[page 9]

**Kim Iryop: Pioneer Writer/Reformer in Colonial Korea**

**Bonnie B.C. Oh**

**INTRODUCTION**

Kim Iryop1 (金一葉 1896-1971) was a pioneer feminist, an essayist/poet, and a Buddhist nun. Until the late 1970s, she was not well known as a serious literary figure, perhaps for three main reasons: first, contemporary literary critics did not regard Iryop and other women writers (*yoryu chakka* 女流 作家) as deserving of serious consideration; second, her reputation as an advocate of women’s rights overshadowed her literary accomplishments; and third, her literary activities were not well publicized after she became a Buddhist nun. But she was one of the most prolific of the first group of women writers, and she considered herself first and foremost a writer. She wrote a total of 58 poems, 35 of which were penned after entering the mountain,2 and 16 novels and short stories, all of which were published before becoming a nun.3

Kim was a serious advocate for reform. Her life may be seen as a paradigm of the first generation of modern women intellectuals. She was outspoken against social ills; she led an unusual life, and was ostracized by society, but she ultimately overcame criticism, unlike two of her close associates, the artist Na Hye-sok (羅惠錫 1886-1946) and the novelist Kim Myong-sun (金明淳 1900-?), and survived to be admired as a great woman.4 As a young woman in the 1920s in Korea, she saw that the greatest need for change lay in improving women’s status. The place and time of her birth and youth led her to become a writer and reformer. Before discussing Kim’s life, we need to take a brier look at the setting in which she lived and wrote.

[page 10]

**THE SETTING**

Of three and a half decades of Japanese rule in Korea, the decade of the 1920s was a time of brief flowering of Korean culture under the official “cultural” policy of the colonial government. During this middle decade, Japan was reconsidering its harsh rule of Korea during the first decade of colonization, which culminated in a mass uprising, the Samil Undong (March First Movement) of 1919; and Korea was exhausted from the years of ceaseless militant resistance ending in a heroic uprising that nevertheless failed miserably.

The decade of the 1920s began for Koreans with a feeling of despair following the failure of the 1919 Independence Movement.5 The Japanese succeeded in brutally suppressing the revolt but, recognizing the futility of using naked force to subjugate Koreans, they initiated a shift in policy. Governor-General Terauchi Taisuke was replaced by Admiral Saito Makoto, a suave former diplomat, fluent in English, who announced, upon assuming the post in August of 1919, that he would respect Korean culture and promote the well-being of the Korean people. Promising freedom of expression, he formally allowed, for the first time since the annexation in 1910, the publication of Korean language materials.

As the Japanese rulers removed the more obnoxious aspects of colonial rule and set forth the new “cultural” policy, intellectual Korean nationalists, drained of energy and disillusioned, took advantage of the openings offered. Although nothing fundamental had changed, “an atmosphere of experiment prevailed in the colony in the early 1920s, as Koreans tested the new boundaries and the colonial administration contemplated the limits of their tolerance. While binding Korea ever more tightly to Japan, the new cultural policy featured cosmetic changes.”6

The “cultural” policy allowed newly educated Koreans to gather together as they had never done before.7 Numerous Korean language periodicals, newspapers, and books were published in the first half of the decade. Two of the oldest Korean language dailies, the *Tong’a Ilbo* (東亞日報) and the *Choson Ilbo* (朝鮮日報) were firsts at this time. In 1920 and 1921 alone about thirty monthly magazines were published, though few of them lasted more than a few months before being suppressed by the Japanese authorities or succumbing to financial difficulties.8

[page 11]

**KOREAN LITERATURE IN THE 1920S**

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, very little literature was written in *han’gul* (한글), the Korean writing system. Although *han’gul* had been invented in the middle of the fifteenth century under the direction of King Sejong,9 it was used mostly by and for the uneducated, uncultured masses and women. *Hanmun* (漢文,Chinese) was the language of literature and of all official documents in Korea. Under the influence of Western ideas and the threat of foreign encroachment, however, a new national consciousness began to emerge. Literature written in Chinese began to be displaced by literature written in *han’gul*, called the New Literature.

In 1908 a young poet named Ch’oe Nam-son (崔南善)10 began publishing a magazine called *Sonyon* (少年 Youth). It was the first even quasi-literary magazine in the history of Korean literature. In this and other magazines produced between 1910 and 1918, Ch’oe Nam-son, in collaboration with another fervent young nationalist-cum-writer, named Yi Kwang-sul1 (李光洙), provided a forum for the work and ideas of young writers. The interests of Ch’oe and Yi were more national than literary, and their work was designed to promote nationalism and enlightenment. Young people rallied to the cause of reviving Korea, but all their hopes were rudely shattered by the failure of the March First Independence Movement in 1919.

Perhaps the most serious effect of the March First Movement was the intellectual disillusionment which followed in its wake.12 Its failure brought profound disappointment to Korean youth. This was reflected in the literature of the 1920s which was full of escapism and despair. Educated young Koreans felt that their nations’s future was bleak. Their choices were extremely limit-ed—complete escape from and denial of reality, collaboration with the Japanese, adoption of the nationalist theme of “strengthening the nation” or following the road of Marxism. For concerned youth of Korea, the first two were no choices at all. Some, therefore, opted to take the gradualist approach of “strengthening the nation,” while others, feeling impatient with such moderate means, leaned toward Marxist ideology, and advocated direct confrontation with the Japanese and immediate independence. When this latter group organized the Korean Artists Proletarian Federation, KAPF, in 1925, the split between the moderates and radicals became permanent.13

Yi Kwang-su was one of those who adopted a moderate approach.14 Up to 1919 Yi had been a radical, idealistic nationalist demanding and working for immediate independence for Korea. Dismayed by the failure of the March First Movement and disillusioned by divisive leadership among the exiled [page 12] leaders of the Provisional Government in Shanghai, which he visited in 1920, he became a realist, thinking in terms of what was feasible here and now, with independence as a long-range goal.15 He called for working within the colonial system while emphasizing morality, education, and improvement in social life, using his novels as vehicles to propagate his ideas.16

Not everybody subscribed to this didactic role for literature. Reaction came in the form of Korea’s first purely literary magazine, *Ch’angjo* (創造 Creation), written and published by a group that was inspired and led by a brilliant, if rather eccentric, young man named Kim Tong-in (金東仁).17 *Ch’angjo* was a manifesto for literary realism, its avowed purpose not political propaganda, but depicting life as it was. It advocated literature in the Western tradition of “art for art’s sake,” an almost revolutionary concept of art in Eastern thinking. A whole new group of writers sprang up. They began to write about Korea and Korean life as they found it. “Reality as it is” was their slogan, and this reality was a very grim one indeed.

The young writers belonging to both of these groups had studied in Japan and had been introduced to the works of Zola, Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev. These Western and Eastern European writers had a tremendous appeal for young Korean intellectuals, mainly because they described depressing political situations—in France the aftermath of defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, and in Russia the corruption of the Czarist government—that seemed similar to the situation of Korea under Japanese colonialism. Depicting life as they observed it, Korean writers developed a type of hyper-realism, “Korean naturalism” that became the dominant literary trend of the 1920s. It was “a literature written with the pessimism of Zola or Maupassant and with the morbidity of Dostoevsky.”18

Korean stories of the 1920s are full of the themes of self-destruction and submission to fate. Always, the characters are walking a path that leads to devastation. This path may be sex, liquor, social inhibition, or some inner compelling force like human weakness or some uncontrollable external force like fate, but always the end is the same—inevitable ruin. Characters in stories are predoomed to certain defeat, because the spiritual can never master the physical, which in these stories is a metaphor for weakness or corruption. The intellectual youth of the 1920s had a vision of ideal life which was unattainable. They felt they could not obtain it because of the blind, irrational element in human beings which was certain to defeat them in their aspirations.19

And yet, 1920s youth cherished life, especially life that was accompanied by love. To them love was the ultimate ideal. It alone could give meaning to life. Young men and women of the period were preoccupied with this newly [page 13] discovered, and yet elusive, human emotion. When love failed, life failed, and only emptiness remained. Love was an unattainable ideal; the animal in man precluded its realization. The situation of 1920s Korea created an attitude of mind among intellectual youth which predisposed them to write “a literature of disillusion.” This was not a literary theory but an attitude to life and society.20

The works of the writers reflected these trends. Literature with enlightenment messages was published in quasi-literary magazines such as *Ch’ongnyon* (靑年 Youth) and *Shinyoja* (新女子 New woman), while works of the realists appeared in the literary magazines, *Ch’angjo* (創造 Creation), *Kaebyok* (開闘 Creation), *Paekcho* (白潮 White tide) and *P’yeho* (廢墟 Ruin). Writers contributing to *Ch’angjo* and *Kaebyok* tended to be less despairing than those who published in *Paekjo* and *P’yeho*.

It was in this atmosphere that women writers, including Kim Iryop and her close friends, Kim Myong-sun and Na Hye-sok,21 wrote. Few in number and excluded from male writers’ circles, women writers did not split into didactic and naturalist schools. The same women wrote pieces advocating reform while simultaneously depicting the grim reality of Korea in the 1920s.

**WOMEN INTELLECTUALS**

Despite much talk of reforms since the 1890s, and “new culture” in the 1920s, few reforms of any significance had actually taken place in Korea. The very nature of colonial rule was opposed to any profound alteration of existing circumstances. If modernization inevitably brought disruption and dislocation, it was to be avoided by any means, for an unsettled society was hard to rule. The Japanese authorities found it more advantageous to maintain the *status quo* in Korean society. They courted the support of well-to-do moderate Koreans for their rule and gave lukewarm approval to minor, non-political activities and reform attempts of young Koreans, but relentlessly suppressed nationalist movements.

Ironically, some Koreans themselves resisted the few Japanese govern- ment-sponsored reforms, even when the long-range effect of reforms might have important benefits. They mistakenly regarded the Japanese-sponsored reforms as the colonial master’s attempt to eradicate Korea’s past and tradition. The cases in point are the reforms related to family and women. The result was that the customs affecting women were tenaciously preserved. Men continued to dominate in Korea under Japanese rule. Almost all norms that [page 14] guided women and family life remained intact. Women were held firmly in their traditional roles throughout the colonial period. Even for those women who had the means to leave the conventional family and live on their own, the social stigma for doing so was too great to bear for long. The few who dared did so at the risk of falling into poverty, tainting their reputations and their families’ honor, and living completely isolated lives.

In the 1920s,there were only a few newly educated women who were brave enough to break away from the established standards. Many of these pioneers were creatively inclined artists and writers. They were advocates of extensive reform to enhance women’s positions. They tried to practice what they preached by living as fully liberated human beings. They attempted to have careers and intellectual pursuits of their own. They divorced their husbands or were divorced by them, abandoned their lovers, and were deserted by them. They lived with men without the benefit of matrimony, and constantly spoke out against oppressive customs affecting women, demanding complete equality between the sexes. They hoped to be models of the “new woman” for other ordinary women, but few outside their small circles dared to emulate them. They were ridiculed, ostracized, and considered decadent and immoral by self-righteous women, by their former patrons, co-workers, and lovers. Their lives often ended in tragedy.22

Women intellectuals of the 1920s in Korea felt that they had been betrayed both by Korean men and the Japanese authorities. They had participated, side by side with men, in the national struggle for survival and independence from the beginning, starting in the first decade of the twentieth century. But their efforts had received little recognition, and their call for improvement of women’s position had been ignored by their male compatriots.23 By the 1920s,disillusioned, but desperate to bring about changes, they reassessed their course of action. Instead of directly participating in the national independence struggle, they concentrated on enlightening women, on reforming and working toward the abolition of old social customs and systems that perpetuated women’s subordinate position. Seizing the opportunity of the new culture policy, these women turned their pens into weapons. They formed and led women’s organizations and published the first women’s magazine, *Shinyoja*.

These women considered themselves privileged elites and felt morally obligated to lead their less fortunate sisters. They were indeed a remarkable lot. Unusual times produce unusual people. The majority were born during the last decade of the nineteenth century, came of age in the declining years of the Yi dynasty and matured during the harsh “dark age” of the first decade of Japanese rule. They were educators, radical reformers, iconoclastic writers and [page 15] artists, who tirelessly wrote to enlighten their sisters. Kim Iryop belonged to this remarkable first generation of Korean women intellectuals.24 Never before had such a rare group of women appeared in Korean history.

As a member of this first group of women intellectuals, Kim Iryop represented a variant prototype. She shared with many of her female compeers an obsession to enhance women’s position, gain the freedom to love, and establish dignity for women as human beings. But unlike some others, who turned to establishing or leading educational institutions as devout Protestant Christians, Iryop remained a free-spirited writer/poet by leaving the Protestant Church she was born into. Iryop was also different from two of her closest friends, the novelist Kim Myong-sun and the artist Na Hye-sok, in that she managed to take control of her life and avoid falling victim to despairing tendencies, but only by becoming a Buddhist nun and giving up the free lifestyle of creative intellectuals of the 1920s in Korea.

**EARLY LIFE**

Kim Iryop’s given name was Won-ju (元周). Her father, whom she confessed to have worshipped,26 was one of the first Korean ministers, predisposing him to progressive ideas. Even so, he was not overly enthusiastic about his daughter receiving formal education away from home. It was her mother who instilled in Won-ju the importance of education and self-reliance as a human being. She did not raise her daughter merely as a female child to be married off. Much later in her life, Won-ju recalled that her mother hoped to raise a daughter better than other women’s ten sons, and wanted her to become a prominent person. With such thoughts in her mind, Won-ju’s mother did not teach her any of the “womanly duties.”27

Won-ju’s place of birth, near Pyongyang, an ancient capital and the second largest city in Korea, was considered reform-oriented at the turn of the century and very nationalistic after the Japanese annexation of the country. The era of Won-ju’s birth and youth was politically chaotic but progressive. The Yi Dynasty of Korea was in the last decade and a half of its existence and frantic attempts were made to save the kingdom by various groups—the young progressives, the government in power, and the Western, mostly American, missionaries. The young reformers and Western missionaries also advocated women’s education and established schools for girls as well as boys.28

By 1896 when Won-ju was born, Ewha, the first mission school for girls, was ten years old, and the missionaries no longer had to recruit destitute [page 16] young women, literally from the streets, to be students at the school. So, it seemed appropriate that Won-ju, the first-born daughter of a protestant minister, be sent to a mission elementary school at the young age of nine. Two years later, she was sent to Samsong Common School in the city of Chi-namp’o. Few girls of the time were so privileged to receive formal education at such a young age.

Won-ju started writing young. Her first published piece was a poem, “Death of a Sister,”29 which she composed when she was only eleven and overcome by grief at her sister’s death,30 As the beginning of the poem shows, the sentiment expressed is simple, but considering her youth, it is a quite sophisticated free-style poem entirely in *han’gul*.

My cute little sister!

If you could wake up

Like new buds in the spring...

Her other siblings died in quick succession and she grew up almost as an only child. She lost her mother at age fourteen and her father a few years later. She had lost all of her immediate family by the age of twenty-one. Her feelings of loss and isolation, her awareness of human mortality and uncertainty, would have a profound impact on her and partly contribute to her becoming a poet and, later, a Buddhist nun. Around this time, her first marriage—to a one-legged, older businessman—took place.31

All through her tragic experiences and her unhappy first marriage, she continued her studies at Ewha, with her maternal grandmother’s financial assistance,32 and graduated in 1918. In the following year, she participated actively in the Independence Movement, making and distributing handbills. Later in that year, she went to Japan, perhaps to escape her disastrous marriage,33 and enrolled in the Tokyo English Institute. Returning to Seoul early in 1920,she began publishing Shinyoja, the first women’s magazine, with the financial assistance and support of Ewha Women’s School.34 Thus began the career of the pioneer feminist writer, Iryop (一葉 One-leaf).35

**KIM IRYOP’S WRITINGS**

*Critical Essays*

Kim Iryop’s career as a serious writer began with the first women’s magazine, *Shinyoja* (New woman), published between March and June of 1920.36 [page 17] Although the magazine lasted only four issues, in that short time Kim published seventeen pieces: seven essays on women, two random thoughts, five poems, and three short stories. A theme running through all of her writings on women was liberation—the liberation of women through understanding reality, through education, and through breaking away from the old family system and from oppressive traditions. Writing was her main medium and *Shinyoja* was her first vehicle. Like many of her male contemporaries, she used her writing to spread her ideas to serve people,37 not necessarily to bring pleasures from reading—whether critical essays, poems, or short stories.

After the magazine closed, she published in daily newspapers, such as the *Tong’a Ilbo* (東亞日報) and the *Choson Ilbo* (朝鮮日報) and also in literary magazines, such as *Choson Mundan* (Literary World of Korea) and *Kaebyok*. Since *Kaebyok* was the longest lasting of the literary magazines, and the founders and contributors of *Kaebyok* were a tightly knit group of men, this was considered a great honor and recognition for a women writer.

Most or her essays on women were written before 1927. She wrote very little during the five-year period between 1927 and 1932, obviously a time of great emotional turmoil for her and perhaps of preparation for the religious life. After 1932,when she settled down in the mountainous retreat of Sudoksa Buddhist temple, she concentrated her efforts on writing poems, mostly with love themes, only occasionally veering from this new focus.38

Her early essay topics ranged widely from daily issues to the lofty ideals of national and human liberation, but one concern that obsessed her was women’s “liberation.” Within this theme, she discussed such topics as “women and society,” “self-awakening for women,” “women and education,” and “love, marriage, and the family.”

**Women and society:** Kim Iryop saw a direct link between women’s status and the nature of a society. In “Reconstruction and Liberation,” written as the introduction to the first issue of *Shinyoja*, Kim Iryop called for the liberation of women from thousands of years’ imprisonment in the inner chambers. She declared it was time for reconstruction from the ruins. She asked,

What should we rebuild? We should rebuild the whole society. If we want to rebuild society we need to restructure the family which is the basic unit of society. If we want to reorganize the family, we need to liberate women. If we [Koreans] want to live like other people in the world, if we don’t want to be defeated by other powerful people, we need to rebuild all aspects of society. In order to do this, we must liberate women.39 [page 18]

Notice her emphasis on the benefits society would gain as a consequence of women’s liberation. In another short article written a month later, she said a happy society was one in which women were happy.40 Thus, she linked enhancing women’s position with general social progress, making it essential for national salvation and ultimate independence.

Self-awakening for women: In “The New Women’s Demands and Claims,” published in the second issue of *Shinyoja*, Kim warned that sacrifice was necessary in order to improve Korean women’s conditions;41 in matters concerning women, Korean society was extremely backward, and if left alone, it would continue without much change, bringing misery to many future generations of women. Even if it meant sacrifice, if no one stepped forward to correct the many abuses, Korean women would be condemned to despair for eternity. Kim called for women to break out of old traditions and start on their way to self-fulfillment. She observed that while men called this “women’s self-ruin and [women’s] betrayal of family and society,” it was men who mistreated women, who treated them as no better than animals. She attacked the notion of man’s superiority in mental and physical strength as misinformation on which the rationale for all the abusive rules, such as the Three Obediences, was based.42

Women were not without blame, however. Women had suffered because they had acquiesced. Now the time had arrived for women to wake up and establish a new society of free individuals where there were no restrictions based on gender and where liberty existed along with equality of privilege, obligation, work, and play. There would be no gain without a fight and no victory without individual sacrifice.43

She repeatedly emphasized the need for women to understand their position in life. In “First, Know the Reality,” she urged women to examine their position: it is true, women need to be treated equally with men, but in order for this to happen women themselves must understand that they are not treated as the equals of men; must be willing to break with the past; must destroy old ideas and customs; and must recreate themselves as “new women.”44 Thus, educating women was essential—to inform, awaken, and mobilize them into action.

**Education of women:** Educating women was necessary not just for the sake of women but for strengthening the nation as a whole. In traditional Korea, Kim lamented, women were hardly educated. What little education women received only encouraged them to be dependent on and completely [page 19] obedient to men. Even in the 1920s,some men continued to oppose women’s education. Kim attributed the might of the industrialized Great Powers to better educated mothers, freer atmosphere in homes, and better educated children. Korean society was so backward because women, the most important element in the society, were not educated. They were only taught pudo yojik (wifely demeanor and women’s work), namely, how to serve the parents-in-law, the husband, and all the brothers and sisters-in-law; how to prepare (but not participate in) the ancestral ceremonies; how to raise children, and how to perform all the household tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing, and sewing.45

She observed that many women who had received the new higher education espoused noble ideals and wanted desperately to work toward enlightening other women and improving women’s status in Korea. At the same time, these women desired to contribute to the general social well-being, but Korean society was too backward to understand them and allow them to do their work.46 Women needed to be educated in the same way as men. They had to be educated to enlighten the society as a whole, to usher in changes that would strengthen the nation.

**Love, Marriage, and Family:** Nowhere were Kim Iryop’s ideas more iconoclastic than in the matters dearest to her heart—love, marriage, and the family. Perhaps because these matters were the most dificult for her to resolve in her own life, they were the ones she was most personally engrossed in. Like male writers of the time, she regarded love as the original fountain of energy of human beings,47 and she was in constant search for that perfect love in her own life. More than half of her 58 poems were love poems and three of her five books were on love themes.48 In her search for perfect love, however, she encountered numerous obstacle, in the form of the traditional family system and outdated norms, which she attacked in her writings.

Kim Iryop felt strongly that women, like men, should have the freedom to love whomever and whenever they wanted. She attacked the traditional mores on “women’s chastity” as extremely prejudicial and even humiliating to women. She spoke out openly against the rules and attitudes about women’s chastity in the essay “My ideas on women’s chastity,” in Shinyoja. She observed that in the traditional way of thinking, women’s chastity was treated like a thing, which could be used, soiled and discarded. “It was like some kind of gem,” she wrote, “which was precious and treasured until it was used and broken, and then it was discarded without a second thought.” “Chastity matters only while love exists between a man and a woman,” she continued. “And when love is gone, the obligation for chastity disappears also. Just like the [page 20] feeling of love, it is constantly in flux and renewed.” Chastity, in her view, was not an objective concept of ethics or morality as the society regarded it, but a passion created in the ultimate consummation of feeling and emotion between two loving persons, a man and a woman.” It was a private matter of the two individuals involved.49 She objected to calling the convention which required chastity only from women “ethics;” she saw the notion of chastity as nothing but a white-washing of love by men, who had all the freedom in the world.50 She deplored the double standards applied to men and women.51

Kim extended her discussion of chastity to the prevailing attitude toward divorce for women and wrote the essay “Destroy the concept of virgin and non-virgin”52 in response to a question posed by the editors of the magazine Sam Ch’olli (三千里 Three thousand li) on whether women should remarry. She replied that there should be no question that they should be allowed to do so and that divorced or widowed women should not be considered any less qualified for marriage than virgins. She deplored the fact that many men and even some women with modern educations considered remarriage immoral. However, she did not advocate a woman’s infidelity, or remarriage immediately after her husband’s death or disappearance. She suggested a minimum three-year waiting, if not a mourning, period.53

Kim Iryop was revolutionary in her ideas on the Korean family system. Her objections to it originated in her desire to liberate women. Although she was dedicated to her own parents and wrote poems and random thought pieces eulogizing and remembering them,54 she was opposed to the traditional family system as an institution of oppression that was most prejudicial to women and inhibited women’s freedom. She even suggested—what many Koreans of the time thought about vaguely but few had the nerve to actually say—that to become a free and fulfilled human being was more important than to be either a filial child to one’s parents or a dedicated parent to one’s children.55 She wrote “Death of a Girl” to contend that parents had no right to demand such sacrifices from their children.

Kim also considered freedom in love as a way for women to realize themselves as human beings. In the article, “Self-Realization.” she asserted that life without love and without a loved one’s understanding was devoid of human dignity and was little different from a slave’s life. She maintained that having human dignity was more important than possessing wealth or material comfort. To have comfort at the price of dignity was worse than a beggar’s life—it was like being somebody’s possession, an appendage, a toy.56

Kim was not alone in advocating freedom of love and freedom from the traditional family system. In fact, the issue of love was a powerful new theme [page 21] in the literature and arts of the 1920s. It was a part of the general resistance to all established values and institutions, including the custom of arranged marriage.57 Many intellectuals, writers and artists of the time advocated freedom of love without interference from family. Yi Kwang-su was responsible for establishing love literature, which was a popular genre. But when Kim Iryop, a female writer and a women’s advocate, tried to live her life based on the ideal of love, she became the target of severe criticism.58

An example of this is a novel by Kim Tong-in, *Kim Yon-sil chon* (Biography of Kim Yon-sil). This is supposedly a fictional biography of Kim Yon-sil, a woman writer, but it was widely known to be a composite portrait of three well-known (or notorious to men) women, the famous trio of Kim Iryop, Kim Myong-sun and Na Hye-sok.59 It was the story of a modern woman writer who in her youth wrote love stories, engaged in many love affairs, abandoned her family and lived for pleasure. In the end, she accomplished nothing and had nothing—no career, no lover, no family. She could not make a living on her own, and she died alone in abject poverty and misery. The author was eerily prophetic in his predictions of the fates of two of the trio, writer Kim Myong-sun and artist Na Hye-sok. Kim Iryop, however, survived and carried on her work of writing, defying the prophesy of the satirical novel’s author―perhaps because she chose the radically different road of becoming a Buddhist nun.

Kim Iryop’s own love life was scandalous by the standards of the time. After her first marriage failed, she had at least two, possibly three, love affairs. One was with a Japanese of high social standing, and the others were with Koreans: Kuk Ki-yol of the *Tong-a Ilbo* and a Mr. B. of the *Pulkyo Ilbo* (Buddhist daily).61 When Mr. B. forsook secular life and became a Buddhist monk, Kim was never able to overcome her feeling that she had been “abandoned.” In the late 1920s, Kim Iryop became acquainted with and lived with yet another man, Ha Yun-sik, a devout lay Buddhist who was devoted to Iryop. She seemed finally to have found the ideal love she sought, and appeared to have led a blissful life with him.62 In 1928, however, she abandoned it all and “entered the mountain.” It was a sensational, highly-publicized story. Many predicted that she would not last a year in the secluded mountain, but she remained a Buddhist nun for the rest of her life. Thereafter, she did not write much on women’s issues. The feminist phase of her life was over, but her days as a love poet were just beginning.

[page 22]

*Short stories*

Kim Iryop’s creative pieces also appeared in *Shinyoja*. She published five poems, three short stories, and two random thought pieces there. Both random thought essays are on the death of family members, mother and sister. The three short stories are entitled: “Revelation,” “Death of a Girl,” and “I am Leaving.” All three short stories deal with women’s struggles against abusive customs. In both “Death of a Girl” and “I am Leaving,” a woman either departs from this world or from the world she has become familiar with. In “Death of a Girl,” the parents of Myongsuk, the eighteen-year-old third daughter of the Cho family, force her to break off her seven-year engagement to Kim Kapsong whose family had fallen on hard times, so that she can become a concubine of a wealthy man. Myongsuk’s parents, who had already sold her two older sisters into prostitution, hoped to live comfortably off their youngest daughter. Rather than live a life without love, as a secondary wife of an elderly man, she commits suicide―knowing that it will be unfilial and bring hardship to her parents. In the last story, Kyongja, a spoiled only child, leaves for Tokyo (as Kim Iryop herself did) in order to get away from her stepmother, rather than be subjected to the conventional treatment of a daughter.

Altogether, Kim wrote 16 short stories as a young woman, but this genre of writing is considered her least polished. Because of the unfavorable evaluation of her short stories, she is not included among the select group of writers of the time. Critics frequently cite two reasons for this unfavorable evaluation: that her stories are didactic, and that they are obviously autobiographical. But there may be at least two other reasons: that there was a considerable gender bias against a woman writer who led what was considered to be a scandalous lifestyle and that she was less talented in story-telling than in expressing herself in poetry.

*Poetry*

Poetry was where Kim Iryop’s heart was and she showed great aptitude in this genre. Her life as a writer started and ended with it. She wrote 58 poems, and she considered herself as a poet although she is better remembered for other roles―feminist, essayist, reformer, Buddhist nun.

Kim Iryop started writing poems at age 11 and continued throughout her life, writing more poetry than any other genre of writing. Her poems, like her short stories, passed through three stages: an enlightenment activist stage, the time when she was an independent writer but a forlorn woman looking for [page 23] ideal love, and finally, the period when she was a mature woman who had attained enlightenment and peace.

Her early poems reflected Kim’s desire for women’s self-awakening and enlightenment. A poem published in the first issue of Shinyoja (1920) clearly reveals her youthful activism, expressing impatience and determination to awaken women.

Do you know the secret hidden

in the unopened heart of a maiden?

Come on out,

Come on out screaming,

tearing away barriers.

Dash out, break out.

Be prepared

to welcome a beautiful new dawn.

New era, new day, and new work

all arrive together.

Kim’s poetry throughout the middle and late 1920s revealed a broad spectrum of inner emotions―loneliness, agon, grief, and love—that reflect her real life before becoming a nun. From this stage of her life, she leaned toward the naturalist school. Like many of her compatriots, she was dismayed and tormented by unfulfilled love, and constantly yearned for perfect love. The titles of her love poems mirror these feelings: “One-sided love,” “Farewell: I am on my way, leaving behind my lover who’s become a stranger,” “ How shall I live alone?” “How can I forget, I cannot forget the feeling you left,” “Just like the dry leaves swirling around, I am going around alone,” and “Would you smile?”

In a poem called “I don’t know what you are to me,” Iryop bared her heart and cried out,

I don’t know what you are to me.

But I want to dedicate to you

My body while living

And my soul in death.

Why do I wish to give you

Everything nice that I see and hear?

There’s no need to separate what’s yours and mine [page 24]

It’s no use to tally gives and takes.

One body where two souls are fused…

But still, but still, ...

Endlessly I yearn.

My longing for you lingers.

I don’t know what you are to me....63

In this poem, one can almost hear her cry, “I don’t know what you are to me, but....”

In the 1930s,after she entered the religious life, Kim began regarding loneliness as a guest who occasionally called on her, or as a gift from a former lover who had forsaken her. Obviously, the heart-wrenching loneliness which tormented her constantly at the beginning of her monastic life was only an occasional problem now. After 1932,the reader detects a subtle change. That year was the most productive year of her poetry composing, and many of the seventeen poems written that year reveal her inner tranquility. The poem titles of this time contrast sharply with the earlier ones: “Your merciful guiding hands,” “This body is life’s attire,” “Peach blossoms smile without a sound,” and “Winter mountain.”

Still there remains a hint of Iryop’s lingering longing for love which she expresses in “Peach blossoms smile without a sound:”

If there’s a faint shadow on the water,

Or a slight rustle, I look for you.

Peach blossoms smile—without a sound,

And plum trees bloom in the winter mountain.

Who would deny

Winter and spring are not one?

In this poem, she was at the point of overcoming persistent agony over lost love and attaining the inner peace which had remained so elusive and came to her only at the end of her life. In a poem written in 1970, the year before she died, Iryop confessed:

Today I cannot return to youth.

This body cannot be revived.

From birth till today [page 25]

I trekked rough paths

To this mountain.

Suddenly today, ...

I forget

All past troubles.

The Buddhist poet Kim Iryop finally attained enlightenment only in the last year of her life.

**CONCLUSION**

Kim Iryop’s choice of topics and styles reflected Korea of the 1920s. All serious writers of both genders and both the naturalist and the enlightenment schools temporarily avoided direct confrontation with the Japanese authorities and concentrated on reform. These artists’ work also expressed feelings of utter despair, abandonment, and doom—both in their own lives and in the life of their beloved homeland.

Although Kim Iryop was undoubtedly an important woman writer of the Korean “enlightenment” period, she was overlooked by literary figures and critics of her own time.64 During her lifetime, she was better known for her unconventional lifestyle, for her advocacy of women’s liberation, and later, for being a Buddhist nun. Most significantly, no male writers either understood her and other women writers or took their talents seriously. Women writers were not included in the close-knit circles of male writers. Since her death in 1971, however, she has been regarded by Korean feminist leaders as “an ultimate hope”65 and a model for modern Korean women, not just because of her advocacy of women’s causes but because she practiced what she preached.

Kim Iryop is finally being remembered and understood as a towering pioneer writer/poet as well as a women’s advocate. There is renewed interest in her and her friends. She has recently become a subject of articles in domestic and internationally circulated newspapers and news magazines.66 Ultimately, her relentless pursuit of her dream of living the life of a full, free human being is being given the long-overdue attention and respect it deserves. Her ideas were far ahead of her time; her solitary woman’s voice was hardly listened to. But her ideas persisted in the dreams of women (and of men) who hoped to overcome the difficulties Korea faced in the early colonial period. As she expressed it in one of her poems, she was one solitary leaf, as her literary name connoted,67 on a stream floating toward a sea, a leaf which would slowly [page 26] but surely reach the sea although torn to pieces by storms.

One small solitary leaf,

On a stormy river fallen,

To pieces torn,

Its soul will reach the vast ocean.68

**NOTES**

1. A literal transliteration would be Ilyop, but Iryop is the style used in the Library of Congress and is used here also.

2. An expression used for becoming a Buddhist; Buddhist temples were usually located in mountains.

3. Kim Iryop, Miraese ka tahago namtorok (Beyond the end of the future world 미 래세가 다하고 남도록),2 vols. (Seoul: Inmul Yon, gusa, 1974), 2:208 (Hereafter quoted as Miraese).

4. If the number of eulogies is any indication of one’s greatness, Kim Iryop certainly ranked very high. Nearly thirty eulogies or eulogizing recollections were published in several major dailies, including the Tong-a Ilbo and Han’guk Ilbo, soon after her death in 1971. Also, a five-story pagoda was constructed at Sudoksa in her memory.

5. Woo-keun Han, The History of Korea, trans. Kyung-sik Lee, ed. Grafton K. Mintz (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1970), p. 487.

6. Michael Edson Robinson, Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920-1925 (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press), p. 46.

7. In 1920,there were 985 Korean organizations of all types registered with the colonial police. By 1922 the number had increased to 5,728. Carter J. Eckert, Ki-baik Lee, Young Ick Lew, Michael Robinson, & Edward W. Wagner, Korea Old and New: a History (Seoul: Ilchokak, Publishers for the Korea Institute, Harvard University, 1990), p. 286. (Hereafter quoted as Carter, et. al.)

8. Han, The History, p. 487.

9. Young-Key Kim Renaud (ed.), King Sejong the Great (Washington, D.C.: International Circle of Korean Linguistics), Passim.

10. Ch’oe Nam-son (1890-1957),the first scholar of Korean language and first to write in han’gul. Began studying Chinese Classics and literature, but self-taught in han’gul. From age 11,contributed articles to the Hwangsong shinmun. Studied at Waseda University in Japan in 1906-1907,expelled for organizing a mock national assembly, returned home, established the Shinmunkwa or the “new literature society,” and started publishing Sonyon, “Youth,” a magazine which was written in han’gul. Ch’oe was instrumental in popularizing Yi Kwang-su’s [page 27] enlightenment novels. Han’guk inmyong taesajon (韓國人名大辭典) (Seoul: Shinku Ch’ulp’ansa, 1967 & 1983), pp. 936-937. (Hereafter to be cited as In myong taesajon.)

11. Yi Kwang-su (1892-?). Born in Chong-ju, Pyong-an Do. One of the first of the New Literature novelists. Graduated in 1910 from Meiji Academy in Japan, taught at Osan High School in Pyongyang, returned to Japan and enrolled in the Philosophy department of Waseda University. His first novels,Sonyon ui piae (少年의 悲哀 “The sorrow of a young man”) and Ch’ong ch’un (靑春 “Youth”), were published. His full-length novel, Mujong (無情 “Heartless”), was serialized in the Maeil shinbo (每日新報 a daily newspaper), for the first time in the history of Korean newspapers and literature. In February 1919,he drafted the overseas students’ version of “the declaration of independence” and left Waseda to go to Shanghai to help An Ch’ang-ho, an independence fighter, to establish the Korean Provisional Government. He returned to Korea in 1922 and published an article, “Minjok kaejo ron,” (民族改造論 “Discourse on National Reconstruction”), which became the basis for his conversion to a moderate stance, working within the colonial framework to prepare Korea for eventual independence. Inmyong taesajon, p. 599. Beongcheon Yu, Han Yong-un and Yi Kwang-su: Two Pioneers of Modern Korean Literature (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), Passim.

12. Kevin O’Rourke, “The Korean Short Stories of the 1920’s and Naturalism,” Korea Journal, (17:3,March 1977,48-63), p. 50.

13. O’Rourke, Ibid.

14. See note 11 above.

15. My emphasis.

16. O’Rourke, p. 51.

17. Kim Tong-in (1900-1951), was a native of Pyongyang, educated at Meiji Academy and Kawabata Fine Arts Academy of Japan. Returning to Korea in 1919,he published Ch’angjo, the first Korean literary magazine, and his first novel, “Sorrows of a weak person.” Accused of violating the publication law of the Japanese colonial government, he was jailed for four months. He wrote numerous historical novels and fictions, some of which were serialized in the Choson Ilbo, but was perennially plagued with poverty. In addition to fiction writing, he was a nigh profile literary critic. Kim Tong-in was also known for his research on Yi Kwang-su, his contemporary and a famous literary figure. Inmyong taesajon, p. 93.

18. O’Rourke, Ibid.

19. O’Rourke, pp. 53-61.

20. O’Rourke, p. 61.

21. These two, together with Kim Iryop, formed a trio of writer/artists who were on the frontline of women advocates for reform. (Sung Rak-hi, “On Kim Ilyop’s Literature,” Journal of Asian women [17 (December 19-8): 307-326]. Kim [page 28] Myung-sun is also known by the name, Kim Yon-sil. Na Hye-Sok was better known as an artist.

22. Yi, Myong-on, Hollo kan yoinsang (홀러간 女人像, Portrait of women of the past) (Seoul: Inkansa, 1958), p. 25.

23. Bonnie Oh, “From Three Obediences to Patriotism and Nationalism: Women’s Studies in Korea Up To 1945,” Korea Journal (22:7), July 1982, pp. 37-55.

24. This group included many who became famous leaders in various fields in post- 1945 Korea. Just to name two, there are Helen (Hwalan) Kim, a long-time president of Ewha Woman’s University and Pak In-duk, the founder of Induk Technical Institute.

25. William R. Hutchison, The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 3-4. The most characteristic attitude was liberalism, which emphasized the immanence of God in human nature, which in turn tended toward general humanistic optimism.

26. Kim Iryop, Miraese, 2:208.

27. Her book, Ch’ongch’un ul pul sarugo (Abandoning youth), (Seoul: Munsonkak, 1962) was a best seller.

28. By 1910,the year of Japanese annexation of Korea, over 60 (63-66) private schools for girls were established. Only one school, established in 1908,was a public school. Han’guk yosongsa p’yonch’an wiwon hoe, Han’guk yosong sa (韓國女性史,History of Korean women), 2 vols. (Seoul: Ewha University Press. 1972), 2:133-137. (Hereafter to be quoted as Yosongsa.)

29. Sung, “Kim Ilyop.” p. 310.

30. As for the number of Won-ju’s siblings, there is considerable dispute. Ibid.

31. Yi Myong-on, Hullo kan, pp. 28-30.

32. Ch’ongch’un, p. 46. Won-ju’s mother’s family was very wealthy, although her mother was married off at age seventeen to a poor, widowed Christian, because Won-ju’s grandparents thought their daughter was getting too old to be properly married.

33. Ibid.

34. Yosongsa, 2:373.

35. From this point onward, she proudly used this literary name only, which Yi Kwang-su gave her. Yi was an idol among women writers and with whom Iryop had reportedly been secretly in love.

36. Much later, it became known that it was during this time that she gave birth to a son born of a wealthy Japanese man of high social standing, which she kept in secret except among a small circle of friends and relatives. This son, Kim T’ae-shin, who also became a monk later in his life and whose existence had been hidden from the public, emerged in 1990 with his first book, Tugo kan chong: Iryop-Ildang shi-hwa jip (鄭ᅳ葉 ᅳ堂 詩畵集 The feelings left behind: A collection of poems and paintings by Iryop and Ildang), Seoul: Koryo Won, 1990. [page 29] He quickly followed it with his second work, Rahula ui samokok (라훌라의 思母曲 Rahula’s love odes for mother), 2 vols. Seoul: Hankilsa, 1991. In both of these works, Kim T’ae-shin describes in detail his yearning for a mother whom he could not call mother.

37. For this reason—that her writing was not genuinely literary—she was not included among the serious writers of her time. Sung Rak-hi, Kim Ilyop, pp. 307-308.

38. A piece published in Sam Ch’olli magazine (三千里 Three thousand li, November, 1937) discussed the question of how long a woman should wait to get remarried after her husband’s death. Iryop urged that a widow should wait a minimum of three years. Miraese, 2:196.

39. Miraese, 2:162-163.

40. Ibid., 2:169-170 (April 6, 1920).

41. Miraese, 2:180; Shinyoja, June 1920; Pyeho, No. 2,1921.

42. “Remaking and liberation of women,” Miraese, 2:164-165.

43. Ibid., 2:165.

44. Ibid.,2:178-181 (June 1920).

45. Miraese, 2:168.

46. Miraese, 2:170-171; Tong’a Ilbo, April 6,1920.

47. Miraese, 2:229.

48. Kim Iryop, Ch’ongch’un ul pul sarugo p. 45.

49. Miraese, 2:156-157.

50. Sung Rak-hi, “Kim Ilyop,” JAW, p. 308.

51. Tong’a Ilbo, June 6,1926.

52. Miraese, 2:194-195.

53 Ibid, 2:196-197 (reprinted from Sam Ch’olli, November, 1937).

54. Ibid, 1:406 (reprinted from Tong’a Ilbo, January 1,1925); Ibid, 1:410 (Tong’a ji [東亞誌, Tong’a magazine], March 1933); Ibid., 1:389 (Shin kajong ji [新家庭 誌, New home magazine], May 1933,January 1938.

55. Miraese, 1:160; Tong’a Ilbo, June 19,26,1926.

56. Miraese, 2:174; Shinyoja, May 1920.

57. Paek Choi, Shin munhak, pp. 123-124.

58. Yi Myong-on, Hullo kan, p. 25.

59. Sung Rak-hi, “Kim Iryop,” pp. 307-326.

60. See above, Note #36.

61. I have not been able to track down who this person was.

62. Iryop said she was married to Mr. Ha, who, because of his profound faith in Buddhism, was not violent like other men she had known, was charitable, gentle and kind. She later wrote in Sudok sa that her love for Mr. Ha delayed her entry to Buddhist religious life. Sudok sa, pp. 49-50. Yi Myong-on, Hullo kan yoin-sang, pp. 37-39.

63. This was composed in April, 1928 and is her last poem before leaving the secu- [page 30] lar life in July 1928. Kim T’ae-shin, Tugokan chong, p. 91.

64. Sung Rak-hi, “Kim Ilyop,” JAW, p. 308.

65. Im Chung-sam, “Kim Ilyop ron [金一葉論, On Kim Ilyop], Sudok sa, p. 10.

66. Yoon Kyong-hee, “Three Pioneering Modern Writers,” Korea Newsreview (Seoul: The Korea Herald, February 22,1992), p. 30.

67. Im Chung-sam, “Kim Iryop ron,” p. 10.

63. Tangsin un, p. 14. My translation.