

THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S PROSE IN SOUTH KOREAN LITERATURE: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

SamSIFL

Department of Korean Philology (PhD)

Associate Professor (PhD)

Bazarova Shakhlo Shukhratovna

Email:shahlobazarova84@gmail.com

Abstract: This study examines the formation and developmental stages of women's prose in Korean literature from the late 19th century to the present. By utilizing chronological analysis and literary evaluation of key female authors, the research highlights the shift from traditional Confucian archetypes to modern feminist perspectives. The findings suggest that Korean women's literature has evolved from a tool for national independence and education into a sophisticated medium for exploring gender equality, human identity, and social structures.

Keywords: Korean literature, women's prose, feminism, patriarchal society, gender equality, colonial period, modern Korean literature.

Introduction

The initial stirrings of feminist movements in Korea emerged in the second half of the 19th century, introduced by Christian missionaries who promoted the concept of human equality. These egalitarian ideals were later reflected in the **Donghak (Eastern Learning)** doctrine, which became a leading force in the struggle for Korean independence. Amidst external threats to state sovereignty, the **Independence Club (Dongnip Hyeophoe)** was established. Its members advocated for democratic freedoms and promoted education as the primary path to national progress, emphasizing the importance of establishing a network of schools for women. However, during this period, the demand for educational equality did not yet reach the level of a formal struggle for gender parity.

Following the Enlightenment movement, women's social activity intensified. By the early 1900s, various women's organizations with their own publications existed in Korea, focusing on education and charitable endeavors.

Methodology

The research employs the following methodological approaches:

1. **Chronological Analysis:** A historical review of the evolution of women's prose in Korean literature.
2. **Socio-Literary Examination:** An analysis of social status and feminist ideologies through the works and protagonists of female writers.
3. **Comparative Literary Criticism:** Evaluation based on scholarly sources from both Korean and international experts (e.g., Sonia Haeussler, Cho Dong-il, Lee Sang-woo, and Kim Chon-ja).

Historical Context and Development

Although Western concepts of "gender equality" reached Korea in the 1920s and 1930s, they failed to gain widespread traction due to the deeply rooted foundations of Confucian society. Active social participation by women was often stigmatized as immoral. Nevertheless, during the Japanese occupation, women participated alongside men in patriotic movements, resisting colonial policies and advocating for national dignity and women's rights.

In the 1920s and 30s, the first professional female writers emerged, laying the foundation for modern women's literature. Authors like **Kim Myong-sun**, **Kim Won-ju**, and **Na Hye-sok** used their prose to expose the injustices of the patriarchal system and the vulnerable position of women in society. Their struggle was not limited to the literary field; voices advocating for women's rights began to resonate throughout Korean society.

In 1948, with the formation of the Republic of Korea, women were granted equal political rights, including the right to education and labor. However, critic Kim Chon-ja notes that this movement was often "unorganized and lacked independence" compared to Western suffrage movements. In Korea, women's activism was inextricably linked to the national independence struggle and patriotic education.

The "second wave" of feminism reached South Korea in the 1960s and 70s, spurred by rapid industrialization which required female labor. This era saw a rise in women's organizations alongside labor and student movements. By the 1980s, the democratization process and economic growth led to significant changes in the social structure. Concepts such as "women's emancipation" emerged, and the legitimacy of male-dominated ideology began to be questioned.

Results and Analysis

The analysis reveals the following key milestones:

-16th–18th Centuries: Women's poetry (**Sijo**, **Kyubang Gasa**) focused on personal emotions and fate. Notable authors included *kisaeng* such as **Hwang Jin-yi**.

-17th–18th Centuries: Women left their mark in prose through diaries, such as the famous "**Hanjungnok**" (**Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong**), which offered deep emotional insights into palace life.

-1920s–1930s: Modern female prose began with writers like **Kim Myong-sun**, who challenged patriarchal norms despite severe social backlash.

-Post-1945: The number of female writers increased significantly. **Pak Kyung-ni**, **Son So-hee**, and **Han Mal-suk** explored the tragedies of war and the complexities of modern society.

-1980s–1990s: Feminist literature gained academic recognition. In 1998, the **Academic Society for Feminism and Korean Literature** was established.

-2000s–Present: Radical tendencies have shifted toward a focus on individual autonomy. Contemporary writers portray women as independent agents who define their own lives.

Discussion

Historically, women's prose in Korea has been closely tied to state independence and educational reform. While male writers dominated the literary canon, female writers carved out a "special island" of creativity that eventually merged into the mainstream.

Authors like **Kang Kyeong-ae** introduced realism into women's prose, depicting the tragic lives of the marginalized. Her novel "**Human Problems**" (**Ingan Munje**, 1934) remains a landmark work. Similarly, **Baek Shin-ae** highlighted the plight of Korean families displaced to Siberia and Manchuria, linking the female experience to the broader national struggle.

In the late 20th century, the definition of feminist prose evolved. As noted by critic Lee Sang-woo, feminist prose shifted from depicting women as mere victims of male authority to portraying economically independent women seeking self-fulfillment. Modern literature, exemplified by **Eun Hee-kyung's "Secrets and Lies" (2005)**, transcends narrow "women's issues" to explore universal human conditions, national history, and the harmony between individual and society.

Conclusion

While Confucian traditions remain influential in South Korea—resulting in a relatively modest representation of women in high-level politics and large-scale entrepreneurship compared to some Western nations—the role of women is steadily expanding. The literary contributions of feminist and female writers have been instrumental in this social transformation, challenging traditional hierarchies and fostering a more inclusive cultural discourse.

REFERENCES

1. **An, N. Y. (1998).** *A Study on the Correspondence Methods of Prose and the Changes in Modern Society*. Modern Novel Research: Korean Modern Novel Association. Seoul.
2. **Cho, D. I. (1998).** *General History of Korean Literature* (Vol. 5). Seoul: Jimmundang.
3. **Cho, N. H. (1998).** *Women's Prose and Feminism in the 1970s–1980s: Debates on the Literature of the 1990s*. Seoul: Munye Publishing.
4. **Haeussler, S. (2006).** *Preserving and Creating Kyubang Kasa in Contemporary Korea: A Traditional Genre in a Rapidly Changing Socio-Cultural Environment*. Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference: Oriental and African Studies at the Universities of St. Petersburg, Russia, and Europe. St. Petersburg.
5. **Kasatkina, N. (2003).** *Poetic Creativity of Women in Medieval Korea in the Sijo Genre*. Materials of the Conference "Russia and Korea: Toward New Horizons of Literary Relations." Moscow-St. Petersburg.
6. **Kim, M. H. (1996).** *Korean Women's Prose and Feminism*. Seoul.
7. **Kim, C. J. (1991).** *Studies on Korean Women's Prose*. Seoul: Minjisa.
8. **Kurbanov, S. O. (2002).** *A Course of Lectures on the History of Korea from Antiquity to the End of the 20th Century*. St. Petersburg.
9. **Kwon, Y. M. (2001).** *Modern Korean Literature (II)*. Seoul Journal of Korean Studies, Vol. 14, pp. 66–67.
10. **Lee, S. S. (1995).** *Conversations on Prose through Various Themes*. Seoul: Jimmundang.
11. **Min, H. G. (1998).** *Research on Modern Korean Prose*. Daegu.
12. **Trocevich, A. F. (2004).** *History of Korean Traditional Literature (up to the 20th Century)*. St. Petersburg.
13. **Tyagay, G. D., & Pak, V. P. (1996).** *National Idea and Enlightenment in Korea at the Beginning of the 20th Century*. Moscow.
14. **Unknown Author. (1960).** *The Tale of Faithful Chunhyang*. (Collected in: *The History of Faithful Chunhyang*). Moscow.
15. **Unknown Author. (1960).** *The Tale of Sim Cheon*. (Collected in: *The History of Faithful Chunhyang*). Moscow.