian state was the National Literature movement that sought to expose and defy state-

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defined nationalism as supporting only the interests of the nation's elite – the state, the entrepreneurial class, the military, and the church. Writing was believed to be a powerful means by which to educate and stimulate the people against oppression. In this tumultuous period, society underwent a massive transformation and the social chaos that ensued forced many Koreans to re-evaluate their history, customs and conventions which no longer seemed to make sense in the face of enormous upheaval.

As painful as industrialization was for most Koreans who lived through the 1960s through 1980s, it helped create a sizable middle-class and consumer culture with a high degree of literacy. The requirement of primary school education ensured that women would no longer be illiterate, although daughters were usually passed over for higher education in favor of their brothers. Professional writers were now able to publish in the burgeoning commercial presses and the 1970s witnessed the advent of the best-selling author who enjoyed fame and financial reward. Including in the ranks of the literati were women writers, whose numbers had grown substantially since the late 1960s. While most women writers were still struggling to be recognized and to support themselves as professional writers, a few attained phenomenal commercial success. Pak Kyöng-ni's 14-volume family saga called *Land* (Toji) helped to start a literary trend of multi-volume historical novels.<sup>12</sup> At a time when many Koreans were struggling to reinterpret and analyze their history, this popular form of novel writing attracted a large audience of readers. Born in 1926, Pak Kyöng-ni began writing short stories in the 1950s about the horrors of the Korean War (1950-53). Like most women writers, she also wrote novels about marriage and family life. The first volume of *Land* was published in the late 1960s and Pak would continue to publish volume after volume of this popular novel for the next

two decades, making her one of the best-selling women writers of all time.

Another critically and commercially successful writer is Pak Wansö who first published in 1970 when she was 40 years old, unusual for the fact that most professional writers in Korea debut by winning literary prizes while in their 20s.<sup>13</sup> Pak Wansö has a loyal following and is one of the first Korean writers, male or female, to enjoy widespread commercial success. A prolific writer who writes persistently on the problems inherent in Korean society, she is also committed to expanding our awareness of women's issues.<sup>14</sup> Her most critically acclaimed works challenge Koreans to better understand their own history and its effects on the present, particularly the devastating consequences of the internecine Korean War. Although Pak Wansö is considered a writer of prose fiction, she has drawn upon the facts of her own life to publish several important works of autobiographical fiction. And like the pioneering women writers before her Pak Wansö relies on her own experiences to delve into the difficulties facing women in a patriarchal society. Her answers are never simple and she is as critical of women's attitudes towards each other as she is about men's callous treatment of women. Unlike her pioneering sisters, however, in Pak Wansö's case her individualistic and unsparing critique of Korean society have made her a well-respected and beloved writer.

#### NOTES

- 1 Kichung Kim, "Kyubang Kasa: The Unpublished Poetry of Chosön Dynasty Women," *Korean Culture* 14:1 (Spring 1993): 22-31.
- 2 See Kathleen McCarthy, "Kisaeng and Poetry in the Koryö Period," *Korean Culture* 15:2 (Summer 1994): 6-13. The title is misleading since

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McCarthy includes a discussion of the Chosŏn period as well.

- 3 See Kichung Kim, "The Poetry of Chosŏn Women," *Korean Culture* 13:1 (Spring 1992): 8-20.
- 4 Yang Hi Choe-Wall, "The Impact of Taoism on the Literature of Mid-Chosŏn, 1568-1724" in *Korean Studies: New Pacific Currents*, ed. Dae-sook Suh (Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 1994), 113-124.
- 5 JaHyun Kim Haboush, *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong: The Autobiographical Writings of a Crown Princess of Eighteenth-century Korea* (Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1996).
- 6 The first full-length feature films were made in Korea in the early 1920s, although kino dramas (plays that incorporated film footage) had been in existence since the late 1910s. Not only did films depict the New Woman but many of the actresses themselves embodied qualities associated with the New Woman.
- 7 Carolyn So, "Seeing the Silent Pen: Kim Myŏngsun (1896-c.1951) Pioneering Woman Writer" in *Korean Culture* 15:2 (Summer 1994): 34-40.
- 8 There is no published English translation of "Suspicious Girl" that I am aware of.
- 9 I know of no published English translation of "Kyunghee" to date.
- 10 Yung-Hee Kim, "From Subservience to Autonomy: Kim Wŏnju's 'Awakening,'" in *Korean Studies* Vol. 21 (1997): 1-21.
- 11 Kim Wŏnju, "Awakening," trans. Yung-Hee Kim in *Korean Studies* Vol. 21 (1997): 22-30.
- 12 The first volume of *Land* has been translated and published in English. See *Land*, trans. Tennant (London: Paul Kegan International, 1996).
- 13 See Pak Wansŏ, *Naked Tree*, trans. Yu Young-nan (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University East Asia Series, 1995).
- 14 Pak Wansŏ's work has been included in several collections of Korean short stories published in English. For the largest selection of translated stories in one collection, see *My Very Last Possession*, ed. Chun Kyung-Ja (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

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