Issue03

The ‘Unhomely’ and New Womanhood: Radical Feminists in Colonial Korea

By Boram Jeong

> *Liberation! This is the call of women who have been confined to the deep, dark, inner chambers for thousands of years. […] Reform! Reform! This call for reform is echoed high and loud from every corner of the world. Truly the time has come for change. Ah, the new era has arrived. Time has come to break away from old things and bring in new things. The time has come to throw off the wrrong-headed, evil practices of the past. The time has come to reform all things.*[1]

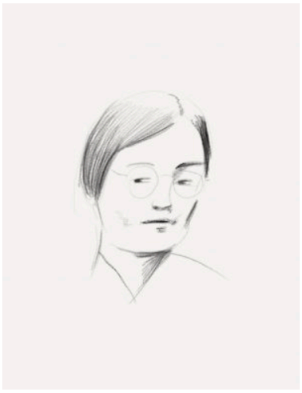
This is an excerpt from the inaugural editorial of Korea’s first feminist journal *Sin Yeoja* (New Woman) published in 1920. This journal played a crucial role in creating a discourse on the status of women and the formation of the idea of “New Woman” in colonial Korea. We see here a sharp contrast between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ values and the urgency of radical change. What makes these women ‘new’? What made this reform necessary?

The term ‘New Woman’ first appeared in 1894 in Sarah Grand’s article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” published in the *North American Review*. The idea of the New Woman has actively been introduced as a cultural and political movement in Korea in the 1920s and 30s. A majority of Korean women at the time was subjected to the Confucian-prescribed gender norms called “womanly virtues (*budeok*; 婦德),” which includes chastity and compliance. As women intellectuals with the knowledge of Western theories of feminism emerged, critical discussions on womanhood began to occur. However, redefining womanhood in colonial Korea involved a much more complex intersection than a mere critique of patriarchy. Korean women were in a particularly precarious position, placed at the center of competing claims of tradition and modernity, Confucianism and Western feminism, liberalism and socialism, and Japanese colonialism and nationalism. The political landscape made it impossible for them to remain who they were, what they were, or where they once considered ‘home.’

This article tells a brief story of the New Women thinkers in Korea, who sought to define new womanhood in their own terms, with a specific focus on their sense of estrangement from home. I draw on the postcolonial thinker Homi K. Bhabha's notion of 'unhomeliness,' defined as a condition intrinsic to the colonial and postcolonial world as well as to femininity. The 'unhomely' is "the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world."[2] It is not a question of being 'homeless,' Bhabha notes, but a question of being outside of home, of not being at home in the home, and of being forced to renegotiate one's place in the world. For women in colonial Korea, it was the influx of Western thought and the colonial condition that necessitated redefining their place in the world, both in the private and public spheres. As Bhabha notes, in the condition of 'unhomely,' the border between home and world becomes confused: "The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart."[3]

By highlighting the notion of home, I hope to reveal some of the specific challenges that a women of color feminism in a colonial context faces. For this purpose, I provide a rough sketch of the unfolding of the New Woman movement in Korea with three defining moments, along with the women thinkers corresponding to them: 1) a woman's individual awakening that leads to the departure from home as a domestic sphere (Na Hye-Seok), 2) the condition of unhomeliness as social alienation and rejection (Jeong Chil-Seong), and 3) the reconstruction of home through political affect (Heo Jeong-Sook).

The departure from old home — Na Hye-Seok



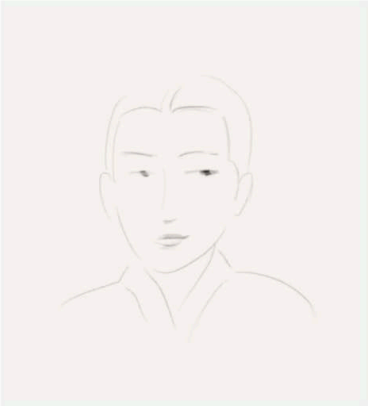
Na Hye-Seok. Drawing by Jinjoo Kim.

Let us first look at the notion of 'home' tied to traditional gender roles and practices: the confinement of women to domestic duties. The idea of home in this sense was challenged by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in his play *A Doll's House*, one of the most influential Western literature for the New Woman movement in Korea. The protagonist Nora, who leaves her husband and three children to lead an independent life, was an "iconic embodiment of the modern self" for the New Women in the 1920s and 1930s.[4] Her act of leaving home symbolized a woman's self-awakening, discovery of true self-identity, refusal to remain silent as a lifeless doll, and ultimately, the desire for liberation. The discussion on Nora was invoked by Na Hye-Seok's essay 'Ideal Woman,' which describes the protagonist as one of the pioneers who challenged the traditional view of the feminine.[5] She rejects the ideology of 'good wife, wise women (*yangcheo hyeonmo*; 良妻賢母)' by calling it a "propaganda to turn women into slaves." In the poem called 'A Doll's House,' published in a newspaper in 1920, Na reiterates Nora's point that "I have a sacred duty to myself, as much as to my husband and children."[6]

Modern womanhood represented by Nora was an unsettling idea not only to traditionalists and nationalists, but also to male reformist intellectuals, as it threatened to undermine the hetero-patriarchal social structure. Therefore, the discussion on new womanhood in the 1920s was centered around the fictional character Nora. Some described her departure from home as an irresponsible, callous act of abandonment, and others as a naive, idealist attitude. Traditionalists offered a moral critique of the New Women's radical view on sexual desire, divorce, and chastity, often in the attempt to dismiss entirely the discourse on womanhood; they viewed the idea of new womanhood as an uncritical reception of Western ideals of gender equality that threaten traditional Confucian family values. Some described *Ewha Hakdang* — a Methodist mission school, from which most of the early New Woman thinkers graduated — as a factory that produces an 'inferior facsimile of advanced Western women.' The New Women thinkers were also condemned by nationalist intellectuals for lacking national consciousness under Japanese colonialism.

A Doll's House ends with Nora's departure from home, with no indication of what happens next. Many wondered about her fate after 'the Departure': where could she possibly go? Is there a place she can call her home? The New Woman thinkers in the first wave, accused of being complicit with the colonial-Western power, there was no alternative home that they can claim to belong. They took an uncompromising stance as radical feminists, in their refusal to submit themselves to Confucian patriarchy, the male-dominated nationalist movement, or to the idea of modern womanhood based on the gender ideology of 'good wife, wise mother' supported by reformist male intellectuals. The leading figures in the New Woman movement including Na Hye-Seok were harshly criticized and eventually rejected by the general public — they remained 'unhomed,' living a vagrant or a cloistered life.

'The unhomely' as a condition of feminine existence— Jeong Chil-Seong



Joeng Chil-Seong. Drawing by Jinjoo Kim.

If the radical feminists understood new womanhood to be a search for individual freedom and autonomy, socialist feminists like Jeong Chil-Seong and Heo Jeong-Sook emphasized economic liberation as a means of overcoming alienation. They described Nora's departure as naive and typically 'petit-bourgeois,' because it lacked a sense of reality and financial means. They found the idea of modern womanhood inspired by the Western liberal feminism to be unfitting to Korean women in a feudal society, nearly 90 percent of whom were illiterate, given no education opportunities, and living in poverty.[7] In an interview, Jeong criticizes Nora as the following:

> *Nora's was a case of individual self-awakening. Because she was awakened to her individuality, she was able to leave her barrister husband's house one snowy night. But where could she go and what resources did she have to support herself? It is not 'liberation' if she escapes only to starve or freeze to death on the street. Thus, if one is not economically liberated, liberation has no meaning. A woman like Nora is either an empty idealist or not, in fact, truly liberated.*[8]

Jeong would agree with Na in that women's role should not be limited to domestic duties, however, not for the sake of 'the divine duty for oneself,' but for her social duties to care for the poor. For her, Vassilissa, the protagonist in socialist feminist Alexandra Kollontai's novel *Red Love*, was a symbol of a newly defined womanhood. Like Nora, Vassilissa also decides to leave home, but is able to provide for herself and eventually establishes child care programs for factory workers. Jeong argues that "what we need most of all in shaping new gender relations is economic independence. [...] without the economic liberation of the proletariat, there is no women's liberation."[9] Jeong was well aware of the economic struggles of the lower-class women in colonial Korea and thus keen on concretizing the means for women's liberation on the economic basis. She thought the true New Women "can be seen only in the factories that make cigarettes and textiles [...] It is their blood, sweat, and tears of suffering that signal the promise of the future."[10]

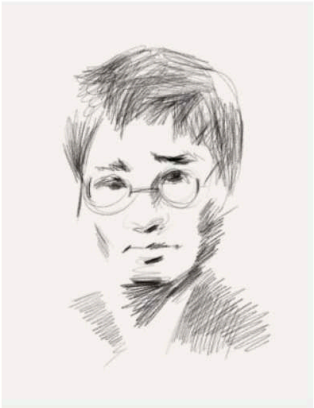
Jeong maintains that her identity as a worker gave her a sense of selfhood that had been absent in her early adult life. She was trained and worked as a *gisaeng* (an entertainer or courtesan) since she was sent to the training school at the age of 7. Jeong became politically conscious regarding gender and class as a result of her experience in the sex labor market.[11] In pre-modern Korea, the *gisaeng* class was regarded as *cheonmin*, the lowest class in society along with slaves and butchers, despite the fact that they were highly skilled in music and poetry. Even after the abolishment of social class system, the *gisaeng* women were viewed as a threat to family values and public health, despite being forced into the industry due to generational poverty. In the 1920s, there was a large number of *gisaeng*'s suicides as a protest against such misplaced contempt. The *gisaeng* women with critical consciousness of their subordinate position began to organize themselves as the socialist *gisaeng* group called '*sasang*(intellectual) *gisaeng*.' Jeong was one of the *sasang gisaeng* who organized the local *gisaeng* women as a political group for the nation-wide March 1st Movement against Japanese occupation.

Jeong's idea of modern womanhood revealed the alienation of working class women from home. Socialist feminism, in its critique of Western bourgeois feminism, provided a theoretical framework for the majority of Korean women, peasants and factory workers, who could not afford to be Nora. Liberal

the majority of Korean women, peasants and factory workers, who could not afford to be Nora. Liberal feminists' claim to depart home was radical largely because it meant giving up the privileges of a married middle-class woman. For those without such privilege, the 'unhomely' is not a matter of their conscious decision but an unavoidable condition of being — they need not leave home to realize their estrangement from it.

Building a new home through political affect — Heo Jeong-Sook

Heo Jeong-Sook, one of the first New Women to introduce socialist feminism to Korea, was particularly interested in localizing feminist discourse. She defined the condition of Korean women as a 'double slavery': class oppression and patriarchy. While recognizing the value of Western theories of gender equality, she believed that liberation could be meaningfully discussed only at the particular intersections of identities: class, gender, colonialism and patriarchy.[12] For this purpose, Heo, known as 'Korea's Kollontai,' eventually turned away from the socialist agenda that prioritizes class struggles despite the complexities that Korean women were facing at the time.



Heo Jeong-Sook. Drawing by Jinjoo Kim.

As a first step, she thought it crucial to bring the New Woman movement led by intellectuals closer to the people. In her essay "To Women Students Returning to Their Homes in the Countryside," Heo appeals to the elite New Women thinkers' ability to reflect on their privilege and to feel responsible for and sympathetic toward the majority of Korean women. She urged intellectuals to (1) pass on knowledge to the illiterate women in the countryside by inviting them over at their homes, and (2) help them "discover their individual characters, develop class consciousness, and learn social civility."[13] She aimed to promote peasant women's participation in nation-wide women's organizations through grassroots movements to show the united effort of liberal and social feminists. As this message was addressed to the women "returning to their homes in the countryside," we might say that it tried to persuade the New Women (who had departed home) to bring feminist ideals back to their home. The 'home' that they return to would then be reconstructed as a new community of women who are alienated on various fronts.

In her critical and innovative adoption of socialist feminism, Heo developed an original idea of new womanhood that emphasizes political affect.[14] She argues that prior to promoting any particular political causes, Korean women need to recognize their own pain and suffering. She writes,

> *We, Korean women, are said to be gentle in emotional dispositions. [...] Hence, we were meek and unprotesting when we should have reacted with anger and rage. We took it for granted when we were treated like idiots, fools, and morons without feeling ashamed or mortified. This is why we have observed no progress, advancement or improvement. [...] If we had kept emotions alive we would have recognized our own anguish and would not be living in this state; our anguish would have caused us a great pain and our pain would have brought about some significant changes. But we do not see any of that coming yet. Women, we shall awaken our feelings. Let us get our anger back. Let us face our pain, from which new flowers and fruits will grow [from which a new life will begin].*[15]

For Heo, developing the sense of self is inseparable from affirming and confronting one's emotions, which is no longer a private matter. According to her, "Korean women are deliberately brought up to disregard and deny their feelings arising from various forms of oppression. Thus, they are made to be unaware of how to express anger, to resist, or even to suffer."[16] In other words, awareness of suffering is necessary for the constitution of the subject. The socio-political condition of 'double slavery' under colonial rule that women in colonial Korea were forced to endure had driven them to give up their sense of self.

Heo's emphasis on political affect seems to resonate with that of the contemporary black queer feminist thinker, Audre Lorde. Lorde emphasized that recognizing anger is an important source of political empowerment especially when you grow up within "a symphony of anger at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness."[17] In a world built on silencing and dehumanizing women (women of color, in particular), women have had to learn to "orchestrate" those furies to sustain their being. And, as Lorde points out, it is not anger that destroys us, but our fear and refusal to listen to its rhythms and to learn within it.

In underscoring the affective basis of political consciousness, Heo Jeong-Sook points to a more fundamental form of estrangement from home: self-alienation. She believed that without feeling at home with oneself, women in colonial Korea would not be able to identify the specific challenges that they faced. It was crucial for the working-class women, peasants and factory workers, to develop critical consciousness in order to indigenize the idea of new womanhood.

The New Woman thinkers were condemned by the traditionalists who viewed them as complicit with the colonial government's modernization project, and by the reformists who viewed women's rights secondary to the modernization of the nation. What further complicated their struggle was the tension between Imperial Japan as a non-Western colonizer and the Western education offered by the American missionaries, who were seen by the general public as a 'genuine bearer of modernity,' and thus later became a threat to the colonial government's authority. The emergence of socialism against the rising American imperialism and capitalism also contributed to the complex geography of power.

The New Woman movement in colonial Korea as a battle field between imperial powers demonstrates an attempt to determine new womanhood in their own terms while exploring the possibility of reclaiming 'home.' The search for new womanhood under 'the unhomely' condition reveals to us the challenges of indigenizing feminism for colonized women of color; it involved a continuous displacement from home and a necessary reinvention of one's relationships with what constitutes home — the self, the family and the nation.

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