
Reconfiguring the 'New Woman' in Koreanized Feminist Discursivity: Na Hye-Suk's Play the Woman in Paris

Jung-Soon Shim
Soongsil University, South Korea

A. The Korean New Women in the 1920's: Historical Context

Since the mid 19th century, Chosun, the old dynasty Korea, began to be subjected to growing western influences in the age of 서세동점 西勢東漸 (Western forces occupy East). It generated a sense of crisis within the Korean society, and the "Enlightenment Movement" came into being. The movement goal was to 'modernize' the nation and upgrade the national standards by introducing Western culture and technology, ultimately to achieve the nation's independence. Education was emphasized as an integral part of such process, and most conspicuously the importance of women's education was emphasized. Despite all its efforts, Korea became a colony under Japanese rule in 1910.

By the 1920s, Korea witnessed a significant change in its history of women. During the era, the issue of women's liberation surface unprecedentedly. and there appeared the first generation of Korean New Women (Sin Yosong).

1. Korean New Women: A Definition

From a larger global point of view, Korea was participating In the global phenomenon of the New Woman, according to Dina Lowy.:

The term New Woman was first used and became widespread in the West in the 1890s. Although the specific outlook and activities of the New Women varied from country to country, a common characteristic was a heightened awareness of self and of gender distinctions, which led to changing views on such issues as marriage, sexuality, and fertility. (2)

Kwon In-Sook indicates that New Women in Korea are a group of women activists, who challenged the moral system of Confucian patriarchy, using a new self-identity that they crafted through modern education in Korea, and overseas.(382)

Many of them strongly endorsed modern values such as freedom of choice in love and marriage, and equality between the sexes, while challenging the traditional Confucian morality of Three Obediences to men, the ideology of chastity and the Wise Mother/Good Wife stereotype.

2. Korean New Women's Movement and *A Doll's House* Translation in 1920

Three representative Korean New Women during the 1920's are:

- 1) Korea's first woman modern painter/writer Na, Hye-suk (羅蕙錫, 1896~1948)
- 2) Kim, Won-Ju, (金元周 alias, Il-Yop 一葉) (1896-1971) the editor of the first Korean women's/ feminist magazine *New Woman* (Sinyoja 新女子) (1920.3-1920.6).
- 3) Korea's first woman novelist Kim, Myung-Soon(金明淳1896-).

They were young Korean feminists in their early 20's, studying in Japan, and seemingly imbibed western feminist ideas of the times including Ellen Key, Emmeline Pankhurst, etc through Japanese feminists such as Hirachuka Raicho and Yosano Aiko. Ellen Key's ideas on True Love and Chastity exerted strong influence in East Asian countries during the 1920s. This point will be discussed more in detail later in this paper.

Timely the Korean New Women feminists realized the potential value of *A Doll's House* play in awakening women's consciousness in order to bring about changes in Korean women's lives and prompted its translation into Korean by Yang, Baek Hwa originally to publish it in their magazine *New Women*. This marks an "important momentum in the history of Korean reception of Ibsen". (Maeil Sinbo newspaper, 23 Jan. 1921)

Na, Hye-Suk, the most prominent 1st generation Korean New Woman, actually identifies Nora with her own self In her poem "Nora"(113), by citing Nora's monologue in the last scene of the play *A Doll's House*.

I was a doll. A daughter doll to father. A wife doll to husband...Let go of Nora...into the air of freedom...A Human being I am... 'I have a sacred duty to myself, as much as to my husband and children..' Girls, Wake up and follow me. Stand up and illuminate. Lights of the new days are dawning.(113)

Through this poem, Na actually repudiates the Confucian morality of Three Obediences(to father, husband and son), traditional woman's role, and declares her own independence as an individual human being. Moreover, she calls for the younger generations of women to wake up and participate in the movement for better future.

Na, Hye-suk and Kim, Won-ju's urgent but unflinching call for actions from the next generations seemingly reflect their sense of Han as colonial subjects under the Japanese Rule at that time. Thus, "better future" here seemingly implicate women's liberation and enlightenment, and ultimately nation's independence.

In her essay “Ideal Women”(183) Na identifies 7 Western and Japanese women as exemplary ideal women, including Ibsen’s character Nora in *A Doll’s House*. Na invokes Nora as her exemplary model because Nora had an ideal of ‘true love’, namely love and marriage that recognize a woman’s worth as a person rather than her value as a daughter, wife and mother. Na also cites Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe for her ideal of religious egalitarianism, and Japanese feminists Hiratsuka Raicho and Yosano Akiko.

3. Challenges Against Traditional Morality of Chastity

Traditional concept of Chastity meant for Korean women during the early 1900’s included the morality of three obediences (to father, husband and son), the practice of arranged marriage by parents, the practice of the ideal of Virtuous Woman by avoiding ‘seven deadly evil acts’ (七去之惡) including jealousy such as against concubine, not bearing a son, etc. By the 1920’s, it was reframed in the modern image of Wise Mother and Good Wife. For the Korean New Women, the question of True Love and Chastity became a focal point in their New Women’s movement.

In 1920, Kim, Won-Ju, and Na, Hye-Suk primarily started the first Korean women’s magazine *New Women*. Kim also formed Korean Blue Tower Society(청탑회(靑塔會)) to wage women’s enlightenment movement. Kim, the editor, introduced her concept of New Chastity and Free Love through her writings for New Women’s Movement.

Kim, Won-Ju stated her goals in leading the women’s movement, in the second issue of *New Women* (Sinyoja) magazine as follows:

Why do we declare ourselves New Women in front of society, despite our ignorance and immaturity?...Because we are going to liberate ourselves from the whole traditional, conservative, cultural and outdated ideology, as New Women in a new era. This is our responsibility and obligation, and that explains the reason for our existence. (26)

As for her concept of New Chastity, Kim redefines it in new terms of True Love as follows:

Human beings are free from the time of their birth. Free love, free marriage and free divorce are sacred, and to prohibit them is old backward convention. (59)

Na, Hye-suk, in her essay “Confession of My Divorce”(397), also criticizes the patriarchal practice of chastity in Korea at that time:

Chosun men’s thinking is hard to understand. They themselves don’t practice chastity but demand it from their wives and women in general. And they attempt to ruin other persons’ sense of chastity as well.(425)

By the 1920's, many Korean New Women became Korean Noras in search of True Love by either leaving their homes or having free relationships with men. However, according to Chung, Se-Hyun, the most liberal attitude toward these changes about women stipulated that "the boundary of women's liberation must not surpass the natural duties of women; the respect and independence of women as individuals must not take precedence over their submission to man."(33)

Many of the lives of the first generation Korean New Women ended with suicide, divorce, or self-imposed seclusion. The tragic endings of these women reflect the particular social circumstances of Korea as the nation sought to deal with modernization/westernization, within less than half a century, roughly from late 19th century up until the 1920s. Loss of the National sovereignty was their source of Han, and national independence was their ultimate goal to achieve. Thus the particular sense of Han seemingly became the driving force for them to help rapidly modernize the nation. It was their mission of the times.

Na, Hye-suk, for example, actively participated in the March 1 Independence movement and because of this were incarcerated. Na clearly indicates her sense of mission for the nation:

for me as an individual woman to have achieved all this, I owe greatly to Chosun, my country. I should have a mission to repay all the gratitude I owe it.(438)

Thus women's Korea spearheaded the nationwide strong aspiration and impulse for change through modernization and thus was inevitably pulled into the whirlpool of New and Old cultural clashes.

Looking back afresh, that these Korean New Women could bear the brunt of this period of cataclysmic social changes and transition witnesses the strength of each individual Korean New Woman, and their ardent devotion to the cause of national independence as well as women's liberation. Through their individual sacrifices, they paved the way for the next generations of New Women to advance beyond.

B. Nora and Early Modern Korean Drama in the 1920's - 1930's

A Korean theater historian Yu, Min-yong characterizes modern Korean drama in the 1920's and the 1930's as "a social and consciousness movement rather than pure art tradition".(13) It is understandable that the woman's emancipation theme of the play *A Doll's House* was rather favorably received in Korea as an essential part of the national liberation plan, when it was first introduced as literary work in the early 1920's. But by the 1930's, public responses to the play became quite ambivalent due to the change of political and social atmosphere.

1. Public Responses to the 1st Public Premier *A Doll's House* in 1934

The first public premier of *A Doll's House* happened in 1934 by Theater Arts Research Group. Na, Woong's review in *Donga Daily News* records contrasting responses from the male and the female audience members as follows:

At Nora's last dialogue, rolling applause broke out from the ladies' seats, whereas the sound 'hush, hush' rose among the gentlemen seats. (27 April 1934, p.7)

Critic Na further recorded the negative attitudes of the male spectators, who took issue primarily with Nora's leaving home:

Audience C: Nora's leaving home is not natural. Her action lacks convincing motivation nor is it based on a firm belief. It seems rather that she acted out on the spur of the moment. (Dong-a Daily News. 29 April 1934, p. 3)

The public response seems at best ambivalent. In other words, the colonial Korean patriarchal society felt the keen necessity to modernize the nation ultimately for the sake of national independence cause. Under this project women's modern education and women's role for national motherhood was emphasized. On the other hand, Nora's act of leaving home was considered a serious threat to the stability of the Confucian patriarchal family system and hence the nation itself.

2. Korean Adaptation: *After Leaving a Doll's House* (1933)

by Chae, Man-Sik

In Korea, the play *A Doll's House* exerted powerful influence not only to women's sectors but also in literary circles. Writers began to create women characters who dare to leave home and family. This was unthinkable before introduction of *A Doll's House* to Korea.

A socialist writer Chae Man-Sik wrote a novel adaptation with a title, *After Leaving a Doll's House*. In this novel, he emphasizes importance of economic independence for women's liberation. Chae recontextualizes the Nora narrative in Colonial Korean society, posing the question if a woman of Chosun makes a decision like Ibsen's Nora what will happen to her. Chae expands the focus from that of gender to that of class, thereby suggesting an alternative solution for Korean Nora's plight.

In this novel, Chae recreates Nora in the figure of Korean New Woman Yim, Nora under the Japanese colonial rule. Yim, Nora in this Korean context is an educated modern middle-class woman, who from the beginning of the narrative is portrayed as equipped with enlightened consciousness of women's questions.

The novel starts with the scene the day after Nora left home. Hyun, Suk-Jun, Nora's husband and a lawyer creates the typical image of a patriarchal husband at the time, showing extreme anger

at the woman's revolt and declares that he will take revenge at her.

Nora, however, says in her own words that she "sustains hope to explore the world outside of home, and a firm spirit to fight the patriarchal world." (108) Thus Yim Nora starts her first step into the real world by going back to her hometown, and taking a job as a church night school teacher. But her high spirit and ideal to change the patriarchal society instantly comes into clash with the base realities of the colonial rural society: for example, In one of her night class she teaches village women that marriage should be based on love and mutual understanding, not by parental choice and arrangement. The village women shockingly reacts to her teaching, and the class is disbanded soon due to the lack of students.

Yim Nora returns to Seoul, and takes another job as a private tutor. But she is soon subjected to sexual harassment, and she quits. Nora now becomes broke and tries other jobs such as cosmetics sales job, and then finally becomes a cafe girl. But there she loses her chastity by Mr. Lee, after drinking liquor with him.

Now she faces three choices: starve to death, or fall to depravity, or go back home. But the Korean Nora takes a slightly different choice by committing suicide, death by her own will. But ironically she fails in this attempt as well, and rescued. Author Chae seemingly uses Nora's suicide attempt and her rescue as a turning point in her creed in women's liberation to that of class struggle.

Determined to live again, Nora takes a job as a worker at a printing factory. Here she comes to change her views about working and working class people.

Working is sacred. I agree with it, as I learn to work.

Working people here all look energetic and spirited. (293)

Now Yim, Nora comes to ideologically enlightened about socialism as she begins to read August Bebel's(1849-1913) Book *Women and Socialism*. Nora starts reading it, finding in it a word that captures her attention. That word is 'class struggle'. Now she seemingly realizes that women's movement and class struggle are closely interconnected.

Another important scene is the last scene of the novel. Nora encounters her former husband Hyun, Seok-Jun, as the manager of Dong Yang Bank, which audits the printing factory, where Nora works. His first dialogue to Nora is "you have fallen under my control again as a beggar." Nora retorts unyieldingly:

You see me triumphantly as if you won the victory. But another fight is just beginning between you and me. They say that this world is a class struggle. I truly believe so.(297)

Regarding how the class struggle between Nora and her former husband develops is left open to the audience's imagination.

The Woman in Paris, A Play by Na, Hye-Suk

Another literary work of significance is the play *The Woman in Paris* (1935) written by Na, Hye-Suk, 4 years after her divorce. The play is an autobiographical representation of her extramarital love affair with Choi, Rin, a male celebrity, and the public responses, which provided the core reason for her divorce. Here in this play, Na challenges firstly to deconstruct the patriarchal male-gaze that dominated the representation of her romance and her own self; and secondly to defend and reconfirm her unflinching belief in the morality of True Love, thereby creating a feminist counter-narrative.

In Act 1, in a Paris apartment two Korean men named C and D discuss about Woman B, who just left Paris with her husband to America on their world tour itinerary. Male character C is sympathetic with Woman B, and says that it is a pity that such a woman of great potential could not stay longer in Europe, where she could enlighten herself in order to ultimately do service to Chosun, her nation. This man talks along the line of women's enlightenment for the sake of the nation. But male character D misunderstands male C's talk, and suspects certain romance between male C and Woman B.

Here in Act 1, author Na Hye-Suk foregrounds Male C's dialogue about Woman B's potential, thereby challenges the Korean patriarchal history's dismissal of her as an immoral woman.

Act 2 portrays Korean residents in New York, exchanging their views regarding Woman B's scandalous romance, the news of which was carried in a Korean Newspaper published in America. Korean New Yorkers criticize Woman B for her depravity, causing such a scandal, and her husband A for not preventing it beforehand. Since A and B are considered valuable persons from whom they expected certain possibility for the nation's independence, they express their dismay and concern for the future of Chosun.

Act 3 is set in a beach in Wonsan, Korea many years after the scandal. Woman is back in Chosun. Male character J is specified as Woman B's lover. They reminisce their past years. Their common concern now is the future of Chosun nation under the Japanese Colonial Rule. Woman B says that she feels "confused after her world tour," but has become more determined about the direction of her future life. J says that "before his tour to the West, he had immense hope, but now after the tour, he has endless disappointment. J says, Chosun is like wasterland and desert compared to European countries. We will have to plant seeds, and wait until they sprout and grow, while they will continuously progress.(149)

Then they confirm their love toward each other. Woman B says that she wants her life to be a master piece. In this scene, author Na, Hye-Suk seemingly justifies her firm belief in the spirit-flesh union through woman B's romance with J, the new morality for chastity, by highlighting how B and J both share common concerns regarding the nation's future, and thus how their spirits correspond

with each other. Through this scene, the author actually comes to her own defense regarding her romance scandal in her own voice, against the patriarchal society's monolithic dismissal of her as an immoral woman.

Notes

Please do not quote this paper, since it is not published in print yet.

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