

# Troubles of New Women in the Early Modern Korea: Focusing on the Correlation of “Women’s Liberation” and “Wise Mother and Good Wife”

**Suh, Ji Young**

Korea University

## Questions about Modern Nation-state and Gender

The well-known feminist novelist, Virginia Woolf said in her essay titled *Three Guineas*: “I have no country as a woman. I do not want to have a country as a woman. My country as a woman is the whole world.” This famous phrase raises fundamental questions between modern nation-state and gender, criticizing the male-dominant state ideology which subordinates women to a national mechanism. Additionally, another question should be asked: can women be citizens of the world, beyond notions of nation, class, and race, including imperialism and colonialism in the early modern period?

The modern nation has formed a complex relation with gender. In the early modern period, women became a part of the public sphere through the birth of the modern nation state; therefore, the modern women were inseparable from the nation. In Korea, a former third world colony where political independence was sought after, gender was closely bound to the nation. Chandra Mohanty and Daniz Kandiyoti are the scholars who already clarified contradictory affiliations in the gender agenda of the nationalist projects led by middle-class male intellectuals in the third world colonies, such as India and the Middle East in the late 19th century and early 20th century.<sup>1</sup> This paper tries to look into the formation of the New Women’s identity and women’s desires in the historical context of early modern Korea where nationalism was a competing force against colonialism. In particular, the paper will examine the correlation between “women’s liberation” and the idea of “wise mother and good wife,” which were the main components in the construction of the female modern identity within the sphere of influence of Western modernity and Japanese mediation.

In Korea, the notion of being a “wise mother and good wife” in nationalistic discourses,

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<sup>1</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders; Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, 2004; Daniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and Its Discontents; Women and the Nation,” J. Hutchinson & Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism; Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Vol. 4, New York: Routledge, 2000.

the new agenda for women, was combined with modern concepts such as “equality of men and women” and “the natural rights of man” from Western political ideologies. At first, the idea of “wise mother and good wife,” which established women’s position as the dominant figure of the home and “women’s liberation,” which gave women political rights in the public sphere, were harmoniously compatible within the enlightenment discourses. The idea of “wise mother and good wife” in Korea originated from the idea of “good wife and wise mother” that was prevalent in the Meiji period in Japan; a concept which was based on the formula of a family state ideology that considered the family as one part of the state apparatus. Moreover, this idea originally regarded women’s public activities as an expansion of family work, and as a result it confined women to the domestic sphere, while imposing restrictions on women’s political participation. It should be noted that the woman’s modern identity in Korea—and perhaps in Japan—was formed at a point where the border of public and private spheres was so intermingled and not so clearly distinct due to the family state ideology.

This paper pays special attention to the asymmetric combination of women’s liberation and “wise mother and good wife” in early modern Korea, and examines the opposition to these by the efforts of “New Women.” This paper does not cover this entire phenomenon but rather serves as a rough historical survey which should be supplemented later.

### **The Encounter between Women’s Liberation and the Concept of “Wise Mother and Good Wife” from the Nationalist Projects during 1900–1910**

On September 1, 1898 in Korea, women’s rights were proclaimed by *Chanyanghoe*, which was the first women’s organization consisting of 304 upper-class women in Seoul for the first time.<sup>2</sup> They submitted a petition to the King to establish a women’s school and in 1899 they founded the first private girls’ school. It should be noted that the equality of men and women and the necessity of education for women requested by *Chanyanghoe* was also the model of the reformist male intellectuals who studied abroad in Japan or America. In the writings of the reformist male intellectuals or the editorial columns in newspapers in 1890, the importance of education for women based on basic human rights or equality of both sexes was emphasized as a part of civilization and the enlightenment discourse.

The political movement for women’s rights was mainly promoted by the reformist intellectuals, and in their discourses, the image of traditional women was depicted as a symbol of uncivilized, pre-modern Eastern culture compared with Western modern civilization. The

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2 “Announcement on Women’s right,” *Hwangsoŋg sinmun* [Capital Gazette], September 8, 1898.

reformists reasoning for the vindication of women's liberation from old customs was the strong desire for an enlightenment that was open to Western modernity. Education for women was required because mothers were believed to be the best educator for children who were expected to contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Equal rights for both sexes and education for women were embodied in the concept of "wise mother and good wife." From 1900 to 1910, the historical significance of this notion "wise mother and good wife" played an important role in discourses on women. In regards to civilization and enlightenment from the reformist male intellectual perspective, a "wise mother and good wife" was viewed as an equal and good companion to a man, while serving as the central figure of the home for both education for children and management of the household.

In nationalistic discourses, the idea of "wise mother and good wife" seems to have been modern and progressive on the grounds that women were regarded as members of the nation and equal to men in the family—a perspective that was different from views of pre-modern women. However, the combination of the views of modern equality or women's liberation and the concept of "wise mother and good wife" should be reconsidered. The idea of "wise mother and good wife" in early modern Korea not only provided the momentum for women's liberation from old oppressive customs but also a new framework which reassigned women to the role of a specific function in the family and not as an individual.

Professor Sakai Naoki has analyzed that the transformation of modality of the individual's identification in modern Asia, especially in Japan, was achieved from a relational identity to a specific identity through Fukuzawa Yukichi's discourses.<sup>3</sup> He stated that the Confucian view of the social nature of human beings is frequently summarized by the juxtaposition of kinship relationships and, in the same way, nations as individual actors are never linked to the whole without detailed kinship mediation. In this respect, one's personal identity is primarily explained as a "relational identity." Meanwhile, in the modern period, the human being is positioned as an autonomous individual, independent of these relations, which leads to a new way of defining individual identity called "specific identity." However, it might be said that this new paradigm does not apply to the case of women in the modern period. The equality of both sexes allowed women to come out to the public sphere as a distinct subject but under the title of "wise mother and good wife" and provided a modern reconstruction of the traditional "relational identity" within the family system. For women, modern identification starts from the conflict between the "specific identity" and the "relational identity" creating a structural contradiction

3 Sakai Naoki, "From Relational Identity to Specific Identity—Modernity in East Asia," *Colloquium for International Scholars* promoted by International Center for Korean Studies, Korea University, November 28, 2008.

of modern discourses on women.

Since Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, the idea of "wise mother and good wife" became the main policy goal of education in girls' schools. Several female Korean students went to Japan for higher education, and among the students studying in Japan, the view of women as human beings was more widely spread leading to the beginnings of modern notions of gender consciousness. It was through the magazine *Yōjagye* [Women's World] that the phrase "women's liberation" became more commonplace. *Yōjagye* was first published in 1917 by a community of female students in Japan. Most articles were based on the idea of "wise mother and good wife," while some female students joined political activities like the Korean Independence Movement of 1919 on behalf of their nation. Within the modern consciousness of the elite New Women in the latter half of 1910, there was no conspicuous discursive clash between the idea of "wise mother and good wife" and "women's liberation," or between the idea of "wise mother and good wife" and nationalism in Korea.

It should be noted that Na Hye-sök, one representative New woman studying in Tokyo, contributed an article in another influential magazine, *Hakjikkwang* [the Light of Learning] which was published by male students studying in Japan. In the article titled "An Ideal Woman," she strongly criticized the idea of "wise mother and good wife" as a male-dominant ideology made to breed docile and submissive women, which finally made women the slaves of men.<sup>4</sup> However, during this period, the general ideological orientation of the New Women was based on the idea of "wise mother and good wife" and "women's liberation," which meant "liberation from the old home and achievement of new home" by being a "wise mother and good wife."

Nevertheless, women's liberation based on God-given rights and the "wise mother and good wife" as a woman's vocation are fundamentally not compatible because the former assumes women as human beings or individuals regardless of the sexual and social differences between men and women, while the latter differentiates men and women and substantiates women's identities in the name of a female vocation. Furthermore, since 1910 the idea of "wise mother and good wife" based on modern concepts of women and family began to be mixed with traditional womanly virtue including the sacrificial image of motherhood, filial piety and various women's obligations in practice. "Wise mother and good wife" was a heterogeneous synthesis of pre-modern and modern thoughts but its logical weaknesses were covered up by strong nationalism in early modern Korea.

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4 Na hye-sök, "An Ideal Woman," *Hakjikkwang*, Vol. 3, November, 1914. pp. 15-16.

## Collision of “Women’s Liberation” and the Idea of “Wise Mother and Good Wife” in the 1920s

In the 1920s, an asymmetric combination of “women’s liberation” and “wise mother and good wife” in nationalistic discourses began to reveal the concealed conflict between the two ideas. The New Women’s magazine *Yōjagye* (1917) raised a new issue of women’s modern consciousness named “freedom of love and marriage” which a New Woman should pass through as a preliminary stage before becoming a “wise mother and good wife.” It shows the historical point when women’s liberation was signified, not just within the sphere of the nation but within the sphere of women’s individual desires in Korea. Modern love and marriage based on the ideas of Ellen Key and Kuriyagawa Hakuson which assumed the equal relationship of body and soul, and love and marriage produced a new direction for “women’s liberation.” But at the same time, it caused a clash between “women’s liberation” and the idea of being a “wise mother and good wife,” and moreover, that of nationalism and gender.

The narrative of “women’s liberation” was composed of two inconsistent propositions, one was equality of both sexes and the other was the hierarchical gender role based on the differences between the sexes. The two fold mechanism of women’s liberation resulted in a confusing and incoherent phase of feministic writings. *Shinyōja* [New Woman] was another magazine published by the New Women group in 1920 with a more radical feminist view. The editor of *Shinyōja*, Kim Wonju, was the representative feminist who graduated from Ehwa Girls’ School and studied in Japan temporarily. In particular, she publicized the issues of “women’s liberation” and the equality of men and women as a social movement. However, the articles of *Shinyōja* are mostly based on the idea of being a “wise mother and good wife” and not as radical on the whole despite the sensationalism in Kim Wonju’s feminist voice. Even Kim Wonju’s editorial made a strategic statement that women should follow men’s claims and carry out the role of “wise mother and good wife” in order to improve gender issues, such as women’s rights, equality in society and women’s place in the home, even though she strongly criticized the limitations and the problems of the role in other articles.<sup>5</sup> The disruption of Kim Wonju’s feminist discourses illustrates the trouble of New Women in 1920s’ Korea who should moderate themselves between women’s liberation and the role of “wise mother and good wife.”

Also, a few New Women who refused the role of “wise mother and good wife” and took an active part in political spheres continuously had to connect themselves with the “nation” and faced contradictory situations which gave a double affirmation of equality and the differences

5 “Argument on the Responsibility of New Women in Society,” *Shinyōja*, Vol. 1, March 1920. p. 108.

between men and women that were brought about. In other words, New Women in the public sphere should minimize discussing sexual and social differences between men and women when they claim political and social equality, which is known as a state of “feminism without woman[hood].” On the other hand, the New Women drew attention to the sexual or gender difference they sought to get rid of when they protest against the inequality between men and women in the public sphere. Joan Scott remarked that this was a women’s paradox which made women fall in a trap where the political theory of liberal republicanism in Western Europe was produced in terms of the equality of both sexes.<sup>6</sup>

In *Shinyōja*, there is another New Woman’s article written by Kim Hwalran’ who was the first Korean female dean of the Ewha Girls’ school. Her article illustrates this kind of dilemma that New Women fell into in the public spheres. In the political sphere, the New Women claimed equality between men and women, while presenting themselves plain in appearance with no makeup to weaken the perception of femininity.<sup>7</sup> However, when they made a protest against the exclusion of women from suffrage, they should have represented women who were isolated within society and raised awareness of the gender difference that existed.

Unlike *Yōjagye*, the magazine *Shinyōja* was published by New Women independent of male intellectuals and publicized feminist views for the first time in Korea. However, in *Shinyōja*, there were vulnerabilities in New Women’s modern identity between “women’s liberation” and the role of “wise mother and good wife,” and between “Western universality” and “Korean particularity.” In one article of *Shinyōja*, the writer identified the members of *Shinyōja* with the members of the Seito Group in Japan and the members of Blue Stockings in England. She also proclaimed that they led a totally independent existence as individuals who had an original and exclusive world that men did not have.<sup>8</sup> This misrecognized identification shows the historicity of New Women in early modern Korea. Within the fragile foundation of women’s liberation, which was subordinate to the idea of “wise mother and good wife” and powerful nationalist discourses in the colonial state, New Women showed the gap of consciousness between what they were and what they imagined in the construction of the modern female identity.

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6 John W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 242.

7 Kim Hwalran, “Calling for the Self-Reflection of Men,” *Shinyōja*, Vol. 4, June 1920, p. 430.

8 Simsa, “The Present Issues,” *Shinyōja*, Vol. 2, April 1920, p. 216.

### Neither Traditional Nor Modern: Transformation of the “Wise Mother and Good Wife” in Korea during the 1930s

In the 1920s, New Women received “the freedom of love and marriage” as another step that originated from Western society towards the liberation of women as individuals; however, this notion uncovered a crack between nation and gender. The crack was officially filled by purging New Women who were located outside of the public sphere. One example was the case of the radical liberal feminist Kim Wonju’ who chose to renounce the world and become a Buddhist nun, illustrating the irony of denying her intense life as a New Woman.

After the mid 1910s, the image of New Women as pioneers disappeared and the New Women became a symbol of vanity, extravagance, and depravity. In the 1930s, society became more conservative than the previous decade and the role of “wise mother and good wife” reemerged as a dominant discourse on women, replacing the freewheeling image of New Women in the 1920s. It should be noted that the concept of “wise mother and good wife” became more conservative and pragmatic during this period compared to the progressive inclination of the role of “wise mother and good wife” in the 1900s and 1910s. One male novelist, Ju Yoseop, said that the “wise mother and good wife” was not an abstract idea anymore but was every woman’s instinct in this period. According to his writing, the desire for freedom of love and marriage to women converged into the subordinate desire of being a “wise mother and good wife.”<sup>9</sup>

One popular magazine in the early 1930s invited several celebrated New Women and opened a roundtable talk, which dealt with women’s issue revaluing the novel *A Doll’s House*, written by Henrik Ibsen, of which the heroine Nora was a symbol of women’s liberation.<sup>10</sup> In this talk, Nora’s choice was reexamined as an unrealistic act with more than half of the attendants at the talk arguing that women’s liberation cannot be achieved by the behavior of running away from home as Nora did. One woman journalist said that Nora’s decision was from the misrecognition of the condition of women who had no economic base, and lacked realistic vision. Many of the participants at the talk bring up the image of “Nora who just came back home from the street,” following the transformed and relocated role of “wise mother and good wife” in Korea during the 1930s.

Most of all, it is difficult to find the connection between “women’s liberation” and the

9 Ju Yoseop, “Paths of New Women and Old-fashioned Women,” *Sinyösong* [New woman], January 1933.

10 “Talk on the Promising Women in a New Age,” *Sinyösong*, January 1933; “Talk on the Problems of Women,” *Sindong’a*, November 1930.

role of “wise mother and good wife” in this period. And the image of “good wife” began to be focused in newspapers and magazines, presenting the housewife as an ideal prototype of New Women. The image of the housewife as a specialist who manages a household in a rational and specific way as well as serving as the core of the nuclear family and conjugal affection was widely discussed in the mass media. The discourses on being a good wife in the 1930s were based on modern knowledge, such as home economics, science and hygiene, and the “good wife” became an indicator of modernity. New Women in the 1930s seem to have received the narratives of the “good wife” actively, distinguishing themselves from traditional women while trying to devise various tactics to obtain the position of a good wife in home and society.

However, there was still a gap that could be bridged between “good wife” discourses and New Women in reality. The novelist Ju Yoseop asserted that unlike the image of a “good wife” and “sweet home” represented in the advertisement of Japanese flavoring, Agimodo, the ideal home which New Women dreamed of was not available in Korea and the “sweet home” was only an imaginary one in films or novels. He added that the proportion of men who would be ideal husbands for New Women was only one out of 10 million people in real life. Therefore, it might be said that the modern “good wife” was a conjured image that was unattainable in reality. Meanwhile, it can be said that a “wise mother” who possessed “modern (scientific) maternity” received more attention than a “good wife” in society. During this period, the mother was reborn as a “wise mother” with a scientific method for childrearing. One magazine described the ignorance of a mother as the most terrifying thing in the world.<sup>11</sup>

The hybrid image of New Women who were neither traditional nor modern at this time should also be noted. In this period, “wise mother and good wife” are reconstructed with traditional women’s virtues, such as obedience, chastity, and sacrifice. Especially, the male intellectual discourses on a “good wife” date back to traditional images of women, contrary to the New Women’s desire to be a modern good wife in a Western way. In a roundtable talk of the magazine, male intellectuals expressed antipathy toward New Women and presented “a woman who is good at housework with an average level of literacy” as an ideal wife. They were sexually attracted to women like Greta Garbo and Clara Bow, who bobbed her hair, from the western films, but they refused to accept a modern girl with bobbed hair as their own wife in real life. The image of a sound and docile woman who just took care of her husband clashes with the image of “good wife” sought by the New Women themselves.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, it can be summarized that the “modern wise mother” and “traditional good

11 “Talk on Problems of School Girls by School Parents,” *Sinyōsōng*, June 1931.

12 “The Ideal of Marriage in Modern Men and Women,” *Byōlgōngon*, May 1930; “Talk of Bachelors,” *Sinyōsōng*, February 1933, p. 350.

wife” was a specific picture of what it meant to be a “wise mother and good wife” according to mass media in Korea during the 1930s. One article pointed out that New Women in Korea bore the heaviest burden in the world because they were still forced to carry out the traditional womanly virtues and obligations as a daughter-in-law, as well as the role of the modern “wise mother and good wife.”<sup>13</sup> By the way, in the 1930s, the idea of “wise mother and good wife” was viewed suspiciously by Socialist intellectuals who saw it as an assimilated ideology of the colonizer and cultural product of the bourgeoisie class. Women’s liberation, which is separate from the notion of being a “wise mother and good wife” became a subcategory of class liberation in the Socialist discourses in Korea during the 1930s.

### **Modern Myth of “Equality” and the Split in the Female Identity**

During the periods of war after the mid-1930s, the New Women who were leading figures in society, especially in educational circles, were mobilized and appropriated by Japanese imperialism, which exploited the weak gender mechanism that existed in the colony of Choson. Some leading New Women collaborated with the colonizer in the name of “women’s liberation” and the role of “wise mother and good wife” in this period, which were two challenges they faced. This shows the insoluble epistemological troubles of New Women who were still seeking a modern agenda for women’s liberation and the role of “wise mother and good wife” under the strong operation of colonialism in wartime. The gap in the modern identity of New Women in Korea shows the gap between the “imagined” women in modern discourses and the “real” women in Korean colonial history.

Recently, the Korean government decided to put a female figure on a new banknote for the first time, and in the end, Shin Saimdang (1504–1551) who was the mother of Yi Yulgok (1536–1584), one of the greatest Confucian scholars in the 16th century, was chosen over Yu Kwan-soon (1902–1920), who was the female patriot who died for the Korean Independence Movement of 1919 and known as the Korean Jeanne d’Arc. Shin Saimdang has been the symbol of a great mother for five centuries and in Korea, the selection of Shin Saimdang as the first female figure on the bill implies that the image of the traditional wise mother is more persistent than the New Women in the modern period. Furthermore, in contemporary Korea, the fact that Shin Saimdang is still seen as the image of the ideal woman, even though she was a 16th century figure, shows the tension between contemporary and archaic values, uncovering a split within the female identity between the traditional and the modern as well as between

13 Pak Hūdo, “Specific Responsibility and Obligation of Korean New Women,” *Sin’kwang*, Vol. 1, 1931, pp. 22–23.

women's liberation and the role of "wise mother and good wife."

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