Na Hyesŏk: The “Korean Nora”*

Jung A Choi and Han Sung Kim

Na Hyesŏk (1896–1948), the so-called “Korean Nora” of colonial Korea, challenged existing patriarchal conventions and tried to dismantle androcentric myths. In her poem, “A Doll’s Song” (1921), an adaptation from Henrik Ibsen's play, A Doll's House, she exclaims, “I have a divine duty, setting out on my mission to become a person.” Her feminism was a common theme among Korean new-age women and her task was one shared with Japanese new women artists. Japan and Korea’s new-age women had ideological ties, despite their political differences as constituents of empire and colony, a fact closely linked to the reception of “Nora” in East Asia. Korean international students in Tokyo learned and experienced Western culture via Japanese intellectuals and celebrated Ibsen’s “Nora” as a role model of modern individuality. For Korean male students, being a “Nora” implied having a sense of enlightenment both as a modern person and a colonial intellectual with an awareness of nationalistic boundaries. However, Na Hyesŏk made it her priority to break with patriarchal ideology so that Korean female intellectuals could play a role equal to that of their male counterparts in modern Korean society.

Keywords: Na Hyesŏk, sin yŏsŏng, first-generation Korean Feminist Artist, Kyŏnghŭi, “Inhyŏng ŭi ka” (A doll's house), Noraism

*This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2017S1A5A8021892). It was also supported by Sookmyung Women’s University Research Grants (1-1703-2011). Unless otherwise noted, all translations to English are the authors’ own.

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Noraism and the Interpolation of Women as a Modernization Project

At the core of the modernization project in East Asia during the early twentieth century was the creation of the “new person.” Colonial Korean intellectuals devoted to escaping premodern Korea’s Confucian tradition sought out a model for the modern individual in Tokyo, which at the time was a comparatively international space. However, this model was altered by Korean nationality. Korean intellectuals were concerned with distancing themselves from the Japanese imperialist citizenry while transforming themselves into modern individuals. In other words, a collective identity as colonial intellectuals bereft of the father (the state) always preceded individual identity.

Korean male intellectuals sought to replace their deficient masculinity with femininity; their political unawareness was transformed into an ambivalent gaze directed at women. They displayed contradictory attitudes toward their female contemporaries, emphasizing the subjectivity of women while silencing female voices. In this way, women became both a target group to be enlightened in the incoming modern era and, at the same time, were required to remain silent under male surveillance. New women (sin yŏsŏng) who resisted the male gaze declared their emancipation from the home using their “humanity” as a rationale. At this point, the Noraism of East Asia displayed an ideological unity surpassing national boundaries.

The introduction and reception of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen in East Asia was part of Japan’s cultural policy aimed at indicating modernization through the “new play” (sin kŭk). In order to eliminate the remnants of the premodern drama, it was urgent for the Japanese theatre to replace onnagata, male actors who played women’s roles, with women actresses; this was the moment when women entered the societal spotlight as part of modernization policy.1 As a result, women were able to stand at the center of the theatrical stage, which had formerly been dominated by male actors. However, under male supervision, women also became the subject of envy and jealousy. For example, Matsui Sumako (1886–1919), the first Japanese actress to play the role of Nora to great success in the premiere of A Doll’s House in Tokyo in 1911, emerged as a symbol of the birth of Japan’s new woman, but was simultaneously denounced as an archetype of the femme fatale.2

1. Ayako Kano, Acting Like a Woman in Modern Japan: Theatre, Gender, and Nationalism (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7.
2. Ch’oe Sŏnghŭi, “Ipsen kwa Tongasia ŭi sin yŏsŏng” [Henrik Ibsen and new women in East Asia], Han’guk yŏn’gŭkhak 30 (2006), 221.
While Matsui Sumako sounded the voice of the Japanese new woman through Nora on the stage, Na Hyeso˘k (1896–1948) was a Korean new woman who played the part of Nora in her real life in colonial Chos˘n, resulting in her suffering doubly at the hands of imperial power and patriarchal male domination. For Korean male intellectuals, the Korean Nora was a surrogate for their political unconscious desiring an escape from Japanese imperial rule, but in reality Nora needed to be controlled and repressed within the patriarchal system. Not only did they eviscerate Nora’s gender, but also used her as grounds to criticize new women under the premise that “there is no real Nora in colonial Chos˘n.” Under patriarchal society and longing for a fuller human existence, Na Hyeso˘k attempted to locate Nora in that very Chos˘n.3

As Korea’s Nora, Na Hyeso˘k challenged existing patriarchal conventions and tried to dismantle androcentric myths. In her poem, “A Doll’s Song,” published in the Maeil sinbo on April 3, 1921, she exclaims, “I have a divine duty, setting on my mission to become a person.” Indeed, her feminism was a common theme among Korean new women at the time, and her task was one shared with Japanese new women artists such as Hiratsuka Raichō (1886–1971) and Yosano Akiko (1878–1942). It is noteworthy that Japan and Korea’s new women had ideological ties despite their political differences, a fact closely linked to the reception of “Nora” in East Asia.

3. The evaluation of Na Hyeso˘k moves away from negative views of the early woman writer (yöryu chakka), expanding on feminist criticism in Korean Studies. Current scholarship continues to reevaluate Na Hyeso˘k’s literature and art as well as her emergence as a “new woman.” Her work was reconsidered in the late 1980s when she became a feminist icon for a new woman’s movement. This was a result of the heightened calls for reevaluation of women’s literature, which had been left out of the existing male-dominated literary history. Especially, Sô Chöngja discovered and introduced Na Hyeso˘k’s short stories “Kyönghû” and “To My Revived Granddaughter” at the inaugural seminar of the Korean Women’s Literature Research Society in 1988, paving the way for full-fledged studies of Na Hyeso˘k. Yi Sanggyŏng’s compilation of Na Hyeso˘k’s works contains her biography, poetry, criticism, essays, paintings, an unfinished short story “Kyuwôn,” and her last short story “Mother and Daughter.” This compilation appears to have become the cornerstone of Na Hyeso˘k studies. See Na Hyeso˘k, Na Hyeso˘k chönjip [The collected works of Na Hyeso˘k], ed. Yi Sanggyŏng (Seoul: T’aehaksa, 2000). Additionally, the “Setting the Record Straight on Na Hyeso˘k” (Na Hyeso˘k paro algi) Symposium held in 1999 has led to various other approaches to understanding Na Hyeso˘k, while her influence in Korean Studies has expanded and deepened since the foundation of the Na Hyeso˘k Society in 2012. Meanwhile, examination of relevant research trends has become tenable as articles on Na Hyeso˘k have been compiled and published in series (yön’gu ch’ongsô). See Na Hyeso˘k yön’gu ch’ongsô 1–2 [The collection of research materials for Na Hyeso˘k], ed. Yun Pŏmmo (Suwon: Na Hyesok hakhoe, 2015). Previous studies of Na Hyeso˘k merely focused on her biography and distinguished her work as a painter and a literary artist. However, recent scholarship attempts to deal with her paintings, literary works, and feminist writings in an interactive way. Other research trends trace her artistic process or address her nationalism.
The reception of Ibsen in East Asia was centered in Tokyo during the 1910s. During this time, Tokyo, as the capital city of the Japanese empire, emerged as an international contact zone where colonial Korean intellectuals studying abroad could encounter Western culture. Korean international students learned and experienced Western culture via Japanese intellectuals and saw Ibsen’s “Nora” as a role model for modern individuality. Nora challenges old traditions and ethics and problematizes her own identity, representing herself as a new person (sin in) who subjectively recognizes her life.4

From a gender studies perspective, it is noteworthy that for male intellectuals the old home that Nora left symbolized pre-modern Korea, while Nora was simultaneously perceived as a role model for the modern individual familiar with Western culture. However, for many female intellectuals, Nora stood for new women awakened to a sense of feminine consciousness and who expressed resistance to their old house symbolizing patriarchal Korea. The divergences in the understanding of Nora become clear when one considers the ambivalence shown by male intellectuals in their perspectives on the Nora figure. They perceived Nora solely as a “modern individual” without referencing her gender, leaving in place the dictum that women should remain in the home. They hypocritically regarded Nora as a “modern individual,” but disparaged new women who wanted to leave their homes. In their literary works, new women were described as defeated subjects who should return to the patriarchal home or else risk their lives being completely destroyed.

Korean male intellectuals could not ignore the political relations between imperial Japan and colonial Korea when considering Nora as a model of growth and the advancement of selfhood. In other words, for Korean male students studying abroad in Tokyo, being a “Nora” implied having a sense of awakening, both as a modern person and as a colonial intellectual with a nationalistic boundary. However, it was a priority for Korean female students

studying abroad in Tokyo to break with patriarchal ideology in order for them to play a role equal to that of their male counterparts. Specifically, for female students, the problem of Chosón’s ubiquitous patriarchy took precedence over the national issue of colonization by the Japanese empire. Their escape from the home coincided with the movement of becoming a human that was then being spearheaded by Japan’s new women artists.

Ambivalent Gaze Aimed at the Korean Nora

As a new woman in Korea, Na Hyesók challenged patriarchal conventions and sought to dismantle androcentric power over women. She portrayed Nora not only as an ideal model, but also an incarnation of herself in her literary works emphasizing women’s awareness. The most notable point of her literary world is that she consistently publicized her own personal experiences, as confirmed in her numerous critical essays. She sought to objectively understand women’s oppressive reality through her own experiences, publicizing them through her writings. She criticized the men who held outdated, conventional ideas, and offered up a more assertive and subjective female figure:

I have never heard of education in becoming a “good husband and wise father,” such is limited to women’s education. It is truly offensive even if it is touted as a mental discipline. Moreover, we do not need to accept the message that a man’s wife should be warm, virtuous, smooth, and right as an ideal. This encourages slavery as a womanly virtue, and we must be careful not to entrap ourselves…. We must steadily increase our intelligence, fulfill our responsibilities through our own efforts, and faithfully carry out our duties. If we undertake our tasks eagerly, study and cultivate ourselves, and bring our conscience closer to the ideal, we will not have spent our days in vain; thereafter, even if death comes tomorrow, our life up to that day will have proved the ideal one. Therefore, I shall struggle now with infinite suffering for my art, facing some path without shadows by dint of my own fervent desires.5

In a number of her essays, such as “Ideal Woman” (Isangjōk puin), “Miscellaneous Sentiments” (Chapkam), and “Miscellaneous Sentiments: To my Sister K” (Chapkam: K önni ege yōham), she problematizes the slave-like life of women in the patriarchal society of colonial Korea. Furthermore, she shows

women’s standardized responsibility based on the critical recognition of their secondary status in deference to their father, husband, and son. Her assertion speaks of “a path without shadows” (yŏngja to poiji anihanun ottŏhan kil) because the universal social norm placed upon women was to follow the samjong chido (three duties), bearing an attitude of warm-heartedness, virtuousness, politeness, and modesty. She dismissed this as an old-fashioned rule of the days “when women eat three times a day, play hide-and-seek in the house, become old, and die.” Of course, she was forced to constantly struggle against these forces.

Her suffering can be seen in a series of life events outlined in her biography: her confrontation with her patriarchal father, her divorce from her husband Kim Uyŏng after her extramarital affair with Ch’oe Rin, and finally, the neglect from her family and society. Nonetheless, she attempted to confront society until the end because she wanted to stay faithful to the beliefs she proposed in her early essays. With her proposition of the “Ideal Woman,” she presented a critical awareness of reality for contemporary women, their future directions, and her own future course of action. While all of these events, actions, and thoughts were unprecedented at the time, her assertion in the last part of her essay, “I shall struggle now with infinite suffering for my art,” merits particular attention as the proposition which suffused her entire life thereafter.

When she wrote “Ideal Woman,” she was involved in a harsh confrontation with her father. This conflict became the source of her opposition to feudal patriarchy. She was born and raised in a relatively open-minded bureaucrat family and she benefitted from a modern education owing to the unwavering support of her elder brother, Na Kyŏngsŏk. However, her father had a patriarchal mindset and always opposed her. When she was studying abroad in Tokyo at the age of eighteen, her father decided to take a famous nineteen-year-old kisaeng from Chinju named Paek Hongsan as his concubine. Her animosity

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Na Hyesŏk spent her childhood in a relatively wealthy and open-minded family. Beginning with Na Sŏngson 羅誠孫, Na Hyesŏk’s thirteenth ancestor and admiral of Suwŏn, her ancestors steadily entered into government work, allowing her family to grow into one of the largest landowners in Suwŏn. In particular, Na Kyŏngsŏk, her elder brother, who acknowledged the signs of genius and artistic talents of his sister from early on, made an effort to persuade his father to send her to study in Tokyo. Yun Pŏmmo, Huaga Na Hyesŏk [The painter Na Hyesŏk] (Seoul: Hyŏnamsa, 2005), 17; Chŏng Kyeong, Na Hyesŏk p’yŏngjŏn: Nae mudŏm e kko Hansongi kkoja chu (Biography of Na Hyesŏk: Bring a flower to my grave) (Seoul: Chungang M&B, 2003); Yi Sanggyŏng, Na núm In’gan ŭro salgo sipta: Yongwŏnhan shin’yŏsŏng Na Hyesŏk [I want to live as a human being: eternal new woman Na Hyesŏk] (Seoul: Han’gilsa, 2009).
against patriarchy and its facilitation of unequal gender relations through practices such as concubinage is also reflected in her autobiographic novella “Kyŏnghŭi.”

“Kyŏnghŭi” dispelled prejudice against new women and showed their subjective awareness through a character named Kyŏnghŭi. The novella reaches a climax with Kyŏnghŭi’s resistance against the patriarchal father who tries to tie her to the feudal tradition through the promise of material comfort. In doing so, Na Hyesŏk considers Kyŏnghŭi not simply as a daughter of Chosŏn or a daughter within a household but a “woman standing with all humanity” and a person above all else:

When her fearsome father first said, “If you marry into this family, you will live a good life and be well-fed and well-clad for the rest of your life,” trembling with fear, she snapped back at him: “Father, you know Confucius’ disciple Yan Hui said that one can find happiness even in a handful of rice and a small amount of water in a gourd. If we live only for food, we are dumb animals, not human beings. I believe that, as human beings, we must earn our food with our own hands, even if it is only a bowl of coarse barley. Women who live off their husbands, who in turn live off inheritances from their ancestors, are no different from our dog.”

Kyŏnghŭi’s thoughts continued thus: “Yes, if human beings live only for food, they are like beasts of a lower order. Besides, all sorts of tragedies take place in rich families whose male members squander the property they have received from their ancestors, without having lifted a finger, on drinking and kisaeng. These men do not know how to use their inheritance, let alone make one themselves. They are not human beings but animals who die after a life of fulfilling their appetites. There are numerous men who lead low lives like animals. Such men are not human beings but animals in human skin. If these men should attempt to take a rest under the bush clovers, even a dog would laugh at them, saying the shade is too good for them.” …

Finally, Kyŏnghŭi declared: “First of all I am a human being. Then I am a woman. This means that I am a human being before being a woman. Moreover, I belong to the universal human race before being a woman. I belong to the universal human race before being a Korean woman. I am God’s daughter before being the daughter of Yi Ch’ŏrwŏn and Lady Kim. After all, I was born with a human form. This form, which includes not only the outer skin but also the internal organs, is

9. See discussions about Na Hyesŏk as a new woman, including her representative work “Kyŏnghŭi,” in Ch’oe Hyesil, Sinyŏsŏng til ʻin muŏt ʻil kkum kkuŏmmin’ga [What was the dream of the new women] (Seoul: Saenggak ŭ namu, 2000); Song Myŏnghŭ, P’eminisit’ŭ Na Hyesŏk ʻil haebu hada [To analyze a feminist, Na Hyesŏk] (Seoul: Chisik kwa kyoyang, 2015); Sŏ Chŏngja, Na Hyesŏk munbak yŏng’gu [Research on Na Hyesŏk’s literary works] (P’aju: Purŭn saeong, 2016).

definitely human, not animal.”

In this work, Kyŏnghŭi’s father Yi Ch’ŏrwŏn firmly believes in his daughter’s “duty as a woman,” and this belief leads squarely to her marriage. When Kyŏnghŭi refuses the arranged marriage that her father desires for her, her father says, “Sending my daughter to Japan, having my daughter refuse marriage—who ever heard of such nonsense!” and “Contemptible bitch! If a girl gets educated she becomes cheeky and useless.” As seen in these utterances, he believes a young girl (kyejejibae) does not require study or self-development, but rather her security is consigned to her marriage and her duty is regarded as conforming to the social order. Lady Kim also worries about her daughter’s marriage being delayed but recalls that her husband was promiscuous when he was young and that she felt sick and tired while he enjoyed two or three concubines following his official transfer as governor of the Ch’ŏrwŏn region. Indeed, Lady Kim agrees with Kyŏnghŭi when she says, “There is anxiety and sorrow hidden in a silk skirt.”

The cited passage is from a scene in which Kyŏnghŭi strongly expresses her opinions to her father and makes clear her attitude toward her future. It is notable that Kyŏnghŭi, while finding her confrontation with her father burdensome, is also proud of herself for standing up to her father and voicing her opinions. Unlike other family members, the existence of her father, a symbol of masculine patriarchy, is so abhorrent to Kyŏnghŭi, now self-conscious as a new woman, that she answers him with a fearful shudder. Nonetheless, Kyŏnghŭi has to endure the pain of this process, as her human declaration is the fundamental task determining the future of the new women in Chosŏn, not just her own. At the root of this concept lies a criticism of the irrational and irreverent life of Korean men and the surety that ignorant Chosŏn women will conform to patriarchy. The fight between Kyŏnghŭi and her father ultimately targets a “humane” project seeking to resist irrational patriarchal tradition and to realize a “woman’s life” that is based on equal rights shared with all human beings, no longer a life like that of an animal.

This context of “Kyŏnghŭi” is quite distinct from contemporary male writer Yi Kwangsu’s representative work, Mujŏng (The heartless, 1918). In both

13. Ibid., 94.
14. Na Hyesŏk and Yi Kwangsu worked together as coterie members of Hakehiguwang when they
works, which pioneeringly touch upon the issue of the new woman in the history of Modern Korean literature, the scope of the Korean “new woman” problem is broadened and the will for female enlightenment is highlighted. However, crucial differences appear in the portrayals of the awareness of female characters.15

“A woman is a human being, too,” the woman student [Pyönguk] said. “Since a woman is a human being, she has many roles. She can be a daughter, a wife, a mother. There are many ways she can fulfill her role in life, whether through religion, science or art; or work for society or the state. In the past, though, the only role for women has been that of wife, and even that was decided by others’ intentions and others’ words. Until now, women have been nothing but an accoutrement for men, a possession. You were trying to go from being a possession of your father, to being a possession of Mr. Yi. Just like an object being passed from one person to another. We too must be human beings. We must be women, but we must first be human beings.”16

The above quotation is from a scene in which a new woman, Pyönguk, impresses the idea of “women as human beings” onto Yŏngch’ae, a traditional woman working as a kisaeng who almost took her own life after losing her chastity. The task of declaring women’s “humanity,” which Kyŏnghŭi barely manages to conclude after going through schizophrenic symptoms in Na Hyesŏk’s work, is here given to Pyönguk. The content of this quotation is the same as in her story, but the way in which it is conveyed is quite distinctive. Until her encounter with Pyönguk on her way to her death, Yŏngch’ae had suffered helplessly under all manner of old-fashioned customs and her inner goodness had become her downfall, setting her on the path to commit suicide. However, in a gratifying turn of events, her life is saved by an accidental

studied in Tokyo from the 1910s to 1920s. Also, Na Hyesŏk’s elder brother Na Kyŏngsŏk and Yi Kwangsu were close friends.
encounter with the pioneering new woman Pyŏnguk. Therefore, in *The Heartless*, Yöngch’ae’s “humane” declaration is incited by an unexpected person and the process of her forming an inner self-consciousness is erased. Although the story of Yöngch’ae, who has fallen from being the daughter of an enlightened educator to kisaeng, to moral disgrace, and to suicide, is narrated at length, the content of the declaration of human rights, which is too extreme to accept for a woman who has led such a tragic and miserable life, is too easily delivered and adopted.

Kyŏnhūi and Pyŏnguk both arrive at the liberating conclusion that they should be “a person” and not just “a woman.” However, whereas Kyŏnhūi demonstrates a process of awakening to self-liberation as a new woman of Chosŏn, Pyŏnguk’s utterance delivered through her authoritative and instructive voice seems little more than a slogan. In other words, Yi Kwangsu, the author of *The Heartless*, speaks of women’s self-awareness through female characters, but this is only a signification of the enlightenment discourse between new and old. Indeed, the inner workings of women’s minds seem to have been erased here. In this respect, Na Hyesŏk’s textualization of the process of self-awareness and consciousness as a new woman is noteworthy and can be highlighted as feminine writing, contrasting with writings by males such as Yi Kwangsu, who proceeded toward ideal Enlightenment, influenced by Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy.17

Na Hyesŏk’s project to become a human being broke from the traditional image of the “warm-hearted, virtuous, polite, and modest” woman and showed the process of forming a female self-consciousness beyond the education to be a “good wife and wise mother” in the traditional Confucian family. Such recognition surpassed the scope of individual awareness in presenting the path to becoming a Chosŏn woman; thus, women needed to improve their lives through self-awareness. In her essay, “Miscellaneous Sentiments: To my Sister K” (*Chapkam: Kŏnni ege yŏham*), these aspects were explained as follows: 1. Desire of the Chosŏn woman to be a person; 2. Desire to be educated for herself and her country; and 3. Desire to engage in social activity.18 What is noteworthy here is the learning and disseminating of one’s education to other Koreans. This meant that like “Japan that made a new culture from external stimuli” by “embracing the culture of others” Korea too was to “embrace the new knowledge and nativize it as the Japanese did.”

Her ideological influences during her study abroad in Tokyo can explain this

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situation. During her study, Tokyo had been transformed from a premodern to a modern city baptized in Western civilization and culture. In particular, Ellen Key’s moralistic theories on free love and free divorce became widespread among Japanese youth at this time. Key’s writings had a great impact on the development of Japanese feminism and education in the 1910s. Her “lofty romance embracing both spirituality and sexuality” advocated that men and women respect one another’s individuality on equal terms and fulfill themselves through love relationships. Key’s ideas met with Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, which influenced Japanese new women during the 1910s.

Ellen Key’s thoughts on free love, free divorce, and maternity impacted Japanese new women such as Hiratsuka Raichō, leading them to publish the magazine *Seitō*, which translates to “blue stocking.” Studying in the liberal atmosphere of international Tokyo, Na Hyesŏk not only experienced the international tide sweeping Japan, but also witnessed the process of women’s emancipatory thought entering Japan from the West that lead to the activities of the Japanese new women. Hiratsuka Raichō organized “Seitō-sha” in 1911 and published *Seitō*, the first Japanese female literary magazine, to promote the awakening of women, demonstrate their God-given characteristics, and inspire future female genius.

In her preface to the first issue of the magazine, Hiratsuka wrote, “Originally, women were the sun. They were real human beings,” and claimed to be reborn as an independent human being by demonstrating the hidden sun, the hidden genius of a woman who has lost her own light. In 1912 Hiratsuka published several provocative articles such as “Dear Mrs. Nora” and “Some Thoughts after Reading Magda.” In 1913, the year Na Hyesŏk was beginning her study in Tokyo, Hiratsuka published articles declaring women’s emancipation based on self-liberation such as “Love and Marriage” (on the occasion of serializing an Ellen Key article), “To Women in the World,” and “New Women.”

At this time, *A Doll’s House* was at peak popularity in Japanese literary circles, along with other literary masterpieces such as *Resurrection* and *Hometown*. Nora, Kachusha, and Magda, the respective main characters of each work, were much discussed as representative examples of new women, and

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19. Ellen Key’s ideas greatly influenced literary circles in Korea through Korean students studying in Japan. Ellen Key emerged as an educator with Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Yi Kwangsu’s novel Majōng. Her ideas were translated into Korean and introduced to the public from the early 1920s. See Sin Ĭrha, “Na Hyesŏk ŭi munhakchŏk silch’ŏn yangsang yŏn’gu” [Study on the literary practice of Na Hyesŏk] (Master’s Thesis, Chonnam National University, 2004), 19–20.


21. Han-Il kuŏndae yŏsŏng munhakhoe, trans., *Seit’o* (Seoul: Ŭmunhaksa, 2007), 44.
they captured the attention of Japanese women, including Hiratsuka. In addition, Na Hyesŏk also identified herself as an ideal female figure while watching the performances of these new women. This is reflected in her writings such as “Ideal Woman:”

I have to say that the number of such ideal women is no longer insignificant: Kachusha is considered an ideal woman for innovation; Magda is considered an ideal woman for self-strengthening; Mrs. Nora holds to the ideal of true love; Mrs. Stowe holds to the ideal of religious equality; Mrs. Hiratsuka holds to the ideal of genius; and Mrs. Yosano holds to the ideal of the harmonious family and a woman active in various aspects of her life. 

It appears that Na was deeply influenced by the articles from Seitō, introducing Hiratsuka as “holding to the ideal of genius” in her description of the “ideal woman.” Another important influence was the woman’s magazine Sin yŏja (New woman), published by Kim Iryŏp, on which Na worked as one of the writers-in-chief. In addition, Yosano, who is also mentioned above, was a sympathizer of Seito and perceived as one of the great writers of women’s literature in the Meiji period. In particular, Na Hyesŏk continued to write and compile literary works related to Nora from Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (1879).

1. When I play with a doll / with joy / as a doll of my father’s daughter / as a doll of my husband’s wife /
   I please them / and become a comfort to them //
   (chorus) Let Nora go / finally, purely / Open the door / tightly closed / firmly shut /
   in the wall / let Nora go //

2. I have a sacred obligation / to make myself a human being / like my obligation toward my husband and children / Stepping on the path of my mission / I wish to be a human being //

3. I know I cannot control / In my heart / I tear it all down / I take away the true person / I am now awakened / that my body is worthless //

4. Oh dear girls / consider me / and devote yourself / to the clear darkness / On another day, behind the storm / You and I will be human beings //

23. From January 25, 1921, Ibsen’s work was translated and serialized under the title “Inhyŏng ũi ka” in Maeil sinbo. Na Hyesŏk’s lyrics and a musical arrangement by Kim Yŏnghwăn accompanied the last installment. See Na Hyesŏk, “Inhyŏng ũi ka” [A doll’s house], Maeil sinbo, April 3, 1921.
Not only did Na draw illustrations for the Korean translation of *A Doll’s House* serialized in the *Maeil sinbo* in 1921, she also published lyrics titled “A Doll’s House” in the final segment and published “Nora” in her book of the same title. In many of her works, she juxtaposes Nora with herself and supplements the image of Nora as a middle-class housewife with aspects of the Korean woman’s lived reality. The false consciousness of the male, symbolized by Helmer in *A Doll’s House*, was transformed by her into the repressive forms of feudal patriarchy in Chosŏn; their false consciousness was conceived symbolically as a “barrier” denying women their right to be human beings.

The position of “Nora” in colonial Korea is that of daughter to the father, wife to the husband, and mother to the children. Attributing this to the family, this position becomes for Na Hyesŏk something from which to escape. The awareness of Nora, who realized that she lived as a man’s plaything or doll, manifests as a subjective voice of Korean women who are free from feudal constraints and receive the power of heaven and earth as liberated human beings. When the songs of liberation from Nora rang out as pioneering songs for awakening Korean girls, male intellectuals like Yi Kwangsu criticized Nora as a “dirty woman:”

Nora, why do you make it your goal to be just like men? You cut your hair, put on a man’s clothes, smoke tobacco, get drunk and stagger out onto the road, so will you sing a triumph song that you have completed the liberation of your own personality? ... When you realize that you are a woman, wife, and mother, not just a human being, then you will be able to become your own woman, and you will become a person who enjoys a full sense of independence. Therefore, dear Nora, please return to your husband again. So, in a new sense, be a gentle, cute wife and mother.24

Although he promoted individual awakening in a new era, Yi Kwangsu never truly considered women as a subject. His voice at some point changed from that of the epochal pioneer who claimed to have modern ideas to that of the absolute father of the patriarchal family that controlled and regulated women. His surveilling gaze condemned Nora as a fallen being who unsuitably wore men’s clothes. For him, women could not be fundamentally independent human beings and their true awakening was merely to be “a sweet, cute wife and mother” in a new way. This proves that the type of women’s enlightenment that he advocated for was not for female subjects who might lead society in a new era, but for the subject serving the new modern family. This coincides with

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Helmer’s gaze, who wanted to repress and regulate Nora under the guise of “divine duty” in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House.

Meanwhile, the Korean male gaze displayed a contradictory attitude toward Nora, respecting Nora’s decision in Ibsen’s opus, but also disparaging Korean Nora as it would a woman of the streets.25 Nora stands for the ideal prototype of the modern woman as human being who leaves home to live a humane life, cutting the rope of confinement that connected her from father to husband. Contrarily, new women in colonial Korea could not be Ibsen’s ideal Nora, one who wants to love and pursue freedom. Rather, the Korean Nora was an imitation, a fallen Nora.26

The double-edged gaze toward the Korean Nora by Korean male intellectuals demonstrates where Korean women stood in the project of colonial modernization under Japanese imperial rule. Korean male intellectuals who experienced Western modernity via their study abroad in Tokyo envisioned Nora as a role model of the modern individual who subjectively and aggressively lives her life against existing traditions and moral customs. Nora’s escape from her home has two overlapping meanings in the Korean context: departure from feudal society and liberation from Japanese imperial rule. In this sense, Korean male intellectuals designated Nora a modern human being and emphasized the enlightenment of Korean female subjects; however, they had to be wary of the proliferation of Korean Nora. For this reason, they tried to make the Korean Nora, who had left home once, return as a subject of the new family. At the same time, they disparaged Korean Nora who refused to rejoin the patriarchal family as a woman of the street and attempted to make her an object of discipline and surveillance.27 However, Nora of colonial Korea, who declared the value of her

25. For a representative article at the time, see Yu Usang, “Yösong ü hyöksin saenghwal: Ipsen ü yösöngjuu” [A woman’s innovative life: Ibsen’s feminism], Sin yösöng 4, no. 1 (January 1926): 61–68.
own life as a human being, did not stop her leap toward a new generation, despite undergoing all manner of hardships.

Locating Nora

The modernization process of colonial Korea, which was planned under Japanese imperial rule, met a new and modern individual in Nora, but was nonetheless characterized by sexual politics strictly governed by the male gaze. Male intellectuals who aspired to escape from the imperial gaze seemed to lead women’s subjective awakening and enlightenment by promoting Nora as their companion. However, this was merely a strategy to restore their deficient masculinity. Once incorporated, female Nora called for liberation and attempted to break away from feudal bondage through female bonding with the Japanese new women. As a first-generation feminist writer who broke through the surveillance network of imperial and male domination, Na Hyesŏk showed the essence of Nora, a woman whose sole desire was to live as a human being:

I have often heard these words from many wives: “What is the point of women studying? When she is married and has a child, she has done enough!” Whenever I hear this, I always answer with a sneer and find it not only ludicrous but also patently false. This is not my own fantasy. Based on the activities of wives in European countries, and in Yosano Akiko’s case, in Japan, which is the closest to Korea, I say with certainty that when I see her reading from essays and poetry collections while being a mother to more than ten children, I am encouraged and feel the desire to have the same ability as this woman.28

In her essay, “The feeling of becoming a mother” (Mo toen kamsanggi), she expresses her feelings about becoming a mother in detail, describing her feelings at the birth of her first daughter, the pain of childbirth, and the difficulty of working while taking care of her children. Here, she shows her suffering from internal conflict, her insecurity about living “as a mother” when she had thought her only task was to live “as a woman.” Then, she remembers Yosano Akiko; she wrote earlier in her essay “Ideal Woman” that Yosano was a person who represented the ideal of the harmonious family. Meanwhile, in her essays described above, she regards Yosano as an ideal woman who works prolifically while taking care of more than ten children. Namely, she considers Yosano an

ideal mother and a female social activist. This contrasted with the conventional belief that “Chosŏn women can do nothing but bear children” and showed that they could believe in and demonstrate their ability. Indeed, Na Hyesŏk not only ventured abroad to Tokyo after her pregnancy, but also opened her first solo exhibition with seventy of her own paintings near the end of her pregnancy in March 1921.29

Yosano Akiko published fifteen books throughout her life as a leader of women’s literature. She was praised with the nicknames “passionate poet” and “anti-war poet.” She resisted the patriarchal family system and worked hard to create a family upholding gender equality. In particular, in 1901, she published her provocative poem collection titled Tangled Hair (Midaregami), which narrated her love and conflicted relationship with her teacher and future husband, Yosano Tekkan. She also became one of the contributors to the women’s magazine Seitō at the request of Hiratsuka Raichō, publishing a poem titled “Wandering Thoughts” in the magazine’s first issue. In 1912, she traveled to Europe for five months and established a culture institute that promoted liberal arts education. She became a founding member of the National Alliance for the Right to Suffrage in 1924. While actively participating in social activities, she also played the role of mother, taking care of more than ten children, and strived to support the lives and honor of her family despite undergoing numerous hardships.30

As outlined in her biography, Yosano published autobiographical works thematizing “love” as a liberalist and free-love supporter. She rejected feudal life in all its forms and advocated gender egalitarianism, asserting that a woman’s life is that of a human being. This is evident through her own stories about love and sex, freely portrayed in Tangled Hair and her poem “Wandering Thoughts.” These activities were deeply connected to Na Hyesŏk’s activities as a supporting member of the journal The World of Women and her references to the theories of free love and of “Sin chŏngjoron” (new chastity), as shown in Yosano’s literary works:

The day the mountains move has come.


I speak, but no one believes me.
For a time the mountains have been asleep,
But long ago they all danced with fire.
It doesn’t matter if you believe this,
My friends, as long as you believe:
All the sleeping women
Are now awake and moving

Let’s write in first-person sentences.
I am a woman
Let’s write in first-person sentences.
I,

The above is the beginning section of Yosano’s poem “Sozorogoto” (Wandering thoughts). Attention should be paid to her praise for “the awakening woman.” Even should the mountains shake, no one cares for the words of a woman poet. Regardless, women are awakened, and that is the reason for the publication of Seitō. Yosano was also committed to speaking as herself and as a subjective woman. Now she could stand “in the first person,” awakened from the sleep of subordination to men. This is demonstrated by her repeated expression, “Let’s write in first-person sentences.”

In addition, Tangled Hair, her collection of poems, gave her the opportunity to lead Japan’s romantic poetic circle at the time as a central figure of the journal Myōjō (Bright star). The collection portrays the poet as she transforms herself from a little girl into a mature woman, navigating the joys and pains of romantic love with a sensuous, bold writing style. The process from her initial encounter with Tekkan to their marriage is also organically expressed in this book. This poem collection has been evaluated as “a passionate book that draws a single stroke in the history of Japanese tanka poetry.” At the same time, it received both praise and criticism because the contents explicitly portrayed women’s sensuality and love. This is because, as a woman, Yosano broke a taboo by singing a sensual and bold love song when people generally considered womanly virtue as being a “good wife and wise mother,” emphasizing woman’s spiritual rather than carnal love. However, the poems actively portray woman

32. Ibid.
as a human being, giving her a feminine prominence through her hair, lips, and breasts and approaching her life as active and proactive:

You have yet to touch
This soft flesh,
This throbbing blood—
Are you not lonely,
Expounder of the Way?34

Here, the poetic narrator expresses the figure of a woman who has begun to be aware of her sexual body. At this time, Japan emphasized the concept of “good wife and wise mother” for women, whose lives were thoroughly restrained by men. In terms of sexuality, they were but sexual subjects to serve the needs of men, and Akiko showed exceptionality in her placing of woman and man as equal individuals in their love of each other. This theme is also shared and reflected in Na Hyesŏk’s “Chŏngjoron” (Thoughts on female chastity):

Female chastity belongs neither to morality nor to law, only to a hobby. Just do it when you want. There’s no need to be restrained by it; for example, when you want to eat rice, eat it; when you want to have a rice cake, you can have it. A hobby can be a kind of mystery, and we can interpret evil as goodness and ugliness as something laughable. Even though it is subject to external constraints, the mind can move freely. There will remain neither suffering nor pain, only joy and satisfaction. Chastity lies not in objectivity but in subjectivity, is not a part of unconsciousness but consciousness, so our actions become artistic as we realize artistic taste in our mind.35

She initially insists on the unity of body and spirit in terms of the love relationships between men and women. In other words, love at this time was not the union of families as in traditional society, but rather an attainment of spiritual understanding based on interpersonal respect. When a couple marries through free love, institutional monogamy is legitimized. If this theory of love is based on the recognition of women as a modern subject, the above article advocates for the sexuality of women while refuting traditional thought on female chastity. In other words, chastity should be a matter of whim, like a hobby, not something enforced as part of a social system. This principle gives women power over their own sexuality, and at the same time, they are also the

subjects of sexual desire. In particular, Na Hyesŏk emphasized women’s emotions and joys. Her claim can be said to be highly exceptional, and it is considered that she was influenced by Yosano, who, among many Japanese new women artists, adopted a bold attitude, in particular, toward women’s sexuality and love.

In addition, Yosano and Na share many biographical similarities. Yosano not only enthusiastically engaged in social activities while raising several children, she also founded a Culture Academy and absorbed new intellectual currents on her journey to Europe. Like Yosano, Na did not stop writing while she raised her four children, and she transformed her artistic world through a long journey to Europe and her study there for twenty months. Also, she sought ways for Korean women to progress using Western women as an example, and she founded an art institute for women after her divorce.36

Four problems always give me anxiety. First, how can a person live well? Second, how can a man and a woman live in peace and happiness? Third, what should the social position of a woman be? Fourth, what is the point of painting? Indeed, these are very difficult problems to answer. I cannot fathom them with my shallow observations, my lack of experience. Therefore, I adore the Italian and French painting circles and want to see the activities of European women, and I want to taste the everyday life of the European people.37

This essay, serialized in the journal *Samch’ŏlli*, vividly captures her feelings before leaving for Europe. Four aspects of this article in particular raised essential questions about being a human being, being a woman, and being an artist through her journey to Europe. Around a year and eight months of experience abroad allowed her to mature artistically and awakened her self-consciousness as a female. While traveling in many European countries with Paris as her base, she encountered artistic works by Van Gogh, Matisse, and Cézanne that she had studied only through reference books before visiting. She also spent eight months studying artworks under the supervision of Roger


Bissière at the Académie Ranson.\textsuperscript{38} She did not plan to study abroad to acquire a degree, but one tendency of contemporary European painting at that time drew her attention:

Likewise, the painters of Late Impressionism never forgot the expression of self and the essence of art. They attempted to creatively individualize the spirit of the arts. They acknowledged that the concepts of beauty and ugliness transmitted from olden times had become meaningless. They tried to produce art works as valuable as their lives by looking at things with the beauty of recognition, surpassing beauty and ugliness. Therefore, their works were said to be neither descriptions of nature nor a hobby to watch and enjoy, but the sign of personality and effervescence.\textsuperscript{39}

Of note in this essay is that Na Hyesŏk focused on the source of artistry rather than on skill and technique. As seen in her essay, her experiences during her journey to Europe and the United States made her realize that her life and art were in a state of stasis and that she needed to search for a new way of life. From this perspective, her view of life, her art works, and her responses to late impressionist painters and the beauty of recognition, surpassing beauty and ugliness, are aspects worthy of note. In addition, she expanded the world of her art by affirming female self-consciousness through cultural exchanges with Western female artists.\textsuperscript{40}

Despite undergoing personal hardships, Na Hyesŏk attempted to establish a
fundamental system for her life as a female artist. It is necessary to focus on her attitude, which can be seen in the process by which she established her Women’s Institute of Fine Arts:

The world of light and color! How many mysteries and energetic lives exist there? What was cramped up becomes refreshing there, what was dark becomes shiny there, what was depressed becomes cheerful, what was sick and bitter receives comfort and relaxes. When we see paintings that firmly express our sense, our skill, our plan, and our hopes in form and line, aren’t we drawn to them? Also, do you think that there is any other foundation other than the world of art that can destroy all of these heavy traditions and overlapping restraints in one swoop, vigorously activate the potential for greatness, and instill wonder and lament and gratitude in the masses? My dear sisters, come to me and let’s do it together… I just want to be a rooster who crows at dawn to bring a heavy burden to you, sisters. I need only to be a guide for you to take a step forward. I will be a small cane until you can stand up for yourself. There will never be such glory again.41

What stands out in this article is that she seeks to emit vitality in her art world with her strong confidence in “light” and “color” through her journey to Europe and the United States. In her private life, she underwent sufferings such as her divorce from Kim Uyŏng after her extramarital affair with Ch’oe Rin and the breakdown of the stability of her life that followed. She also suffered from a hand tremor due to a fire accident near the Haegŭm River in the Kŭmgang mountains. She drew dozens of paintings there, but they were all lost to the fire. Nonetheless, her willpower is also reflected in this article; she did not give up her identity as an artist in spite of successive hardships. She dreamed of another great leap forward in her art with the determined statement expressed in “Ideal Woman,” “I want to strive for art fighting against infinite sufferings.”42 The trials and pains in her real life inspired her as she deepened her artistry, and gave her comfort.

The discovery of “vitality” comes from Cezanne’s concept of “personality.” A world of light full of vitality is a world that can express the artist’s interiority through concrete shapes and lines, not to be seen superficially with the eyes, but with the mind’s heart. This artistic sensibility is said to be possible through liberation from patriarchal society, which is laden with the weight of tradition and restraint, and by freely exercising one’s inner potentiality. The wide range of


women’s inner potentialities spoken of by Hiratsuka Raichō and Yosano Akiko can be transferred to Na Hyesŏk’s art world. If we consider that this essay was written for women at the time that Na Hyesŏk opened the Women’s Art Institute, it may be surmised that it contains the desire that young women should not be repressed by feudal traditions, but establish themselves through art. Her desire to become a “rooster crowing at dawn” includes her artistic will, as she exerts herself as a pioneer for women’s liberation.

**Conclusion**

Na Hyesŏk was the first woman writer and painter of modern Korea. She challenged existing patriarchal conventions and practiced feminist thought that dismantled androcentric myths. Her feminism was not only a common theme of contemporary colonial Korean new women but was also shared by Japanese new women. The ideological ties between the Japanese and Korean new women were related to the “Nora phenomenon” embraced by East Asia. Japanese intellectuals and Korean students studying abroad came to experience Western modernity through the works of Henrik Ibsen in Tokyo in the 1910s. “Nora” from *A Doll’s House* became a model of the modern individual woman who challenges her identity by resisting old-fashioned traditions and ethics.

While Japanese and Korean male intellectuals considered Nora a role model for the “modern person,” female intellectuals considered Nora a representative of the “new woman” that resists patriarchy and reminds women of their “female self-consciousness.” Male intellectuals believed that Nora was only a “modern individual,” divorced from her gender, and showed an ambivalent attitude toward the “new woman,” reasoning that such women could not survive after leaving their patriarchal homes. These male intellectuals criticized the new women who left home and described in their literary writings the destruction of runaway women or their process of returning home. Moreover, Korean students studying abroad considered Nora not only an awakened modern person but also as an awakened colonial subject. Contrarily, for Korean female students, playing the role of an intellectual equal to their male counterparts and overcoming patriarchal ideology took precedence. In other words, for female students, Choso˘n was a “patriarchal house” before being a colony of the Japanese Empire, thus the escape from Choso˘n coincided with the movement toward “becoming a human being” and a new woman in Japan.

In this context, the Korean modernization project has an ambivalent character in terms of its gender politics. The male intellectuals introduced “Nora” as a
companion under the premise of creating a new modern person, but this was a strategy to restore their deficient masculinity. As a result, they tried to subdue Nora as she began to become aware of her human rights. However, once awakened, Nora sought to break free from these feudal restraints and create an international feminine bond resisting patriarchal pressure. Na Hyesŏk, a Korean Nora, was a first-generation Korean feminist who wanted to be treated as a real human being and aspired to break through the empire’s male surveillance network.