

***From Wise Mother/Good Wife  
to Women Who Kill:  
Images of Women and  
Transcultural Feminism  
in Modern Korean Drama***  
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In 1979, the book *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was translated into Korean and introduced to the Korean public. Around this time, for the sake of women themselves, the Korean version of second-wave feminism began. By the early 80s, a small coterie of women's groups, such as the People's Friends Group (Minwuhoe) and the Alternative Culture (Tohana ui Munhwa), formed. Notable about these groups is that their leaders were Korean women intellectuals, usually professors who were educated in the U.S. and Europe, and that these groups were formed as women mentors passed down their acquired knowledge and ideas about feminism to their women students. Thus the second wave of the Korean women's movement was generated from the upper social strata with the introduction of Western feminist thought, and it naturally took a considerable length of time for these foreign (Western) ideas to take root in a totally different cultural soil.

This paper examines 1) how Western feminism, once introduced into Korea underwent certain modifications to accommodate the needs of a differing cultural context and 2) against this backdrop, how Korean women's drama represents ideas of Korean feminism, the result of such cultural interactions.

I need to contextualize my discussion by briefly mentioning the historical background of Korean feminism. It was in the late 1800s when Christianity and formal education for women were introduced from the West, that Korea was exposed to the historical momentum to liberate its women. Christianity, although a patriarchal religion in the West, effected, in the Korean social context, the liberation of women from the confinement within women's quarters in the home, as well as equality of the sexes as it permitted both husbands and wives to attend services side by side. Also during the same period, schools for girls, established by American women missionaries, made a great contribution in bringing about a significant "revolution" in the consciousness of Korean women.

The stated educational goal for these girls' schools was not revolutionary. Their goal was "not to make women independent members of society to compete with men, but to equip them with a wider vision as mothers with the important mission of educating their children." Part of the reason for this seemingly "conservative line" of educational strategies by American missionaries seems to have resulted out of consideration for the strongly patriarchal nature of the hosting

culture. (History of Korean Women, Seoul: Ewha Women's University Press, 1972, p. 152)

By the 1920s, there appeared the first generation of Korean New Women, who were educated with modern values such as individualism, freedom of love and marriage, and equality between the sexes. Most of these New Women (such as the first modern Korean woman painter Na Hye-sok, and Korea's first soprano Yun Sim-dok) practiced these newly-acquired ideas in their lives vis-a-vis the Confucian stereotype of the Wise Mother/Good Wife, and as a result, ended tragically.

Though seemingly rebellious, these Korean feminists shared a staunch belief in heterosexual love and the institution of the patriarchal family. Values such as independence in the pursuit of one's career apart from the family were undervalued. This strong family orientation also characterized the Korean version of the first-wave women's movement at the turn of this century. Korean women formed women's organizations such as the Women's Friendship Association (Yowuhoe) in 1898, which waged a sit-in demonstration against concubinage in front of the king's palace. Another, the Women's Association for National Reparation (Kukchae Paesang Puihoe) which was formed in 1907, participated in activities to raise money to pay back the nation's debt to Japan.

These women's organizations waged activities expanding the mothering role at home to the national level, and promoted patriotism. They made a great contribution to the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919 under Japanese rule, but after the 1930s became dormant due to the oppression of Japanese rule.

The second wave of the Korean women's movement re-emerged in the late 1970s. For the small coterie group-based women's movement to take root, however, it had to come to terms with the patriarchal culture of the larger society.

In this culture founded on Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist cultural complex, yin and yang are not binary opposites but complementary essential forces, and the family is the place where harmony between these two forces can materialize in human terms.

Family-oriented values continued to characterize the Korean women's movement in the 1980s and the 1990s as well. Among the hot women's issues were wife-rape and the resulting family disintegration, and the institution of preventive law against domestic violence. Sexual harassment issues attracted only incidental attention in the wake of the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas case in the early 1990s. The Korean version of a sexual harassment case, however, the Assistant Ms. Woo Case, in which a student assistant accused a male professor of the Seoul National University of sexual harassment, was lost in a lawsuit after long exhausting trials over several years.

Now, against this family-oriented backdrop of Korean feminism and the women's movement, I would like to examine how Korean women's dramas embody this cultural difference as a representational system. It was in the late 1950s that the

first generation of professional women playwrights such as Kirn Ja-rim and Park Hyon-suk made their debut. The themes that they pursued most frequently in their plays were freedom of love and marriage, and husband and wife relationships centering on the wife's reactions to the husband's infidelity. They did not yet raise questions about the institution of marriage itself, and even their dissatisfaction with the husbands was expressed in a "womanly," roundabout way.

For example, Kirn's play *Whirling Wind* (1958) deals with three generations of widowed women in a household, a grandmother, a mother and a daughter with different values regarding love and marriage. Daughter Ki-suk, the central character, wants to remarry but her grandmother and mother strongly oppose it, saying that "a virtuous woman should follow and obey only one husband," the traditional morality for women which both of the women faithfully lived by after they became widows. Ki-suk, however, wins the conflict with her mother and grandmother regarding her remarriage, and chooses her own partner for love.

In Park's *Masquerade* (1976), a women character named Wife rebels against her unfaithful husband. To carry out her revenge, she goes secretly to a masquerade and is matched with her own husband as her masked partner. But they find out about each other in a hotel room. The man and his wife suddenly become very generous in forgiving each other and making up. This reversal of plot line for comic effect and the happy ending can be read as Park's "womanly" way of lodging a veiled criticism, trying to save the face of patriarchy in the name of unfaithful husbands.

Thus, these plays voice a distinctly women's point of view, but the playwrights' concern lies rather in improving the husband-wife relationship within marriage. Kirn succinctly expresses this point: that more opportunities should be made accessible to women. At the same time men must not be openly challenged as a reaction to the age-old subordination of the opposite sex; and women should still acknowledge sexual differences and recognize that competition beyond sex lines is not equality.

Around the mid-1980s women's drama as a distinctly professional genre began to emerge on the Korean stage. One such moment is marked by the performance of the play *A Woman in Crisis* (Wigi ui Yoja), adapted from Simone de Beauvoir's novel in 1986 by the Sanwullin theater group. Actually this play recorded a stunning box-office success and stimulated the staging of more women's dramas.

One of the main sources for this play's wide appeal to middle-class Korean wives is its theme: the central character Monique's internal journey to find herself, provoked by her husband's infidelity after twenty-some years of married life. In a strongly male-dominated culture where divorce is such a social taboo especially for women, and where men are still the privileged breadwinners, upper-middle class Korean wives seemed to have found in this play a source of empathy, identification and certain consolation.

Many similar plays followed suit. A major female playwright, Chong Pok-kun, created a Korean version of *A Woman in Crisis* in *What is the Matter with You, Honey?*

(1988), with a slightly modified ending. In a one-woman monodrama, the character Wife, who is also a middle-aged, upper-middle class woman, exposes her feelings of betrayal and despair when confronted with her husband's infidelity. But she ends her story by saying that she forgives her husband for his human failings and weaknesses. She concludes that it is because she accepts "her destiny." (Chong Pok-kun, *What is the Matter with You, Honey?* (Wenil Iseyo. Tangs in), unpublished script, 1988).

Entering the 1990s, divorce and the institution of marriage began to be questioned more seriously, as a batch of younger generation women playwrights made their debut. Also by the early 1990s, Marsha Norman's *Night, Mother*, Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls* (1993), Nell Dunn's *Steaming* (1991), and Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women* were introduced to the Korean stage, and made considerable contributions in familiarizing Korean audiences with the sense and sensibilities of Western women's drama.

Of these, *Night, Mother* and *Steaming* won considerable commercial success, mainly because of the moderate theme of the mother-daughter relationship and the excellent performance by Park Chong-ja in *Night Mother*. The bathhouse scene in *Steaming*, where women characters appear half-naked with towels around their bodies, a rare scene thus far on the Korean stage, especially appealed to male audiences.

In addition to this, by the early 1990s, stories of sexual harassment and domestic violence such as the Anita Hill and the Bobbitt cases made their way to the Korean public and caused repercussions in Korean society and women's drama as well.

Playwright Chong Pok-kun revised her original text of *Cello* (1994) to reflect the changing sensibilities in creating Yunhi, the central woman character, who this time rebels against the male order by attempting an extra-marital love affair at the cost of her marriage. This play was an overwhelming commercial success with middle-aged upper-middle class wives in Seoul. In this play, Yunhi, another upper-middle class wife, actively seeks an escape from her meaningless married life with a successful businessman who is dominating and habitually unfaithful. She falls in love with a man of the working class, challenging the social stereotype of the "Virtuous Woman". But later her lover has a change of heart, and leaves her. Left to herself, she finally reaches a certain self-realization. She says:

Probably I wasn't looking for someone. I just wanted to be myself and that is why I had this affair. I'll face trial, go to jail, and will pay for my own sin. After all that . . . I would like to live the rest of my life as myself, not as somebody's someone. (27)

Actually, as a character Yunhi shows considerable transformation from the woman character who "accepts her destiny" with her incompatible husband in a 1988 work by the same playwright. But the process through which she

arrives at self-recognition is forced by her lover's desertion of her rather than being voluntarily initiated.

By the mid-1990s, however, the institution of marriage came under closer scrutiny by the younger generation of women writers in their thirties. They showed unique candidness and vehemence in dealing with subjects such as marriage, divorce, sex-roles, sexuality and other women's questions.

One such younger generation woman playwrights, Kim Yunmi, contrasts the stories of two women in her play titled *A Married Woman and an Unmarried Woman* (1996): Jong-ae, a middle-class full-time housewife by an arranged marriage, and Su-in, a career copywriter single woman. Here again the commonality between these two women is their problematic love relationships with men. Jong-ae, the housewife, had to give up her job when she married, because her husband and her mother-in-law did not approve. She confesses her disillusionment on the first night of her honeymoon. "My mother explained what a woman should expect on the first night, but did not tell me about the deep hurt in the soul that she has to undergo. He was just like a hungry tiger, which spotted a deer. Our mothers have created for us the illusions of marriage only for the sake of futile nights." (13) Through the experience of her own pregnancy, Jong-ae comes to a realization about her stereotypical role in the home: "The in-laws are making a fuss, and demand a son in round about ways . . . . The reason for my existence is like fulfilling the role of a cow. No more expectation for self-fulfillment." (14) On top of this, this wife also finds out about her husband's infidelity and voices a strong detestation about the marriage institution.

On the other hand, Su-in, the single career woman, has a relationship with a married man and becomes pregnant. But Su-in realizes that he is irresponsible, feels used and undergoes an abortion. Only Jong-ae accompanies Su-in to the hospital and takes care of her. Jong-ae and Su-in here show a certain bond of sisterhood, after being totally disillusioned by men. They even discuss lesbianism.

Su-in: Have you thought about lesbianism?

Jong-ae: Lesbians?

Su-in: Yes. Somewhere I read that two women deeply immersed in women studies decided that they will become lesbians and went to an inn together, with such a determination as if expecting the first night.

Jong-ae: Then?

Su-in: They tried everything to become lesbian. They took their clothes off one by one, trying to create the mood as if you were having dates with men. And at last just as they were reading each other's faces on the verge of attempting the serious act, suddenly one burst out laughing, and the other followed, losing control.

Jong-ae: So what happened?

Su-in: They married and lived happily.

Jong-ae: With women?

Su-in: No, with men. (8)

This dialogue shows that these women are looking for an alternative form of marriage about which they have heard, but as yet a homosexual relationship is beyond their socialization and comprehension. In the end, the two women confirm each other's emotional support, and Jong-ae implies that she will walk out of her marriage.

The one-woman play titled *The 30 Ways to Kill a Husband* (1996) by So Mi-ae, another younger generation woman playwright, deals with the issue of spousal abuse. Miyon, a middle-class housewife, begins her story by saying that she exists only in the way of her dominated and abused body. She is undergoing identity crisis due to her long subjection to battery by her husband. She confesses how the beating has degraded her to slavery.

At his word, I have to stand up. I have to follow his order and attend on him in his bed. He dashes at me without any feeling, like an animal. And we have loveless sex. No, rape. Swallowing insufferable insult, I am raped. And I cry along with his snoring . . . and I wish to kill my husband by a method as cruel as it possibly can. (5)

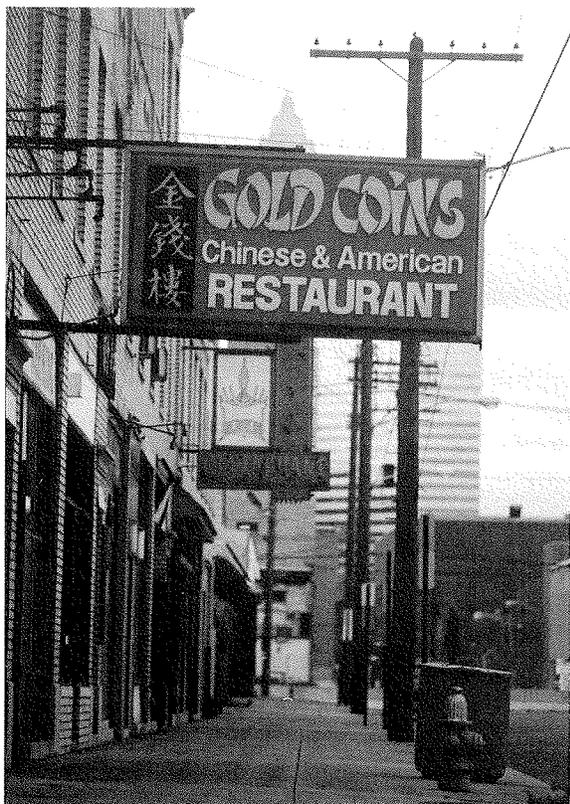
This battered wife creates a world of illusion to escape from the pains of such an existence, in which she devises thirty possible ways to kill her husband. In an episodic scene, she carries out the homicide of her husband. But soon the story line is arranged in such a way as to frame this homicide scene as a play within a play by way of the psychodrama she was participating in. This kind of made-up device reminds us of a similar strategy by Park Hyon-suk in her play *Masquerade*, in which she reverses the plot line into a comedy, thereby lessening the subversive impact of the wife's revolt against her unfaithful husband.

This wife's story ends as her husband is suddenly and mysteriously killed. The ending seems to be rather contrived, but probably because the playwright herself could not see any other alternative to liberate this young battered wife from confinement, without facing possible negative reactions from the patriarchal society in which she lives.

In conclusion, women's dramas in the mid-1990s by the younger generation of women playwrights voiced their strong discontent and questioning regarding the patriarchal institution of marriage, and traditional sex role stereotypes. Unlike their predecessors, who could only imply their discontent with unfaithful husbands in round-about ways in their plays, in their plays these younger women playwrights show candidness and audacity in articulating their antipathy and even hostility toward unfaithful, dominating and abusive husbands as well as the system of marriage itself.

However, both generations of women playwrights share a commonality in that their ultimate concern lies mainly

in improving the husband and wife relationship within marriage in the absence of the alternative entities on their immediate horizons. So far women's pursuit of independence beyond the boundary of marriage and family is not projected in any one play. This indicates that the Korean form of feminism has established itself on a firm foundation of the patriarchal family values, and women's dramas as a cultural representation reflect such tendencies. When and how it will develop feminist family politics, which are radically different from the Confucian-based ones engulfing Korean women, remains to be seen.



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