



THE EVOLUTION OF KOREAN FEMINIST LITERATURE: FROM RESISTANCE TO RECOGNITION

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Abstract: *The article explores the emergence and evolution of Korean feminist literature, focusing on the contributions of its writers and the transformations within literary processes. It examines the thematic diversity of feminist works through cultural-historical, comparative, and hermeneutic methods. As society has developed, aesthetic culture has evolved alongside various philosophical disciplines, with shifts in values enriching human life through the formation of new traditions. These processes have contributed to the development of the spiritual foundations of aesthetic culture and have played a role in reshaping both past and present worldviews, particularly in the consciousness of younger generations through the principle of continuity.*

Keywords: *Literary feminism, confucian traditions, gender equality, sijo, kyubang kasa, annexation, division of the country*

INTRODUCTION.

In South Korea, Confucian traditions remain deeply rooted, contributing to a patriarchal social structure where male dominance is evident across many spheres of life. Compared to Western developed nations, women's participation in politics and large-scale business remains limited. Nonetheless, there has been a growing awareness of women's roles and their significance in all areas of society. The initial steps toward feminist activism in Korea can be traced back to the latter half of the 19th century, when Christian missionaries introduced the idea of gender equality. These ideals later influenced the Tonghak movement, which became one of the key forces in Korea's struggle for independence. Amid external threats to national sovereignty, the Independence Club (Dongnip Hyeophoe, 독립 협회) was founded. Alongside advocating for democratic reforms, its members emphasized education as a path toward national progress and highlighted the importance of women's roles, supporting the establishment of girls' schools. However, at the time, calls for educational equality did not fully extend to advocating equal rights between men and women. Following the Enlightenment movement, women's activism gained momentum. By the early 20th century, various women's organizations had been established, some publishing journals dedicated to education and others engaging in charitable work. Although Western concepts of gender equality entered Korea during the 1920s and 1930s, they failed to take root due to the strong Confucian underpinnings of Korean society. Women who engaged in public or social work were often viewed as immoral. During the Japanese colonial period, Korean women, alongside men, participated in nationalist movements opposing colonial oppression, ethnic discrimination, and gender inequality. However, by the 1930s, Japanese authorities began to suppress both patriotic and women's organizations, significantly curtailing their activities.

It was during the 1920s and 1930s that the first female writers emerged on the Korean literary scene. These pioneers laid the groundwork for contemporary women's literature, using their works to expose the marginalization of women, challenge patriarchal norms, and assert women's rightful place in society. Their advocacy extended beyond literature, as public discourse around women's rights began to take shape. With the establishment of democratic institutions in the Republic of Korea in 1948, women were formally granted equal political rights, including access to education and employment. These rights, however, were conferred rather than earned through direct political struggle. As a result, entrenched traditional norms remained unshaken, preventing many women from experiencing genuine freedom. Literary critic Kim Jong Jae referred to the



women's movement of this period as "unorganized and lacking autonomy." Unlike the Western feminist movement, which emerged through the fight for civil rights such as suffrage and legal equality, Korean feminism in its early stages was primarily educational and nationalist in nature. The second wave of feminism, which swept the West during the 1960s and 1970s, reached Korea somewhat later. As South Korea underwent rapid industrialization, the demand for labor extended to women, resulting in a surge of women's workforce participation. This period also witnessed the rise of labor and student movements, with women's rights organizations becoming increasingly active. Despite this, Korean society remained largely indifferent to feminist voices. In the 1980s, feminist ideas continued to permeate various segments of Korean society. The country embarked on a path of democratization, fueled by sustained economic growth and a rise in the standard of living. These changes led to significant transformations in the social fabric. The influx of Western cultural values influenced lifestyle choices and prompted many Koreans to reject rigid institutional norms in favor of individual expression. New terms like "women's emancipation" gained traction, and the legitimacy of male-dominated ideologies began to be questioned. A marked increase in divorce rates during this period reflected women's growing autonomy and changing societal expectations.

By the 1990s, feminist activism in South Korea had gained considerable momentum. Women's organizations intensified their efforts, and in 1998, the academic society Feminism and Korean Literature was established. This organization remains active and continues to promote the study and development of feminist literary thought. These developments have played a crucial role in enriching Korean literature by bringing greater focus to the exploration of the human psyche. Women writers have made substantial contributions to this cultural transformation.

II. MAIN PART

Women's prose has a special place in South Korean literature, it has its own history and its development spans a long time. Unfortunately, Uzbek Korean studies still do not pay enough attention to this topic. A chronological study of the formation of women's prose reveals its most important stages in Korea, and in the Republic of Korea after 1945: 16th-century lyrical poetry (sijo) written by women in Korean and Chinese has survived. The authors of these poems were kisen (singers and musicians), the most famous of whom were Khwan Chi Ni (pen name Muyengwol) (1506-1544), Li Ke Ran (Machkhan) (1573-1611), and Chin Ok.

Modern researchers of women's poetry in the Sijo genre believe that their poems are "magic", "prayer" aimed at making the world happy, "... life goes on due to two eternal principles - the harmonious interaction of man and woman." The poetic tradition of the 16th century continued in the poetry of the 18th century with the development of the genre of kyubang kasa. The theme of women's poetry at that time did not change much - the world of personal feelings; women wrote about their difficult destinies, meetings and divorces, their devotion to a loved one, waiting for his return. In the early twentieth century, "civic issues" began to emerge in women's literature, along with love poetry. Sonya Haussler, a German scholar of Korean literature, argues that the kyubang kasa genre has "disintegrated" since the 1960s, but has retained its traditions. Today, talented women in the literature continue to create and perform kasa in accordance with the rules of the genre. Women have left their mark on prose, primarily in the everyday genre. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Korean literature became increasingly interested in private life. The daily prose, which was a record of the members of the palace, is filled with personal impressions and emotional experiences. The most famous work in this genre, written in Korean, is "Written in Suffering" (한중록). Its author is Mrs. Khan (1735-1815), wife of the heir to the throne, Prince Sado (1735-1762). Mrs. Khan died in 1815, leaving behind a diary named "... her emotional state is close to that of women's lyrics." At the end of the 17th century, the traditional Korean novel genre developed. The main readers of these manuscripts, whose authorship is unknown, were usually women. It is possible that the main authors of these novels were women as well. Interest in man, in his personal destiny, was revived in the 18th century in the genre of chon – biography. His characters were real historical figures, often with tragic fates. Among the works in this genre is the "Biography of the Emperor In Hyun", dedicated to the "exemplary wife" who was driven out due to the conspiracies of the members of the palace. There is speculation that the author of this work may have been one of the women closest to the emperor (p.205). As for the female protagonists of



popular works of traditional literature, it should be noted that the main characters are, as a rule, the image of a virtuous wife (the story of an unknown author “Faithful Chung Hyang”, Kim Man Jun’s novel “Mrs. Sa’s Journeys in the South” or “The Tale of Sim Cheon”. This traditional Korean female symbol dominated literature until the early 20th century. In the 1920s and 1930s, new types of heroes began to emerge. Korean society has always been critical of women’s social life in society in general, and literature in particular. In the works of Korean researchers, this literature “seems to be a special island and does not join the general flow of literary development.” Even in the researches of modern authors, it is considered not as one of the directions related to the general principles of the literary movement, but only in special parts devoted to women’s poetry and prose (p.175). One of the writers of new wave in the 20th century was Kim Myong Sun (김명순) (1896-?). As well as male writers, she worked as a member of the editorial boards of such magazines as Creation (창조), founded by Kim Tong Jing, and Kim Eok – a magazine founded by a group of young writers led by Kim Ok (1896-?). She has published her works in these magazines. Kim Myong Sun’s first story, written in 1917, is called The Girl Under Suspicion (의심의 소녀). This story is an actual image of reality and describes a woman’s plight with deep sympathy. After this work, the author published several more romantic and sentimental stories. Her talent was also reflected in poetry – in 1925 a collection of her poems was published. However, in her homeland, Kim Myong Sun’s work was met with protest and became an object of criticism and condemnation. Traditionally, literature in Korea has been considered the prerogative of men. But in the 1930s, in addition to Kim Myong Sun, two other writers appeared in the literary field: Kim Won Ju (김원주) (1896-1971) and Na Hye Seok (나혜석) (1885-1946). Their work has also been condemned and attacked by the conservative section of society. However, their activity helped to liberate the Korean woman from patriarchal foundations, contributing to her ability to create Art. The first writers were prominent women of their time. They had not only courage but also literary talent. However, critic Kim Young Chan said, “they lacked the experience to analyze current events and understand life in all its aspects.”⁸ In the 1930s, Kim Mal Bong (김말봉) (1901-1961), Kang Kyung Ae (강경애) (1907-1943), Bek Shin Ae (Bek Shin Ae) (1908-1993) continued their activities in the women genre. The introduction of Koreans to Western culture and the emergence of women’s schools and institutions have helped women to take an active part in society, to be able to teach and to be creative. Their works have been published in newspapers and magazines. Some Korean women have managed to continue their studies abroad. One of the most famous women writers of the period, Kang Kyong Ae, has a special place in Korean literature. Unlike most of the works in the main line of didactic prose of that period, the principles of realism were confirmed in the work of Kang Kyong Ae. The writer portrayed the lives of ordinary people, and her stories often ended tragically. The story “Mother and Daughter” (어머니와 딸), published in 1931, deals with the contradictions between the older and younger generations. The Problems of Humanity (인간 문제) (1934) depicts the lives of peasants in the 1920s and 1930s. Young people go to the capital in search of a better life and fight for their lives and happiness. As the Korean literary critic Cho Dong Il (조동일) points out, “... there were not many works in this period that accurately and unreservedly portrayed the lives of people fighting violence. Kang Kyong Ae’s art is characterized by a unique style, the author’s point of view is expressed not in the decisive actions of the heroes, but in the reflection of special signs, characters.”

Another writer, Bek Sin Ae, has left a significant mark on Korean literature, despite his short life. An active member of the women’s movement, she expressed sympathy for the plight of ordinary people and her attitude to the current problems of her time. The author wrote real stories about the fate of Korean families living not only in Korea but also abroad. The novel “Koreans” (꺼래이) (1934) describes the tragic fate of a family who left their homeland in search of a better life and settled in Siberia. In “A Friend Who Goes Far Away” (멀리 간 동무), the boy tells the story of his friend who is forced to divorce: poverty has driven his family to Manchuria. The main idea behind the works: “... the need to liberate the homeland and the suffering people from colonialism.” Unlike the above-mentioned authors, who focused on the social problems and



atrocities of the modern world, Kim Mal Bon continued the traditional direction of women's literature, dedicating her stories and novels to human relationships, giving priority to love stories. “Business” (고행) tells the story of a man who regrets the futility of his life. In the story “Letter” (편지), the protagonist suffers from jealousy. “Kim Mal Bon's works have become very popular, despite the lack of determination and strength of his heroes in the fight against fate.”

According to modern Korean scholars, the works of women writers of the 1930s are characterized by a high degree of artistic skill. These works are united by a common theme - suffering of the poor from the tough colonial life, revealed through the character and destiny of the female protagonists. “In the 1930s, the ideological maturity of women writers and women's self-awareness increased.”¹³ Typically, all of the women writers were educated, fought for equality with men, and participated in the activities of women's organizations. In women's prose of the period of foreign aggression, the tragedies that befell ordinary people, their sufferings, and the tragic endings of the lives of the protagonists of the works are reflected. It should be noted that the theme of women's prose is different from works written by men. The only distinguishing feature is that its protagonists are mostly women. Therefore, at that stage, the selection of specific “women's literature” by critics seemed artificial. Perhaps critics could not follow the tradition and escape the usual “woman-man” confrontation. A similar contradiction in the assessment of Korean literary work can be seen in the works of modern critics. By 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese rule, the number of women writers had increased. In addition to their literary work, they also took part in discussions between various literary groups in newspapers and magazines. The writers, along with other public and cultural figures, sought to find a way for the new literature of a nation that had been liberated after 35 years of colonial rule. After the end of the Korean War in 1953, the most prominent female writers who contributed to the emergence of new Korean literature were Song So Hee (손소희) (1917-1986), Han Mal Suk (Xan Mal Suk). Hân mò shū (born 1931) and Park Kyung Ni (박경리) (born 1927) and others. The most famous female writer of this period is Park Kyung Ni. Her story The Age of Unbelief (불신시대) (1957) shows the decline of modern society from a women's point of view. At that time, most writers addressed the tragic theme of the division of the country. The novel The Market and the Battlefield (시장과 전당) (1964) provides an analysis of the causes of the civil war from the perspective of ordinary people. Author Song So Hee focused on the psyche of women by describing love stories in the novels “When the irises bloom” (창포 필 무렵) (1956) and “Valley of the Sun” (태양의 계곡) (1959). Love helped the heroes of these works to overcome the difficulties of life. The main theme of Khan Mal Suk's prose is also the position of the woman, her attitude to the current system. “A ravine shrouded in mystery” (신화의 단애) (1957), a novel about the life of the people after the war, criticizes women who live only for today. In “Bon voyage” (하얀 도정), Khan Mal Suk described the bigotry of the townspeople and the new generation of people who opposed the old system.

The central themes in women's literature of the 1960s in South Korea included legal inequality, women's inferior social and familial status compared to men, and discriminatory laws. Despite addressing these issues, Korean literary critics at the time did not categorize these works as feminist. From the 1970s onward, a growing self-awareness among Korean women became evident in literature, which increasingly reflected feminist ideologies as a challenge to male-dominated societal norms. Notable authors from this period include Park Wan-seo (박완서), O Jeong-hui (오정희; b. 1947), Seo Yeong-eun (서영은; b. 1943), and Kim Chae-won (김채원; b. 1946), among others. Their works explored women's roles within the family and society in a rapidly modernizing era. Through their narratives, these writers highlighted the struggles of ordinary women living within patriarchal family structures, exposing the injustices and often hostile treatment inflicted by men. Their stories not only examined interpersonal dynamics between genders but also emphasized women's longing for mutual respect and harmony. These writers also critiqued male characters driven by selfishness or greed, and examined themes such as the idealized, often self-sacrificing love of mothers for their sons. In the fast-paced, transforming society of 1970s and 1980s Korea, there was little space for individuals to confront personal



issues. The increasing influence of mass media and the spread of computerization across all sectors began to dominate daily life. Both male and female writers of the period focused on the decline of traditional ideologies, the commodification of life under a profit-driven system, and the psychological impact of mass media on society. Literature of this era took on a distinctly social orientation.

III. CONCLUSION

The patriotic sentiments that spread in the early years of the annexation turned into a nationwide uprising in the spring of 1919 (March 1 movement for independence). During this period, along with newspapers and magazines, the role of fiction in the life of the Korean people was invaluable. The novel in Hanmun was in crisis, and modern prose in Hangul developed. It is known that in ancient Korea, women were first taught Confucian books on morality. Knowledge consisted of the rules of the correct behaviour of educated women in the home of their fathers and husbands, the qualities they possessed, the organization of family life, and the conduct of ceremonies. In the state of Joseon, men were engaged in science. Most women did not have access to education. Noble women were not given the opportunity to engage in literature and art. Women were taught to read in Hangul (the Hangul-Korean alphabet for women and ordinary people). The men wrote and read in Hanmun (Chinese for Korean phonetics). Textbooks (규중요람 1544, 사소절 1775, etc.) stated the importance of women's education: 남자를 가르치지 않으면 내집을 망케 하는 것이요, 여자를 가르치지 않으면 남의 집을 망하게 하는 것이다 If you don't teach a man, you lose your house, if you don't teach a woman, someone else loses his house. 여자는 정절을 사모하고 남자는 재주를 본받는다 A woman should be faithful and a man should be capable.¹⁶ Despite the difficult circumstances of Japanese colonization (1910–1945) and the subsequent division of the Korean Peninsula (post-1945), Korean women continued to engage in literary creation. Feminist writers, who had already established a presence in the literary landscape, remained dedicated to exploring women's experiences and issues in their work. They persisted in writing despite cultural and political obstacles, including state censorship, increased surveillance of intellectuals, and the prohibition of the Korean language in literary expression. Through resilience and determination, these women built a cohesive and enduring literary tradition that continues to evolve today.

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