



FEMINIST MOVEMENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE
NARRATIVE IN KOREAN LITERATURE

PhD

Seong Hoon Choi

Korea, Songwon University

Bazarova Shakhlo Shukhratovna

PhD Associate Professor

Department of Korean Philology

Email:shahlobazarova84@gmail.com

Abstract: The article analyzes the stages of formation and development of the feminist movement and women's literature in South Korea within the context of historical, cultural, and literary processes. It examines the emergence of ideas of gender equality in Korean society from the late nineteenth century, educational movements, women's activities during the colonial period, and their reflection in literature. The study highlights the role of women's writing in the genres of *sijo*, *gyubang gasa*, diary prose, and the novel, and reveals the evolution of the female image through the works of Kim Myung-sun, Kang Kyung-ae, Paek Sin-ae, Kim Mal-bong, Park Kyung-ni, Son So-hui, Park Wan-seo, and other women writers. In addition, the paper analyzes the penetration of feminist ideology into literature in the second half of the twentieth century, the growth of women's self-awareness, and their acquisition of a new social status. The article scientifically substantiates the significance of women's prose in the Korean literary process, its traditional and modern trends, as well as contemporary tendencies of development.

Keywords: South Korea, feminist movement, gender equality, women's literature, women's prose.

Introduction. The genesis of feminist movements in Korea can be traced back to the latter half of the 19th century, initiated primarily by Christian missionaries who introduced the revolutionary concept of egalitarianism. These early notions of human equality found further resonance in the *Tonghak* (동학) doctrine, which emerged as a pivotal ideological force in the struggle for Korean independence. Amidst escalating external threats to national sovereignty, the Independence Club (동립협회) was established, advocating for democratic liberties and promoting education as the primary catalyst for national progress. Notably, this era marked the first strategic emphasis on the



social status of women, leading to the advocacy for a specialized network of women's schools. However, it must be noted that during this period, the demand for equality within the educational system had not yet matured into a comprehensive struggle for full gender parity. Following the enlightenment movement, women's social and literary activities intensified. By the early 1900s, Korea witnessed the emergence of organized women's groups with their own publications, focusing on dual objectives: education and philanthropy.

Research Methodology. This study adopts a multi-dimensional analytical framework to explore the trajectory of Korean women's prose:

1. **Chronological Analysis:** A historical mapping of women's prose from the traditional era to the contemporary period.

2. **Sociological Perspective:** Examination of the evolution of the "female image" and social status through the lens of feminist ideology and character development.

3. **Comparative Literary Assessment:** Utilizing both Korean and international scholarly resources (e.g., Sonia Haeussler, Cho Tong-il, Lee Sang-vu, and Kim Chon-ja) to provide a nuanced literary evaluation.

In the 1920s and 30s, although Western concepts of "gender equality" began to permeate the Korean peninsula, their dissemination was severely hampered by the deeply rooted foundations of Confucian patriarchy. Active social participation by women was often stigmatized as "immoral." Despite these constraints, the period of Japanese occupation saw women standing alongside men in the patriotic movement, protesting against colonial policies and the marginalization of national dignity. The 1920s heralded the arrival of the first professional female writers, such as **Kim Myong-sun** (김명순), **Kim**

Won-ju (김원주), and **Na Hye-sok** (나혜석). Working within the editorial boards of influential journals like *Ch'angjo* (창조) and *Pyokho* (폐허), they challenged the traditional monopoly of men over literature. Kim Myong-sun's debut story, "*Uisim-ui sonyo*" (의심의 소녀, 1917), served as a realistic portrayal of the precarious female condition. Despite their talent, these writers faced severe social backlash; however, their courage paved the way for the "New Woman" identity in Korean letters.

By the 1930s, writers like **Kang Kyung-ae** (강경애) shifted the focus



towards social realism. Her seminal work, *In-gan munje* (인간문제, 1934), depicted the struggles of the peasantry and the urban proletariat, moving beyond domestic issues to encompass national and class struggles. The liberation of Korea in 1945 and the subsequent Korean War (1950-1953) significantly altered the literary landscape. The 1948 constitution theoretically granted women equal political rights, including the right to education and labor. However, these rights were "granted" top-down rather than won through a grassroots feminist revolution, meaning that centuries-old traditional hierarchies remained largely intact. During this era, **Pak Kyung-ni** (박경리)

emerged as a monumental figure. Her work *Bulsin sidae* (불신시대, 1957) critiqued the post-war social decay through a female perspective. Other notable writers, such as **Song So-hui** (손소희) and **Han Mal-suk** (한말숙), explored the psychological depths of women navigating the ruins of war and the pressures of a rapidly modernizing society. In the 1960s and 70s, the "Second Wave" of feminism reached South Korea, coinciding with the country's rapid industrialization. The burgeoning economy required a new female workforce, which in turn fostered women's labor movements and student activism.

Literature from this period, particularly by **Pak Wan-seo** (박완서), began to scrutinize the "materialist worship" and the collapse of traditional family values.

The 1980s marked a phase of gradual democratization and the influx of Western cultural paradigms. The concept of "women's emancipation" entered the public discourse, and the rising divorce rate began to be viewed as a symptom of women's expanding agency. In 1998, the establishment of the academic society "**Feminism and Korean Literature**" (페미니즘과 한국문

학) institutionalized the study of women's writing. The 1990s are often

described as a "gynocentric" period, where writers like **Lee Kyung-ja** (이경자) adopted radical stances against patriarchal "relics." In the 21st century, the radicalism of early feminism has evolved into a more harmonious and introspective literary trend. Modern authors such as **Eun Hee-kyung** (은희경)



focus on the complexity of human relationships, as seen in the 2005 novel *Bimil-gwa goerog* (비밀과 거짓말). Today, Korean women's prose is no longer restricted to "women's issues" but serves as a profound medium for exploring the universal human condition and cultural heritage. To understand modern prose, one must look at the XVI–XVIII centuries. The **Sijo** (시조) poetry, often written by *kisaeng* (기생) like **Hwang Jin-yi** (황진이), represented a "prayer-like" attempt to harmonize the male and female principles. This tradition was continued by the **Gyubang gasa** (규방가사) genre, which allowed women of the inner courts to express their "difficult fates" and loyalty. These traditional forms laid the emotional and stylistic foundations for the modern female "voice."

Conclusion. In conclusion, women's prose in South Korea has undergone a profound transformation—from the private laments of the medieval court to the radical political activism of the 20th century, and finally to the sophisticated, multi-layered narratives of the contemporary era. While Confucian patriarchy continues to influence social structures, the consistent growth of feminist literature has ensured that women are no longer silent observers but active architects of the Korean literary process.

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