

PART ONE  
CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION

*Then the world had changed abruptly ever since the Sino-Japanese war of 1894, and the Kabo reforms, and many old men had fallen behind the times, and now passed their days in desolate loneliness... Before 1894, when the old man was in his prime, he must have thought the rivers and mountains of P'yŏngyang, and all the people in the world, existed for him. With the cannonfire from Ŭlmil Pavilion in the 1894, though, the peaceful times he had dreamed of were shattered, and a new age began, like a flash of lightening in the darkness. He became a person abandoned by the world, and young people whom he did not know and have never seen before, took over. He knew nothing about railroads, telegraphs, telephones, submarines or torpedo boats... Since he would never realize what this new world was like, it was as though he were living outside of the world, even though he dwelled within it. Hyŏng-sik and the old man were people of different countries, who do not speak or write the same language, thought Hyŏng-sik. He is a man behind his times, a man living in the past.<sup>1</sup>*

The old man had *fallen behind the times* and he knew nothing of railroads, telegraphs, and telephones that seem to appear with the abrupt changes of 1894, with the change in world order as Japan defeats China in the Sino-Japanese War, the suppression of the peasant's cry for economic reform in the Kabo Peasant Rebellion, and the changes in society brought on by the Kabo reforms. Just as the quote above articulates, it was an abrupt change that came with violence, chaos, confusion and

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<sup>1</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujŏng*. p.215

uncertainty to the mass majority of the people who knew nothing of the world outside Korea that have modernized before them and now were entering to threaten Korea's sovereignty and world order. What did this *new age* mean in Korea at the turn of the century? Yi Kwangsu says that since the old men knew nothing of this new world it was as though they were living outside of this process of transition or *abandoned* by this new age. In his articulation we see his vision of a new world without the remnants of the old, he seeks to eliminate the man living in the past and looks to the young people who will take Korea through modernization. In his vision of a new age, he imagines a world where language and thought sever the old man from the new man. New language and thought then becomes a project of modernity that called for the reconstruction of society. And in Korea, this reconstruction of society at the turn of the century was in large part directed at women. In this paper I would like to examine the meaning of modernity that Yi Kwangsu and the early enlightenment thinkers sought through social gender reconstruction, and its significance and various mechanisms that were specific to Korean modernity, which sought to harness the contradictions of modernity through a concept called love.

I will look at novels *Mujǒng*, *Hwanhŭi*, and *Kim Yǒnsil ch'on* as commentaries on Korean modernity in their portrayal of women and society during a specific time in Korean History that is characterized by the transition I mentioned above. When the enlightenment thinkers in the 1890s first promoted civilization, nationalism and social reform, they targeted the traditions and perspectives defining women's role in society. Kenneth Wells says in his discussion "Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement,

*Korean society historically presents an almost prima facie case for using gender as an interpretive framework. The metaphysics, mores, human functions, architectural designs, spatial divisions, and state ideology of the Chosŏn dynasty were so consciously organized with reference to gender*

*principles that instead of a social construction of gender one might justifiably speak of gendered construction of Korean society.*<sup>2</sup>

I will examine this “gendered construction” in modernity and think about its function, its limits, its manifestations and its purported mission in order to reveal the struggle as seen in the selected literature.

1894 marked a violent and chaotic turning point in Korean history, which made it clear that the structures of Chosŏn dynasty were no longer able to sustain the internal and external pressures suffocating Korea. 1894 also revealed Korea’s failure to process modernity according to its own agendas. The transition was manipulated and influenced by foreign forces and created a precedent that repeatedly plagued Korea’s course through modernization. In this context civilization, nationalism and social reconstruction did not mean addressing “real” and urgent Korean problems arising from the breakdown of feudal order, economic disparity, social injustices and political chaos, instead it meant privileging and forcing a modern structure that seemed powerful, dazzling and foreign. Yi Kwangsu repeatedly says, “the only way for Koreans to survive would be to bring the Korean people to the same level of civilization as that of all the most civilized peoples in the world – that is, the same level of civilization as that of the Japanese people.” (*Mujŏng*, 130) I am not strictly adhering to the idea that Korean modernization merely imitated Japanese and European modernization. I want to examine through *Mujŏng* how this foreign modernization process, expressed through the new women and love construct, was internalized and how it reacted to the flow of events in Korea. I want to address questions such as –what was the significance of love as an ideology during the

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<sup>2</sup> Wells, Kenneth M. “The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931,” p.193

colonial period? What did it help accomplish and where did it fail? Yi Kwangsu laid the foundation of love as a hegemonic ideological construct in which the new woman becomes the harbinger of society bringing with her the ideas of nuclear family, free marriage and divorce, romance and education. She is the ideal mother who possesses modern refinement and individuality, a symbol of Korea's modern consciousness and progress. But because she is part of the reconstruction efforts, she does not obtain autonomy or subjectivity that should have come with her "liberation from tradition." The ideology behind love comes to harness her freedom in marriage and stands in to sanctify the family through which she is required to willingly give up her autonomy. Her chastity and devotion to family becomes the ultimate symbol of her patriotism, her devotion to progress.

Threat of imperialism, which eventually became a reality with the colonization of Korea, unleashed several other evils adding to the angst and hopelessness of Korea's already deteriorated state. In part two, I look at the "gendered construction" at this stage in Korean history through *Hwanhŭi* (Na Tohyang) and *Kim Yŏnsil ch'eon* (Kim Tongin). Each of these novels reveals a different "evil" of modernization under colonialism and provides insight into the limits and manifestation of the modern structures envisioned by the enlightenment thinkers of 1890s. In *Hwanhŭi*, the angst and desperation arising from the contradiction of modernity, in its desire for the liberated and harnessed women, and the uncertainty and confusion over the unbridled passion are depicted in the senseless acts and passion of the characters who fall madly in "love" after one glance and condemn themselves to anguish because of an "unchaste" act. Whereas in *Kim Yŏnsil ch'eon*, the degenerate state of society is said to produced a menace to society who feels no shame in her ridiculous pursuit of becoming the new woman. It uses a satirical and harsh tone to describe a female

protagonist who represents not the new woman, but the modern girl, a product of senseless and lewd consumer of foreign goods who must be humiliated and stopped.

Various trends resulting from the project of modernization in Korea can be seen in these novels, coming out of the explosion of literature and arts, what is known as culture, in Korea after the 1894 in the form of modernism. I want to borrow Rita Felski's definition of *modernization, modernism, and modernity* as I continue to discuss Korea's project at the turn of the century. She says,

*Modernization is usually taken to denote the complex constellation of socioeconomic phenomena which originated in the context of Western development but which have since manifested themselves around the globe in various forms: scientific and technological innovation, the industrialization of production, rapid urbanization, and ever expanding capitalist market, the development of the nation-state, and so on.*<sup>3</sup>

Korea's experiences after it was forced to open its harbors and its market to foreign in 1870 can be seen as the first socioeconomic phenomena of modernization. Creating a social structure that supports a modern economy, which has already been established by the foreign powers, meant a rapid change in people's relationships and activities to their surroundings. Just as the old man in Yi's imagination had no capacity to incorporate himself into this new imagined relationship, many people at the time felt overwhelmed by the force of the changes that were taking place. At the beginning of Chosŏn dynasty, Neo-Confucius ideology created a social structure, defining familial, communal and labor relationships that supported the new economy of small-scale agriculture farming. But in light of the deterioration in economy, social and political structures, there needed to be a new ideology that replaced Neo-Confucianism, an ideology that created new social structures that catered to the changes. Modernization

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<sup>3</sup> Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. p.13

at this time was a process of undergoing social transformation to fit the new economical agendas, demands not favoring the peasants, like the old man, but favoring the arising capitalists, self-conscious foreign educated elites and foreign capitalist who saw Korea as an untapped resource.

Reaction to and support of social reconstruction in the process of modernization was expressed in the realm of modernism, which Felski defines as follows:

*Modernism, by contrast, defines a specific form of artistic production, serving as an umbrella term for a mélange of artistic schools and styles which first arose in late-nineteenth-century Europe and America. Characterized by such features as aesthetic self-consciousness, stylistic fragmentation, and a question of representation, modernist texts bore a highly ambivalent and often critical relationship to process of modernization. The French term modernité, while also concerned with a distinctively modern sense of dislocation and ambiguity, locates it in the more general experience of the aestheticization of everyday life, as exemplified in the ephemeral and transitory qualities of an urban culture shaped by the imperatives of fashion, consumerism, and constant innovation.<sup>4</sup>*

Korea's self-awareness and its fear of the threat of foreign nations became the crucial factor in Korea's aesthetic self-consciousness as reflected in Korea's literature.

Everything from fashion, consumerism, and constant innovation that caught fire after 1890 reflected Korea's experience of the aestheticization of everyday life as unbridled, sentimental, consumed with angst and listless passion that becomes self-destructive, thus the theme of love-suicide takes unprecedented popularity among the youth. There is an abrupt severing of the old man and the new man as Yi Kwangsu defines them in this urban culture. According to Felski, "Increasingly, "modern" was to become

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<sup>4</sup> ibid.

synonymous with the repudiation of the past and a commitment to change and the values of the future.” It is a project to create a culture that is stylistically and ideologically different from that of the past. It is driven more by passion and desperation, and it is self-conscious and filled with inferiority complexes. The gendered construction is an expression of this modernism.

Lastly, Felski defines modernity as follows:

*...modernity is often used as an overarching periodizing term to denote a historical era which may encompass any or all of the above features. This epochal meaning of the term typically includes a general philosophical distinction between traditional societies, which are structured around the omnipresence of divine authority, and a modern secularized universe predicated upon an individuated and self-conscious subjectivity.*<sup>5</sup>

This last categorization speaks about the change in philosophical understanding of the relationship between individuals and society. The distinction between traditional society and modern society is marked by a new found subjectivity that privileges individuality. But people are asked to conform to a belief in individuality, and such belief becomes an unquestioned social norm.

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<sup>5</sup> ibid.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FROM OLD TO NEW: A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

Three major events in 1894 mark a turning point in Korean history from old to new: the Kabo Peasant's Rebellion, the Sino-Japanese War and the Kabo Reform initiated under the Japanese by a pro-Japanese cabinet. These events reflected the break down of the feudal system, of Neo-Confucianism as an ideology and an end to Chinese order. Korea becomes enmeshed under foreign influences, foreshadowing the onset of imperialism. We witness the breakdown of feudal economic system as Korea's rice gets sold in the international market, and the differentiation of wealth under feudal land system becomes aggravated to a point of violent peasant rebellion. Peasants by this time have been suffering under the repressive feudal economic system of heavy taxation and corruption of local officials who accumulated land by abusing their power. At this time tax grew to be more than 50% of their harvest and more than 10% of the population became landless. Bruce Cumings in *Korea's Place in the Sun* quotes Isabella Bird Bishop saying, "...she found but two social classes, "the Robbers and the Robbed"; the yangban were "the licensed vampires of the country," and the other four-fifth of the nation "supply the blood for the vampires to suck." <sup>6</sup> Taxes ranged from government, land, fallow field, military, local officials, local estates, commodities such as salt, fish, boat, and babies, elders, relatives and even the dead were taxed. <sup>7</sup> And when you couldn't pay the extortionate tax you took out a loan on high interest and ultimately lost your land, in addition to becoming indebted for the rest of your life. The Kabo Peasant Rebellion was the culmination of these severe injustices.

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<sup>6</sup> Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. p.128

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.115



Out of the cry of the peasants, what resulted was not a genuine attempt to make economic changes and mend the ills of society plaguing Korea at the time, but a violent suppression of the peasants and a change in the world order, and an abrupt change in society through various reforms instigated by Japan under the name of progress and modernization. King Kojong alarmed by the violence and force of the rebellion turned to China for support. King Kojong's call to China provided Japan with an excuse to send in their troops. This was made possible by the 1884 treaty between Japan and China, which stipulated that when one side sends in troops the other side must be notified and is allowed to send in their troops in return. During this time, many powerful Japanese merchants were shipping Korea's rice to Japan, gradually asserting their influence over Korea. Japan was waiting for a chance to oust China and rid Korea of Chinese influence. This is how the Sino-Japanese war came to be fought on Korean soil. When King Kojong saw that Japanese troops were advancing, he made another crucial error and asked the peasant army to disband for the sake of national crisis. The peasant army disbanded, which gave free reign for Japanese army to move up North. In turn, the peasant army rose up once again to fight Japanese imperialism but their reaction was belated. The peasants were suppressed easily by 1895. Japan's victory over China signaled in this way not only an end to Chinese order, but again a putting aside of the real problems concerning the peasants. The problem between the landlords and peasants under the strain of the breakdown of feudal order should have climaxed with the Kabo Peasant Rebellion, which was really a latent force since the 1590s. But while other feudal structures such as social, ideological, and political were changed with the Kabo reform, the land-system remained feudal; a repressive economic structure remained in tact.

Many site the Kabo Reform as the first attempt in Korea to create a modern nation-state. But it was a clumsy progression from feudal to modern in the sense that

the conflict between the peasant and landlord course of reform regarding the basic land issue was not allowed to resolve itself due to foreign intervention. It is hard to tell what would have happened without foreign interferences. Nevertheless, as it was then, modernization meant something different for Korea than for other countries not only in the sense of its belatedness but in the pressures it received from external powers. When Korean peasants banded together to rebel in 1894, they had already a decade of resistance under their belt, under Tonghak leaders they were by this time becoming more politically conscious and modern. Cumings says, “A classic peasant rebellion had turned into a modern demand for agrarian revolution – all in the name of restoring a proper moral and political order, The rebels had fought Japanese soldiers in the name of “our nation” (*urinarā*), a kind of proto-nationalism. Korea was getting more and more “modern” all the time.”<sup>8</sup> It seems that Kabo Peasant Rebellion was one of internal process toward modernization that was ruthlessly suppressed by Japan. And already we see the Korean aristocracy collaborating with the Japanese to secure their exploitative interests. Many Koreans believe that Japanese colonialism “did nothing for Korea except retard a progressive drive already well under way before 1910.”<sup>9</sup> They believed that economic impetus for modernization was retarded due to the fact that the conflict between landlord and peasant course of reform, which is indicative of the breakdown of feudal order, was not allowed resolution on its own terms. Japanese colonization maintained the feudal landlord system for its own economic benefit and stimulated changes in ideological, social and political realm. It implemented a bureaucratic state system that was so thorough it was able to penetrate into daily lives. And social changes with the Kabo reform began to restructure traditions and perspectives. Under Kabo reform many issues pertinent to women’s status was

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 118

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p. 132

changed. Remarriage for widows was legalized, social status system and child marriages were abolished.<sup>10</sup> New system of public schools, which included primary and middle schools, normal schools, and foreign language schools appeared. And in 1886, Royal Academy was established by the Korean government to teach Western knowledge<sup>11</sup>. There were also many private schools founded by Protestant missionaries that contributed to Education efforts in Korea. The first women school, Ewha Girls School, was founded in 1886 by American missionaries.

Although Kabo reform seemed like the first progressive attempt to build a nation-state in Korea, its reforms addressed feudal societal construct without addressing the feudal nature of economy and did nothing to protect the Korean merchants from the growing market economy that foreign merchants were manipulating. But the effects of social changes were beginning to instigate change in others aspects of Korean society. For example a significant event is the launching of the newspaper *The Independent* in 1896, which was the first newspaper using pure Korean script and also to print in English. Thus the first capitalistic enterprise essential to creating a modern state began, creating a new form of intellectual production that changed the relationship between the state and society, and society and economy. Through this new medium, the Independence club founded in 1896 attempted to spread modern and western civilization. The Independence Club lead by western educated scholars like Sŏ Chaep'il and Yun Ch'ihŏ, began to campaign for two concepts, civilization and nationalism. Faced with the threat of Russia and Japanese imperialism, they turned to the western model of civilization. Korea had always seen themselves as a civilized country because of their long history of association with China, which they considered the most civilized nation, but with the opening of the

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<sup>10</sup> Kim, Yung-chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. p.215

<sup>11</sup> Eckert, Carter J. *Korea Old and New A History*. p.247

ports and with China falling behind the race of modernization, Korea saw themselves as barbaric, at the bottom rung of civilization. We see that the definition of civilization changed from that of Neo-Confucianism to Westernization. There was a clear sense of inferiority complex. Korea saw themselves just 50 years ago as a superior and civilized country, but now with this new consciousness of the West they saw themselves as inferior. Their efforts and urgency to reconstruct society can be said to stem from this complex. New social institution of learning and change in social structures needed to penetrate into people's daily lives and change the very mindset of the people. Sŏ Chaep'il used the newspaper to press feminist issues and "stimulated public awareness of women's issues as one of the most pressing national priorities that had to be practically and forcefully tackled."<sup>12</sup> These reformers influenced by Social Darwinism, which had a linear view of history adopted the revolutionary model and tried to put Korea on the path toward civilization. Thus with the growing threat of Russia and Japanese imperialism, Korean promoted nationalism by asking the people to join the modernizing efforts and included Korean women who represented half of the entire population. Under the Social Darwinian model, Korea can move from barbarism to civilization by rejecting old ideology and embracing quickly a unique national spirit and imitating Western civilizing agencies. Although this idea of unique national spirit and imitating the West seem contradictory, the reformers at this time believed that Korea's national sprit was lost due to the many years of tributary relationship with China; Korea's efforts toward civilization from the onset was plague with urgency, inferiority complex and awe of the West.

Christianity exerted a tremendous effort to this milieu and contributed largely to the education and social transformation efforts in Korea from early 1880's. The women's movement also owes its impetus largely to Christianity. The very first

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<sup>12</sup> Kim, Yung-hee. "From Subservience to Autonomy". p. 3

women school founded in 1886 was due to the efforts of an American missionary Mary Fitch Scranton. Mrs. Scranton, in line with the national reformers, expressed her desire to make Koreans “better Korean and proud of things Korean.”<sup>13</sup> Introducing women education to Korea at the time was a very “revolutionary” move, since there was no social structure to support the women who would have to internalize different social relations as they set their foot outside to attend school and participate in activities that went against their traditional customs. Becoming a better Korean in this sense also meant rejecting traditional values and becoming more Western. Christianity in Korea also fell within this contradictory framework of nationalism and civilization. Nationalist reformers call for enlightenment and civilization, which meant change in social customs and ideology, and the Christian schools provided a perfect place to grow individuals with such consciousness. As the women from these schools became pioneers of education and they themselves started to educate illiterate women of Korea in the backward regions of the country, they were participating in the social expression of their patriotism.<sup>14</sup>

The impetus for women’s liberation movement thus began in this way. The events overlapping and twisting Korean politics with the changing world order, the efforts to modernized Korea under the threat of imperialism, followed by the American missionaries efforts to convert and civilize Korea and the leading male intellectuals of the time leading and supporting change in society from that of the old to the new. The first women’s organization Ch’an’yang-hoe formed in 1898 reflects the demands made on women to participate in the modernization efforts before they had a chance to fully address their own problems as women. They were asked to

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<sup>13</sup> Kim, Yung-chung, ed. *Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945*. p.220

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 222

adhere to a new image of women, which sought to erase the Confucian women and contribute to securing national strength:

*The Independence Club proposed to secure practical benefits from such education. It pointed out that one of the reasons Korea lagged behind Japan and Western nations was the neglect of women's education and prohibition of women's social participation. It also asserted that if women were not given education, half of the Korean population would be of no use and, furthermore, such ignorance would jeopardize the education of the future generation which would ultimately result in the deterioration of the national well-being. It would follow, therefore, that if only women were well educated, then the Enlightenment Movement would be promoted accordingly.<sup>15</sup>*

Thus women's modernization became crucial in the effort to modernize Korea, because she had to be used to cultivate future modern beings who are capable of securing Korea's place in the world order. The goal of the Ch'an'yang-hoe was to begin schools for girls to share in the responsibility in building a progressive society. The members were usually housewives from wealthy upper class families in the northern part of Seoul<sup>16</sup>, male supporters and several foreign women, who from the beginning acted together with the Independence Club. They were able to petition the King and founded the Sunŏng Girls School. Although the organization dissolved along with the Independence Club for political reasons, it initiated other organization and education efforts. The surge of education efforts continued well into the Japanese protectorate agreement in 1905. Under the Japanese protectorate agreement, which lead to colonization in 1910, educational and Christian activities were the only activities sanctioned. Furthermore, the Japanese helped organized movement such as

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<sup>15</sup> Kim, Yung-chung. "Women's Movement in Modern Korea." p. 81

<sup>16</sup> Kim, Yung-chun, *Women of Korea*. p. 223

the Korean-Japanese Women's Society (1906) to pursue women's education and rights. Disguised under the benevolent charitable activities or to promote friendship with the Koreans to modernize them toward independence, these organizations worked to spread pro-Japanese sentiments toward a Japanese expansion policy. Because it allowed women's organization to expand its educational policy and help bring in Western culture and awareness about women's issues such as free marriage and divorce, it appealed to upper-class women who saw modernity as their emancipation. On the other hand, because of the pro-Japanese and upper class concentration of these movements, they isolated themselves from the masses politically, economically and socially.

While women's movement that focused on feminist awareness was tainted by the fact that there was pro-Japanese and bourgeois element, early women's movement such as Tae'gu that focused on paying national debt to Japan that reached 13,000,000 *won* by 1907<sup>17</sup> was looked upon favorably. There was a spontaneous participation in the national debt recovery movement by women from Seoul, Inch'on, Pusan, to other provincial regions all the way to Chinju and Cheju Island.<sup>18</sup> Although they did not raise enough funds, the awareness of women as mass force in Korea was first recognized in these movements. Another important factor highlighting the nature of these movements at the time is its investment in nationalism. The women's movement from its inception was not about women's liberation, but the efforts first at imitating Western civilization and then of creating a modern nation-state. This trend in women's movement continues into the colonization era. The construct of women and their roles in society were defined through these nationalist efforts to gain independence. The first underground women's group called the *Songjuk-hoe* (pine and bamboo

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<sup>17</sup> Kim, Yung-chung. "Women's Movement in Modern Korea." p. 87

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p. 88

association) formed in 1913 in P'yongyang focused its efforts at liberation through promoting Korean economy and raising fund for independence efforts. Its members were the newly educated women who grew up with the national rhetoric of civilization, enlightenment and reconstruction.



CHAPTER THREE  
KOREAN MODERN LITERATURE

There are various competing ideas on when modern literature began. Some assert that fiction written during the reign of Yǒngjo (1724 – 1776) and Chǒngjo (1776 – 1800) were the very first modern fictions while others situate the beginning of modern fiction between the Kabo reform and 1905. The differences between these two ideas reflect the different views on Korea's modernization - whether or not Korea would have modernized without foreign intervention or if indeed Korea owes its modernization to foreign powers. But there was a trend in *sinsosŏl* (new novel) after the Kabo reforms that attempted to affect a foreign subjectivity and facilitate reconstruction, which began with women.

A call for civilization and nationalism incited interest in the use of Korean vernacular language and a move away from the Classical Chinese script that had dominated intellectual learning for centuries. The newly established schools taught not only Western culture but emphasized the learning of *han'gul*, the Korean language which was until this time only spoken and considered vulgar. The “new novel” or *sinsosŏl*, which was introduced as a new genre and considered “a literature in transition”<sup>19</sup> used the Korean script mixed with classical Chinese. Yi Injik (1862 – 1916) introduced this new genre via Japan. He “introduced into Korea not the writing techniques of his own contemporaries in Japan's literary world but rather the literary fashions of twenty or thirty years earlier. This is because, in terms of content, the time-conditioned character of the just mentioned Japanese political novel, made up of such things as the elevation of the status of women, study abroad, and the introduction of freedom of thought, matched the catch phrases of Korea's own period of

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<sup>19</sup>Kim, Donguk. *History of Korean Literature*. Hurvitz, Leon. Trans. p. 237

modernization.”<sup>20</sup> The first new novel was by Yi Injik called *Tears of Blood* in 1906. Another trend introduced at this time was the translation of foreign works into Korean vernacular. Another writer of new novels, Yi Haejo (1869-1927) was a prolific writer of his own accord and also did many retranslations of foreign novels such as the French novel *World of Iron* from Japanese to Korean. Korea’s modern literary beginning can be seen as a frantic effort to produce literature of enlightenment in a period of political upheaval. Through Japan, who experienced a period of enlightenment thirty years ago, Korea and China was acquainted to Western literature. Literary movements were lead by reformers whose ideology and propaganda were “forerunners possessed of the impatience to teach, and thus reform society.”<sup>21</sup> According to Kim Donguk, “the fundamental intention of Korea’s new novel was, on the basis of the ideas of independence and of modern civil rights, to introduce new educational ideas to a mass of people wandering aimlessly in the midst of ignorance, and, in particular, to urge them to study abroad. It also counseled a break with convention and superstition. Concerning women, it hoped to open the doors through which the new woman was to enter society.”<sup>22</sup> The literary realm became a place where people sought the national spirit through creating literature in the spoken Korean language and where foreign literary techniques and ideologies were internalized. Again, we see the inherent contradiction of Korean modernization in which a country seeks its national autonomy while following the path set by foreign processors of modernization.

One of the first modern novels that entered the door opened by the new novel was Yi Kwangsu’s (1892-1917) *Mujǒng (Heartless)*, which was serialized in the

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 237

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 239

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 239

*Maeil sinbo* (Daily News) in 1917.<sup>23</sup> *Mujǒng* marks the first of many trends in Korean modern literature. Yi Kwangsu, who belonged to the genealogy of the nationalist who promoted civilization and enlightenment, popularized the novel and begin to create fervor among the newly educated generation who sought to internalize the new form of desires expressed in these novels. But we have to be mindful of the fact that even until the 1930s illiteracy rate was still 77.73% of the population.<sup>24</sup> So when talking about trend and fervor of literary movement we have to consider the fact that these were ideological constructs that dominated the urban cities. The changes that Yi calls for in the novel are really the beginning of various reconstruction efforts that reformers from 1890s have been attempting to articulate and make coherent to fit the Korean situation. Kwon Bodŭrae sites *Mujǒng* as an exemplary novel, not only in its accomplishments as a modern novel, but in its depiction of the new trend, new distress and chaos that appeared in urban Korea after the 1910s.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For examination of Yi's literary style, influences and life refer to Ann Sung- hi Lee's introduction to her translation of *Mujǒng*.

<sup>24</sup> Kwon, Bodŭrae. *Yǒnae ũi sidae*. p. 96

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 25

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE CONSTRUCT OF CONFUCIUS WOMEN AND NEW WOMEN

*The woman student forcefully attacked traditional morals, her face reddening. “You have been a slave of such outdated thought, and have tasted futile suffering. Free yourself from those shackles. Awake from your dreams. Be a person who lives for herself. Attain freedom.”<sup>26</sup>*

There existed a woman construct who represented everything that was non-modern, old-fashioned, anti-progress, anti-nationalism and the past, she was the Confucius woman. At this time the consensus on the Confucius woman is that she is oppressed under patriarchy and tradition, and that she needs to seek her own autonomy through education and become enlightened. The common caricatures of the Chosŏn woman under the Neo-Confucius construct of three obediences is that she is oppressed by her father, husband and son, endures further oppression from the Mother-in-law after marriage and slaves over the kitchen and household duties. The virtues of a chaste, obedient, and unassuming daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law were an image that kept the women in the inner quarters and under strict code of conduct during the Chosŏn era. But this caricature of feudal woman only applied to a small population of yangban status women. It was true that the laws ignored the rights of women during the Chosŏn era but it was also true that most men, with the exception of the small group belonging to the noble class, did not have any legal rights before the Kabo Reforms. And considering the situation of colonialism, the civil rights granted to Koreans soon became annulled as they became second citizens in their own country. Furthermore, not all yangban families kept a strict code of conduct regarding their

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<sup>26</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujŏng*. p. 272

daughters. In reality the women of Chosŏn era of all class had different conceptions of their sexuality and role in society that differed from the modern construct.<sup>27</sup>

It was also common that while daughters, wives and daughter-in-law of yangban families supposedly remained at home, there were the kisaengs and commoners who came out onto the streets unveiled. Men of wealth were allowed to keep second and third wives who were usually kisaengs. These women were educated and artful, and they were the ones with whom men carried on their romance and play. Although early marriage and arranged marriages were common practices for yangban families, most people had sexual relations and formed families in very different ways as suited their situation. But with modernity the very structure that became the center of debate is this construction of gender identity that applied to a small group of women belonging to the noble class and kisaengs, and as an opposition to the Confucius woman construct, a new construct call the new woman emerged.

In the first stages of the new woman, kisaengs who were most visible in cities becomes the embodiment of western culture. They were the first ones to peel off their traditional garbs and clad themselves in western dresses and western hair-style. In the early 1900s they were the ones with whom the new modern boy can experiment on the foreign ideas of love and romance. The newspaper headlines sensationalized stories of school boys committing suicide over their love of a kisaeng and lamenting their poverty and their lack of status to obtain these women. However, after the 1910s and

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<sup>27</sup> For further discussion on Chosŏn women and how their chastity becomes privileged in modernity, please refer to Ko Mi-sook's *Nabi wa Chŏnsa*. One of her discussions reveal women on the periphery, but those who made up the masses, a woman who lost three husbands and married four times, marrying because without two people working to make a living it was impossible to survive. These women had very different views of their sexuality and autonomy than the common Confucius woman or the Modern New Woman we are familiar with.

into the 1920s when the new women in the form of girl students entered the streets and the fashion race, they became the main subjects of modernity<sup>28</sup>.

Traditionally, the role of kisaengs has always been delegated to romance and sexual intimacy. They learned arts of refinement and seduction through classical poetry and music, and had to be able to carry on conversations with the educated wealthy elites. It was natural that they were the main actors when it came to desire and intimacy. But the construct of love that came in at this time redefined these gender relations and sacrificed sexual autonomy to the greater good of a modernizing nation under colonialism. Relationships with kisaengs came to be considered immoral and acts of degeneracy, and increasingly, kisaengs themselves came to doubt their own sexual behaviors as impure and lewd. Love became an ultimate symbol of monogamous devotion and kisaengs felt they did not deserve this sentiment, which became the ultimate and lofty symbol of happiness and transcendence from the past.

The Confucius woman and new woman were two constructs that came to fore just around the 1890s and articulated the efforts of the reconstruction of society based on Social Darwinian model of civilization. The figure of the self-sacrificing woman who is devoted to national liberation and is an ideal mother to the future generation who will carry on the effort of modernization was thus the New Woman. She was supposed to have been the expressions of individuated and self-conscious subject, who clarified the distinction between traditional and modern society. She reflected the change in fashion, consumerism and constant innovation, but at the same time she needed to promote nationalism and sacrifice her autonomy. The unpredictable and secular impulse arising from becoming an individual of desire and society, and becoming an ideal mother devoted to the nation consistently confused women's roles

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<sup>28</sup> For further discussion on kisaeng and emergence of girl students in the 1920s refer to Kwon Bodŭrae's *Yŏnae ūi sidae*. pp. 20-33

and identities at this time. Few women who rose to fame with their literary and artistic subjectivity ended their lives tragically, because their subjectivity was a threat to the men who had promoted their subjectivity in the beginning. These women who attempted to exercise their autonomy and freedom were asked to sacrifice their autonomy and freedom for the causes of the nation. This is reflected in the marriage and divorce practices that the intellectual elites advocated. They wanted to stop all traditional marriage practices, which usually meant arranged marriage and early marriage practices. In the modern way, they wanted people to romance and fall in love between two equals and construct a nuclear family, moving away from the traditional extended family structures. Within the nuclear family structure, education and culture were emphasized, and the education of the children became the task of the mother, while essential societal, economical and political participation belonged to the father. The mother was asked to produce modern individuals who will change Korean society permanently, saving it from tradition and from backwardness. And as we can readily imagine, an ideal mother cannot have a promiscuous and adulterous sex life and freely engage in secular activities - she needed to have a pure and refined image, thus sacrificing her autonomy. There was also the issue of her sexuality becoming a commodity as it became a constant subject in the media. The passion and desire that arose after such public displays became a threat to the society's construction; it signaled degeneracy and immorality. In this sense the efforts to harness the growing political and social consciousness of women became an important and daunting project for the men who imagined that these women will become a threat to the efforts to liberate Korea from colonization. The imagined threat of the growing social and political consciousness of the women is something that still puzzles me. This is not to say that women of all class and situation did not make headway in obtaining their autonomy, many voices of these women in rural society who fought subjugation on

their own terms did exist, although not often heard, but what we see in urban literature is still the portrait of the new women as the ideal counterpart of men or the tragic ruin of a women who refuses to conform to the rule of the new women and love.



CHAPTER FIVE  
SAFEGUARDING THE NEW WOMAN

*Feminism and nationalism are the antinomic offspring of modernity. Feminism as a project of modernity stands at odds with nationalism, which imagines a fraternal community. On the one hand, nationalism, while emphasizing liberal democratic notions of individual differences, has in fact reconstituted the class hierarchy of the ancien regime. On the other hand, it is these very liberal democratic notions that have been used to segregated gender and race on the interests of a unifying ideology of the nation-state. Feminism in the colonies, having inherited this double legacy of discriminatory gender and race politics, has either been subsumed under or subordinated to the greater cause of national liberation, which usually imagines the liberation of men.<sup>29</sup>*

*Mujǒng* laid the foundation for the construct of the New Woman. It imagines the Confucius woman as the oppressed slave to traditions and an obstacle that must be overcome to pave way for civilization. And the New Woman who replaces the old woman becomes the harbinger of a new society. The new woman in *Mujǒng* is a construct that follows the genealogy of the Enlightenment thinkers of 1890s who sought civilization through a new modern individual. She was to be the counterpart to a newly envisioned modern individual and in this way her sexuality and subjectivity needed to be harnessed. What comes to harness individual difference and freedom is the foreign concept of love. I am looking at love not as a feeling, but as a symbolic code that encourages the individual subject to have appropriate feelings. The love

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<sup>29</sup> Kim, Elaine H., Chungmoo Choi, ed. *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*. p. 7

construct between a man and a woman that comes in at this time was a very foreign<sup>30</sup> and modern concept that idealized the new woman and gave her an appropriate place in society.

*How could he have asked her whether or not she loved him? Didn't he feel embarrassed? He did not seem like a decent man if he could say such things without embarrassment. Was it not something he said to kisaeng when he went to kisaeng houses?*

*The word "love" seemed very sacred when speaking of love for God, or love for one's countrymen, or how husband and wife should love one another; but it seemed vulgar and undignified to ask someone to love oneself, or to tell someone that one loved them. According to what Sŏn-hyŏng had heard at home and at church, all other kinds of love were holy and clean, but the love between young men and women was impure and sinful. Sŏn-hyŏng did not know that the notion of love, and the very word "love" originated in love between the sexes.<sup>31</sup>*

In this passage Sŏn-hyŏng is confused about the meaning of the word love that Hyŏng-sik, her fiancé, used to describe as the sentiment that must exist between them in order for their continued relationship. *Mujŏng* is a story of a love triangle between the two characters I just introduced and another character named Yŏng-ch'ae or Kye Wŏr-hyang. I will focus on the love construct between Sŏn-hyŏng and Hyŏng-sik who represent the ideal modern woman and man. Even to these characters these concepts of love and modern woman seem like an uncharted territory they must discover in

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<sup>30</sup> Kwon Bodŭrae's *Yŏnae ũi sidae*. Pg. 97-110

<sup>31</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujŏng*. p. 290

order to become enlightened individuals who can lead the country into a modern future.

The novel begins with Yi Hyōng-sik, an English teacher on his way to tutor Sōn-hyōng, the daughter of Elder Kim who is a wealthy man “enlightened in the way of modern civilization.”<sup>32</sup> Hyōng-sik’s reaction to first meeting Sōn-hyōng is described as follows:

*Hyōng-sik thought of Sōn-hyōng as a younger sister. This was how he always thought towards young women who were not his relatives. He did not know any way to think of them. What he could not understand though, were the strange flames that rose within his breast. These were inevitable when a young man and woman came into close contact, like the sparks that fly when positive and negative charges react – something that had been ordained when heaven created the universe. These feelings were restrained only by the strength of morals and cultivation for the sake of maintaining social order.*<sup>33</sup>

The author talks of love as something that has always existed, “something that had been ordained when heaven created the universe” but something Hyōng-sik does not understand because it is new to him. It is described as a natural urge that rises in one’s heart, but something that must be checked for “social order”. In this way the author defines the feeling and appropriate behavior for that feeling in the name of “social order.” Love is described as a lofty sentiment that is esteemed as a creation ordained by the heaven. From the onset we see that the love between Hyōng-sik and Sōn-hyōng is considered good and pure. Hyōng-sik imagines Sōn-hyōng as “an immortal. She was completely free of the slightest particle of unclean behavior or

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<sup>32</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujōng*. p. 80

<sup>33</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujōng*. p.83

unclean thought. She was clear and pure, like snow or white jade, or crystal.”<sup>34</sup> In the novel she is the most ideal character suited to becoming the new women because of her upbringing and her chastity. However, she is described as yet “only a potential material for a human being. She was like a marble that was to become a sculpture... someone like Sŏn-hyŏng would become a true human being only after she had received the fiery baptism of life and the “person” within her had awakened.”<sup>35</sup> Here we see the new woman at her inception. The narrator explains that “had she been born in a “civilized” nation, she would have received the baptism of life through poetry, fiction, music, art and storytelling from the early ages of seven or eight, or perhaps four or five, and now that she was eighteen years old, she would have been a woman who was a real human being. Sŏn-hyŏng was not yet, however, a human being. The human being within Sŏn-hyŏng had not yet awakened.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the new woman is someone who has received cultural education and “awakens” to civilization through them. In this construction the author makes a tacit comparison between the “old” woman and the new woman. The “old” woman is not even considered a true human being, she is “like a machine that had been kept in storage shed and never actually been used. She was not yet a person.” Although Sŏn-hyŏng doesn’t possess a precedent as to be labeled as a traditional woman, she is also not yet a new woman and therefore not yet a fully formed individual, she like the society she lives in, is in transition. It is clear from this description that the new woman must somehow internalize the various aspects of a “civilized” nation. The main conflict of Sŏn-hyŏng throughout the novel is this path toward becoming a human being. She has to be more

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<sup>34</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujŏng*. p. 176

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 136

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 136

than “virginal” and “pure of heart”<sup>37</sup>; she has to find a path toward becoming the new woman that is asked of her.

As an ideal material for the new woman, Sŏn-hyŏng is repeatedly asked to partake in the process of her modernization by the men around her, her father, the pastor, and Hyŏng-sik but everything seems unfamiliar and awkward to her. She goes through the motions. In an awkward attempt at imitating the “new way” Elder Kim gathers the pastor, his wife, Hyŏng-sik and Sŏn-hyŏng to secure his daughter’s engagement.

*“We must hear from the bride and bridegroom themselves,” the pastor said. He seemed pleased with himself, thinking that he knew more than the Elder about the new ways.*

...

*“Now we must ask Sŏn-hyŏng.” The pastor looked at Sŏn-hyŏng’s lowered face from the side. “Tell us what you think. There is nothing to be embarrassed about,” the Elder said. Sŏn-hyŏng thought it was funny, and felt embarrassed. She thus did not answer when the Elder asked her what she thought. The Elder turned to the pastor and smiled. Mrs. Kim smiled too.*

*“Mrs. Kim, why don’t you ask her,” the pastor said, as dignified as ever.*

*“Answer him, dear” Mrs. Kim said.*

*“This is the new way. Please answer,” the pastor rejoined.*

*“Answer him,” Mrs. Kim said again. This time her voice was somewhat sharper. Seeing that she had no alternative, Sŏn-hyŏng said quietly, “Yes>” No one heard her voice, though.*

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.* p. 136

*“Hurry up and answer,” the Elder said. After this repeated urging, Sŏn-hyŏng said again, “Yes.” Neither the Elder nor the pastor heard her this time either. Mrs. Kim however heard her. Hyŏng-sik too heard her.*

*“Hurry up and answer,” the pastor said.*

*“She has given her answer,” Mrs. Kim said on behalf of her daughter. Sŏn-hyŏng had lowered her head so far that her face was practically touching her knees.<sup>38</sup>*

All the characters in this gathering find this “new way” unfamiliar. They are self-conscious and embarrassed. But they insist that Sŏn-hyŏng must be made to answer the question of her marriage because it is the new way. Sŏn-hyŏng is portrayed as a character who does not yet know whether it is something she wants or not, she doesn’t even know how to begin to ask herself this question. They are embarking on a very modern relationship in which the two individuals concerned are considered the perfect example of a modern man and woman. They will go abroad together to study and each earn a Ph.D. and then get married and have a perfect modern family. But everything from when they should get married and how they should conclude this engagement seems like a tenuous experiment. The narrator remarks that “the betrothal had been carried out as though it were child’s play, and in a similar manner, it was decided that the two would be married after they finished their studies. Everyone nevertheless thought they had carried out the proceedings most rationally. They believed they had been guided by the Holy Sprit.”<sup>39</sup> Rationality and the Holy sprit seal the marriage between these two people who has supposedly exercised their freedom of choice in agreeing to this arrangement. Furthermore, rationality and the Holy Sprit,

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.* p. 259

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

two concepts that stand at odds with each other are accepted as naturally existing together. It inserts civilization with claim to rationality and spirituality with claim to Holy spirit.

The last step to Sŏn-hyŏng's trial before she becomes the ideal new woman is her internal awakening. She is made to experience conflicting emotions and her task is to overcome them for the sake of a higher cause.

*Today she had tasted for the first time what it was like to be a human being. She had tasted the bittersweet taste of life for the first time, in love's burning flames, and jealousy's surging waves... this baptism of life everyone receives. Though it might seem as though there could be no greater happiness than to get by without it, once would be better off not having been born a human being than not receiving this baptism...*

*The germ of jealousy had entered her now, though. And the germ of love. She did not know what to do. If she had learned about what love was, and jealousy, she would clearly have known what to do in this situation.<sup>40</sup>*

Sŏn-hyŏng's baptism of life comes in the form of jealousy and her struggle to love the man her parents had assigned her. To love like a human being in this narrative is to internalize an ideal sentiment that is deemed lofty and spiritual. But since this type of love was not something that people from an "uncivilized" nation knew how to do, Sŏn-hyŏng must learn this passion. Returning to the quote at the beginning of this section regarding Sŏn-hyŏng's reflection on love, she wonders *was it not something he said to kisaeng when he went to kisaeng houses?* because that would have been a defined relationship. It seemed that he was asking her to have that kind of intimate relationship. But she realizes that this is not quiet the case. Love in this context meant

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.* pp. 327-328

something in between the sexual relationship and the lofty relationship one had with God: *The word “love” seemed very sacred when speaking of love for God, or love for one’s countrymen, or how husband and wife should love one another; but it seemed vulgar and undignified to ask someone to love oneself, or to tell someone that one loved them.* The author interjects this dilemma and says that Sŏn-hyŏng’s confusion is normal because she did not know that *the notion of love, and the very word “love” originated in love between the sexes.* He establishes a precedent, as he has repeatedly done throughout the text, concerning the origin of love. Philosophically the notion of love in Europe before the 1600s applied to a sentiment one had towards God. Eroticism, devotion and yearning for God were expressed in this notion of love<sup>41</sup>. In Korea in the early 1900s one talked of unchanging love for one’s country and one loved one’s emperor more than one’s own life.<sup>42</sup> It seems that the discussion of love, in the structure the author presents here, did not have a place until modernity. But in the author’s narrative, love becomes a sentiment that has *always* referred to the intimacy shared between two sexes. Just as the Confucius woman construct was a way to justify the new woman construct, Sŏn-hyŏng’s confusion about love is attributed to her ignorance because again, she was born in an uncivilized nation.

Sŏn-hyŏng must be able to feel the modern love before she becomes a human being. She has begun to feel emotion and conflict within herself with this jealousy, but what does the author further required of her so that she can become the new woman he has envisioned? A model of love he has so far been trying to relate to us appears within Hyŏng-sik.

*Hyŏng-sik had certainly not want Sŏn-hyŏng merely as a plaything, or out of mere physical desire. He had a strong aversion to his fellow countrymen’s*

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<sup>41</sup> For discussion on the European history and myth of love refer to *Love in the Western World* by Denis De Rougemont.

<sup>42</sup> Kwon, Bodŭrae. *Yŏnae ũi sidae*. p. 16



*attitude that love was just as diversion, an amusement. He thought it was a great sin to love the opposite sex just to satisfy a moment's desire. Hyōng-sik believed that love was one of the most important and most sacred aspects of human spirituality. His love for Sōn-hyōng thus was very meaningful and sacred to him, and he thought it a great spiritual revolution in comparison to the attitudes of his fellow countrymen. His attitude towards love was religiously fervent and reverent. Though he did not think that love was all there was to life, he did think that one could decide one's views of life in accordance with one's attitude towards love.*<sup>43</sup>

Love is severed from physical desire and sexual expression. How one conducts himself in love becomes the ultimate test of one's evolution. If individuals can love the way Hyōng-sik does they will get closer to catching up with the rest of the modern nations and go further up the Social Darwinian model of history. Spiritual evolution is intricately weaved with the notion of culture as we have so far seen. People are asked to exercise their freedom in choosing their partner and their lifestyle, but this freedom should be exercised by modern individuals who possess reverence for love. The culture in this context teaches these various reverence and spiritual battle one must experience in order to be deemed worthy of love. The trend of spiritual love can be seen in many Western literatures that enter Korea, via Japan, beginning in the 1890s.

There is one more step in this love construct. As we saw with Sōn-hyōng, chastity and pure heart is a precondition, a given by the fact that the Confucius women construct is also built on this model. Free will and individual choice is the second condition, even if it seems awkward and foreign, imitation is not necessarily a bad method, since society as a whole does not have the infrastructure to support

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<sup>43</sup> Yi, Kwangsu. *Mujōng*. p. 323

such practices. In the act of imitation, she is stirred and she begins to feel emotion, which is the third condition. There is conflict and anguish, which is part of her evolution. Reverence comes to a person in love, when she realizes that the love between herself another extends beyond them. Hyōng-sik realizes this before the others:

*He realized that he was still very immature in terms of spiritual and emotional development. He realized that he did not yet understand life, and that therefore it was not yet time for him to talk of love...He was still a child. He had tried to take on the role of an adult because he was in a society where there were no adults.*

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*I thought I knew the road that Korea should take, he thought... Moreover, in order to learn about Korea's present, he would need to understand modern civilization, the world situation, and cultivate judgment necessary to understand society's situation.*

*Moreover, I do not understand life, he thought... I do not know my own self.*

...

*He opened his eyes again and looked at Sōn-hyōng. She seemed to be sleeping, her mouth half-opened and her breast moving up and down as she breathed. Hyōng-sik could not help but kiss Sōn-hyōng's hand where it lay on her lap. She seemed to be his sister, rather than his wife, and they were both trying to find their way, hand in hand, bereaved of parents.*

*We are on our way to learn, he thought. Since you and I are both children, we are going far away to a civilized nation in order to learn.*

*Hyōng-sik thought that when he, Sōn-hyōng, Pyōng-uk, Yōng-ch'ae and hundred of other people who were trying to learn, eventually returned to Korea, the later would be transformed into a new Korea within days.<sup>44</sup>*

Love as it becomes the ultimate test of human evolution is the uncharted territory that Hyōng-sik's generation must walk. Hyōng-sik's reflection on love leads him to unravel his understanding of life and his wisdom concerning the proper path of Korea. We see over and over again, the characters' attempt to discover their subjectivity. Where do they stand on this issue and on this other issue, issues all regarding Korea's future path? The language of love becomes one with discovering a modern consciousness and furthermore, it is a task that is part of the ideology of nationalist reform. The shift in narrative voice from third person to first person shows this search for subjectivity, which finally settles itself in the nationalist task of reconstructing a nation. In the last phase of the love construct, nationalism becomes the dominant ideology that harness all chaotic passions resulting from love. Hyōng-sik finds comfort in the knowledge that although he does not understand love, himself, and Korean's true path, he is on his way to experience all these things with Sōn-hyōng who represents the ideal potential material for a "human being". Likewise, Sōn-hyōng's internal conflict with jealousy, anger and hatred reconciles itself in the knowledge that she is part of a greater cause. She comes to this realization at the end of the novel when the train that is taking the main characters to study abroad is stopped because of a flood, which destroys the livelihood of the peasants:

*Within them moved feelings of worry and fear that transcended the self.*

*Thoughts of the floods and a bad harvest, the sight of the billowing clouds, the sound of the water, and the sight of homeless people scrambling for safety*

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.* pp. 324-325

*made them forget about the self, and have common thoughts that all shared as human beings.*<sup>45</sup>

In this scene, the author finally refers to the characters as having a “human” thought. The evolution of their internal conflict brought them to feel the tragedy of the peasants. Their respective internal struggles are reconciled by the fact that they have a greater purpose to learn about love and its civilization. But as we see they look down upon the peasants as backward and unformed. Their mission to learn and become pioneers in the midst of a national tragedy, surrounded by a mob of peasants who are in contrast mere “bodies” “powerless” to conduct their lives, qualifies them finally as human beings.

*Looking at their faces, it did not seem likely that they would have anything particular wisdom. They all looked foolish and insensitive... Their bodies grew gradually weaker, and their minds duller. If left in this condition, they would eventually become like the Ainu people of Hokkaido. They needed to be empowered. They needed to be given knowledge. They needed to have their means of living thereby made complete.*<sup>46</sup>

The main characters are described as possessing subjectivity and interiority while the peasants touched by the tragedy are described as devoid of feelings, and self-determinacy. They sit by while their whole life is destroyed and grow duller in mind and body. This is the final test of their subjectivity. It reconciles the conflict between individuality and the interest of the nation: *On the one hand, nationalism, while emphasizing liberal democratic notions of individual differences, has in fact reconstituted the class hierarchy of the ancien regime.* Elaine Kim in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism* talks about feminism and nationalism as

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* p. 331

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* p. 340

projects of modernity which stand in opposition to each other. We saw how the women's movement and call for women's liberation became the topic of fervent debates in the 1890s with the change in political situation, and how nationalism was equated with progress, which necessitated the rejection of old constructs and the reconstruction of society. But as we see there is an inherent contradiction in Korea's modernizing process. The contradiction of feminism and nationalism is burden also with colonialism as we will see reflected in the feminist movements after 1919. I want to add that the construct of love we traced in *Mujŏng* blankets some of the flaws of this feminism, nationalism and colonialism model we see in modern Korea. This was the reason why the modern girl (as opposed to the new woman) who steps out of bound with the love construct could not be accepted in Korea. While we see in other modern nation that such woman were allowed their autonomy to an extent. The threat of the modern girl is my next topic of discussion.

## PART TWO

### CHAPTER SIX

#### WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AFTER THE MARCH FIRST INCIDENT OF 1919

*This colonial experience was intense and bitter, and shaped postwar Korea deeply. It brought development and underdevelopment, agrarian growth and deepened tenancy disputes, industrialization and extraordinary dislocation, political mobilization and deactivation; it spawned a new role for the central state, new sets of Korean political leaders, communism and nationalism, armed resistance and treacherous collaboration; above all, it left deep fissures and conflicts that have gnawed at the Korean soul ever since.<sup>47</sup>*

Korea becomes Japan's colony in 1910 and the next stage in Korea's history becomes what is commonly referred to as the dark ages. Colonialism creates a society in which the internal dynamics of society becomes oppressed and all efforts to react against this oppressive force become crippled. At the turn of the century Korea was undergoing one of the natural historical processes. The dispute between the landlord and the peasant course of reform was becoming more intense and it might have climaxed into a resolution, but Korea is colonized instead. There were ideological, economical, political and social factors that were seriously jeopardized by this and it was clear that the transition from a feudal to modern Korea was to be carried out under colonial rule. Japan implemented a very systematic, military bureaucratic dictatorship in which the subjugation of society was so thorough that it pervaded the everyday lives of its subjects. Under this condition the gap between the landlord and peasant course of reform deepened. All the efforts at modernity became twisted and deformed

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<sup>47</sup> Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. p. 148

under the colonial rule and women's movement can be seen as one of this deformity. Unlike other countries the women's liberation movement was not allowed its internal development, it was just another awkward attempt at modernization. It was burdened with the desire for national liberation in a society already dealing with the strain of ideological spits and economic devastation.

Nationalism campaign efforts to create ethnic and linguistic identity at the turn of the century in Korea addressed women's issues as far as creating new social relations and to enlist human resources, but it was not a genuine effort to reorganize the power relations between men and women. Moreover, it seems that the imagined power relations between men and women also became a construct that was necessary in order for it to be rejected as we saw in the construct of the Confucius woman. Although women's movement began under this pretension, it showed the potential to become more than a joint nationalism movement after the 1920s when the Government-General alarmed by the force of violence and massive uprising changed its policy to what is known as a cultural policy in which laws on press were relaxed. The debate on women's issues exploded at this time and the term "New Woman" appeared for the first time. This term in 1920s evolved to include liberal feminist views and was proposed by Kim Wŏnju in her journal *Sin yŏja* (New Woman)<sup>48</sup>. Female writers like Kim Wŏnju (1896-1971), Na Hyesŏk (1896-1946) and Kim Myongsun (1896-1951) as highly educated and truly revolutionary women piqued the interests of leading nationalist and cultural publication in 1920s. But the construct of new woman in these feminist writer's views differed from the leading nationalists' agenda and men quickly blackened their glamorous images and redirected the debate in the nationalist direction.

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<sup>48</sup> Kim, Yung-hee. "From Subservience to Autonomy: Kim Wŏnju's "Awakening." p. 6

The women's movement at this time was split into two ideological flows that reflected the men's movement. On the one hand there was the Christians and non-socialist nationalists who identified with the Korean YWMC founded in 1922, church social programs and various patriotic societies that supported the Provisional Government and focused on women's education. The other group was characterized by their socialist and communist ideology and identified with Chosŏn yŏsŏng tonguhoe (Korean women's socialist league) founded in 1924. They were considered radical feminist, pursuing class revolution and female revolution. The three female writers I mentioned leaned more to the non-socialist group but as I have mentioned when they overstepped the bounds outlined by the nationalist they were discredited. Even among the socialist, their agenda for true women liberation came only after their agenda of class liberation. Furthermore, the socialist group was weaker in ideology and numerically weaker than the Christian and non-socialist activist. Women were first educated through Christian activity and usually only wealthy nationalist elites sent their daughters to school before the 1919s. Girl students enrolled in school in 1920 approached 6,000 and by 1921 it increased to 9,000, but in 1910 it was rare to see girls in school.<sup>49</sup>

The issue that continues to be important from the late nineteenth century and into the 1920s was that of education. Education for the culturalist and nationalist was the bar that would raise Korea's chances of gaining national independence. For the non-socialist women, education became a means of raising economic and social status and improving their family life. They focused on issues concerning health, hygiene, kitchen management and diet, home economics and child-rearing practices. Although a small group of socialist objected to these activities of the nationalist women who wanted to use education to raise political consciousness of women, they remained on

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<sup>49</sup> Kwon, Bodŭrae. *Yŏnae ūi sidae*. p. 46



the periphery of women's debate in the media dominated by nationalist. And socialist men did not support the socialist women's in their efforts because they thought it hindered class revolution or nation's independence accordingly. The Chosŏn ch'ŏngnyŏng tang, which represented the left-wing coalition held a meeting on March 1923 that reflected its views on women issues. Out of 150 delegates from 80 organizations, only eight were women from four different socialist organizations in its beginning stages. Kenneth Wells examines the situation as follows:

*Of the eight items proposed, four (reform of the family system, resistance to the good mother / virtuous wife ethics, freedom in marriage and divorce, and abolition of prostitution) were approved, and four (resistance to male violence, reform of women's social systems, support for women's economic independence, abolition of customs disadvantageous to women) were rejected. All the rejected items concern problems that concerned women primarily or required males to change their habits and attitudes. The approved items all involved aspects of reform that were believed to have national implications.<sup>50</sup>*

We see here the growing awareness of women but again the suppression of the goals they outlined for themselves. Thus as we have seen so far, in both the nationalist and socialist struggles, women's issues were dictated by men of respective groups.

However, the women did continue to address liberal feminist issues whenever they could. In 1927 the women's movements came together to form a sister organization called Kūnuhoe to the men's efforts at a united front called Sin'ganhoe. By 1929 membership rose to 2,970 women, including 260 residing abroad, mostly in Tokyo. Within the group the socialist focused mostly on educational, social and economic activities such as giving assistance to the flood victims in northeast, teaching hygiene

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<sup>50</sup> Wells, Kenneth M. "The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927 – 1931." p. 206

and handcrafts, conducting lectures and debating tours, labor disputes, and literacy campaigns.<sup>51</sup> While the Christians and non-socialist did not have a clear position on how to liberate women, the early suppression of liberal-feminist position of Kim Wŏnju, Na Hyesŏk and Kim Myongsun directed them to vaguely aspire after freedom of love, marriage, motherhood, and divorce discussed by writers such as Ellen Key, who was said to have been popular among Japanese women activists. The Swedish feminist reformer Ellen Key also influenced male nationalist such as Yi Kwangsu concerning issues on women and the discourse on the freedom of love, marriage, motherhood and divorce stayed within the bounds of civilization and nationalism. As we saw with Sŏn-hyŏng, the “new women” stayed in this realm of non-socialist, nationalist agenda.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 209

CHAPTER SEVEN  
LITERATURE AFTER THE MARCH FIRST MOVEMENT

The next generation of writers who grew up reading writers such as Yi Kwangsu were immersed in several trends that came in through Japan. There was the French naturalism and realism, which suited the sentiments arising from the failure of the March First Movement with its opposition to the old ideas and longings, reflection on inner-self, and self-criticism. Kim Tongin (1900-1951) stressed that realism should be the highest point of interest in a novel<sup>52</sup>. The novels belonging to this school were characterized by gloomy and melancholy tendency bemoaning the reality of life while revealing it with objectivity.

Another trend that coexisted with realism and naturalism were decadence and romanticism. In the West, the development of romantic era followed by naturalism and realism culminated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century decadence. And in Japan romanticism appeared in the 1890s. But Korea after the March First Movement became a market for Japanese capitalism. The young generation who grew up with political movements and social reforms and saw the violence and failure of the March First Movement were said to:

*...shut themselves up in the entertainment quarters to conduct their literary debates, a product of resistance, self-ridicule, and desperate self-abandonment. Modeling themselves on the fin-de-siècle experience of Europe, they sang songs of their own feelings. In short, it was decadence. Petty-bourgeois hatred of a gloomy reality in which political and economic contradictions were exposed to view was sublimated to a nihilistic, illusionary world, where it*

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<sup>52</sup> Kim, Donguk. *History of Korean Literature*. Leon Hurvitz, trans. p. 243

*strayed hither and yon in quest of a transcendental “something” exceeding the limits of realistic knowledge. It was deformed romanticism.*<sup>53</sup>

The sentimental angst of love where the lovers never realize their love and commit double suicides was a common theme in literature at this time. The outpouring of emotions and lust for love that was chaste and pure became a contradiction that overwhelmed the characters in the novels and drenched the reading public’s appetite. The novels still retained most of the didactic promotion of enlightenment and “new” culture and positioned itself invariably in the midst of the transition from “old” to “new” that was still taking place in society. And even in the midst of decadence, the new women harness under the love construct of Yi Kwangsu still maintained its grip on the characters.

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 244

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### FAILURES OF THE GENDER CONSTRUCT

In Na To-hyang's *Hwanhŭi* (1922), we see the continuation of the themes of modernization. Everything new is cast in a positive light while everything old becomes backward practices or ways of thinking. The gendered construction in the novel continues to focus on the issues of women in traditional society versus women of modern society, their marriage practices, their education, their chastity and finally their devotion to love. But unlike Yi Kwangsu's didactic tone full of hope and aspirations for the future for these modern women and men, Na's protagonists experience unrequited love and hopelessness for the future. Love retains its ultimate value, but it becomes impossible for the characters to attain love. They sacrifice for the sake of their love, but there is a sense of futility, everyone ends up solely sacrificing. At the same time, their concerns seem trivial and overly sentimental. They claimed to have fallen desperately in love after just five minutes of encounter, and all of the characters are not able to harness their passions and desperations. The desire for love becomes then a shallow pursuit that drives the characters into desperate illness but cannot in the end give them anything they really need. By this time, it is clear that the course of Korea's modernization of the enlightenment thinkers does not address the real problems of society, but rather creates passions that are undirected and unsatisfied. A mechanism is set into motion and a desire is bred into society, but this campaign for *new* to replace the *old*, whether it be the old customs, passions, relations, or people, did not address the problems pertinent to Korea or sustained them in times of confusion and chaos. They have just experienced the euphoric violence of the March First Movement. And they have also experienced the tragic failures to obtain their freedom. In such times, their effort to modernize Korea, to see themselves as

citizens of a modern country, transformed to enter the civilizations of the world, has not given them what was promised. I think we see these signs in the characters of Na To-hyang's novel, we see it in their hopeless conditions and their unbridled passion and imagination of love.

*Hwanhŭi* (1922) begins with Hye-suk's mom daydreaming about Hye-suk's *modern*<sup>54</sup> marriage:

*Since her daughter attends school now, as soon as she graduates, she will be engaged to some young wealthy man in a suite and hat, who has studied in a foreign country, is well-mannered and has many prospects. If this comes to pass, Hye-suk will meet this man and see if she likes him or not. They will go in a car or in a carriage to the church, and in front of a pastor put a ring on each other's finger and get married in the modern fashion. A celebration will take place at a restaurant, and they will hold hands and go off to their honeymoon... Since they got married because they liked each other they cannot complain throughout their lives. They cannot blame the parents. Hye-suk's mom after having heard Hye-suk and her older brother speak of marriage, know only that in a modern marriage, the couple goes to the church in a car or a carriage, put rings on each other's fingers in front of a pastor, celebrate their marriage in a restaurant and go off to their honeymoon.*<sup>55</sup>

Compared to the *old fashion*<sup>56</sup> way of getting married, she concludes that the new way is hassle and worry free. She goes onto wonder about the couple's first night together. She says, "what about their first night? Since they had a modern marriage, the husband

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<sup>54</sup> The author uses the word *sinsik*, which literally means *new way*. I translated this to *modern*, since this new way in question refers to foreign practices. Here for example, the *new way marriage* refers to marriage practices in the western and modern sense.

<sup>55</sup> Na, Tohyang. *Hwanhŭi*. 1922. I translated the passages of this text in this paper. p. 105

<sup>56</sup> The author uses the word *kusik*, which literally means the old way. She is referring to traditional weddings.

would not take the wife's clothes off; would they take off their clothes and rush in under the blanket?"<sup>57</sup> The mother's day dreaming goes on to describe how beautiful and pure her daughter is and how suitable she is for this kind of *modern* marriage. The marriage in a church with a man in a suit who has studied abroad and is wealthy, and the agreement of the two couple to be wed are the canon of modern marriage we have seen in *Mujŏng*. And the character that fits into this canon is Hye-suk, who is similar to Sŏn-hyŏng in almost every way. Hye-suk is also a daughter to a "progressive" gentleman and his concubine; Hye-suk is educated, proper, shy and obedient. She possessed a refine and pure beauty that is beginning to blossom when the novel begins. But unlike Sŏn-hyŏng, Hye-suk's life is shrouded in tragedy as she realizes that her naïve hopes are unrealizable.

Hye-suk at the beginning of the novel was a dreamy young woman, obedient, unassuming, and chaste. While her mother dreamed of her modern marriage, she began to have feelings of curiosity and sensual urge towards the opposite sex:

*Before, when she attended elementary school, the people who passed her on the streets, especially the young male students, seemed like people in moving pictures and their presence mattered very little to her. But in these days, it seemed as if the young lads she encounters each day all have some intimate relationship with her. Someone who does a second take and stares at her in a side glance seem to ask something of her, and when she fails to run into fellow students who she meets daily in the morning on her way to school, she feels as if she has lost something. Whether he is good looking or bad looking, if she doesn't see a friend, she imagines that he avoided her for her faults, and the whole day she felt like crying and the world seemed gloomy and uninteresting. But on the next day, when they would meet again, she felt as if she has found*

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 106

*something she lost, and imagined him more beautiful and adorable than the girl students and felt very happy. From then on she shined her shoes, adjusted her carelessly swept western hairstyle to the side, carefully parting and applying oil to her bangs that hung above her eyebrow. And her walk was more energetic and her skirt became shorter.*<sup>58</sup>

In many ways she is responding to the expectations of others. The expectation to be happy living in the new modern way, *sinsilk*, because even the daily encounters with young men at school and on the way to school was said to be a new phenomenon, a new social relationship that bred desire in the younger generation. The narrator says, “simple and pure Hye-suk who has not yet suffered at the hands of the world sees the person’s outer appearance to judge his inner meaning.”<sup>59</sup> She has not yet learned the harsh reality of the world and is free to dream about the opposite sex. Her mother, who has not learned the harsh reality of the modern world also dreams about a modern marriage, as if the novelty of the situation can save her daughter from the heartaches and tribulation of life. These two women are shrouded in a false sense of hope, they hope that happiness can come from their imagined relationships that all things new can save them from the hardship of the older generation of women. This scene is poignant in its portrayal of hope and aspirations of people who are consumed by this desire that they can’t define fully except to say that it is new, *sinsik*. There is a sense of naiveté and unquestioning acceptance that pervades even the tragedies they incur as a result.

Hye-suk through her brother Yōng-ch’ōr meets Sōn-yong, a poor student studying in Japan, barely paying his tuition with the money he earns delivering newspapers at dawn in Tokyo. Sōn-yong, like the other characters appears full of hope

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 108

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p. 109



and is idealistic about love at the beginning of the novel. After being introduced to the beautiful Hye-suk he contemplates the meaning of love:

*'which woman's love is true love.' He wondered if seeking love with a woman who has worldly learning and who has many experiences is ideal love. He wondered if a frivolous woman who learned the ways of maneuvering in an awakened world is worthy of becoming the ideal girlfriend. He wondered if the love of a woman who grew up chaste and simply, nurtured by the fine mountains and clear watered nature is not true love... It's a lie to say that love comes from knowing fully the other person's character, scholarship and disposition. Love is the ceaseless burning flame that arise within one's heart at the mere utterance of the other's name, the sentiment of familiarity upon reading a line from the other person's hand. How can you attempt to make her your girlfriend only after knowing everything about her? Although true love is the love of one instant moment, when that instance passes away, does not the sinister designs of the world encroach upon that very love?<sup>60</sup>*

This is the philosophical inquiry of Hye-suk's first love, Sŏn-yong. His attitude that love happens in an instant, that it is an inexplicable and irrational force that consumes and justifies everything seems effusive and overly sentimental to us. Sŏn-yong anguishes over the ultimate ideal love or the meaning of true love, and he concludes that love's purity is tainted by the *sinister designs* of the world. He describes love vaguely as an instantaneous rush of emotion and equates it with untainted beauty of nature. In all this, we see how, although the love construct has retained its attribute to passion and desire, it failed to deliver its promise of a new society, liberation from tradition or oppression. Here we see the reasoning that although love is still the ultimate sensibility, the world in which the characters live in does not allow them this

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.* p. 140

love. The hope for society has lost much of its force. Characters still aspire for foreign or new institution of marriage and concept of family and social activities, but there is a sense that all is tainted somehow. It can be attributed to the failure of the March First Movement, and the sense of hopelessness that pervaded society as conditions of colonization dehumanizes and displaces the dreams of the enlightenment thinkers.

Hye-suk and Sŏn-yong have one encounter in which they confess their love for each other. But Sŏn-yong has to leave to Japan to continue his studies. The two lovers (?) depart after making promises to write and wait until they can be together again. The plot is complicated when Hye-suk meets another of her brother's friend, Pyaek U-yŏng. He is the son of a rich man and is described as idle, arrogant, and shallow. He spends his time frequenting kisaeng houses. Hye-suk becomes curious about Pyaek and admires his clothes, and good looks. Pyaek in turn tries to seduce her and succeeds in inviting her to his house unaccompanied by her brother. After a brief encounter, this time, Hye-suk is violated by Paek. They are married off quickly without much detail and she begins to lead a life of sadness and regret. The harsh strain of the impersonal relationship with her husband who continues to frequent kisaeng houses and considered being married a nuisance is revealed through her illness and change in her name to Chŏng-Wor, which contains sad poetic attribution.

During this time Sŏn-yong suffers terribly at the news that Hye-suk has gotten married to Pyaek. He attempts suicide by stabbing himself and is hospitalized. He anguishes for a while until he learns that he has a secret admirer. Although Sŏn-yong is saved from his anguish, Hye-suk's illness worsens.

There is another tragic love story that unfolds between Yŏng-ch'ŏr and Sŏr-hwa. Sŏr-hwa is a kisaeng and when Sŏr-hwa learns that Yŏng-ch'ŏr is in love with her, she falls in love too. There are many passages in which she is wondering if a low and dirty person like her is worthy of love, and she wonders how it is that she can love

and be loved. She describes the time spent with Yōng-ch'ōr as the most wonderful time of her life. Yōng-ch'ōr also wonders how it is that he can love a kisaeng and hopes that somehow Sōr-hwa will die and be reborn into a pure and chaste woman so that their love can be perfect. There is so much jealousy and uncertainty between their love since her occupation is to entertain other men and both of them struggle to remain faithful to each other. The interaction of these two characters shed light on the new system of morality instilled by love. They each question their identity and their self-value as they anguish and desire for the perfect love they cannot attain. Their love story, unlike the love story between Hye-suk and Sōn-yong, is doomed from the beginning.

Hye-suk, having learned that her brother is dating Sōr-hwa, takes the initiative to break off their relations. She goes to Sōr-hwa and lies to her saying that one must give up their life for the happiness of Yōng-ch'ōr and since Sōr-hwa is the kisaeng, she should sacrifice herself for his sake. Sōr-hwa becomes mad with grief and falls seriously ill. And in her anger and grief she goes to Pyaek, who has repeatedly expressed his interest in her. But Yōng-ch'ōr catches them in a room together holding hands and seems almost relieved that all his previous fears have been realized and leaves her. Her illness after this incident grows worse and she commits suicide. Yōng-ch'ōr reads of her suicide in the newspaper in the countryside where he went with Hye-suk to get her some rest. The newspaper reports “suicide of a beauty,” which was said to have been a sensational headline common during the time. Hye-suk, grief-stricken with the loss of Sōn-yong, her incurable illness, the knowledge that she has driven Sōr-hwa to commit suicide and as a result filled her brother with grief, throws herself in the Paekma river.

At the end of the novel, both of the women protagonist dies. The one most suited to fit the role of the new woman, and the kisaeng, who represents the lingering

traditional evil, both fail to become liberated by love, instead atone for their failure with their lives. Hye-suk makes the mistake of not remaining faithful to a moment's passion, and Sŏr-hwa's sin is the fact of who she is, a kisaneg who dared dreamed of love.

Another variation of the search for transcendence can be seen in Hye-suk's father, who like Sŏn-hyŏng's father, is religious. But Hye-suk's father's first wife is still alive and he becomes deeply troubled by living with Hye-suk's mother who is a concubine, although he cares for Hye-suk and her mother very much. He wonders despairingly,

*...can he also go to heaven if he believes in Jesus. Then he thinks he will also believe in Jesus, confess all his sins and try going to heaven, or maybe he will believe next time. But by the end he decides he wants to go to heaven. He felt his body floating up to the heaven on a cloud and he felt very comforted. But when he comes to his senses he is again lying on a bed of anguish. If he believes in Jesus and wants to go to heaven, he has to leave his mistress who he has lived with for more than ten years and has even a daughter with... His heart felt constrained again. And isn't that also a sin? he lamented.<sup>61</sup>*

The father's anguish continues and his desire for heaven in the end makes him ashamed of his mistress, and he provides them with a home and living expenses but goes back to his wife's house. The son from his legitimate wife, Yŏng-ch'ŏr, disagrees with his father's new belief in Christianity and goes to lives with his half-sister Hye-suk and his father's mistress, whom he also calls mother. Yŏng-ch'ŏr say's to his father, "I cannot believe in the words of a father who would sacrifice the woman and daughter he loves, so that he can go to heaven when he dies."<sup>62</sup> The father is said to

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.* p. 119

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p. 125

react, not to the criticism of hypocrisy, but to the words “love” and “woman” that his son dared to utter in his presence. The narrator tells us that his father could not stand the shame and disgust, and refused to speak further with his son. Thus the first major theme addressed in the novel concerns the morality of love and woman. What was once a common practice, second marriage to a mistress, begins to be scrutinized under a new discourse that drives people to renounce the past. However, Yǒng-ch’ŏr’s responds to his father’s reasoning shows us a dissenting discourse, which was at the root of Yi Kwangsu’s message, one that declares that the older generation does not understand the true meaning of love, and therefore civilization. It is a constant conflict between the older and the newer generation. Yǒng-ch’ŏr’s rebellion towards his father represents the rejection of the attempts of the older generation to come to terms with the changes in society, ideologically and socially. But still it stands at odds with what the younger generation has come to believe as civilization and enlightenment. The rejection hurts Yǒng-ch’ŏr economically since his father will not support him, and he has no real direction on his future. In spite of his education, he spends his time drinking, reading novels and chasing his lover around town. Somehow the preoccupation with meaning of life and overindulgence in their sentiments of love had lead Yǒng-ch’ŏr’s generation to become, not harbingers of society, but anguishing and lost souls searching for transcendence.

The angst of love, in contrast to the love under nationalistic construct, had still to be chaste, passionate and all consuming - with one look you fell madly in love that seemed greater than life itself that when it falters you can only image suicide. This idea of love created such a strong vacuum that sucked everything in and turn it tragic and gut wrenchingly sad. But this idea of love was the only alternative to founding a new society. The characters grieve and anguish over their identities, thoughts and actions through a very colored lens of love and becomes self-indulgent and abject. It

was a psychological activity that consumed them, which really conjured this decadence and deformity of romanticism discussed by Kim Donguk.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE MODERN GIRL

The portrait of woman in Kim Tongin's *Kim Yönsil ch'on* (1939) stands at odds with the construct of the new woman in *Mujöng*. She is a defect of the experiment where passion, desire and internalization of new ideas in a degenerate and chaotic society have gone awry; she is the modern girl. The main protagonist Kim Yönsil has a concubine mother, who passed away, and a father who held some obscure administrative position with some family wealth. Yönsil lives under the tyranny of her step-mother who has two children of her own. The father has already obtained another, younger concubine and set up house on another part of town. This was the common portrait of the family life in transition and the degenerate nature of the feudal order in which men had several households and wives who were former concubines. Kim Yönsil's lack of emotion, feeling of guilt or shame makes her a cold-hearted abnormality, which is attributed partly to her environment and partly to her innate nature.

Not able to stand her step-mother's abuses, Yönsil runs to where her father has set up house with his younger wife and seeks paternal love, but instead she witnesses her father having sex with his younger wife while acting like a child. This shocks her to the core but nevertheless she learns that this is what a relationship between a man and a woman entails. She is later influenced by this memory and imitates this act with her Japanese tutor who is ten years her senior. She hides the act as a secret, not as something one should be ashamed of because it's outside the bounds of what is considered normal, but as an act everyone performs but does not mention because it's not very pleasant to talk about it. She compares it to defecating - justifying that everyone goes to the bathroom but they do not talk about it. It's interesting that this

scene is described without sentimentalism or dramatic overture but with indifference. The tutor one day noticed how much Yönsil has grown and then he causally reached over and touched her. Yönsil not unfamiliar with what takes place between a man and a woman acquiesces. She later relates that the act hurt her and wonders if this act that causes her pain is what is required of her and feels a bit sad and disgusted. This continues and as the pain and disgust lessens, she does it almost mechanically. They were even able to create a kind of code, with the use of the pillow. She asked for a pillow for the very practical reason of keeping her hair from becoming messy, but from then on his desire is signal by asking her to bring over the pillow or Yönsil would fetch the pillow herself when “she felt tired or wanted to relax.” Her desires are also stated in this nonchalant fashion in which she recognizes her own desire and brings down the pillow herself.

The reason why she started to study with her tutor was to escape her family life in Korea and go abroad to study in Japan. Her study abroad is the second stage of her awakening. She enrolls in school, attends a meeting where seven women gather to talk about the fate of Chosön women and how they will become the pioneers of those women after they have studied. This concept of becoming the pioneer of women and having value as a student makes Yönsil happy and gives her a purpose for the first time in her life. Before she existed without a reason, she even condemned her mother for her having given her this wretched existence, but now she values herself as a pioneer, someone who will help the other women to become modern women who romance and marry for love. She learns about the angst and passion of love through reading romance novels of Goethe and other popular writers that her Japanese roommate supplied. There are vague examples in these novels about romance such as going for a stroll, reciting poems to each other and professing their undying love, but she confesses that she doesn't understand yet how a modern romance between a



man and a woman is carried out. Furthermore, it was difficult for her to find a sensitive and brooding man depicted in the novels who understood this kind of romance. In her first attempt she tries to aggressively romance a guy who confesses of having a traditional wife. Yönsil makes a speech about how if there is love such trifling condition as his outdated and old fashion marriage can be overcome. He gives in to her but later confesses to his friends that she cornered him and a rumor spreads that Yönsil is a loose woman. She does not heed the rumors because she believes herself to be a pioneering woman whose actions should reflect her convictions. Everything she does she does in a spirit of learning and experimentation. She tries to draw from her reading and from her prior experiences to become a new woman.

Along this journey she is faced with a very nasty article about her lewdness, castigating her for her behavior and warning other students not to associate with her. Yönsil seeks the advice of her former roommate and friend and this friend also reprimands her saying that Yönsil did not adhere to “clean” romance. Yönsil’s pride is hurt but at the same time she claims that she understood something about romance that she repeatedly encountered in the novels she’s read concerning chastity and purity of love. But everything is revealed in their contradiction when Yönsil walks in on the friend, who had previously reprimanded her, naked in the embrace of another man. Her friend acts very normal about the whole situation and advises her to seduce the man who wrote the defamatory article about Yönsil. The novel ends with the author of the defamatory article becoming Yönsil’s lover, and Kim Yönsil’s realization, “Oh this is the way to true romance” and she adds with conviction that she will become a beacon of light for women everywhere.

This story, very different in tone and theme from the previous two novels we’ve examined, is said to be a ridicule of a writer whose pen name was Kim Tansil (Kim Myöngsun, 1896-?), whose literary career ended in a denunciation of her work,

and whose life ended tragically in dementia and financial ruin. The protagonist in *Kim Yŏnsil ch'on* is set apart from the characters of the two previous novels, in her lack of shame. She is the only protagonist to seek her own liberation by taking charge of her own sexuality. But the author is neither kind nor sympathetic to her plight, instead he describes her as a menace, someone who will continue to wreak havoc on society with her ignorant, careless and degenerate interpretation of the meaning of love, and new woman.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CONCLUSION

Why were women like Kim Tansil described as shameless menace to society and given caricatures like Kim Yönsil? Or why were women asked to commit suicide for the men they loved? Or why were they asked to love for the sake of the nation?

Elain Kim says,

*Anti-colonial nationalism idealizes the self-sacrificing woman who is devoted to the national liberation struggle: mothers as asexual vessels of fertility dedicated to revolutionary husbands and sons... Their patriarchal ideology confers neither anti-colonial revolutionary agency nor autonomous subjectivity to women. Instead, the boundaries are drawn and the terms set by a male elite, so that women, though always indispensable participants in political struggle, are relegated to the status of voiceless auxiliaries.*<sup>63</sup>

The three female protagonists we have seen thus far, Sön-hyöng, Hye-suk and Yönsil are symbolic figures of Korea's modernization in that they represent the gender construction of Korea's modernity. Sön-hyöng and Hye-suk were typical characters outlining the caricature of modern woman, the new woman, who possessed modern desires that freed them from the traditional marriage practices and lifestyles. They were free to daydream about their future husbands who invariably always wore western suits and returned from studying abroad. And these two characters set the standard - their desires and uncertainty were the gender construction that the enlightenment thinkers wanted all newly "liberated" women to seek with their education and status. As Elaine Kim points out, they played the role of the self-sacrificing mothers, who after marriage is expected to become asexual and stay within

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<sup>63</sup> Kim, Elaine H., *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, p. 4

the bounds and terms dictated by men. With Sŏn-hyŏng, we see the possibility and hope for the new gender construction, of coming to terms with this new concept of love that Sŏn-hyŏng finds so bewildering at first. Sŏn-hyŏng realizes that she has to accept and learn to understand this new concept called love and embrace her role as a new woman for the sake of the nation, this eases her passion and desires and teaches her social decorum. In this sense love in the scheme of the gender construction was suppose to have harness the desire and passion that arose out of the new social relations that was introduced in the name of civilization and enlightenment. But we see with Hye-suk that true love becomes tainted once it is aired out, because world is corrupt and degenerate. There is sense of hopelessness and wretchedness, but still love as the ultimate sentiment is not question, rather the desire for love becomes overwhelming and unbridled in a society. The condition of colonialism, the failure of the euphoric March First Movement, and the oppressed passion are expressed in this failure to attain love. Instead the characters of *Hwanhŭi* die for their love, because that is the only option left to a society whose national liberation seems unattainable. I think the passion for liberation and the passion for love becomes equated after the March First Movement, and the women, although, voiceless auxiliaries, must pay the price of its failures, because they aroused the insatiable passion for freedom, which resonates with the slogans of the enlightenment thinkers – free marriage, free love, free divorce, free romance, etc. After the tragedy comes the comic relief in Kim Yŏnsil, but in reality she was the most revolutionary character among the three. She took charge of her own sexuality and directed her own desire. Although she may have been trying clumsily to tread the path already paved, she took it in her own terms. She didn't adhere to the code of conduct and ignored the social codes of love, one that fed you desires and passion, and then asked you to control yourself. Instead, she felt what she wanted and did as she pleased. In reality, such woman were driven to ruin with real

devastating rumors, even if they had talent and real ideas about women's liberation, if they were expressed then they had to be rooted out.

The conditions for this gender construction was rooted in Korea's faltering steps as it makes its way through feudal society to a modern society. I say faltering because along the way from the 1890s, Korea is met with both internal and external pressures that really plagues it's already tense situation. Korea, politically, socially and economically in need of change, attempts its modernization under the threat of imperialism and then the actual Japanese imperialism. A genuine effort to solve the problems of society is replaced by faltering steps to protect itself from the growing imperial powers through a campaign of civilization. Gender construction that directed the desires of men and women came to define new social relations and construct new institutes of behaviors, such as marriage, family and interactions. I have tried to trace some of these gender constructions in literature and show their various transformations and functions. As I have mentioned before, the trend that I attempted to reveal in this paper does not give voice to many creative and diverse gender constructions that were sought by women of different social class and status. I have traced a gender construction that was dictated by nationalist thinkers like Yi Kwangsu, and other popular literary figures who refused subjectivity and autonomy to women. In the future, I hope to examine the wider spectrum of the gender construction that existed on the periphery.

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