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NA TOHYANG AND LOVE

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Na Tohyang (1902–1926), the talented and prematurely deceased Korean novelist, like many young Koreans in the 1920s, was fascinated by the problems of love. He himself suffered from unrequited love and was very fond of women. His three novels, *Ch'öngch'un* (The Youth), *Hwanhŭi* (The Game of Illusion) and *Ömöni* (Mother), were devoted to the topical theme of the 1920s: love, ill-matched marriages, and tragedies evolving from them. In a deeply traditional Korean society where, according to the Confucian principles, the sexes were strongly separated and only *kisaeng* (dancing and singing girls) had some freedom of manners, the Western ideas of freedom to choose a partner, of free love, equality of rights for both sexes, and education for women, which reached Korea through Japan, caused a great ferment.

How topical and important was the problem of love in the 1920s one can see, for instance, from the titles of some articles in *Puin* (Woman) magazine. In the special first anniversary edition of *Puin* of 1923 the following titles appeared: «Hyöndae namnyönün öttöhan isöngül yoguhannŭnga» (What Modern Men and Women Demand from the Opposite Sex); «Namnyö haksængganüi yönae munje» (The Problem of Love among Students); «Kyörhonesö ihonkkaji» (From Marriage to Divorce). In the May edition of the same year we find: «Hyöndae namnyöwa kyörhonüi kot'ong» (Modern Men and Women and the Sufferings of Marriage); and in the August edition «Changnae kyörhon'gwa chölcho munje» (Future Marriage and the Problem of Fidelity).

In 1925, *Chosön mundan* (Korean Literary Stage) magazine published in its July edition the views of nearly thirty writers on love. Yöm Sangsöp (1897–1963), in the introductory part of his essay «Kamsanggwa kidae» (Impressions and Expectations), stated that at that time in Korea tendencies in the field of moral principles varied so greatly that it was very difficult to understand them properly. For instance, in the same house in one room somebody could have been quoting Confucius while someone else next door studying the works of Lenin. Similarly, each of the thirty

writers had a different view on love. Some of them wrote long, serious dissertations, while others treated the subject very lightly. Some writers viewed love in physical terms only, while others stressed the spiritual, loftier aspects of love.

In his essay «Pömmü kkoriwa yōnae: yōnaenūn nūlgūniūi haril» (The Tiger's Tail and Love: Love is for Old Men) Kim Tongin (1900–1951) compared love to a game with a tiger.

For me, love looks like an interesting plaything, but also like a disastrous toy. It is like a tiger's tail, which one cannot catch and once one catches cannot let go. You regret losing love, but you cannot catch and hold it forever.

Ch'oe Haksong (Sōhae; 1901–1933) in «Chōnsaengmyōngūi yogunūn anida: naūi yōnaegwan» (It is not the Claim of the Whole Life: My View on Love) wrote:

I, too, recognize that in man's life love is only one among several great matters. I recognize, too, that in love the borders of a country and a class do not exist. But I cannot agree that it should be the demand of the whole human life.

In «Yōnaegwan kkūt'e» (End-Piece of Views on Love), Pang In'gōn (Ch'unhae; 1899–) wrote:

Everybody knows about love and thinks about love. But many people hearing the word «love» pretend to disregard it and sneer at it. But love has a serious connection with human life and by no means can it be neglected; especially in Korea in the present situation I believe it is necessary for us to study the problem of love.

Among other essays we can see Na Tohyang's contribution in this vein as well, namely «Naega minnūn mungu myōkkae: naūi yōnaegwan» (Some Points of My Belief: My View on Love). The following thoughts are prominent:

... love is a sweet spring of life, but at the same time it is a pain and a pleasure. A sweet spring is not by all means beneficial. Pain and pleasure are not by all means harmful. Some people get sick after drinking spring-water but, for instance, morphine need not be harmful; it can be even helpful in easing an excruciating pain. . .

Though these are not my words, that love with a taste of rice or bread lasts longer than love with the taste of sugar, it should not be forgotten. . .

As a man, active, not passive. . . I did not think to receive love from a woman but to give love to her. In this I see a bigger and stronger idea of one's own responsibility and the strain of life.

Though there exists the view that love is stronger than death, do I not know that love is stronger than life? I prefer to live than to die for love.

One cannot buy love with money but if one has no money, one cannot love. This is contemporary man's worry and the source of pessimism.

There exists the view that marriage is a grave of love, but indeed it is only the first step towards creating love.

The love of the haves contains many conquests, while in the love of the have-nots there are many resignations.

«Love is best.» These are a poet's words, but not the novelist's opinion.¹

The theme of love was the main subject of Na Tohyang's novels and can be found in many of his short stories as well. In his novels, Na Tohyang postulated the necessity of change in the moral rules existing in Korean society. One of the heroes of his novel *Ōmōni* speaks with bitterness to his friend about the depravity of young Korean men. He argues that the reasons causing the depravity are of a political and familial nature, but that the foremost reason is the lack of opportunity for men and women to meet and mix freely. He adds that one simply cannot ignore the problem of male-female social relations.

The social milieus described in his three novels *Ch'ōngch'un*, *Hwanhŭi*, and *Ōmōni* are very similar. Principal heroes do not suffer from a lack of money. They are usually from wealthy families or if not, there is always a rich friend conveniently at hand who can help when needed. Male heroes are usually employed in banks or unspecified firms; this perhaps implies that they are clerks. In such conditions, the most important problems for them are their spiritual and love lives – unrequited love, unfulfilled love, or love threatened by outside circumstances.

The main hero of *Ch'ōngch'un* is Yu Ilbok, a young clerk from a yangban family who fell in love with a pretty girl, the daughter of an innkeeper. She belonged to the lower class of Korean society, and their love encountered many obstacles. In addition there lived another girl, the daughter of a bank director, who was designated the bride for our hero. Her pretended suicide provoked the inhabitants of the village to condemn Yu Ilbok. The innkeeper did not want to give him her daughter in marriage, and the broken-hearted Yu Ilbok in despair killed the innkeeper, her son, her daughter, and put fire to the inn. He himself, mortally wounded, died in a remote Buddhist monastery in the presence of his bride and his best friend.

The plot of *Hwanhŭi* is very complicated. In it we can observe various kinds of love and various characteristics of men and women. At the end of this novel the two main heroines die. One of them, Hyesuk, a sister of the main hero, demanded from her brother's mistress, a beautiful *kisaeng*, that she make him leave her for his own sake. It led to the *kisaeng's* death

1 *Chosŏn mundan*, 10:54–56 (June 1925).

and, ultimately, the suicide of Hyesuk, who, being seriously ill and disappointed in her marriage, pitied her unhappy brother as well as his mistress and regretted having behaved as she did towards them. In this novel one can find interesting, vivid, and touching descriptions of the *kisaeng*'s life and her attitudes towards her various male customers. The author described the *kisaeng*, Sŏrhwa, as a sensitive human being who is capable of whole-hearted love as well as passion. The man in question, whom she loves and who loves her, is worried by many doubts. He thinks the *kisaeng* is not capable of true love. It is true that most of her visitors expect her only to wear a smiling face, to sing and dance, and to grant them sexual pleasures, yet deep in her heart, she continuously longs for a great, real love.

In the novel *Ōmōni*, there are psychologically based descriptions of lovers' behaviour and touching descriptions of a child's longing for its mother and of the awakening of maternal love. The main characters form a typical triangle affair, although not a simple one. One woman is not a wife, but a concubine, while her man has another home in the country and a wife there. Yŏngsuk, the concubine, has a child by her master, but does not love her child's father, even though he provided her and her old mother with sufficient wealth. She was, nevertheless, quite satisfied with her fate until she met her old friend, Yi Ch'unu, with whom she fell in love. She left her home and started a new life with Ch'unu, but her daughter belonged to the father, and she could not take her along. The little child was ill and its poor mother was desperate. Ch'unu at last decided to leave Yŏngsuk in order to facilitate her return to her daughter's father. The heroes of *Ōmōni*, quite different from the heroes of Na Tohyang's previous novels, understood that in some cases one must give up one's happiness for the sake of another human being. A new quality of Na Tohyang's view on love is expressed in the following sentences from his essay «Naega minnūn mungu myŏkkae:

I want to declare that love without a moral basis cannot be fulfilled. Self-sacrifice will bring eternal victory. Without an idea of sacrifice. . . love will become a kind of a game and sexual intercourse only.

Na Tohyang wrote three poems. Although from the literary point of view they may not have considerable merit, their subject matter is significant. All of them deal with love and emotions involved in the passing of time and life. They are: «Ch'ajŏna polkka» (Let Us Seek), «Onūren nal-dŏrŏ sŏbangnim hajiman» (Today They Name Me Young Master) and «Sarang kogae» (The Hill of Love). The third may be another good illus-

tration of Na Tohyang's view on love and also of his need for it. He wrote as follows:

When one crosses over one hill
 There appears another one,
 When one crosses over the other one
 There again appears a ridge;
 If with much suffering one passes over the hill of love
 One should avoid that hill
 Which makes one's heart flutter.
 One would prefer a different way,
 But then again a stream becomes an obstacle.
 One who is about to drown
 Has no other way than to cross over the hill.²

In almost half of his twenty short stories Na Tohyang chose a woman as the principal character, around whom the plot revolves. In several of the stories there is no heroine, while in others women invariably play a great role in the story. The image of women evolved simultaneously with the growing life experiences of Na Tohyang. In his earlier short stories, we see an ideal image of women. His heroines are always beautiful, of mild character, and good heart. But in his short stories written during the last few years of his life, he changed his attitude towards women. He concentrated on the lives of lower class women in Korean society. In many cases they had to sell their bodies to earn a livelihood. Plain sexual instinct and the desire to live in more convenient circumstances often prevailed, while others preserved, to a certain degree, their moral principles. The author describes their lives and feelings in such vivid scenes that no reader can read them indifferently.

Among Na Tohyang's short stories concerned with love, seven centered on physical love, sexual desire, and passion, while five deal with ideal and platonic love. In several of his short stories as well as in his novels, a simple village girl is shown in opposition to a new-fashioned woman with a made-up face and a modern hairstyle. In Na Tohyang's essays one may encounter also such sentences as: «The village girl's blush is sweeter than a kiss of a modern city woman of fashion.»³ He had a liking for natural beauty, for delicacy and mildness. In his essay «Kŭmŭmtal» (A Waning Moon), Na Tohyang wrote:

I like the waning moon very much. It looks like a surprisingly beautiful girl, so fascinating that one cannot touch her and cannot speak to her. This moon is at

2 *Chosŏn mundan*, 5:71 (1925).

3 Na Tohyang, «Naega minnŭn mungu myŏkkae,» p.56.

the same time so miserable that one's heart feels sore and burns. . . The waning moon seems as if it has suffered many kinds of hardships of the world. It is, finally, like an embittered woman, who, nursing a grudge, throws herself to the ground. It is so touching. . . If I were to be born as a woman, I would want to be born as a woman resembling the waning moon.⁴

I think that Na Tohyang's words as quoted above are a good illustration of his attitude towards women and towards love. He himself suffered much and observed many suffering people. In his literary works it is obvious that he felt sympathy for the poor and oppressed people. Who at that time suffered more than others in Korean society? Women always were the victims. Na Tohyang described their fate with deep commiseration in his heart and understanding for their feelings and was able to give to his readers a touching image of the Korean woman of that time. He painted an interesting picture of Korean manners especially concerning love relationships and gave meaning and understanding to the problems of love.

GLOSSARY

- «Changnae kyōrhongwa chōlcho munje» 將來結婚과貞操問題
 «Chōnsaengmyōngūi yogunūn anida – naūi yōnaegwan» 全生命의要求는아니다=나의戀愛觀
 Chosōn mundan 朝鮮文壇
 Ch'ajōna polkka 차저나불까
 Ch'oe Haksong (Sōhae) 崔鶴松(曙海)
 Ch'ōngch'un 青春
 Hyesuk 혜숙
 «Hyōndae namnyōnūn ōttōhan isōngūl yoguhanūnga» 現代男女는어떠한果性を要求하는가
 «Hyōndae namnyōwa kyōrhonūi kot'ong» 現代男女와結婚의苦痛
 Hwanhūi 幻戲
 Kamsanggwa kidae 感想과期待
 Kim Tongin 金東仁
 kisaeng 妓生
 «Kūmūmtal» 그무달
 «Kyōrhonesō ihonkkaji» 結婚에서離婚까지

4 Chosōn mundan, 4:93 (1925).

Na Tohyang 羅稻香

«Naega minnūn mungu myōkkae: naüi yōnaegwan» 내가 믿는 文句 몇개:

나의戀愛觀

«Namnyō haksangganüi yōnae munje» 男女學生間의戀愛問題

Ömöni 어머니

«Onüren naldörö sōbangnim hajiman» 오늘날 날더러 書方님 하지만

Pang In'gōn (Ch'unhae) 方仁根(春海)

«Pömüi kkoriwa yōnae: yōnaenūn nūlgūniüi haril» 범의 꼬리라戀愛=戀愛는

늪은이의 할인

Puin 婦人

«Sarang kogae» 사랑 고개

Sōrhwa 설화

Yi Ch'unu 李春雨

Yōm Sangsōp 廉想涉

«Yōnaegwan kküt'e» 戀愛觀 끝에

Yōngsuk 영숙

Yu Ilbok 柳一馥