
Romantic Love in Colonial Korea: Feminist Attempts at Liberation

Hannah Kim

Graduate student at the Yonsei Graduate School of International Studies

Romantic love, or *yeonae*, as a modern concept was introduced to Korea during the Japanese colonial period. It became a rich source of discourse during this time which revealed the contradictions and complexities of modern, colonial Korea. While both men and women actively participated in this discourse, Korean women in particular, saw the opportunity to seek liberation through these changing definitions of romantic love. This essay compares the different discourses on *yeonae* generated by two groups of women: the New Women and communist women. While the New Women emphasized education and free marriage, communist women advocated for “red love” and comradely love. The divergence between these two groups reflects differences in their political views and class backgrounds as well as the broad range of responses to the discourse on *yeonae*. However, ultimately neither group was successful in liberating themselves via a discourse on romantic love due to the subsuming of women’s issues under nationalism and the reinforcement of a domestic patriarchy following Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonization. This reflects the resilience of patriarchy in co-opting potentially liberating discourses.

Keywords: colonial Korea, romantic love, yeonae, women’s movements

Introduction

In modern society, replete as it is with romantic comedies and love songs, the concept of romantic love as a private act between two individuals may seem like a given. However, this conception is neither a natural nor inherent idea, but rather a norm that has been constructed via certain sociohistorical contexts. In the case of Korea, modern conceptions of romance were

introduced in the colonial period during which Korea was exposed to an unprecedented level of Western influence, as mediated through the Japanese. During this process of bringing in Western modernity to Korea, themes of love, sexuality, and marriage became contested sites of discourse.

Women activists and intellectuals of this time seized upon and generated discourses of romantic love, *yeonae*, in an effort to liberate themselves from repressive patriarchal norms. Far from a monolithic feminist movement, however, these concerns were mediated through both class and political beliefs. The earlier wave of elite New Women thinkers was generally made up of educated, privileged women who attempted to wield romantic love as a way to gain sexual subjectivity and independence as an individual. On the other hand, the later wave of socialist and communist feminists brought in class analysis by propagating “red love”, which sought to define a comradesly love free from the shackles of a “property” mindset. Ultimately, however, both of these strains of thought on *yeonae* failed to bring about liberation for women due to male anxiety surrounding female sexuality. The colonial patriarchy’s emphasis on nationalism proved to be an obstacle to reinventing a new model of a society that could sustain either female sexual agency or revolutionary sexuality. Through the reinforcement of the “wise mother, good wife” archetype, as well as the pretext of nationalism, men co-opted educated women as tools of the state and oppressed them once more under a new, modern patriarchy.

The New Women and Free Love

Underscoring how the modern conception of romantic love was a foreign import, the Korean word for *yeonae* originates from the English word “love”.¹ Initially, *yeonae* was valued as a way for Korea to enter “civilized”, modern society, by ending the so-called barbaric practices of early marriage.² As a result, people began to see the experience of love as tied to individual desire. Through this modern conceptualization of love, people were able to assert their individual values in the “private sphere”.³ It is precisely this point that the first wave of the New Women sought to capitalize on in order to assert their freedom.

1 Chiyong Kim, “The Conceptual History of ‘Yeonae’ (Love) in the Korean Colonial Period,” *Acta Koreana* 16, no. 1 (2013), 115.

2 Chiyong Kim, “The Conceptual History of ‘Yeonae’”, 118.

3 Ji-young Suh, “Collision of Modern Desires: Nationalism and Female Sexuality in Colonial Korea”, *The Review of Korean Studies*, 5, (2), (2002), 114.

Korea's conceptualization of the New Woman materialized around the 1920s with the emergence of the first generation of educated Korean women. These women received modern, Western-style educations, often from Japan, and then brought their new ideas back to Korea, wielding them to challenge the traditional Confucian system.⁴ The label of New Women was also often associated with Western styles of dress, vanity, and an obsession with consumerism.⁵ These women were heavily influenced by the works of Western writers, like Ellen Key and Henrik Ibsen, and espoused a philosophy of free love (*chayu yeonae*), or the idea that romantic love should not remain within the purview of the state or traditional customs.⁶ There was a newfound belief in love-marriages, or the idea that love should exist in a marriage, and that women should have agency in selecting their partners. Through these new conceptions of romantic love, New Women sought to exercise their individual agency and sexual subjectivity.⁷

Both male and female intellectuals participated in active discussions on the changing mores of romantic love and marriage and how to integrate them within the Korean context. Alternative forms of marriage and relationships were considered and debated, such as temporary separation, remaining single, and trial and companionate marriages.⁸ However, for the most part, these ideas remained abstractions that were not actually put into practice. The distance between these abstract discussions and the lived reality in colonial Korea remained vast, particularly for women. On a logistical level, New Women had difficulty finding suitable marriage partners, since many of the educated men of their age were already married as a result of the practice of early marriage.⁹ This led to situations where New Women became unofficial "second wives", a position that was essentially equivalent

4 Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945*. Berkley: University Of California Press, 2014, 73.

5 Ji-young Suh, "The 'New Woman' and the Topography of Modernity in Colonial Korea." *Korean Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013), 20.

6 Jooyeon Rhee, "'No Country for the New Woman': Rethinking Gender and Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea through Kim Myöngsun", *Acta Koreana* 17, no. 1 (2014), 403.

7 Ji-young Suh, "Collision of Modern Desires", 116.

8 Keong-il Kim, "Alternative Forms of Marriage and Family in Colonial Korea," *The Review of Korean Studies* 11, no. 4 (2008), 61–82.

9 Jooyeon Rhee, "'No Country for the New Woman', 411.

to that of a feudal concubine.¹⁰ Additionally, the double standard of the patriarchy meant that women's careers and reputations could be ruined by sex scandals, while that of their male counterparts remained unscathed.¹¹ For instance, in the case of the writer, Myeong-sun Kim, several of her male contemporaries derided her love life by using her as a thinly-veiled character for their stories.¹² Although concepts such as free marriage and free love were idealized in discourse, women who actually attempted to live by these values were punished with labels of promiscuity and moral bankruptcy.¹³

Modern concepts of *yeonae* also received criticism from other quarters. Socialist scholars were critical of *yeonae* because they saw it as a petit bourgeois love that was based on individualism, rather than the collective.¹⁴ Additionally, while this first wave of New Women thinkers prioritized education, later socialist writers were more attentive to class differences.¹⁵ Proletarian women writers shifted the focus away from love-marriages, a priority for the first wave of New Women, to more radical proletarian thought.¹⁶

Communist Women and Red Love

Just as the first wave of New Women was impacted by the writings of Ellen Key and Henrik Ibsen, socialist women were greatly influenced by the works of writers such as Alexandra Kollontai. With the translation of Kollontai's works into Korean in the late 1920s, socialist ideas were further dispersed by the popular press, leading to an active discourse in newspapers and magazines.¹⁷ The concept of "red love" as an erotic sensibility provided a fundamentally different framework from the "free love" of the New Woman. While New Women attempted to assert their individuality by bringing romantic

10 Ji-young Suh, "The 'New Woman' and the Topography of Modernity", 28.

11 Jooyeon Rhee, "'No Country for the New Woman', 412.

12 Ibid., 413.

13 Ibid., 412.

14 Chiyong Kim, "The Conceptual History of 'Yeonae'", 129.

15 Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave: Literature and Leftist Culture in Colonial Korea, 1910-1945*, Cambridge, MA: The Harvard University Asia Center, 2015, 198.

16 Elizabeth Grace, "Women Educating Women: Class, Feminism, and Formal Education in the Proletarian Writing of Hirabayashi Taiko and Kang Kyöng-Ae," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 48, no. 1 (2015): 7.

17 Ruth Barraclough, "Red Love and Betrayal in the Making of North Korea: Comrade Ho Jong-Suk," *History Workshop Journal* 77, no. 1 (2014): 91

love into the private sphere of their subjective sexuality, Kollontai claimed that love was not private, but rather, a “fundamentally social issue”.¹⁸ On this note, she argued that couples needed to look beyond themselves and toward the collective, rather than focusing their love only on one another.¹⁹ At the crux of Kollontai’s thinking was the need to move away from a love defined by property relations, to a more expansive, comradesly love.²⁰

Famous communist feminists such as Ho Jong-suk and Kang Kyeong-ae sought to synthesize their political activism with sexual freedom through “red love”.²¹ Writer and revolutionary Ho Jong-suk was notorious for her sexual promiscuity, and the public assiduously followed her exploits in the tabloids. Infamously, Ho Jong-suk dated another leading socialist while her husband was in jail, sparking consternation and debate in communist circles on the “nature of comradeship”.²² Though a core component of “red love” and comradesly love was to decry ownership of one’s partner, the discourse shifted in the 1930s to emphasize fidelity over revolutionary fervor as the most “desirable attribute” in a woman.²³ As socialist men served long prison sentences and sought the support of women on the outside, they began to emphasize a need for female loyalty, which led to changes in how the role of love was perceived within the party.²⁴ Ho Jong-suk was eventually purged in North Korea, and as a result, her story was often framed as a cautionary tale of the “sexually emancipated Communist woman who knew neither loyalty nor fidelity”.²⁵ Essentially, her punishment was cast as the direct result of her sexual autonomy, further illustrating the distance between ideals in communist discourse and reality.

Not limited to condemning feudal customs, such as arranged marriages or concubinage, women communists and socialists also drew

18 Maria Lind, Michele Masucci, and Joanna Warsza, eds. *Red Love: A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai*, Stockholm: Konstfack Collection, 2020, 37.

19 László Kürti, “The Wingless Eros of Socialism: Nationalism and Sexuality in Hungary,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (April 1991), 57.

20 Michael Hardt, “Red Love,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 4 (2017), 781.

21 Ruth Barraclough, et al., “Red Love in Korea: Rethinking Communism, Feminism, Sexuality,” *Red Love Across the Pacific: Political and Sexual Revolutions of the Twentieth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2015, 23.

22 Ruth Barraclough, “Red Love and Betrayal”, 93.

23 Ibid., 95.

24 Ibid.

25 Ruth Barraclough, et al., “Red Love in Korea”, 30.

attention to the plight of working-class women in factories.²⁶ In her works, author Kang Kyeong-ae wrote about the possibilities of red love, or “sexual fulfillment, intellectual companionship and shared political commitment” for proletarian women such as factory girls.²⁷ In her most famous story, *The Human Predicament*, she underscored class differences by depicting the ethical failings of the educated New Women character, Ok’chom.²⁸ This class analysis served to complicate notions of female solidarity, since Ok’chom shows no desire to help the tenant farmers under her father.²⁹ Additionally, while Ok’chom’s character obsessively seeks heteronormative romance and a love-marriage, these are neither a possibility nor a priority for the working-class female character, Sonbi. This difference highlights how class and social status affected women’s approach or access to romance and *yeonae* during this time.

Starting in the late 1920s, some socialist intellectuals came to view romantic love as a barrier to revolution and as a petit bourgeois vice.³⁰ This is a shift from the previously held view of socialist writers that romantic love and revolution go hand in hand.³¹ This distinction between private and public spheres served to depoliticize gender issues as well as relegate women’s issues to the irrelevant private sphere.³² Kang Kyeong-ae radically counters this trend through her depiction of the male character, Sinch’ol, whose romantic infidelity is directly linked to his political infidelity. The character Sinch’ol is a bourgeois law student who is in love with Sonbi and spurns Ok’chom’s advances. He is initially involved in the underground workers movement, but he loses his revolutionary fervor when he is imprisoned. After he is released from prison, he marries a bourgeois woman and moves to Manchuria, through the luxury of choice afforded him by his class status.³³ Kang’s linkage of romance and politics through Sinch’ol makes it clear that “only a good lover can make a

26 Ibid., 23.

27 Ibid., 31.

28 Samuel Perry, “The Context and Contradictions of Kang Kyöng-Ae’s Novel in’Gan Munje,” *Korean Studies* 37, no. 1 (2013), 112.

29 Ruth Barraclough, “Tales of Seduction: Factory Girls in Korean Proletarian Literature,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 14, no. 2 (2006), 354.

30 Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave*, 226.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 227.

33 Samuel Perry, “The Context and Contradictions of Kang Kyöng-Ae’s Novel in’Gan Munje,” 118.

good revolutionary”.³⁴ This served to highlight that for women, the “personal is political”, while also challenging the solidifying dichotomies of the public and private.³⁵ This dichotomization was just one of the many ways that men attempted to negate the revolutionary potential of women’s ideas on romantic love.

Nationalism, the “Good Wife, Wise Mother,” and a Modern Patriarchy

Korea’s position as a colonial state contributed to male intellectuals’ myopic view of nationalism as the most important priority, superseding other issues such as women’s rights. As figures oppressed under Japanese colonial authority, Korean men sought to exercise what limited power they had over women, using the excuse of nationalism.³⁶ As a result, men demanded New Women to subordinate their feminism “in service of the nation”³⁷ and portrayed sexual freedom as “deviant morality” that directly threatened the nation-building process.³⁸ Women who participated in free love were considered decadent and selfishly focused on trivial private affairs rather than on the collective good of the nation. In tying women’s sexuality to patriotism, the Confucian virtue of chastity was brought into the discussion of *yeonae* and portrayed as an integral part of nationalism. Starting in 1925, articles that mentioned both *yeonae* and chastity together began to appear more frequently.³⁹ In other words, *yeonae* started being associated with the control of women’s sexuality, rather than as a space for free love and liberation.⁴⁰

This focus on nationalism can also be seen in the reinforcement of the “wise mother and good wife” as a feminine ideal. Though this concept existed before the 1930s, it became even more conservative during the 1930s as a

34 Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave*, 226.

35 Amy D. Dooling, *Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 104.

36 Haeseong Park, “Korean New Women Yim Youngsin in Feminist and Nationalist Contexts,” *Journal of the Southwest Conference on Asian Studies*, 2015, 59.

37 *Ibid.*, 54.

38 Jooyeon Rhee, “‘No Country for the New Woman’”, 407.

39 Chiyoung Kim, “The Conceptual History of ‘Yeonae’”, 133.

40 *Ibid.*, 134.

reaction to the New Women feminist ideologies of the early colonial period.⁴¹ The concept of “wise mother and good wife” valued traditional feminine virtues, such as obedience, sacrifice, and chastity and defined women in relation to men.⁴² Famous nationalist and writer Yi Kwang-su claimed that the goal of women’s education was to prepare them to be mothers who will raise their children to become “sacred citizens”.⁴³ In other words, women were expected to be educated, not for their own self-development, but to educate their sons, and thus “contribute to the national development”.⁴⁴ In 1936, Yi Kwang-su said that if women follow the path from “chaste romance to sacred motherhood”, then Korea as a nation will be prosperous and peaceful.⁴⁵ Here, chastity and motherhood are invoked as sacred and glorified as a panacea, while the role of the father remains conspicuously absent in these discussions. The preface to the 1933 issue of the magazine, *Sin Kajeong*, claims that the figure of the housewife held incredible social value because the successful maintenance of a home not only brought happiness to that individual household, but to Korean society and people as a whole.⁴⁶ The figure of the “wise mother and good wife” was attributed with a great deal of power to serve the abstract needs of the nation. Insidiously, this archetype incorporated modern elements to appeal to the newly educated women, while still containing them within “traditional gender boundaries”.⁴⁷ For instance, the modern, “good wife” was encouraged to use modern technologies to her housewifely duties better, and while this gave her the opportunity to be educated in the latest scientific innovations of the household, the end result was that she was still confined to the domestic space.⁴⁸

Though women aimed to structurally change their society through the discourse on romantic love and sexuality, they were instead subsumed

41 Ji-young Suh, “The ‘New Woman’ and the Topography of Modernity”, 28; Lim, Sungyun, “Affection and Assimilation: Concubinage and the Ideal of Conjugal Love in Colonial Korea, 1922-38,” *Gender & History* 28, no. 2 (2016), 475.

42 Ji-young Suh, “The ‘New Woman’ and the Topography of Modernity”, 30

43 Jooyeon Rhee, “‘No Country for the New Woman’”, 410.

44 Yang-hee Hong, “Debates about ‘a Good Wife and Wise Mother’ and Tradition in Colonial Korea,” *The Review of Korean Studies* 11, no. 4 (December 2008), 44.

45 Sunyoung Park, *The Proletarian Wave*, 217.

46 *Ibid.*, 216.

47 Theodore Jun Yoo, *The Politics of Gender in Colonial Korea*, 60.

48 Ji-young Suh, “The ‘New Woman’ and the Topography of Modernity”, 29.

under a new form of patriarchy. Central to this problem lies the fact that these women paradoxically sought to be recognized as individuals in a society where individuality is defined by “patriarchal power...manifested in nationalism”.⁴⁹ Moreover, while the concept of *yeonae* is predicated on equality between the two people in a relationship, women were not considered equals to men in colonial Korea, making it impossible for them to become sexual subjects. Without the ability for women to be sexual subjects, an “asymmetric gender structure” was maintained, and the word *yeonae* came to tamely denote the stage of dating before marriage, rather than a possible source of freedom or liberation.⁵⁰ Though women were seeking romantic intimacy with men as equals, this proved to be a futile effort due to the “sociohistorical realities of male hegemony” as well as the “asymmetrical relations of power” between men and women.⁵¹

This regressive phenomenon was not limited to Korea. In socialist Hungary, Kollontai’s ideal of “winged eros”, or comradesly, collective love, never took flight. Following the fall of socialism in 1989, “heterosexual images, codes, and behavior” once again became dominant, just as they had been in the pre-socialist era. In other words, women were presented yet again with a paradigm for living within the restrictions of “male-dominated sexual politics.”⁵² Though this took place in a later time period from colonial Korea, it reveals a similar theme of the persistence and durability of patriarchy in surviving even revolutionary ideologies. Though *yeonae* played a key role in defining the “modern subject” for Koreans, neither free love nor red love was ultimately able to abolish the deep-rooted idea that women’s sexuality was “something that had to be controlled”.⁵³

Conclusion

Romantic love served as a locus of discourse during the colonial period in Korea for both women and men as they sought to understand their position as new, modern subjects. For women, romantic love and the related issues of sexuality and marriage were a fraught site in which they experienced gender-based oppression, but also the potential for liberation. With the rise

49 Jooyeon Rhee, “‘No Country for the New Woman’”, 423.

50 Chiyoung Kim, “The Conceptual History of ‘Yeonae’”, 132.

51 Amy D. Dooling, *Women’s Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*, 27, 29.

52 László Kürti, “The Wingless Eros of Socialism”, 60.

53 Chiyoung Kim, “The Conceptual History of ‘Yeonae’”, 132.

of educated Korean women, different ideas of romantic love and partnership that challenged Confucian patriarchy were conceptualized. The first wave of New Women maintained a focus on education as a liberating force for women, alongside the modern ideas of free love and love marriages. On the other hand, communist women looked to “red love” as a model for comradely love that extended beyond private romance and incorporated the needs of the proletariat.

This period of modernization was a pivotal moment for Korean society during which it could have reconfigured its relationship to romance and gender, of course within the confines of colonial modernity. However, any opportunity for revolutionary change was ultimately co-opted by patriarchy in the service of nationalism. Male anxiety around female sexuality led to the reinforcement of the Confucian value of chastity, albeit repackaged in a modern veneer. Additionally, women’s issues were consistently relegated to secondary importance to the nation-building project. As a result, the image of a chaste, sacrificial, and “good wife, wise mother” rose to even greater prominence as the feminine ideal. Far from suggesting women go back to their premodern state without access to education, the newfound patriarchy sought to harness the modern, educated woman as a tool for nation-building. This is a testament to the strength of male desire to control female sexuality, as well as the resilience of the patriarchy in resisting feminist ideologies.

Questioning the assumption that modernity is inherently liberating for subaltern figures like women, it is imperative to examine the hypocrisies that lie in the space between value and practice, as well as the ways in which the state and patriarchy co-opt these ideologies. Though much has changed in Korea since the colonial period, women’s sexuality is arguably still policed by the state and the patriarchy to this day. The social mores and mechanisms of power have evolved, but the underlying rationale and the roots of patriarchal thinking remain unchanged. Rather than just a historical study, the analysis that this paper begins can be applied and extended to current day gender relations. By doing so, one can examine how conceptions of romance and sexuality have been changed and co-opted to reflect the needs of the state and patriarchy in both the past and the present.