

# **Portrayal of Women: An Analysis of Fictional Works by Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun**

Representación de la Mujer: un análisis de las obras  
ficcionales de Na Hyeseok y Kim Myeongsun

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## **Abstract**

This work aims to analyze the representation of women and the main themes in the fictional works of Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun between 1917 and 1937, and to identify the similarities and differences in their portrayals. This paper does not attempt to homogenize the Korean Women's experience, but rather to understand some aspects of women's lives through the lenses of these two writers, who were born in 1896 and lived during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The analyzed stories in this article are taken from *Selected Works of Na Hyeseok*, *the Korean Pioneer of Women's Liberation*, and *Collected Works of the First Korean Female Writer Kim Myeongsun*.

**Keywords:** Korean Literature, Na Hyeseok, Kim Myeongsun, New Women, Wise Mother, Good Wife

## **Resumen**

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Este trabajo pretende analizar la representación de la mujer, los temas principales en las obras de ficción de Na Hyeseok y Kim Myeongsun, así como determinar las similitudes y diferencias en sus representaciones. Este trabajo no pretende homogeneizar la experiencia de las mujeres coreanas, sino comprender algunos aspectos de la vida de las mujeres a través de la comprensión de estas dos escritoras que nacieron en 1896 y vivieron durante las primeras décadas del siglo XX. Para analizar sus escritos se utilizan dos libros: *Obras escogidas de Na Hyeseok*, pionera coreana de la liberación femenina, y *Obras completas de la escritora coreana de la primera época Kim Myeongsun*.

**Palabras clave:** Literatura coreana, Na Hyeseok, Kim Myeongsun, nuevas mujeres, madre sabia, buena esposa.

## Introduction

During the colonial period, literature bloomed in different ways despite censorship. Both Koreans and foreigners currently read delightful works written by Korean women and men during these decades filled with turmoil<sup>2</sup>. According to Kim Yung-Hee (2022, p. 2), Modern Korean literature was developed during the latter part of the 1910s and the early 1920s, and in 1917, the writer Yi Kwangsu published *Heartless*, which is recognized as the first example of modern fiction in Korean literature. Also, according to Lee Jae Yon (2017, p. 35), “the 1920s was a period when Korean writers entered the literary scene in collective form” (Lee 2017, 35), so there were a lot of literary groups as well as collective magazines. This was a formative period, and the small book market could not support professional writers, pushing them to take on side jobs such as newspaper reporting, to mention an example.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to mention that some of the prominent artists of that period were neglected and not studied for many years, while their male counterparts received recognition for a long time; this is the case with Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun. According to Yoon Sunme (2021, p. 30), in the 70s and 80s, their works were brought back to light, and many started to do research on their writings; in fact, there have been several dis-

2 Na Hyeseok's and Kim Myeongsun's texts have even been translated into Spanish, thanks to Hwarang publishing house in Argentina.

sertations and articles about them. However, their works were not studied for a long period, and they were perceived as “unimportant figures” because their ideas of modern women did not fit their male counterparts’ descriptions that portrayed women as frivolous and models of moral and sexual decay. For instance, the well-known author Kim Dongin, part of *Changjo* (창조), created a literary piece called *The Story of Kim Yeonsil*, referring to Kim Myeongsun’s rape by portraying her as a woman who indulged in libertinism. While the author Yeom Sangsup wrote *New Year’s Eve* about women who got married without knowing the father of their children, referencing Na Hyeseok in a negative connotation (Yoon, 2021).

Furthermore, these male authors were in contact with these artists before; Kim Myeongsun was the only female member of *Changjo* (1919-1921), and she published several poems as a member. She was a central figure who contributed to the group and helped its expansion. She used to publish in the *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*, so she became a bridge between the coterie and newspapers, too (Lee, 2017). In the case of Na Hyeseok, she contributed to magazines and newspapers, and she played a central role in the creation of the group *Pyeheo* (1920-1921), which was led by Yeom Sangsup. Their previous writing partners wrote distorted versions of their lives, which contributed to the devaluation of the image of New Women in society.

A crucial aspect that Lee Jae Yon mentioned is that female writers were essential in the creation of male-centered literary coteries. Also, Kim Myeongsun wrote her first work of fiction in 1917, *Mysterious Girl*, while Na Hyeseok published in 1918 one of her most famous works, *Kyeonghee*. These works preceded those of their colleagues, thus working as stepping stones for the male authors’ debuts after 1919. So, it is not an exaggeration to imply that these two women were quite important in the literary scene of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to this, analyzing their fictional works helps to understand the kind of concerns they had, the themes they discussed, and how women were presented in their writings. Before doing this analysis, it is necessary to clarify what was understood back then as “New Women” and what was the ideal of a “Wise Mother and Good Wife”.

## New Women vs Wise Mother and Good Wife

The concept of “New Women” is not static; it has a lot of meanings according to the historical period, and even in the present, some new interpretations can be made. This terminology is related to the last decade of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century. However, before touching upon this concept, it is crucial to understand what women’s lives were like before this.

Han Heesook (2004, pp. 115-117), mentioned that women’s lives were certainly dictated by Neo-Confucianism in the Joseon Dynasty. Many books were written for *Sadaebu* scholars who said that women needed to be educated to preserve their chastity and be good wives and daughters-in-law. During that period, several regulations were established; for instance, women were prohibited from visiting temple monasteries and from engaging in direct contact with members of the opposite sex. Also, there were several prohibitions on women’s activities outside of the household; for example, according to their social class, some women were forced to hide their faces with an outer garment whenever they went outside.

Also, women were taught basic life skills to run the household and how to behave with “the three more important people in their lives, their fathers, husbands, and sons; the four fundamental virtuous which they should possess: virtuousness, a proper talking style, delicate features, and domestic skills” (Han, 2004, p. 118). Considering that women’s education was directly related to becoming an ideal wife and mother, according to the patriarchal family structure, they did not need to be part of the public sphere or be seen outside the house’s inner quarters, an interior space reserved for domestic life. This division in the home’s architecture was not recorded before the Joseon Dynasty and reflected that time’s social view of women. Oliverio Coelho (2020) has an interesting definition, which helps to summarize some of the aforementioned aspects; he said that “the forms of oppression against women were institutionalized, their confinement at home did not contemplate any type of freedom and was similar to that of a person forced to remain in eternal quarantine”. So, the inside of the household was almost their whole world. Their interactions were mostly limited to those with other

women. Without a doubt, their lives were confined to the private sphere, while the public sphere was exclusive to men.

Han Heesook's research also described what was expected during marriage; this was seen as a union of two families rather than two individuals, so their decision was not made based on their feelings, rather, it was a transaction or a contract between the households without taking into account the thought of those getting married. Besides, women were expected to live with their in-laws and obey them, in addition to their husbands. Also, women who got married more than once were shunned, as it came into conflict with the Confucian ideal exemplified by the saying, "Just as a loyal subject should not worship two kings, virtuous women should obey only one husband" (Han, 2004, p. 121). These were some expectations of how women should live during the Joseon Dynasty and the situations that they dealt with.

On the other hand, Suh Jiyoung pointed out that, in the 1880s, some foreigners visited the peninsula and wrote about the situation of its women, describing them as almost invisible. The author quotes Percival Lowell, who was a diplomat from the United States, who said of the Korean woman, "[she] practically does not exist. Materially, physically, she is in fact, but mentally, morally, socially, she is a cipher." This is a fragment from 1885 that corroborates what was described before, that women were present only in the domestic sphere, rather than the public one.

## New Women

Si Jiyoung (2013, p.14), asserted that the New Woman's birth was a result of the Western ideas' incursion, and they were mainly represented in mass media and literature during the 1900s and 1940s. There are many approaches to this concept and no specific answer as to its meaning because the "New Woman is not a historically single and fixed concept". The author also mentioned that, during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were discussions about women's education, where the establishment of girls' schools was a crucial topic. As a result, the idea of educating women aligned with the country's initiative to overcome its uncivilized state, so a modern education for women saw encouragement. For instance, according to Kim Yung Hee (2022), Ehwa Women's School was established in 1886, and

Chongsin Women's School in 1995; other institutions were also created in those years.

In the modern period, higher education was warmly welcomed as an ideal trait for women; these educated women were praised for their knowledge until they started to confront the old customs. Then, society's attitude changed because they started to become a threat to men's position (Suh, 2013). With this increasing criticism, their views radically changed, mainly in the second half of 1920, according to Kim Hyeshin (2003, p. 97), "New Women were seen as beautiful ornaments of modern urban space, much like commodities on display in fashionable department stores". They were perceived as manipulative, frivolous, and not as wives' material for Korean men; in fact, they were targeted as objects of mockery and criticism in the newspapers and magazines. For example, the satirical phrase "Any Guy is okay for me if he buys me a piano" in Ahn Seok Yeong's cartoon published on Chosun Ilbo in 1930.

These New Women, according to Sunme Yoon (2021), were asking for women's right to have an education, equality between genders, freedom to choose whom they loved, and the individual's prominence over family and society. An example of this view can be the creation of several women's magazines in the 1920s; such as *Sinyoja (New Women)*, which was created in March, 1920 by Kim Wonju (pen name Kim Iryeop) with publications of Kim Myeongsun and drawings of Na Hyeseok. Kim Yung-Hee (2002, p.3) states that this magazine was "the first journal published by Korean women with a pronounced feminist credo [...] the next issue included Kim Wonju's article *Our Demands and Claims as New Women, which boldly attacked sexism in Korean society*". Until this point, it is clear that the concept of New Women changed drastically during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that this can describe different groups of women with divergent characteristics. But it was not always present; according to Kim Young Na (2003, p. 221), the terminology was used for " also women whose hair or clothing style distinguished them from traditional women".

In addition, when this concept appeared, it had a counterpart, which was Old-Fashioned Women that referred to "uneducated women outside the modern educational system" (Suh, 2013, p. 25). They were, in fact, for years, targets of criticism; however, when the New Women were going through a

liberation movement, the Old-Fashioned Women were once again considered virtuous women. Suh (2013, p. 27), mentioned that these categories were usually used in mass media during the 1930s and that “New Women and Old-Fashioned Women became rivals of each other in different styles that could be chosen to suit men’s tastes and needs”. The construction of these ideas and concepts was made by men.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, in Japan, there was a movement called *Seito*, led by Hiratsuka Raicho, who later created a group’s journal with the same name by Yosano Akiko in 1911. This group introduced works of Western writers such as Ellen Key with her essay *Love and Marriage* (1903) and Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* and *Nora*, among others. Raicho and her colleagues were symbols of Japan’s New Woman (Y.H. Kim, 2002, pp. 7–8). This was the scenery that Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun found when they studied in Japan.

### Wise Mother and Good Wife

According to Choi (2009), the discourse and concept of Wise Mother and Good Wife are related to the notion that women should occupy the domestic sphere, and in Korea, it is also connected with the expectation of womanly virtue. This concept appeared first in 1906 in a statement of Yanggyu Uisuk, a private Korean girls’ school. The institution’s purpose was to cultivate qualifications geared toward this ideal by educating girls. In 1908, the Korean Government created the first public school with that purpose; these institutions taught care for the ill, childcare, hygiene, and home economics (Choi, 2009). According to Suh (2013), there is an alteration in the syntax from the concept of a Good Wife and Wise Mother from Meiji Japan; in Korea, the order was altered, making the figure of the mother more prevalent.

Su Jiyoung (2013, p. 18), mentioned that this idea was the basis of the modern education of New Women. Indeed, “the principal goal of female education was to raise a mother who could educate one emerging member of the nation at home, which was deeply related to the modern nation-state building project”. So, this education was intended to educate women to be better subjects for the advancement of the nation; despite the fact that they were going to institutions to learn, the focus

was on their role in the family and not their participation in the public sphere. However, these women who were learning in these institutions became critics of their teachings and objectives. According to Suh (2013, p. 19), this concept of a Wise Mother and Good Wife was “simply another framework which relegated women to a specific function in the family in the name of vocation”. Then, women such as Na Hyeseok criticized this concept, denouncing this idea as a male-dominant ideology that wanted women to be docile and submissive. So, in some magazines, such as *Yojagye*, there were critics against this ideal, while the ideas of women’s liberation became predominant in the 1920s, when the magazine started to advocate for women to be recognized as human beings.

During the 1930s, there was a focus on what a Wise Mother should be like; the discussion was centered around a kind of combination of modern motherhood and the traditional female virtues. In other words, a qualified woman who “possessed a scientific method for childrearing” (Suh, 2013, p. 30) with the virtues of a wife, such as obedience, chastity, and sacrifice. Suh then mentioned that, in the 30s, there was a combination of ideas from the New Women and Old-Fashioned Women that resulted in the modern wise mother and the traditional good wife, who possessed the aforementioned virtues.

## **A Brushstroke of Their Lives: Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun**

### **Na Hyeseok: the Korean Pioneer of Women’s Liberation**

Na Hyeseok was born in 1896 as the third child of a noble family in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province. She had four brothers and belonged to a family that had produced high-ranking officials in the late Joseon Dynasty. In 1910, Na studied at the Chinmyeong Girls’ School in Seoul, and three years later she graduated at the top of her class. In 1913, she studied painting in Japan and specialized in oil painting at the Tokyo Women’s College of Arts. She was encouraged by her brother to study abroad; he was a graduate of a Japanese technical College (Y.H. Kim, 2002). Two years later, Na became an influential figure in the Association

of Korean Women Students in Japan, and in its magazine, she published *Kyeonhee* in March 1918 (Yoon, 2021).

In 1919, she participated in the March Movement for Independence, and she was jailed for five months. According to Kim Yung Hee (2002, p. 12), “Na took part in organizing underground circles, financing their activities, and mobilizing female students. Arrested by Japanese police on March 8 on charges of conspiracy”. The lawyer who helped her would later become her husband, Kim Uyeong, whom she married in April 1920. Between 1923 and 1927, she lived with her family in Dan Dong, Manchuria, where she continued writing and painting. Between 1927 and 1929, she traveled to Europe and the USA with her diplomat husband; she was the first Korean woman to visit these places. While in France, she took painting lessons and later wrote about her experiences. In 1931, her husband asked for a divorce because she had had an affair while being in Europe. The divorce meant no longer allowed to see her children, and her public image was tarnished. Between 1935 and 1939, she lived close to a Buddhist temple, where her friend Kim Iryeop lived. By this point, her physical and mental state had deteriorated because of Parkinson’s and other health issues, and she died in 1948 in a Charity hospital in Korea (Yoon, 2021).

According to Kim Yung-Hee (2002, p. 1), “Na Hyeseok was a beneficiary of progressive education in Korea, Japan, and Europe, rarely available to average Koreans of her time, Na enjoyed high social visibility and reputation”, in fact, coming from a noble background helped her to be receive a formal education and later become a respected figure. However, these characteristics did not save her from being criticized and put aside when she went against the values of the society at that time and criticized the established order.

### Kim Myeongsun: the First Korean Female Writer

Kim Myeongsun was born in 1896 in Pyongyang as the daughter of a merchant and a concubine who used to be a *Gisaeng*<sup>3</sup>. Kim was an actress, journalist, and writer. She was also proficient in five languages, and she translated Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. She traveled abroad to Japan, attending school at

3 *Gisaeng* refers to a Korean female entertainer and courtesan during the Joseon Dynasty.

Shibuya, but there she was socially disgraced after she was a victim of rape. She could not graduate, and the institution expelled her for soiling the institution's name. However, she completed her studies in Korea in 1917. That year, she published her first fictional work, *Mysterious Girl*, when she was twenty-one years old.

In 1918, she went back to Japan and had close contact with other literature students; she became part of *Changjo*, where she published her first poems. She also contributed to the magazine *Yeojagye* and the Association of Korean Women Students in Japan. According to Hyeon Chaewun, she published 170 literary pieces, many of which reflected on the predicaments of lower-class women. In 1924, she published an autobiographical novel called *Tan Sil and Ju Yeong*, where she complained about the prejudices and discrimination she suffered for her origins.

Kim used to write articles and columns in the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* in 1926. She became a reporter after passing an exam for *Maeil Sinbo*. Between 1927 and 1930, she worked as an actress; nevertheless, this path was not successful. Despite her trying to write again and make a living while writing, she could not. She lived her final days in Tokyo, where she died in a psychiatric hospital (Yoon, 2021). Hyeon (2022), mentioned that Kim was probably not as recognized as other writers for different reasons, among other the fact that she had no relatives, friends, or support from the public that would help share her stories. Currently, gladly, there is more research about her contributions, and her writings have been translated into different languages.

### **Analysis of their fictional works**

The analyzed stories are taken from *Selected Works of Na Hyeseok, the Korean Pioneer of Women's Liberation*, and *Collected Works of the First Korean Female Writer Kim Myeongsun*. These were published in 2021 and 2022, respectively. Hyeon Chaewun, who majored in International Studies at Ewha Womans University, translated their writings.

The first aforementioned publication compiles six fiction and ten nonfiction essays by Na Hyeseok, from which five will be analyzed. The second publication is divided into two sections,

the first contains fictional works, of which there are four, and the second contains some of her poems, ten in total. The latter publication includes English translations and the original versions in Korean.

To accomplish the objectives of this paper, each text was analyzed considering the main themes discussed by the writers and also paying attention to the characteristics of the main and secondary characters. In addition, touching upon the controversial topics, connecting them to the social and historical background in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (mainly from 1917 and 1937). The texts by Kim were written between 1917 and 1924<sup>4</sup> while she was in her twenties, while Na's texts were written from 1918 to 1937. Below, there will be an analysis of each text and its characteristics.

### Na Hye-seok's fictional works

#### *Kyeonghee (1918)*

This was her first story and one of her masterpieces. The main character, the eponymous Kyeonghee, is referred to by her given name throughout the story, a powerful statement, considering back then –and even still sometimes today- women in Korea were not mentioned by name but by their relations to their fathers or husbands. According to the translator, this character is an idealist who wants to break the stigma and stereotypes about educated women. The story itself takes place inside the house, where women were the main subjects. Kyeonghee was studying in Japan and came back home to her family. Because she was nineteen and from a noble family, her parents wanted her to get married soon, but she was against this idea and had been able to avoid it before. As mentioned previously in this article, Han Hee Sook states that, during the Joseon Dynasty, marriage was perceived as the union of two families; that's why Kyeonghee's parents wanted her to marry a young man from an important family, since this union would be beneficial. Furthermore, throughout the story, several female characters are portrayed, who, contrary to Kyeonghee, are afraid of change and the stigma toward New Women, seen by society as unable to do the domestic activities that were primordial in a good wife.

4 However, some of the poems translated in this book were written in the 1930s.

Kyeonghee represented the educated and enlightened New Woman. It aims to show the traditional expectations that were put on women, as well as the rejection of marriage for convenience, rather than marriage as an embrace of love.

### *The Anguish of a Grass Widow (1921)*

Once more, the story revolves around a female protagonist, Ms. Lee, who was part of an affluent family with four brothers. She narrated how her life was when she was a model wife and mother according to society, before she became an unlucky woman who fell from grace. Ms. Lee got married at sixteen to the son of the family of her father's best friend, and the adults decided to link the families. She had two children with him, but unfortunately, he died due to his illness. She was blamed for the situation by her in-laws, but they pitied her. Nevertheless, due to a misunderstanding, she was accused of having an affair with another man and was expelled from her in-laws' house and later from her family's house. She struggled to find a place, she even said "I've earnestly been through hardships. Even so, if I were to go somewhere, would there be anywhere else?" (Na, 2021, p. 96), Ms. Lee could not preserve her chastity after becoming a widow, so she was mistreated by society.. As she had nowhere to go, she became an outcast. Marriage and the role of a woman in the family played a significant role in this story. Ms. Lee was accused of being responsible for her husband's illness, even though she did nothing. There is a clear condemnation of the family structure and society for failing to provide women with a place to flee when they did not have a man next to them.

### *Grundge (1926)*

Ms. Lee Sojeo holds the main role. She is also from a wealthy family, and she got married to Kim Cheolsu, who was the son of a minister. His young age didn't stop him from being an alcoholic and spending money on *Gisaengs*. Hence, Sojeo became a widow pretty shortly, because her husband was immature and could not control his lifestyle. Then her in-laws pitied her and allowed her to visit her family sometimes. Sadly, Mr. Park, a neighbor, directed his lustful eyes at her, so when she found out, "she was terribly infuriated and sad because it was as if she was looked down on by everyone, treated as an object without its owner" (Na, 2021, p. 107). This is a reference on how wo-

men without a man besides them were ostracised. In this case, Park went into her room and raped her and she could not do anything to defend herself. When her in-laws knew about the situation, she was kicked and later forced to become Park's third concubine. In this story, other themes aside from marriage are considered including the description of men being allowed to have more women, regarding this Han Hee Sook (2004, p. 125) stated that "men were allowed to have several concubines in addition to their wives, cases in which the wife was abandoned in favor of a concubine frequently arose". Indeed, Ms. Lee was kicked out of Park's house at the end because the legal wife did not like her, so these situations were not uncommon. According to the description, a woman is viewed as an object instead of a human being. Also, there is criticism against men's flexibility in their behavior and harsh punishment for women's mistakes.

### *Hyeon Sook (1936)*

This story's main character, Hyeon Sook, is a reflection of Na's life and her desires to be independent and get married to someone she loved. Her life as a painter was translated into Hyeon Sook's life as a model for paintings, someone who could make a living from their job. The character is also shown as a woman who breaks the ideal because she drinks, writes, and lives on her own in an inn that is also inhabited by men. She falls in love with a man, her neighbor, but is afraid to follow her feelings until she reads a letter from the man that strengthens her resolve, when she realizes he loves her back. This further depicts her independence by being able to live free from marriage for convenience and instead pursue actual love. This is a contrast to Na's real life, where she married the lawyer who helped her during her legal troubles; a marriage arranged for its benefits and not mutual love. This story focuses on the ideal of free love; the characters are built as delightful, with writing as a crucial element in their lives.

### *Mother and Daughter (1937)*

The setting of this story is an inn. Mr. Kim, who lives alone in one of its rooms, is described as a student and writer who rejects marriage. For that reason, she is constantly the topic of conversation of the landlady with Lee Gybong and Hanwoon, who were two divorced men. The landlady had a negative vision of educa-

ted women and wanted her young daughter, Yeongae, to marry a man from a wealthy family. However, Yeongae wanted to study literature in Japan, which is why she admired Ms. Kim, but her mother was not supportive and accused Ms. Kim of corrupting her daughter. The landlord said during a conversation, “What would she do from knowing a lot ? It is enough to give birth to children and do household chores”(Na, 2021, p. 172). Ms. Kim left the inn due to the constant criticism, and Yeongae was kicked out for misbehaving from her mother’s viewpoint, loving a man without being married to him.

This story discusses a few themes, including divorce. According to Han (2004, p. 123), “the right to grant a divorce was limited to the state and the husbands themselves [...] such divorces were regarded as having been caused by the woman’s failure to faithfully carry out her obligations as a wife”. The two divorced men are depicted as a potential couple who did not lose their worth, which is quite different from the women’s case. Finally, there are discussions about women who preferred education over marriage, as well as the freedom of choice that cannot be chosen without compromising family expectations.

### **Kim Myeongsun’s fictional works**

#### *Mysterious Girl (1917)*

The narrative focuses mainly on a young girl who lived in a small village with an old man who was her grandfather, hidden from his father, who was the culprit of her mother’s suicide. His father was constantly looking for her, so her grandfather decided to move regularly to protect her granddaughter. Her name was Gahee, she was the daughter of the director Choi and his legal wife. Nevertheless, her mother committed suicide because she could not bear her husband being with different concubines while she was inside a “cage”. Gahee’s father was a womanizer who was constantly with other women and, despite loving his daughter, would not pay attention to her, making her vulnerable in a house with a half-sister who hated her and a jealous concubine. For these reasons, her grandfather decided to flee with her. In this story, several women are portrayed as figures in a patriarchal scheme that allows men to exert sexual pres-

sure without any problems and destroy their own families. The flexibility of men's behavior in society is being directly criticized.

### *When Looking Back (1924)*

A young woman is again the main character, Soryeon, an English teacher who refused to get married to a man without loving him. During her stay with her aunt, Ryu Educk, she was often reminded that her mother was not the legal spouse of her father and that her ancestry was present in Soryeon's character. Ryu Educk was also an educated woman who became a widow at a pretty young age, but she became very successful on her own. Despite this, she wished for her niece to get married soon, as people were constantly talking about her being single. By luck, during a trip with her students, during his visit to the observatory, Soryeon fell in love with a man who spoke to her and promised to visit. He visited Soryeon's house with his wife. So, Soryeon developed a platonic relationship with him; there were feelings from both parties, but they did not commit any sin. Finally, Soryeon got married to a man who was not at home and constantly had affairs with *Gisaengs*. Here, there is a clear reference to how the freedom of an individual is oppressed, for instance, free love. Some of the themes discussed are education, romance, marriage, free love, and concubines.

### *Tan Sil and Ju Yeong (1924)*

This story is Kim Myeongsun's most personal, and it was written as a response to Kim Dongin's story. Certainly, Kim portrays the character of Tan Sil as a beautiful woman willing to learn, which is constantly compared to the character Ju Yeong from *Behind You*, written for a Japanese man. Their experience of rape led them to approach this event differently. In the case of Tan Sil, her perpetrator was a Korean man instead of a Japanese man, as in the novel. Regarding this issue, Han Heesook (2004, p. 122), stated that during Joseon "in the case of adultery or rape, women usually received more stringent punishment than the men involved". Despite being victims, women were stigmatized and unable to marry due to losing their chastity, as in Tan Sil's case. She is depicted as a woman in her twenties who cannot be married to a man because she was dishonored.

Tan Sil suffered a lot growing up because of her mother, Sanwol, who used to be a *Gisaeng*, who was sold by her mother.

Tan Sil's mother was not her father's legal wife, so she could not have the same rights as her brother, even her mother "wondered why Tan Sil wasn't born a boy and even grumbled about her child" (M. Kim, 2022, p. 154). Tan Sil had a troubled relationship with her mother; after going to church and school, she had a negative perception of her, so Tan Sil constantly asked Sanwol to repent for her crimes and go to church. Sanwol once did and told the people there, "so, as every one of you knows, there is no way for a *Gisaeng* to be someone's legal wife and so, naturally, I became someone's concubine. I also know that is a sin. But what could I do about it?" (M. Kim, 2022, p. 162) This is a clear example that women's circumstances dictated their decisions even when they did not want to follow certain paths. Sanwol adapted as far as she could to the circumstances to survive.

When Tansil was a teenager, she went to Seoul to study at Jimmyeong girls' school, where she stayed inside the school per her uncle's orders. Later, Tansil's father died, and she did not inherit anything apart from debts; even some people asked Sanwol to sell Tansil to a gisaeng house to repay the debts. Regarding this, Han Hee Sook (2004, p. 127), stated that "children of the concubines were in effect greatly disadvantaged in terms of what they could inherit". As portrayed in this case, she was treated as a second-class child. Tan Sil went to Japan to study afterwards, and during her time there, a man introduced to her by her uncle took advantage of her, leading to gossip about her being deviant.

This story comprehends a lot of themes that were important for Kim Myeongsun, here there are discussions about chastity and rape, and how society treated rape victims as guilty of their own misery without taking actions against the perpetrators. Also, there is criticism of those Koreans who wanted to be assimilated as Japanese and constant references to the gisaengs and concubines. Regarding this, the translator mentioned a corrupt society encouraged engagement in concubinage, but ironically pointed fingers at those women. In addition, education and enlightenment as the ideal of a "wise mother, good wife" are present in this story.

### Seonrae (1923)

In his twenties, the story's narrator, a music teacher, fell in love with a pretty Korean woman while in Tokyo. Her name was Seonrae, and she was a muse for Mr. Kim. She is presented as an educated woman who was the daughter of a concubine and who was in a good economic situation. While living in Japan, she adapted to the situation by changing her name because she was constantly bullied for her origins. In this story, there are several discussions about art movements as well as music, so education is a key element in this narrative. Indeed, according to the translator, Kim Myeongsun shows "her critical view of people's lack of openness to new things" (Hyeon, 2022, p. 18) while describing how characters were afraid of the new movements in art and music. Although subtly, this story discusses being the daughter of a concubine and a modern educated woman.

### Themes

Their narratives established a contrast between the paradigm of the New Women and the Old-fashioned Women, as well as the ideal concept of a Wise Mother and Good Wife. Their texts described women from different backgrounds who faced social situations that drove them to make certain decisions and sometimes actually left them unable to make a decision, which was instead made for them; this decision-making was reserved for men, while the women could only accept this unfair reality. In addition, education was a crucial topic for many of their characters. Also, as the translator mentioned, "New Women, inspired by modern ideals came to long for free love against arranged marriage customs and liberation from a patriarchal class system that discriminated against concubines and gisaeng" (Hyeon, 2022, p. 11), these were some of the themes that, despite being controversial, were displayed in their writings.

### Similarities and differences

Aside from her story *Mother and Daughter*, Na Hyeseok depicted main characters from noble families. Some of them got married because of their families' expectations, and became outcasts after the death of their husbands, as in *Grundge* and *The Anguish of a Grass Widow*. Others refused to get married and were portrayed as educated women, such as Ms. Kim in *Mother and*

*Daughter*. Some Western ideas are presented with dialogues from the characters in her stories, such as free love or women's right to education. Another common feature is that many of her characters have a sad ending, such as Yeongae's. Without a doubt, there is constant criticism of a society that only allowed women to be submissive and whose only role was to create and live for their family.

Kim Myeongsun, on the other hand, expresses some aspects of her own life through her characters in a more evident manner than Na Hyeseok. In her stories, the main characters are women with proper names that do not come from a noble background, instead having more varied contexts. She used her literature as a medium to complain about the prejudices of society in her time. Additionally, she constantly used the figures of *Gisaengs* and concubines in her works, while men's attitudes were explored in depth; the former topic is never explored in Na's stories, while the latter is only explored superficially. Meanwhile, the permissiveness toward men's behavior and restrictiveness toward women's are common topics in the two writers' stories, such as in *When Looking Back* with Choi Byeong Seo's behaviours, in contrast to those of his wife, Soryeon.

As mentioned, both writers used similar themes, and both criticized the society in which they lived for its unfair treatment of women. The works from both authors contain autobiographical features. However, their characters reflected their backgrounds. Kim frequently made use of the concubines' topic in her fiction works from different perspectives, while Na Hyeseok explored characters' motherhood and divorce.

## Conclusions

The themes discussed by the two writers were well summarized by Oliverio Coelho (2020), when he stated that "the unfaithful woman, the divorced woman who could no longer tolerate the life of concubinage, became something like a leper, a declassed woman, a vagabond. Na Hyeseok and Kim Myeongsun experienced this anomie firsthand". It is also possible to see that different kinds of women had a place in their narratives, showing the varying circumstances of women in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they can be better understood through their works of fiction. Some of their characters were agents of their lives, while others were passive

beings who could not go against the system. It is common to see different characteristics in the women depicted in their writings, even a contraposition between “New Women” and “Old Women”.

In addition, their social and historical context played a significant role in the development of their writing. For instance, in reference to Kim’s writings, the translator Hyeon Chaewun (2022, p. 11) says, “It’s the fact that she uniquely conveyed the reality of Joseon’s class hierarchy and gender discrimination to a society that turned a deaf ear to the voices of the minority”. However, this description would be valid for both writers. As mentioned, a lot of autobiographical details were included in the creation of their characters, including situations they experienced themselves, such as discrimination and pressure to get married, and yet, their characters can be very different from each other. Finally, all their stories are definitely a great read, not just because they provide a real understanding of the social situations that women faced 100 years ago, but also because their prose and the themes they cover are absolutely delightful for any reader.

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