# Re-visioning Gender and Womanhood in Colonial Korea:Yi Kwang-su's *Mujŏng* (The Heartless)

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Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950), the pioneering leader of modern Korean literature, played up the efficacy of the edifying and civilizing function of literature. Beginning with his early critical writings published in the late 1900s, Yi emphatically and ceaselessly reiterated this social mission or service of literary undertakings. Especially, in consideration of Korea's political predicament as a Japanese colony, Yi saw the purpose of his own writing as alerting the most critical issues of his society to the masses in order to enhance their social awareness and self-knowledge. He even asserted that the true value of literary production lies in achieving such didactic and practical objectives. Yi's first full-length novel, *Mujŏng* (The Heartless), was an extension of his literary aspirations and its fictional exemplification.

Serialized in *Maeil shinbo* from January to June of 1917, *Mujŏng* captivated the attention of its readers, mostly the youth of Yi's generation, amidst the outcry of the elders of contemporary Korean society, and became an instantaneous bestseller. The unparalleled fervor and massive following *Mujŏng* generated among the young largely stems from the author's revolutionary re-visioning of traditional concepts of women and gender relationships. Consistent with Yi's insistence on the uplifting and inspiring influence of literature, *Mujŏng* communicates new modes of thinking and behavior for the young of contemporary Korea in the areas of gender identity and male-female relationships.

The novel executes this task by highlighting through the personal change and growth of the novel's heroine the need for a self-awakening of Korean women regarding their centuries-old oppression by their own patriarchal society and advocates gender parity to be achieved through women's education and activities in the areas beyond the confines of marriage, family, and domesticity. Ultimately, *Mujŏng* propagates the idea that ideal gender relationships and women's true self-identities can

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be actualized only when they are sublimated for public or communal causes.

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## Yi Kwang-su and Literary Functionalism

From the end of the nineteenth century, Korea went through radical and often staggering socio-cultural transformations launched by the leaders of the so-called enlightenment (*kaehwa*) movement that swept the entire Korean peninsula. These progressive and nationalistic leaders, spearheaded by Sŏ Chae-p'il (1866-1951), mounted campaigns for the modernization of Korea in the face of the increasing encroachment by foreign powers, most formidably Japan.[1] The highest goal of the movement was to empower Korea by instructing its people on modern systems of thought, institutions, and practices, mostly of Western origins, so that the country could sustain itself as a political entity strong, informed, and prosperous enough to forestall and repel any foreign aggression. Through the frenzied and desperate endeavors of the campaigners who tried their utmost to refashion and gain control over the course of their country's destiny, Korean society was able to produce some measurable improvements in citizens' lives, most notably in the area of education of the young. Although those crusaders' reform zeal and visions fell short of full materialization when Korea collapsed politically and became a Japanese colony in 1910, the spirit of their patriotic idealism continued to live on in the minds and activities of their successors in a variety of forms, approaches, and programs throughout the colonial period (1910-1945).

An heir to this lineage of enlightenment advocates, Yi Kwang-su (1892-1950; pen name, Ch'unwon) was firmly convinced that he had a

* A preliminary version of this article was presented at the 1997 Conference of the Association for Korean Studies in Europe held in Stockholm, Sweden, April 17-21.

1. For detail about the reform activities and projects of Sŏ Chae-p'il, see (Yung-Hee Kim 1995: 125-29).

pioneering and crucial leadership role to play for his society that would contribute to ameliorating the lot of Koreans suffering under oppressive colonial rule.[2] As a writer, he seized upon literature as an effective vehicle for his own reform projects, and beginning from the early 1910s, Yi interminably made use of literature as a means for educating and raising the consciousness of the masses as well as the elite. His article of faith in this regard is encapsulated in the following: "I write as easy as possible so that even those who know only the Korean alphabet can read; so that people can understand by listening to my work being read to them. I write so simply that even uneducated people can comprehend. And my writing won't do my readers any harm morally."[3]

Yi's notion of literature is largely articulated from utilitarian perspectives, and in his scheme of thought, literature is purported to perform didactic, ennobling, and inspiring missions. In this respect, Yi's conceptualization of literature signifies an attempt to idealize as well as romanticize literary practice, extolling its spiritual potency and influence and its moral purposefulness. The following passage, written in a high-flown style, illustrates the core of Yi's formulation of literature and its utility:

> The ideal of literature ... should be to lead humanity from illusion to truth, from anxiety to peace, from strife to love, from vulgarity to nobility, from shallowness to profundity, from ugliness to beauty, from evil to goodness; to elevate humanity and make it enter and advance to higher and wider dimensions. True literature should be the interpreter of life, its inspiring revealer, its comforter, its counselor, and its leader. We get to know the true nature of life through the sincere literature produced by sincerest writers (Yi Kwang-su 1962k: 234-35).

From such an ideological position, it was only a short leap for Yi to

2. Yi Kwang-su definitely had high esteem for his literary talent and output, which, he insisted, should command public respect and appropriate monetary remuneration; see (Yi Kwang-su 1962j). See Yi *Kwang-su chŏnjip* (Collected Works of Yi Kwang-su; hereafter, *Chŏnjip*) (Samjungdang, 1962) 1: 515-17.

3. Yi Kwang-su (1924); quoted from Kim Tong-in (1935b: 260). Kim Tong-in said that it was to reach the general populace that Yi Kwang-su chose to publish his novels as serials in the newspapers, primarily *Tong-a ilbo*; see (ibid.).

declare the role of writers as mentors and tutors of the highest order for the masses:

> A poet's duty lies in showing the masses his 'best.' Rather, he should show the masses the best he could think and the best he could feel.
> In this sense, the poet is the teacher and leader of the masses. Poetry should represent the highest spirit of the masses, which produced it, both aesthetically and morally. Poetry, by showing us the best, elevates us, cleanses us, makes us strong and beautiful, and also makes us love each other. In this sense, it shares a common function with religion. The people who have evil religion and bad poetry are to be pitied (Yi Kwang-su 1962d: 146-147).

It is interesting to note here that Yi Kwang-su equates literature with religion in terms of its function, which is reiterated in another of his articles as follows: "Literature is not an entertainment. It is religion. Therefore, the writing practice is no different from religious training" (Yi Kwang-su 1962k: 234-35). In these observations Yi apotheosizes literature itself, lifting it up from mundane dimensions of pleasurable diversion or personal amusement with which it is commonly identified and puts it on a pedestal on equal footing with religion. This is an attempt to endow literature with a supreme and uncontested power in terms of moral edification and civilizing efficacy. Seen thus, Yi's statements can be interpreted as an apologia for literary endeavors in general and perhaps, more accurately, as a justification for his own literary engagement and production. This is an unprecedented phenomenon in Korean literary history in that no Korean writer had ever tried to go to the length of sanctifying or canonizing literature in order to provide its practitioners with affirmation or legitimacy for their literary enterpris-

4. Yi Kwang-su's insistence on the social serviceability of literature became the target of sharp criticism by Kim Tong-in (1900-1951) and his like-minded colleagues — proponents of realism, naturalism, and "art for art's sake." Yi retorted by pointing out that such literary ideologies were socially irresponsible; see Yi's article (1962o: 141-42).

es. In short, Yi claimed himself to be a promoter of “arts for life's sake” (1962l: 19) and gave priority to socially useful function over purely aesthetic appeals of literature-in favor of *utile* over *dulce*, to borrow the Horatian dictum.[4]

Yi Kwang-su's configurations of the objectives and function of literature also closely paralleled with his acute historical consciousness that a new age was in the making in Korea, undeniably under the influence of Western culture, which was making inroads in almost all areas of the life of Koreans at the time. The realization that such challenges and impacts and resulting changes in native thinking and emotions needed to be accommodated and correctly expressed in literature led Yi to his commitment to inaugurating innovative and fresh literary forms, language, and stratagems that would adequately meet the needs of his time. His was a search for new wineskins into which to put new wine, so to speak. The following remark summarizes Yi's concern and insights on this score:

> At the present, new Western culture is flooding into Korea. Koreans ought to divest themselves of their old garments and wash old grime, and then bathe their entire body in the new civilization. With the free spirit thus acquired, Koreans should commence to create a new spiritual civilization. Since the Japanese annexation of Korea [in 1910], all Korean systems of civilization have been based on this new culture, but the thoughts and emotions of Koreans, which shape their lives, remain unchanged. From now on, therefore, a new literature should be created to express Koreans' refreshed thoughts and emotions and to produce their first legacy to be handed down to posterity (Yi Kwang-su 1962j: 512).[5]

Yi's sense of mission as a ground-breaking frontrunner in the establishment of new Korean literary traditions and his unwavering conviction about the tutorial agency of literature resulted in the persistent

5. Yi repeated similar observations in his “Munsa wa suyang” (1962l: 17).
6. For an extended discussion on this point, see Song Myŏng-hŭi (1997: 35-62).

and ubiquitous strain of moralizing and didacticism in his master works, which remained his trademark.[6] Taking upon himself the tasks of the social reformer and cultural critic and exploiting to the maximum the instrumentality of literature for his reform agendas, he leveled his criticism at the debilitating weight of Koreans' traditional way of thinking, human relationships, institutions, customs and manners. At the same time, he also kept playing the role of cheerleader, rousing in his reading public a nationalistic consciousness and determination to rectify their grievous reality and the wronged course of their collective national destiny. Greatly benefiting from his easy access to leading contemporary journals and newspapers, such as *Tong-a ilbo, Chosŏn ilbo* (Chosŏn Daily), and *Kaebyŏk* (Creation), which provided him a convenient and ready platform for wide dissemination of his ideas, Yi was able to lead the way in engaging literature to sensitize Koreans to the urgent issues of their time, to prod their will to generate new forms of thought, behavior, and ideals, and ultimately to push them to reinvent a civilization of their own for themselves.

Most noted in his major novels was Yi Kwang-su's endeavor to identify and bring to light the complicated problems faced by the educated, younger generations of his society including himself. Invariably, Yi structured his novels — especially those produced from the 1920s to the 1930s — around the vicissitudes of the lives of his young characters readily recognizable from among the contemporary readership. Some of the most notable leitmotifs in his novels were in large measure related to the pressing problems of his society and culture as well as to those of the young intellectuals of his time. They included the necessity of universal and popular education of Korea's young regardless of gender difference, enlightenment of the masses, infusing the spirit of social service and civic responsibility, recognition of the importance of respect for individual choice, and changes in gender order and marriage and family institutions, to name a few. And these issues received their first concrete and comprehensive novelistic treatment in Yi's first full-length novel, *Mujŏng* (The Heartless), published in 1917. The primary focus of this article is Yi's articulation of gender relationships and the position of women in colonized Korea.

## On Mujŏng: Its Impact and Significance

*Mujŏng* itself was an epoch-making event and represented a decisive break from traditional novels in terms of character depiction, plot development, thematic concerns, narrative strategies, use of the vernacular language, and other literary conventions, signaling a new beginning in the genre of Korean narrative.[7] The novel, hailed as the first full-fledged modern Korean fiction and a monumental turning point in Korean literary history (Cho Yŏn-hyŏn 1969, [1996]: 26; Kim Yun-shik 1986: 528), became an overnight sensation upon its appearance in 1917. Even Yi Kwang-su's archrival Kim Tong-in paid his highest homage to the novel:

> This novel is the greatest work for the writer Ch'unwon himself, and all the novels published thereafter (except for his historical works) are in strict sense extensions of this *Mujŏng*.... In this sense *Mujŏng* is the representative work of Yi Kwang-su to date and an absolutely indispensable cornerstone in the great edifice of modern Korean literature" (Kim Tong-in 1935a: 214).

7. For instance, Yi Kwang-su's invention and use of the pronoun, "kŭ" (he or she), in *Mujŏng* is considered one of his most original contributions to Korean literature. Kim Tong-in's claim that he was the first to create the word "kŭ" proved to be erroneous; see Kim Yun-shik (1986, Vol 2: 565).
8. During this period of serialization, Yi Kwang-su, aged twenty-five, was a philosophy major at Waseda University in Tokyo, Japan. This was his third sojourn in Japan as a student (May 1915-18), made possible by Kim Sŏng-su's (Inch'ŏn; 1891-1955) financial support. Yi's first stay in Japan (1905-1906), begun at the age of fourteen on a scholarship from the Ilchinhoe, the pro-Japanese Korean association, was brief, disrupted by Japan's annexation of Korea. Yi Kwang-su's second visit was for study at Meiji Gakuin (Meiji Academy; March 1907-March 1909), from which he graduated. Yi's period of study at Waseda was marked by uninterrupted publication of a series of his major theoretical writings on Korean marriage and family systems and gender issues, such as "Chosŏn kajŏng ŭi kaehyŏk" (Reform of the Korean Family, 1916), "Chohon ŭi aksŭp" (Evil Custom of Early Marriage,1916), "Honin e taehan kwangyŏn" (My View of Marriage,1917), "Honinnon" (On Marriage, 1917), "Chanyŏ chungshimnon" (Children-Centered Views, 1918), and "Shin saenghwallon" (On New Life, 1918). His second major novel, *Kaech'ŏkcha* (A Pioneer, 1917-18), was also a product of this period.
9. Yi Kwang-su observed that, since he was staying in Tokyo as a student at the time, he did not know what kinds of responses his novel provoked from his readers. But letters sent to him included such inquiries (Yi Kwang-su 1962n: 400).

The novel ignited explosive popularity among young readers, who frenziedly consumed it while it was serialized in the newspaper *Maeil shinbo* for close to half a year from January 1 to June 14, 1917 (126 installments in total).[8] Young readers in the countryside gladly ran miles to get copies of the daily in order to follow the development of the plot (Ku In-hwan c. 1983, 1987: 24), and volumes of inquiry reached the author asking whether the novel was a translation of a foreign work or if it were the author's original work, who the models for the characters in his novel were, and other similar questions.[9] The novel also triggered negative responses, which questioned its value and objectives, such as "What's the purpose of writing the novel? Is something like this beneficial to Korea?" or, "Why are you causing corruption among young people by writing such a love story?" (Yi Kwang-su 1962n) Provoking such a wide range of responses, *Mujŏng* reportedly shook the whole country (Ku In-hwan c. 1983, 1987: 24).[10]

The controversial but phenomenal success of the novel with the young audience of Yi's generation testifies that it touched to the quick some of the most troubling issues faced by contemporary Koreans. Through the words, actions, and trials of the characters who appear in the novel, *Mujŏng* accurately identified and vividly illustrated the quandaries of young Koreans caught between conflicting claims of tradition and change, such as Confucian legalistic collectivism/familism and imported Western individualism, age-old sexism and newly emerging feminist consciousness, and mandates of nationalism and Japanese colonialism. In fact, it has been observed that "the young characters of *Mujŏng* felt, thought, talked, acted, and dreamed pretty much like its young readers of 1917" (Beongcheon Yu 1992: 108).

The uproar and exultation with which readers responded to the novel attests that *Mujŏng* succeeded in providing them with new

10. The novel's unmatched popularity led to publication in book form by a commercial publisher, Kwang'ik Sŏgwan, in Seoul in July 1918, about one year after its serialization. In May 1938, *Mujŏng* was converted into a movie script by the film director Pak Ki-ch'ae and published in *Samch'ŏlli* (May 1938: 275-95), obviously with an eye toward making the novel into a movie. Eventually in April 1939, *Mujŏng* was made into a motion picture, directed by Pak Ki-ch'ae and debuting actress Han Ŭn-jin in the role of the heroine, Yŏngch'ae (Yi Kwang-su 1939b). Yi Kwang-su (1939a), however, expressed his disappointment with the film version, pointing out that it was not faithful to the original novel.

visions and solutions, which was the very objective of its author, just as he set forth:

> When I wrote *Mujŏng*, my intention was to depict the ideals and agonies of contemporary Korean young people and at the same time to supply them suggestions for their future. It was written with a kind of nationalistic and liberal ideology (Yi Kwang-su 1962n: 399).

What captivated the popular imagination most, however, seems to have been the polemic of women and gender relationships enunciated in the novel. *Mujŏng* presented radically unconventional views for its time on these issues by demonstrating possibilities for women's finding autonomy, achieving gender equality, and making contributions to society outside the home through self-awakening, education, and cultivation of their individual talents. The novel propagated a new gender ideology and thereby promoted a new social order, to be created by revision of womanly ideals and male-female relationships. This ideological thrust of the work was, in truth, a direct and subversive challenge to the existing paradigm of Korean women, which defined women's lives in terms of family, submission to male dominance, and self-negation, all sanctioned by Confucian patriarchy — the spiritual mainstay of Korean society. Probably for this very reason alone, the young generation of Yi's time looked up to him as their consummate spokesman and champion and idolized him.

## *Mujŏng* and the Making of Modern Korean Women

*Mujŏng* conveys these reform ideas by chronicling the dramatic metamorphosis of Pak Yŏngch'ae, the nineteen-year-old heroine of the novel, from a tradition-bound woman into a self-governing individual. Although the male protagonist, Yi Hyŏngshik, occupies a pivotal position in the novel, in fact, the original focus of the novel was on Yŏngch'ae, as is revealed by Yi Kwang-su's remark that he had been working on a manuscript titled *Yŏngch'ae* when he was asked by *Maeil shinbo* to contribute a novel for the new year of 1917.[11] And it is through Yŏngch'ae's

dynamic transformation in interpersonal relationships involving Yi Hyŏngshik and two other major female characters, Kim Sŏnhyŏng and Kim Pyŏng ŭk, that the novel s̓ central message is delivered.

Initially, Yŏngch ǎe represents the traditional womanly ideal-an incarnation of unwavering loyalty, perseverance, self-sacrifice, and sexual purity. A dutiful daughter, schooled in Confucian classics such as *Sohak* (Small Learning), *Yŏllyŏ-jŏn* (Biographies of Virtuous Women), and *Shijŏn* (Exegesis on the Book of Songs) under the tutelage of her scholarly father (Pak Ung-jin, known as Pak *chinsa*) (p. 24), [12] she sells herself to become a female entertainer (*kisaeng*) in order to save her patriotic-minded father and two older brothers, who were imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Yŏngch ǎe thus projects an idealized model of filial piety (*hyo*) who sacrifices herself for the sake of her parent and older members of her family. This makes Yŏngch ǎe a modern version of Shimch ŏng, the canonical figure for *hyo*, who offers herself to redeem her father from his visionless (sightless) blunder.[13] In fact, some scholars even find in Yŏngch ǎe a closer parallel with Ch ǎebong, the female protagonist of *Ch ǎebong kambyŏlgok* (The Moving Tale of Ch ǎebong; a late Chosŏn classical novel whose date and authorship are unknown)[14] and the daughter of a Confucian literatus (*chinsa*) who, by becoming a kisaeng, succeeds in releasing her father from prison (Yun Hong-no c. 1979, 1995: 385-86).

Unlike these heroines of traditional novels (or romances), however, Yŏngch ǎe s̓ laudable filial action backfires. It only hastens the premature death of her father, who commits suicide in protest against

11. Yi Kwang-su said that when he received a telegram from *Maeil shinbo* asking him to contribute a novel to the newspaper, he dug this manuscript out and worked on it day and night during his winter vacation in 1916, producing about seventy installments (Yi Kwang-su 1962n: 399).
12. The text used for this paper is Yi Kwang-su, *Mujŏng* (c. 1979; 1995), and citations from the novel are put in parentheses.
13. It has been noted that when he was young, Yi Kwang-su had extensively read classical novels such as Kim Man-jung s̓ (1637-1692) *Sassi namjŏnggi* (Lady Sa s̓ Expedition to the South), *Ch ŭnhyang-jŏn* (The Tale of Ch ŭnhyang), *Shimch ŏng-jŏn* (The Tale of *Shimch ŏng*), and *Hŭngbu-jŏn* (The Tale of Hŭngbu) (Sŏng Hyŏn-gyŏng 1984: 472-73).
14. *Ch ǎebong kambyŏlgok*, also called *Ch ŭp ŭng kambyŏlgok*, is included in *Chŏngsŏn han ǵuk kojŏn munhak ch ŏnjip* (Selected Collection of Classical Korean Literature), (Sŏyŏng Ch ŭlp ʾansa, 1987), 8: 343-86.

Yŏngch ăe ś becoming a *kisaeng*, and it does not even save her two brothers from death, either. In the end, Yŏngch ăe is left a hapless orphan at the age of twelve. The tragic turn of events underscores the fact that the traditional paradigm of filial piety that Yŏngch ăe adopts in her sacrificial feat proves non-functional and self-defeating in her time and society, and by extension, it implies the author ś critique of the concept of hyo as an outmoded and ineffective means of maintaining the familial happiness, solidarity, or unity.[15]

As the narrative of *Mujŏng* unfolds, Yŏngch ăe, now a marginalized and vulnerable kisaeng, is subject to a series of temptations and threats to her sexual purity. Notorious rich men of the town pester her to sell her favor to them, but she resists them with determination and perseverance, though tempted at times to give in.[16] The strength that sustains Yŏngch ăe under pressure stems from her ardent hope to be reunited with Yi Hyŏngshik, a promising and beloved pupil of her father, from whom she was separated after her father ś death about seven years earlier (p. 31). Her obsession is based on the suggestion of her father, who, by way of teasing, had said that she should become Yi Hyŏngshik ś wife in the future (pp. 31-32; 265). Yŏngch ăe unquestioningly clings to her father ś casual remark, spoken when she was still an adolescent, and single-heartedly pursues the whereabouts of Hyŏngshik, despite mounting hardships she experiences as a kisaeng. The image of Hyŏngshik she holds so unfalteringly in her heart gives her the purpose and strength to overcome the numerous odds in her life:

> Although Yŏngch ăe was sold as a kisaeng and led such a life for the past six, seven years, receiving numerous requests from men to sell her favor, she never permitted anything like that to happen. This was partially because of her study of *Sohak* and *Yŏllyŏ-*

15. Yi ś criticism on the hierarchical and male-centered ordering of family members giving supremacy to father and sons is first elaborated in" Chosŏn kajŏng ŭi kaehyŏk. " Later, Yi targeted his denunciation at the *hyo* concept in his" Chanyŏ chungshimnon "(Children-Centered Views), *Ch ŏngch ŭn* (Youth; May 1918), and also in" Shin saenghwallon "*Maeil shinbo* (Sept. 6-Oct. 19, 1918).
16. Yi Kwang-su observed that the early part of *Mujŏng*, which describes Yŏngch ăe ś younger years, was derived from his own fond and also bitter memories of his childhood (Yi Kwang-su 1962n: 399).

> *jŏn*, but it was mainly due to her memory of Hyŏngshik. When she, as an adult, recalled her father ś remark, " You ought to become Hyŏngshik ś wife, "it was not a passing joke but was out of his real, serious intention. So, she made up her mind not to go against her father ś will, even if it cost her life (p. 32).

In the end, thanks to her tenacity and faithfulness to her dream, Yŏngch ảe does find Hyŏngshik, now a Japan-educated intellectual and high school English teacher, and has a brief session with him recounting her past. This reunion draws another parallel to Ch ủnhyang, a virtuous wife (*yŏllyŏ*), who preserves spiritual integrity as well as sexual purity under adverse circumstances. In this sense, Yŏngch ảe ś life course reenacts that of Ch ủnhyang-the icon of chastity for Korean women — who was reunited with Yi Mongyong after suffering cruel mental and physical torture at the hands of the local magistrate, Pyŏn Hakto. A twist occurs at this juncture, however. Unlike Ch ủnhyang, Yŏngch ảe, even before she has a real chance to fully relay her vicissitudes to Hyŏngshik (Yŏngch ảe ś imaginary Yi Mongyong), and thereby reveal her longstanding yearning for him, is sexually attacked by Kim Hyŏnsu and Pae Myŏngshik, infamous town profligates, who are Hyŏngshik ś arch enemies as well as school superiors (symbolic doubles for Pyŏn *hakto*). Most disastrous is the fact that, unlike Yi Mongyong, Hyŏngshik arrives at the scene of the crime too late to prevent the catastrophe from happening— a stark contrast to Yi Mongyong ś impeccable timing. Consequently, the inflated ideal of womanly virtue and the image of a filial daughter on which Yŏngch ảe put such a premium are punctured beyond repair, as these principles are ineffectual in the nightmarish realities in which Yŏngch ảe finds herself.

Now, her loss of sexual purity demotes Yŏngch ảe from the Confucian paragon of womanly virtue. It means a metaphorical death for her, nullifying the reasons for her being alive. Yŏngch ảe ś subsequent suicidal attempt soon after the sexual assault, therefore, is merely a physical confirmation of her death in life. According to Confucian gender orthodoxy, she was a sexually defiled and, therefore, worthless non-being.

Furthermore, Yŏngchảe is also rejected by Yi Hyŏngshik, evidenced

by his half-hearted search for her whereabouts after the news of her possible suicide and by his feelings of ease at the rumor of her death (p. 222). Hyŏngshik's rejection of Yŏngch'ae is further confirmed by his choice as his marriage partner of Kim Sŏnhyŏng, a Western-educated woman, aspiring to further study in the United States (pp. 242-51).[17] Hyŏngshik's abandonment of Yŏngch'ae in favor of Sŏnhyŏng ultimately seals the fact that the kind of gender principles that Yŏngch'ae has held so supreme are anachronistic, self-destructive, and illusionary, only rendering her their pointless martyr.[18] Yŏngch'ae's story then is an ironic parody built on Shimch'ŏng and Ch'unhyang motifs, emphasizing the waste and meaninglessness of her suffering based on her ill-informed filial piety and gender ideals. That is, Yŏngch'ae portrays a dysfunctional heroine, living in a temporal and cultural order where the classical, orthodox female identity and personal choices are no longer operative.

In contrast to Yŏngch'ae, Kim Sŏnhyŏng, who becomes the fiancée of Yi Hyŏngshik, seemingly draws a picture of a modern, liberated woman. She is the daughter of a Westernized father — a well-to-do Christian church elder and a former government official who served as a diplomat in Washington, D.C. (p. 235). Sŏnhyŏng's English lesson with Yi Hyŏngshik and her organ playing symbolize her membership in the bourgeois class in Korea — a new, rising social elite, which was the beneficiary of Korea's frantic adoption of things Western under the name of modernization. She glows in the seductive glamour and amenities that accompany such a privileged position, living as she does in a house decorated with Western paintings, mostly on Christian themes, carpets, organ, and Western furniture — the source of pride of her father (pp. 234-37).

Sŏnhyŏng's plans for going abroad for study are based on her

17. Hyŏngshik's choice of Sŏnhyŏng over Yŏngch'ae may be considered a telling revelation of his bourgeois view of marriage which prizes a marital partner's materialistic conditions such as family background, education, economic assets, and sexual purity. [Note: I would like to thank the reviewer who provided this insight.]

18. Kim U-jong (c. 1981, 1986: 87-89) touches upon Yi Kwang-su's criticism of the irrationality of Yŏngch'ae's behavior in his "Yi Kwang-su ŭi kyemong ŭishik" (Yi Kwang-su's Enlightenment Consciousness).

dream of achieving social status by "associating with Western women through English conversation" (p. 84). Her life's goal is "to meet a man on the boat returning home from her study in the United States, to marry such a U.S.-educated man, and to live in a two-story brick house, enjoying playing the piano" (p. 84). Sŏnhyŏng, a "new woman" (*shinyŏsŏng*), therefore, stands at a polarizing distance from the world of Yŏngch'ae — Yŏngch'ae, a tradition-bound woman (*kuyŏsŏng*) and orphan of an impoverished and maligned Confucianist who represents the disappearing classes of traditional scholars; Yŏngch'ae, who, deprived of opportunities for modern education, was reduced to the outcast kisaeng status to earn her livelihood; and Yŏngch'ae, who, as a victim of sexual violence, has given up her hopes for the future.

And yet, Sŏnhyŏng is almost a mirror image of Yŏngch'ae in that she basically lives in the same cultural space as Yŏngch'ae does. She passively yields to her father's initiative and decision in selecting Yi Hyŏngshik as her spouse without questioning its relevance or consequences. Although Sŏnhyŏng has been meeting Yi Hyŏngshik as her English tutor, she has little idea about what her fiancé is really like, just as Yŏngch'ae had no inkling about Yi Hyŏngshik. Furthermore, Sŏnhyŏng knows she does not love Hyŏngshik:

> Sŏnhyŏng didn't know what to think about Hyŏngshik. A girl with a heart of a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old, she wouldn't detest any man, unless he was evil, mean, or very ugly. Moreover, since Hyŏngshik was more or less well thought of by others, she didn't dislike him, either. In a way, she felt somewhat close to him and began to think of him with more affection than before, after having heard words about him from her father in the morning.
>
> But of course this didn't mean that Sŏnhyŏng loved Hyŏngshik. There's no way love could sprout like that within two or three days. Granted that love for him may grow in her to some extent in the future, love was not what she felt, at least, for now (p. 241).

Once her engagement is concluded, Sŏnhyŏng's study plans are orchestrated by the joint cooperation between her father and Hyŏngshik without her input or participation in decision- making (p.

248). When Sŏnhyŏng begins to have qualms about her marriage, and even feels angry at her father, she concludes that she ought to follow her parents' wishes and has to love Hyŏngshik as her husband in compliance with the teachings in the Bible (pp. 282; 289).[19]

It becomes clear that Sŏnhyŏng is another example of a consciousness that submits to patriarchal directives with little power to design one's own course of life. She, just like Yŏngch'ae, dwells in an Other-dependent cultural domain, where crucial choices in women's lives are determined by others' priorities and expedience. Sŏnhyŏng's cultivation of and adornment with modern cultural trappings notwithstanding, she is essentially identical to Yŏngch'ae in her orientation toward womanhood-perennially accepting, conforming, and accommodating others' needs and finding in such submission the rationale and fulfillment of her life.[20] This makes Sŏnhyŏng operate in the same ideological continuum as Yŏngch'ae, except for the fact that they occupy opposite ends of the social spectrum. Yŏngch'ae's Eastern tradition-bound ethos is simply replaced in Sŏnhyŏng's case with the cultural point of reference to the illusory and make-believe world of the West. The fantasy elements in Sŏnhyŏng's thinking and her indulgence in the superficial things of the West render her a caricature of pseudo-modernity and a travesty of the popular image of a "new/modern woman" (*shinyŏsŏng*).

## Paradigms for "New Women," Female Bonding, and Sisterhood

At this juncture, we encounter Kim Pyŏng'uk, a female violin student studying in Japan, who represents negation of what both Yŏngch'ae and Sŏnhyŏng exemplify. Pyŏng'uk stands for a new female norm of conduct and thinking characterized by individualism and self-determination. As an educated woman, she demonstrates a spirit of indepen-

19. Ku In-hwan (c. 1983, 1987: 283) categorizes Sŏnhyŏng as one of the submissive women characters to be found in Yi Kwang-su's novels.
20. Similarities between Yŏngch'ae and Sŏnhyŏng have been noted by Cho Yŏn-hyŏn (c.1969, 1996: 179).

dence, freedom, and confidence that comes from her application of critical faculty and rationality to inter-human relationships and to her life as a whole. Similar to Yŏngch ảe and Sŏnhyŏng, Pyŏng ủk is also under pressure from her father to marry a man of his choice — a widower given to dissipation and vanity. But unlike both women, Pyŏng ủk stands her ground and feels no compulsion to follow her father ś order (pp. 273-74). In fact, Pyŏng ủk has already chosen a man she loves, an illegitimate son at that. She regards love and marriage as a matter of personal choice, not an obligation toward parents or others, and insists that she will marry whenever she wants to (p. 272). Thus, the female paradigm projected by the figure of Pyŏng ủk is one of autonomy and self-authority in need of no external approval for her being.

It is instructive here to note that Pyŏng ủk actually renamed herself. Her present name, Pyŏng ủk, is her own choice, after concluding that Pyŏng ỏk, her original name, was too feminine, and Pyŏngmok, a possible option, was too masculine:

> The female student ś name was Pyŏng ủk. According to her, her original name was Pyŏngỏk, but it sounded too soft and too feminine so she changed it to Pyŏngmok. But then, she found it too rough and masculine; so she took the middle ground and chose Pyŏng ủk. One day she said to Yŏngch ảe, " Pyŏng ủk sounds lonely. But I don ť like the old idea that women should be simply docile and soft. At the same time, however, I don ť like women being rough and stiff like men. I think it is truly appropriate for women to stand in between the two. "(p. 269)

This act of self-rechristening on the part of Pyŏng ủk signifies she has found her own identity and subjectivity based on a balanced integration of both maleness and femaleness and on her own terms. Ultimately Pyŏng ủk stands for a new female role model, who can transcend the female stipulations of her society and lead a self-sufficient life as a result of such successful mastery over gendered provisions and fiats. In this sense, Pyŏng ủk is the first prototype of a truly " new woman " character, a woman unhampered by gendered mandates of her society, in Korean literary history.

It is through the catalytic mediation of Pyŏng ủk that Yŏngch ảe

actualizes her transformation. Pyŏng ủk identifies the causes of Yŏngch ȧe ṡ misfortune and prompts her to self-awakening. Stimulated by Pyŏng ủk ṡ powerful reasoning and persuasion, Yŏngch ȧe begins to realize the absurdity of her pursuit of Hyŏngshik, as is revealed in her conversation with Pyŏng ủk:

> “ Yŏngch ȧe, you have lived fooling yourself. You have kept your chastity for Hyŏngshik, whom you don ṫ even love. You have vainly kept your loyalty for the past seven, eight years, living up to one word your father casually said in jest. Isn ṫ it pointless to be loyal to someone whom you don ṫ love and with whom you haven ṫ even exchanged promises? Isn ṫ it the same as being loyal to someone who ṡ dead or to someone who doesn ṫ exist in this world? Your intention is beautiful and your loyalty is firm, but that ṡ all there is to it.... ”
> Yŏngch ȧe said, “ But I have given my heart to him up to now, and what am I supposed to do now? There are teachings of old sages I have to follow... ”
> “ No, Yŏngch ȧe, you have been daydreaming all this while. How could you give your heart to someone whose face you don ṫ even recognize and whose heart you don ṫ even know? That ṡ a totally old and wrong notion, which has chained you up. People live for their own life. How could any woman take a man as her husband whom she doesn ṫ love? So, your past history is a dream. From now on, a true life begins. ”
> Yŏngch ȧe was shocked at these words. They sounded very different from what she had thought of as the image of a virtuous woman. But what Pyŏng ủk said appeared to be true. Yŏngch ȧe has actually never loved Hyŏngshik. Instead, she simply drew up a phantom image of a man to her liking, naming him Hyŏngshik, and pursued Hyŏngshik instead of the man of her dream. When she finally met Hyŏngshik, she realized that he was not the man of her heart and got disappointed. She became disappointed, lamenting that she would never meet Hyŏngshik.
> When her thoughts reached this point, Yŏngch ȧe realized her delusion and felt as if she found a new light in this deep despair (pp. 264-65).

Pyŏng ủk tracks down Yŏngch ảe ṡ trouble to her unexamined subscription to the “ Rule of Three-fold Obedience ” (*samjongjido*),[21] as reflected in her blind acceptance of her father ṡ word, and makes her see its irrationality and destructiveness:

> “ Children may have to obey their parents and a wife may have to follow her husband. But isn t́ it true that the lives of children are more important than the words of parents and the life of a wife is more important than her husband ṡ words? It is suicide to decide the course of one ṡ life in order to please others. Furthermore, it is really male tyranny to force women to obey their children after the deaths of their husbands. It is a rule that disregards women ṡ individuality . . . Dear Yŏngch ảe, you have been a slave to these old ideas and have suffered senselessly up to now. You have to cut these shackles. You have to be awakened from these illusions. You ought to live for yourself. You must get freedom! ”(p. 266)

In this consciousness-raising session, Pyŏng ủk also tutors Yŏngch ảe how to reorder and revise her life course for the future:[22]

> “ From of old, Korean women have regarded the role of wife as their only function and even their marriages were decided by others ’wills. Up to now, women wanted to be a part of men and their possessions. We women have to be human beings. We have to be first of all human beings as well as women. You have a lot of work to do. You were never born to live for your father or Yi Hyŏngshik only. You were born for the sake of past Korea for eons of ages, for the thousand millions of people of today, and for tens of thousands of future generations. ”(p. 267)

Pyŏng ủk ṡ humanity, charismatic magnetism, and genuine concern

21. This principle prescribes that a woman follow three rules: 1) before marriage to follow her father; 2) after marriage, her husband; and 3) after her husband ṡ death, her son(s).
22. The tutor-disciple relationship between Pyŏng ủk and Yŏngch ảe has also been briefly touched upon by Kim Yun-shik (1986: 540-41).

for Yŏngch'ae brings her back from her social and spiritual death, and reincarnates her into a "new woman," as evidenced by her own inner musings:

> All this while, Yŏngch'ae has controlled her life by pinching her own flesh whenever an image of another man [other than Yi Hyŏngshik] appeared in her mind, thinking it was a great sin. Therefore, Yŏngch'ae has never been an independent being, but a mere model of certain moral laws. Like a silkworm cuddled up inside a cocoon, Yŏngch'ae built a house called female chastity and thought it was the whole world. This house was completely destroyed by the recent incident, and Yŏngch'ae was finally pushed out into a wider world. Moreover, ever since she met Pyŏng'uk in the train, she came to realize that the only world she knew was in fact nothing but a worthless phantom and that there exists in human life a free, happy, and wide world. Now she wants to become a free, young person — a young and beautiful woman.
>
> Finally, Yŏngch'ae felt real human blood beginning to circulate in her heart and human passions burning within her. Yŏngch'ae realized that her mind had now changed completely. She felt as if she had come out for the first time into a world where the sun shines, the wind blows, flowers bloom, and birds sing, after having been shut up in a dark and narrow prison (pp. 277-278).

As these three women characters' stories have demonstrated in *Mujŏng*, Yi Kwang-su suggests that the key to women's true self-identity and purpose of life lies in liberation from Confucian patriarchal indoctrination and in their self-awakening in the true sense of the word. The most significant authorial suggestion, however, would be that such an objective can be best achieved by women's cooperative, mutual help, as is seen in the fact that it is not a male character, Yi Hyŏngshik, but Pyŏng'uk who in the end guides Yŏngch'ae to a true recognition of her own personal reality and to self-discovery. In fact, Yŏngch'ae's obsession with Yi Hyŏngshik has only drawn her back into her irredeemable and regressive past and has mired her in the conflict-ridden impasse of the present with little hope for the future. It is only

through exposure to Pyŏng ủk ṡ practical personal care, convincing persuasion, and self-affirming lifestyle that Yŏngch ảe finds a dominance-free support system, is nurtured back to normalcy, and reclaims her future and a life worthy of a human being. To Yŏngch ảe, Pyŏng ủk is a life-changing force, a new female paradigm, and most of all, a savior.

The relationship between Pyŏng ủk and Yŏngch ảe exemplifies a feministic sisterhood, a lateral female camaraderie, and professional collegiality, touched by human warmth and trust. Their coalescence signifies the first, special moment in Korean narrative history, since the majority of pre-modern vernacular novels, and even " new novels " (*shinsosŏl*), which recycle the motifs of adversarial or conflictual relationships between women, be they the fabled mother-in-law/daughter-in-law antagonisms, or legal wife/concubine hostilities, or stepmother/stepdaughter animosities.[23] These rankling aversions and feuds among females are invariably staged within domestic and familial domains, often accentuated and marred by jealousy, hatred, and competition for exclusive favor or love of males. In sharp contrast, the relationship between Pyŏng ủk and Yŏngch ảe is on a dimension entirely devoid of such poisonous impulses or destructive behavioral patterns and is also formed outside of immediate, kinship contexts.

This suggests the author ṡ unique and unconventional vision, which rectifies the stereotyped and prejudicial concepts about Korean women ṡ interpersonal relationships. It replaces them with those that can be mutually fulfilling and productive, while transcending conventional forms of female associations restricted to narrow familial boundaries and interactions. We discern in this new configuration of female friendship something comparable to male bonding, a privileged male monopoly considered impossible for women. As such, the two women ṡ companionship implies new possibilities for expanding the radius as

23. Some of the classical texts that belong to these categories are: Hŏ Kyun ṡ (1569-1618) *Hong Kiltong-jŏn* (The Tale of Hong Kiltong), *Inhyŏn wanghu-jŏn* (The Tale of Queen Inhyˇon), *Changhwa Hongnyŏn-jŏn* (The Tale of Changhwa and Hongnyŏn), *K ỏngjwi P ảtchwi-jŏn* (The Tale of K ỏngjwi and P ảtchwi). For narratives in the new novel genre, see Yi In-jik ṡ (1862-1916) *Kwi ŭi sŏng* (The Sound of a Ghost, 1908) and *Ch ỉaksan* (Mt. Ch ỉak, 1908); and Yi Hae-jo ṡ (1869-1927) *Pinsangsŏl* (Frosty Hair, 1908).

well as revolutionizing the dimensions of dealings of women with one another, closely approximating a fraternal esprit de corps. In short, the sororal fellowship that transpires between Pyŏng ủk and Yŏngch ảe demonstrates a shift toward a new female culture of collaboration and alliance, a revisionary departure from traditional, warped, and most of all, unwholesome views of women s̉ networks and patterns of behavior toward other females.

Also interesting is the pastoral setting of Pyŏng ủk s̉ home in the outskirts of Hwangju, Hwanghae Province, away from the urban centers of P'yŏngyang, which serves as a reminder of Yŏngch ảe s̉ painful and fossilized past, and Seoul, a site where Yŏngch ảe s̉ basic human dignity was destroyed. The secluded, idyllic village offers a therapeutic haven of rest for Yŏngch ảe, helping her heal her trauma and pessimistic outlook on life. In addition, the natural bounty the village supplies in the summer, described as " mother-nature s̉ milk " (p. 296), reinforced by the generosity and openness of Pyŏng ủk and her family, provides suitable nurturance for Yŏngch ảe to recuperate from her horrific suicide attempt. This temporary sojourn in the countryside also signifies her reconnection to her unblemished childhood and personal roots, as is indicated in Yŏngch ảe s̉ conversation with Pyŏng ủk:

> " I like villages like this where grasses and trees grow — most probably because I grew up in the countryside. I feel like being shut up in prison when I stay in cities like Seoul and Pyŏngyang, " said Yŏngch ảe while throwing up a round stone and catching it.
> " Of course. Our body and mind become totally free and leisurely when we live in this spacious nature, but in the city....Good Heavens! How terrible the dust and foul air are, and on top of that, how unclean even people s̉ minds become there, " said Pyŏng ủk, frowning as if she had just smelled something rotten. Then she continued,
> " But it is so spacious and clean here, don ť you think? "Pyŏng ủk drew deep breaths. Indeed, the air was clean. From time to time, warm, fragrant wafts from grasses drifted over, as if to intoxicate them (p. 296).

In this notion of nature expressed by Yi Kwang-su, we observe a

streak of romanticism that locates in nature a soothing and curative power, restoring weary and depleted souls to spiritual and emotional well-being, recharging them with energy.[24]

## The Woman Question and the Nation

One last point in *Mujŏng* that needs serious consideration is the idea that the meaning of a woman's life is incomplete until it includes society and people in it, a much larger entity than one's own home and family.[25] This social dimension of liberated womanhood is clearly expressed and advocated in the climactic scene toward the end of the novel describing a charity concert held by the three women, Yŏngch'ae, Pyŏng'uk, and Sŏnghyŏng, when they realized the necessity of their involvement in the lives of the flood victims. In fact, this scene was highly praised by the social critic Kim Ki-jŏn, who gave tribute to it by observing that it represented "the epitome of the spirit of the novel, its life and its ideal" (Kim Ki-jŏn 1917).[26] Kim Tong-in also lauded Yi Kwang-su for the creation of the scene analyzing it from a more technical perspective. He commented that the scene was a perfect device, which made it possible for the author to resolve the ever-complicated relationships among the four principal characters, Yŏngch'ae, Pyŏng'uk, Sŏnhyŏng, and Hyŏngshik, without overly straining the plot:

> Here are the four characters—one male and three females—each wrapped up in different emotions: Pyŏng'uk, who is observing with a sense of scorn as well as sympathy this group of male and females dancing wildly the dance of a love triangle right in front of her eyes; Sŏnhyŏng, who is looking with displeasure at

24. This notion seems almost analogous to William Wordsworth's concept of nature projected in his *The Prelude* (1805).
25. Cho Yŏn-hyŏn (c.1969, 1996: 168, 179) stresses that in Yi Kwang-su's novel nationalism, enlightenment, and new forms of love relationships are inextricably interwoven, and *Mujŏng* is the author's first bold and explicit attempt to express his passion for his position and ideas.
26. Kim's article was published three days after the last installment of *Mujŏng*, no. 126, was published in *Maeil shinbo* on June 14, 1917. *Kim Ki-jŏn* was a key contributor to the journal *Kaebyŏk* from its inaugural issue published on June 25, 1920.

> the relationship between her fiance and Yŏngch'ae; Yŏngch'ae, who is agonizing over the loss of her beloved for whom she has yearned for nearly twenty years; and Hyŏngshik, who is wavering spinelessly between the two women.
> How is the author going to resolve the problems of these four characters when they come together in one place?
> Here we have to give credit to the author, who resolved the emotional complications of these characters with their compassion for their compatriots, the flood victims in Samnangjin. Unless such an enormous event had occurred, the four would have parted, each harboring different feelings.
> This patriotism has been the author's frequent weapon and is usually inserted in his works artificially and self-consciously. Since such use of patriotism fits ill with the content of certain works, it could create weird feelings in his readers. But the present scene is an exception, because without such problems [the flood and its victims] the characters would have never come together and had their heart-to-heart talk in perfect harmony. In this sense, this method was the only instance of "appropriate insertion" to be found in Ch'unwon's entire corpus (Kim Tong-in 1935a: 211-12).

There certainly exists a measure of artificiality and contrivance — a kind of *deus ex machina* — as hinted by Kim Tong-in, in the coincidental convergence of the principal characters at the scene of the flood and in the young characters' agreement to perform for the benefit of the destitute. It seems as if Yi Kwang-su resorted to the intervention of nature in the form of a flood — virtually a heaven-ordained happening, and therefore, irrefutable — to authenticate beyond question his design to bring a semblance of finality or closure to the ever-diverging narrative involving the main characters. The fact that Yi struck upon the idea of linking the lives of the privileged young of the bourgeois, who represent the future leadership class of Korea, to those of the dispossessed in Korean society thereby accentuating the necessity of the elite's public responsibility and commitment, however, is an ingenious one.

By drawing out the spirit of social work from the female characters in the novel at this junction in the development of the story line, Yi

Kwang-su advances social commitment and engagement as integral parts of educated women's lives. And seen from this perspective, to dwell in female domesticity and exclusively pursuing private love interests would be an unconscionable luxury and self-indulgence, especially given the colonial situation of Korea at the time. The gender relationship becomes wholesome and complete only when it transcends the personal and egotistical satisfaction of love between male and female and expands to include the larger humanity and thereby fulfills societal obligations.

The most ideal form of love relationship, then, would be the one that has been sublimated to the love of one's own country and its people. In short, for Yi Kwang-su, proper human love and relationships are only legitimate and authenticated when they are prompted and sustained by love of the nation at large. In this connection, it is extremely suggestive that it is Pyŏng'uk — a female character — not Yi Hyŏngshik, the male hero, that proposes the idea of a concert and pushes it to a successful conclusion (pp. 353-54). It expresses another authorial message that women need not be passive, secondary agents in performing civic duties or public service. That is, women are as competent as, if not superior to, men in executing social projects as full-fledged citizens and can make a difference in times of national crisis.

The penchant on the part of Yi Kwang-su to promote the necessity of harnessing the idealistic energy of the young and educated urbanites to work for their country's disenfranchised and deprived, especially for those in the countryside, became crucial and recurring motifs in his later works. The most notable example of this category is *Hŭk* (Soil; 1932-1933).[27] Yi Kwang-su's subsequent, vital involvement in the "Return to the Countryside" (V Narod) campaign initiated by *Tonga ilbo* in 1931 can, therefore, be better understood in this context, as it was his own actualization of the nationalistic message seminally propagated in *Mujŏng*.[28]

27. *Hŭk* was serialized in *Tonga ilbo*, 4/12/1932-7/10/1933. Shim Hun's (1901-1936) *Sangnogsu* (An Evergreen Tree, 1935) is thematically on the same line with *Hŭk*.

## Epilogue

It is illuminating to recall here that Yi Kwang-su had already published in 1910 a short story with the same title, "Mujŏng."[29] This narrative centers on the suicide of its twenty-four-year-old heroine, an act committed to protest her plight as the victim of an early, arranged marriage, her husband's philandering, the practice of concubinage, and Koreans' preference for male children. An exemplary daughter-in-law and wife in an extended family, the woman personifies virtues of traditional Korean women such as absolute submissiveness to parents-in-law and husband, self-effacement, sexual purity, reticence, and discretion in behavior. Here it is crucial to note that the heroine has been given no personal name and is identified by her status as a daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law. Uneducated and illiterate, she is a captive of a home-bound world, which is determined by the wishes and actions of her family and relatives.

The woman's male-ordered world crumbles around her when her husband's concubine comes to live in her house, and her wretchedness reaches its extremity with the discovery of her own pregnancy with a female child. No longer able to maintain stoic acquiescence, she resorts to suicide — one of the most powerful but ultimately self-negating weapons of the weak. She sees self-destruction as the only way to end her misery and to make a statement about her anger and mortification. And Yi describes this utterly helpless and lonely woman with no one to share her predicament as a figure abandoned to the "silent," "heartless" (*mujŏng*), "cruel," and "stern" law of the universe (p. 529).[30] That is, this heroine is a tragic epitome of woman's life circumscribed by and trapped in patriarchal dictates and conventions with no recourse but to despair and final self-annihilation.

28. The movement aimed at mobilizing Korean high school and college students to go to the countryside to help the literacy movement, promote personal hygiene among the rural people, encourage them develop secondary income sources, organize co-ops, and improve agricultural cultivation methods and even marketing.

29. "*Mujŏng*" was published in *Taehan hŭnghakpo* (Korean Bulletin for Encouragement of Learning), nos. 11-12, March-Apr., 1910.

30. Han Sŭng-ok (1995: 97-101) interprets "mujŏng" as an experience comparable to that of *han*.

In drastic contrast, the full-length novel *Mujŏng* deconstructs this world of tradition-shackled woman with the new image of Yŏngch'ae, who makes a radical turn from the same male-privileged world and proceeds to re-chart the course and objectives of her life. Essentially, Yŏngch'ae shared the same predicament with the heroine of *Mujŏng*, in that she was dismissed by Hyŏngshik and alienated from him, since his attitude toward her was lukewarm at best and indifferent at worst. In fact, Hyŏngshik's noncommittal stance toward Yŏngch'ae is described as "mujŏng" (heartless), repeatedly uttered by the old woman, the owner of his boarding house, when she learns of Yŏngch'ae's presumed suicide during her conversation with Yi Hyŏngshik:

> "She killed herself because you didn't treat her right!" the old woman said.
> "What do you meanŏ" asked Hyŏngshik.
> "You treated her so heartlessly (mujŏng hage), when she had yearned for you so much for ten years."
> Hyŏngshik was startled at the word "*heartlessly*." So, he asked, "*Heartlessly*? What have I done so *heartlessly*?"
> "Of course, you were *heartless*! You hadn't even tenderly held her hands..."
> "How could I hold her hands?"
> "Why couldn't you? As far as I saw, Myŏngch'ae...."
> "No, her name is Yŏngch'ae, not Myŏngch'ae, you know."
> "All right! As far as I could see, Yŏngch'ae seemed to have given her heart to you. But you behaved so heartlessly to her. You should have held her back or followed her when she said she was going away," said the old women accusingly (p. 221).[31]

It turns out that Yŏngch'ae did survive the heartlessness of Hyŏngshik, obtained a true friend in Pyŏng'uk, and in the end succeeded in reincarnating herself as a changed person. By resurrecting Yŏngch'ae from her virtual death, Yi Kwang-su in the end offers a positive and creative space for Korean women similarly locked in impossi-

31. Italic for the word "mujŏng" has been added by the writer of this article.

ble situations. It seems as if the earlier version of "*Mujŏng*" serves as a necessary prelude to the diametrically opposed depiction of the "new woman" presented in *Mujŏng*. By revisiting the short story, the reader is reminded of the distance Yi traveled in the span of seven years from the negative approach in his formulation of female existence in the first story to the affirming and uplifting one in the latter. Actually, the novel *Mujŏng* ends with the following positive note:

> The dark world wouldn't remain forever so, and the heartless world is not to remain forever so. With our own power, we will make it bright, loving, happy, rich, and strong.
> With a joyful laughter and hurrah, let's end "heartlessness" which grieves the bygone world (p. 368).

In this sense, the title of the novel, *Mujŏng*, is partial, enigmatic, and even deceptive, inviting the reader to reflect upon the ultimate but elided implications of the messages of the work.

*Mujŏng*, Yi Kwang-su's first extended fictionalization on the themes of new gender identity and relationships, served him as a powerful instrument for propagating his "re-visioning" of existing notions and premises about Korean women's existence, by pointing out their inadequacy and flaws in dealing with the changing realities of contemporary Korea. The novel advertised the desirability of restructuring gender ideologies and reformulating human relationships based on a fresh recognition of gender symmetry, the autonomy of women as human beings, their rightful membership in their society, and the concomitant citizenship duty and social obligations on their part. These would have been a tall order for the time and in the cultural milieu in which the readers of *Mujŏng* found themselves, but Yi Kwang-su single-handedly undertook the task, putting himself in the forefront as a propagator of these issues. It is probably for this reason that the novel enjoyed such a following. In fact, even Kim Tong-in, Yi Kwang-su's often scathing critic, had to offer the following compliment as an acknowledgment of Yi Kwang-su's pioneering spirit and courage:

> The literary works that Ch'unwon first whirled at his society were rebellious proclamations. He was a truly courageous Don

> Quixote. He issued a declaration of war on Confucianism and Christianity. He declared war upon the elders of Korea and marriage systems. He rebelled against all kinds of morals, institutions, rules, and decorum; this courageous Don Quixote revolted against all conventional moral codes. These rebellious ideas were exactly the same as those held in the hearts of all young contemporary Koreans. But they dared not speak up, keeping only silence. When these young people, either because of the moral precepts still rooted in them or because of decorum, could not express themselves, Ch'unwon raised the rebellious banner high. All young Koreans could not help but gather under this banner. When they realized that ‘this incident could happen,’ and ‘this rebellious action is possible,’ Korean young people thronged to the camp of Ch'unwon, without complaint or competition for rank.[32]

The appeal of *Mujŏng* seems to derive from the continuing relevance of its author's reformulation of the gender order to today's readers in Korea, where similar issues still remain as a troubling part of the feminist agenda and discourse. In this regard, the novel's implications are as challenging, perennial, and problematic as they were to its earlier audience. Herein lies the enduring value of *Mujŏng*, which merits rereading and reappraisal, particularly from gender perspectives.

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