Introduction

Traditions in Modern Korean Women’s Fiction Writing

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Modern Korean women’s engagement with fiction writing began in the late 1910s under the adverse conditions of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), which had put an end to the Chosŏn (or Yi) dynasty (1392–1910) and with it Korea’s political autonomy. Notwithstanding their national plight, first from Japanese colonization and then from national division in 1945, Korean women have kept their voices alive, using their writing to express concerns about both themselves and their society. This pursuit has been anything but easy, but these women have succeeded in forging an unbroken line of their own literary tradition that stretches now through nine decades.

Externally, these women writers have had to overcome formidable cultural and sociopolitical obstacles—corollaries of Korea’s own historical vicissitudes. Among these obstacles were Japanese government censorship, including the surveillance of intellectuals and even the banning of the Korean language during the colonial period; the postliberation ideological chaos and the resulting national division; the destruction and social upheaval of the Korean War (1950–1953); and oppressive military rule from 1961 until the reestablishment of civilian government in 1993.

Internally, they needed to liberate themselves from centuries-old Confucian gender injunctions imposed upon women—injunctions that demanded they be submissive, silent, and invisible, as stipulated in “Three Rules of Obedience” and “Seven Vices.”1 These actual and symbolic patriarchal mechanisms—the Korean version of “the Angel in the House”?—to control
women's thought, speech, and behavior contributed to curtailing their dreams and needs and silencing the voice to speak what was closest to their hearts. Women writers who dared to speak out had to negotiate their careers through the male-dominant milieu of the Korean literary world, where established male figures presided as the supreme arbiters of literary standards and taste and even controlled the channels to publication.

Furthermore, tagged with the belittling appellation yöryu chakka (lady writers), Korean women writers also had to conquer the public's long-standing prejudice against their work as inferior, or at best secondary, to that of their male counterparts—as the Other of Korean literary traditions. Even their Confucian-scripted, other-oriented domestic responsibilities as daughters, wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law negatively affected their literary production, denying them "a room of their own"—unhampered space, time, and material reality—so essential to any creative activity. These extraliterary factors may in part account for the brevity of the careers, or the entire disappearance into obscurity, of a number of Korean women writers who boasted promising beginnings.

Today women writers such as Pak Wan-sŏ (b. 1931) and recently deceased Pak Kyŏng-ni (1927–2008) command high respect as elders of the Korean literary world. Because of their consistent production of works that may rank as modern Korean classics, they have even become household names. What's more, highly educated, talented, young women writers of the 1980s and the 1990s are now enjoying unprecedented prominence, particularly in the field of fiction. Their innovative themes, narrative structure, and strategies challenge old practices, and their works repeatedly make the best-seller lists. Many of this new generation of rising women writers have garnered Korea's most prestigious and coveted literary accolades, such as the Hyŏndae, Tong-in, and Yi Sang literature awards. Thus women writers have firmly carved their niche in the literary, cultural, and intellectual history of contemporary Korea.

Historical Overview

The Pioneers

Since most of the writers in this collection are little known outside Korea, it is helpful to begin with an overview of the major developments in the Korean women's narrative tradition and to ascertain the relative positions these stories and their authors occupy therein. This survey is limited to presenting landmark features and does not pretend to be thorough or even analytic in its approach; it may risk simplification or generalization for the sake
of presenting essential information. Yet this chronological sketch provides a sense of temporal flow and a proper context necessary for a better understanding of achievements by modern Korean women writers as well as their failings.

The genesis of modern Korean women’s fiction writing is usually traced to “Ŭisim ŭi sonyŏ” (A girl of mystery; 1917), by Kim Myŏng-sun (1896–ca. 1951). Kim’s story is an implicit critique of the tragic and far-reaching consequences of concubinage, expressed in the suicide of a wronged wife and in the suffering of her innocent young daughter. “Ŭisim ŭi sonyŏ” was closely followed by “Kyŏnghŭi” (1918), by Na Hye-sŏk (1896–1948), which embodies the author’s firm belief that women empower themselves through a modern education, enabling them to obtain their own identities and to craft an individualistic purpose for life. This radical challenge to the received notion of marriage as the sole goal of a woman’s life is demonstrated in the tortuous struggle of the Japan-educated, eponymous heroine, who in her determined quest for an autonomous path in life dares to defy her father’s pressure to accept an arranged marriage proposal. Together these works represent the first literary voices of young women in modern Korea, raised in their common critique of the dominant gender ideologies of their society. They broke the more than one century of silence since the court women of the Chosŏn dynasty had last aired their personal thoughts and experiences from their sequestered inner quarters.5

In the early 1920s the burgeoning literature of modern Korean women attained a new momentum. In the wake of the March 1919 Independence Movement, the Japanese colonial administration loosened its iron grip and put in place the so-called cultural policy, notably in the area of publication and press law. Cultural and social activities by Koreans revived, albeit still under the watchful eye of the Japanese authorities. Young Korean elites launched major newspapers such as the Chosŏn ilbo (March 1920) and Tonga ilbo (April 1920) and magazines such as Kaebyŏk (Creation; June 1920), and literary circles mushroomed. Capitalizing on this turn of events, Korea’s first feminist magazine, Sinyŏja (New woman; March 1920), edited by Kim Wŏn-ju (1896–1971) with the assistance of like-minded colleagues such as Na Hye-sŏk, made its appearance.

The aim of Sinyŏja was to foster the creativity of women by providing them a public outlet, as attested by its policy of publishing only work by women. With Sinyŏja and other contemporary magazines as her platform, Kim Wŏn-ju spoke boldly of the urgency for the education and self-awakening of Korean women, the reform of marriage and family systems, and, ultimately, gender
equality. For instance, her “Chagak” (Awakening; 1926) epitomizes her belief in education as the key to empowering women to construct unconventional modes of life.

The contentions of these women writers, seen especially in the works of Na Hye-sŏk and Kim Wŏn-ju, were informed by Western feminism. Most influential were ideas advocated by Swedish thinker Ellen Karolina Sofia Key (1849–1926) and the dramatic masterpieces on the “woman question” by Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), especially A Doll’s House (1879). These progressive notions from the West inspired Korean women writers, intermediated by the activities of Japanese feminists of Seitō (Bluestockings), a group spearheaded by Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) and Yosano Akiko (1878–1942) in the early 1910s. The works and thought of the pioneers of modern Korean women’s writing therefore had an international dimension, transcending cultural and national boundaries and possessing an aura of intellectual cosmopolitanism.

Kim Myŏng-sun, Na Hye-sŏk, and Kim Wŏn-ju experimented with a wide spectrum of genres, including poetry, short stories, essays, drama, autobiographical writings, and translations, frequently contributing to Tonga ilbo, Chosŏn ilbo, Kaeb’yŏk, and other periodicals. These trailblazers rose to celebrity status and became icons of the “new/modern woman” (sinyŏsŏng), and they enjoyed close professional and even personal ties with Ch’oe Nam-sŏn (1890–1957) and Yi Kwang-su (1892–1950), the two male giants of modern Korean literature. Given the conservatism of early modern Korea, however, these women’s iconoclastic thinking, behavior, and personal lifestyles, including the advocacy of free love, multiple amorous relationships, extramarital affairs, and divorce, made them the targets of condemnation and ostracism and eventually caused their decades-long erasure from the memory of Korean society itself.

**Marxist Strains**

The heyday of the Marxist-inspired literary activities of the Korean Artists Proletariat Federation (KAPF) from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s added a new dimension to Korean literature and changed its contours. With “Art for life’s sake” as its slogan, KAPF became the mouthpiece of the socioeconomically oppressed and displaced. The ubiquitous themes of KAPF writers were poverty, the stark contrast between the haves and have-nots, and the condemnation of the wealthy as a social evil—all fraught with propagandist zeal. In the midst of this ideological and literary agitation, the second generation of modern Korean women writers emerged, and a number of them fell under the sway of socialism. Led by Pak Hwa-sŏng (1904–1988), women writers such as
Kang Kyŏng-ae (1907–1943) and Paek Sin-ae (1908–1939) became specialists in “poverty literature,” producing works entirely different from those of their immediate predecessors in theme and approach. Predictably, their preoccupation was to depict the affliction of those at the bottom of society, to expose the extremities of privation that Koreans—especially those at the social margins—were suffering under ever-intensifying Japanese colonial exploitation. Pak’s “Hasudo kongsa” (Sewage repair work; 1932) and “Han’gwi” (Ghost of drought; 1935) and Kang’s Ingan munje (Human question; 1934) and “Chihach’on” (Underground village; 1936) are the most notable examples. As a consequence, some of these writers criticized modern educated women as lacking a commitment to larger sociopolitical issues beyond their own gender identity or as having a superficial or even wrongheaded understanding of feminism and modernity itself. Pak Hwa-sŏng’s “Pit’al” (Slope; 1933) and Kang Kyŏng-ae’s “Kŭ yŏja” (That woman; 1932) are cases in point.

An exception during this period was Kim Mal-bong (1901–1962), whose melodramatic love stories enjoyed considerable popularity. Serialized in newspapers, her major novels, Millim (The jungle; 1935–1938) and Tchillekkot (Wild roses; 1937), entertained the masses and demonstrated the possibility of commercial success for both romance writers and their publishers.

Diversified Voices: The 1930s

During the mid-1930s, when the socialist fervor simmered down as a result of the Japanese ban on Marxist activities in Korea, a third generation of women writers came to the forefront. These included Yi Sŏn-hŭi (1911–?), Choe Chŏng-hŭi (1912–1996), Chang Tŏk-cho (1914–2003), and Im Ok-in (1915–1995). Most of these writers eschewed gender polemics, focusing their creative efforts instead on the domestic drama of women that revolved around their love lives or conjugal complications. Their stories played on different shades of male-female relationships and at times featured strong-willed women characters, such as the protagonist in Im Ok-in’s “Huch’ŏgi” (Notes by a third wife; 1940), who orchestrates her marriage arrangements and constructs her marital life on her own terms, with complete disregard of the opinions of others.

With the occasional exception, however, the works of this new group lacked the forthright and provocative feminist-oriented urgency palpable in the writings of women in the 1920s. Of the 1930s group, Choe Chŏng-hŭi’s works have been singled out as the foremost articulation of the competing claims of womanhood and motherhood. Her major stories—such as her trilogy of “Chimaek” (Earthly connections; 1939), “Inmaek” (Human connections; 1940), and “Chŏnmaek” (Heavenly connections; 1941)—feature the
lives of highly educated, willful heroines who aggressively attain what they want, following the dictates of their passion while flouting society’s sexual norms and gender expectations. They carry on affairs with married men, bear children out of wedlock, become single mothers, and consider the possibility of remarrying, even while taking along children from a previous marriage. After their amorous excursions or sexual experimentation, however, Ch’oe’s heroines eventually settle into conventional wifely or motherly roles, awakened to the power of a reality that will not tolerate their individualistic, non-conformist impulses.

Closing Days of the Colonial Period

The period from the late 1930s through the early 1940s marked the darkest hours of the Korean colonial period, culminating in Japan’s entry into World War II in 1941. From that time Korea was transformed into a Japanese military supply base. Koreans lost their language and were forced to adopt Japanese-styled names, pay homage to the Japanese emperor, and worship at Shinto shrines. Korean male students were drafted into the Japanese army, while young Korean women were recruited as sex slaves (“comfort women”) for Japanese troops. The two leading Korean newspapers, Tonga ilbo and Chosŏn ilbo, were forced to fold. A number of writers, including Yi Kwang-su and Ch’oe Nam-sŏn, succumbed to collaborative roles within the Japanese war propaganda campaign.

Son So-hŭi (1917–1987) and Han Mu-suk (1918–1993) embarked on their careers with these bleak developments as backdrop, but their principal works were published after Korea’s liberation from Japan. The strength of Son So-hŭi, a master of psychological realism, lies in her superb ability to capture the fine shades of emotions and dissect the emotional complexities of her characters—usually those of women protagonists. Han Mu-suk debuted with her award-winning full-length novel, written in Japanese, Tomoshibi o motsu hito (The woman carrying a lamp; 1942). On the whole, Han’s works are marked by a deep historical consciousness and an abiding concern with the intriguing interplay between unfolding sociopolitical forces and human destiny.

New Beginnings: Postliberation and Korean War Periods

The jubilant hopes shared by all Koreans upon liberation from Japan in 1945 were soon dashed. The postliberation years became for Korea a prolonged period of social and political anarchy, ending in 1948 with the division of the country into two ideologically opposed regimes of South and North. Within two years the Korean War (1950–1953) broke out. As with so many
other aspects of Korean society, its toll on the development of Korean literature was colossal. A large number of Korean literary luminaries were killed, kidnapped, or defected to the North, leaving a void in the literary world in the South.

This turbulent transitional period witnessed the debut of such Korean women writers as Kang Sin-jae (1924–2001), followed by the major post-Korean War women writers, including Pak Kyŏng-ni, Han Mal-suk (b. 1931), Ku Hye-yŏng (1931–2006), Son Chang-sun (b. 1935), and Chŏng Yun-hŭi (b. 1936). Their concerted efforts, together with those of their immediate predecessors, Son So-hŭi and Han Mu-suk, helped Korean women’s fiction writing win recognition as a credible and essential component of the modern Korean literary repertoire.

Kang Sin-jae distinguished herself by her sophistication in deploying natural objects, color schemes, and sensory descriptions to enhance the symbolic significance of the narrative action and the inner lives of her characters. Through these strategies of indirection and distancing, Kang “shows” with classical restraint, lyricism, and aesthetic sensualism rather than “tells.”

Of the post-Korean War writers, Pak Kyŏng-ni has become a pillar of modern Korean literature. Early in her career Pak was involved extensively in Korean War issues based upon her personal experience as a war widow. “Pulsin sidae” (An age of distrust; 1957), her best-known war account, is a scathing indictment of the corruption, hypocrisy, and rampant mammonism that inundated postwar Korean society. Pak’s greatest literary achievement, however, is related to her fascination with the fluctuating, powerful operation of historical forces in human life, a concern crystallized in her masterpiece, Toji (Land; 1969–1994; sixteen volumes). A panoramic family saga, Toji is built around strong-minded and domineering women in an upper-class family over four generations from the late Chosŏn dynasty to the end of the colonial period. This monumental project, completed in twenty-five years, triggered the popularity of the so-called taeha sosŏl (long-river novel), or roman-fleuve genre, to be emulated by a younger generation of writers in the 1970s and 1980s.

**On Firm Ground: The 1960s–1970s**

The 1960s marked another watershed in Korean history. The decade witnessed two major political events of lasting import: the toppling of the despotic and corrupt civilian government of South Korea by student revolutions in April 1960 and the coup d’état of May 1961, resulting in the establishment of military rule that would continue until 1993. A sharp social and political consciousness crested among young writers, compelling them to embrace
as their primary mission the critique of the dictatorial military government. Such new literary visions led to a public discourse on the writer’s responsibility for and commitment to social causes.

A few new women writers arrived in this engagement-oriented literary milieu: Chŏn Pyŏng-sun (1927–2005), Yi Sŏk-pong (1928–1999), Pak Sunnyŏ (b. 1928), Song Wŏn-hŭi (b. 1927), and YiKyu-hŭi (b. 1937). Of these, Chŏn, Pak, and Song shared an interest in revisiting Korean historical experiences spanning from the colonial period up to the post–Korean War era. Their works scrutinize the ramifications of Japanese colonialism, Koreans’ anticolonial resistance movements, the ravages of the fratricidal civil war, and the hardships of the war refugees. Some of these writers, such as Chŏn, ended up writing popular newspaper novels about clandestine love affairs of well-heeled women or the erotic pursuits of urbanites. In contrast, Yi Kyu-hŭi early on drew critical attention for her focus on rural idealism, regional flavors, and the folksy, unadulterated lives of countryside dwellers, which contrasted sharply with the regression of other contemporary women writers into melodramatic mass entertainment. In the end, however, the majority of this generation of women writers ceased to be of consequence, and their works fell mostly into obscurity.

The 1970s saw an unprecedented acceleration in industrialization and urbanization in South Korea, driven by a series of governmental economic plans. The booming economy and new wealth, however, were attended by a host of new social problems, such as urban overcrowding and pollution, the disintegration of rural communities, the dominating influence of materialism and consumerism, and the loss of traditional values. The collective voice of sociopolitically engaged writers grew louder than in the previous decade, drowning out those colleagues less willing to be so committed. Some writers appointed themselves as social consciences and launched literary activism. In direct proportion to the military government’s crackdown on intellectual dissidents and student activists, the antigovernment stance of the engagement writers grew more belligerent and confrontational.

In this tense atmosphere a new crop of women fiction writers appeared, represented by Pak Wan-sŏ, Sŏ Yong-ŭn (b. 1943), Kim Chi-wŏn (b. 1943), Kim Ch’ae-wŏn (b. 1946), Yun Chŏng-mo (b. 1946), Ŭ Chŏng-hŭi (b. 1947), Yi Sun (b. 1949), and Kang Sŏk-kyŏng (b. 1951). Collectively, this group constituted the first real blossoming of writing by Korean women, evidenced by their sweeping the most esteemed Korean literary prizes and demonstrating the possibility their works might become part of the canon of modern Korean literature.

Among these writers, Pak Wan-sŏ deserves special mention. A prolific
and highly awarded writer of today, Pak has towered over the women's literary world since the 1970s. She firmly established her stature as a sociocultural critic whose thematic versatility ranged from vital social issues, gender relations, marriage and family, and problems of the elderly to the Korean War. Pak is also one of the earliest writers of the 1970s to call attention to the necessity of confronting the Korean War experience once again and examining its long-term, debilitating effect on families. This theme found its first expression in her debut novel, *Namok* (Naked tree; 1970), based on her own tragic experiences of the war and has become the leitmotif of her literary corpus. Another trademark of Pak is her uncanny ability to pinpoint social evils and shallow fads, pitilessly exposing their sordidness and vulgarity. Her favorite targets are the foibles of urban, middle-class housewives, often captives of consumerism and bourgeois pettiness. With her characteristic acumen, wry humor, and deliberate verbosity, Pak levels her critical pen at her characters' crass materialism, obsession with social climbing, status consciousness, hypocrisy, and familial egotism, often turning their antics into tragicomedy. Pak also excels in problematizing women's midlife identity crisis, as well as divorce and the issue of gender inequity. She has proven pivotal in the revival of feminist interest in Korean literature since its decline from the 1930s.

**Sociopolitical Challenges of the 1980s: Expansion and Enrichment**

The massacre of the antigovernment, pro-democracy demonstrators during the Kwangju Revolt in May 1980 opened a dark chapter in Korean history. A culture of violence began to prevail, most observably in the terrorization of intellectual dissenters and in bloody street clashes between police and radicalized college students. In the midst of seeming economic prosperity, the country was riddled with such problems as unremitting disputes between labor and management, violent union-led strikes, intensifying deterioration of rural areas, widening economic gaps between classes and between regions, and the erosion of commonly held spiritual values. Popular discontent and hostility grew against the government's tyranny in the name of national security, law and order, and economic development.

As college students, young women writers of the 1980s experienced firsthand this oppressive social atmosphere. Few were left untouched by the pressure to make the difficult choice between pure academic pursuits and membership in popular student movements. Many became politicized and turned into willing and regular participants in street demonstrations and covert antigovernment activities. The list of major women writers who came of age during the 1980s includes Kim Hyang-suk (b. 1951), Ch’oe Yun (b. 1953), Yang Kwi-ja (b. 1955), Kim Hyŏng-gyŏng (b. 1960), Kim In-suk (b. 1963), and Kong Yung-Hee Kim.
Chi-yŏng (b. 1963). The collective trauma of citizens during the Kwangju Revolt became the inspiration and material for Ch'oe Yun's “Chŏgi sori ōpsi hanjŏm kkonnip i chigo” (There, a petal silently falls; 1988), which impeaches the senselessness and inhumanity of the military regime's civilian butchery during those fateful days. Kim Hyang-suk and Yang Kwi-ja were leaders in their focus on the lives of the “little people.” Kim drew her protagonists mostly from women of lower classes, while Yang excelled in presenting snapshots of an assortment of characters from the lower classes congregated in a satellite city outside Seoul, as revealed in her Wŏnmidong saramdŭl (People of the Wŏnmidong neighborhood; 1987), a collection of stories in the yŏnjak sosŏl (linked short stories) genre.

Kim In-suk, who during the 1980s was absorbed in producing “labor novels,” was one of the most ideologically radicalized writers. Some of her works are inflammatory exposés of the industrial exploitation of wage earners. Kong Chi-yŏng’s ideological path converged with that of Kim, and Kong produced stories revealing the leading roles of young activists involved in organized labor movements. In contrast, Kim Hyŏng-gyŏng took a more reflective and eclectic stance toward the social developments of her time. Her major interest was in showing the importance of striking a balance between the individual and society, without group ideology hindering the individual’s pursuit of his or her own personal self-fulfillment.

Another new factor adding impetus to the development of Korean women's literature in the 1980s was the implementation of women's studies in Korean academe in the mid-1970s and its resulting impact on Korean society as well as contemporary literature. Increasing scholarly research on the history of Korean women and current women's issues stimulated interest in women writers, both past and present. Especially noteworthy was the contribution of Tto hana ŭi munhwa (Alternative culture; 1985), a feminist journal, to the sensitization of the public’s and creative writers’ awareness of current feminist discourses, theories, and praxis.

**Wider Horizons: The 1990s and Beyond**

After three decades of military rule, in 1993 Koreans celebrated the reestablishment of the civilian government and ushered in a new cultural epoch. With most of the tyrannical government controls removed, Korean writers began to readjust to the freedom of self-expression and to chart their future courses, while reflecting on their past work. The changed cultural atmosphere of the 1990s coincided with an unparalleled upsurge in the creative activities of women writers, as each year brought new faces and record-setting award winners in the field of women’s literature. This new generation of women writ-
ers, whose careers are still evolving, is represented by Ŭn Hŭi-gyŏng (b. 1959), Yi Hye-gyŏng (b. 1960), Sŏ Ha-jin (b. 1960), Chŏn Kyŏng-nin (b. 1962), Sin Kyŏng-suk (b. 1963), Kong Sŏn-ok (b. 1963), Ch’a Hyŏn-suk (b. 1963), Pae Su-a (b. 1965), and Ha Sŏng-nan (b. 1967). Together with women writers of the preceding decade, a handful of these contributed to raising the visibility and credibility of women writers by reaping many respected literary awards.

One distinctive change of the 1990s was the slow but definite waning of interest in topics dealing with political oppression, labor classes, and rural populations—themes prominent in the late 1980s. The success of the democratization movement greatly reduced the pertinence and demand for such subjects. In its place, there appeared a swing toward reassessing the true implications of the previous decade’s democratization process and its effects on participants in radical activities. Another characteristic of the decade was a rekindled and widened interest in feminist and gender issues. As a result of this development, the works of pioneers in women’s writing have been excavated and rediscovered, and tomes of research are currently available in Korea for specialists in women’s studies and Korean literature. Most notably, from the mid-1990s to the present there has been a boom in Na Hye-sŏk studies. Autobiographical writing has also become popular, especially among women writers. Lastly, the “division literature” dealing with the political polarization of South and North Korea has also gained prominence, underscoring the complexity of Korea’s reunification project and expressing wariness of romanticized visions of unifying Korea under one political ideology.

Over the past century, Korean women writers have bequeathed a laudable literary legacy, a result of their implacable urge to communicate what has been of utmost concern—the dynamics between the lives of women and the shifting social realities of their time. These days Korean women writers enjoy a solid following among well-seasoned and discriminating readers and will continue to entertain, educate, and inspire. Undoubtedly, in the new millennium, these writers will again have to adjust to new sociocultural mandates and demands for thematic diversification and depth, technical sophistication, and conceptual maturity. It is expected that their efforts to meet such challenges will further authenticate the endeavors of modern Korean women’s writing, bringing a gender balance that has long eluded Korean literary traditions, and, in the end, enrich the Korean cultural and intellectual heritage.