A study of hysteria in the women of Pak Wansô’s fiction
--repression of desires in a Confucian patriarchal system

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Chapter One: Introduction

In this paper I will link five of Pak Wansô’s short stories and one novel by analyzing each female protagonist’s unconscious use of ‘hysteria’ as a way to escape her repression. Though its manifestation, and the results it produces, differs from story to story, the linking theme concerns the way middle-class women in modern Korean society respond to entrenched patriarchal oppression. This link hinges inevitably on the psychology of Pak’s characters, which I will expose through a critical analysis of the literary devices used in each story. I will also reveal the effectiveness of this method for the women in each of these stories. First I will present a brief overview of research on Pak that relates to this topic, then some background information on the patriarchal system specific to Korea, after which I will delineate my analytical method and then proceed with a detailed analysis of the stories I have chosen.¹

I will touch on differences in hysterical manifestations, and the critical work on that topic, between the Korean characters portrayed here and female protagonists or real women of Victorian England and turn-of-the-century Europe, to which much feminist scholarship has been devoted. I propose that the Korean women in Pak’s stories manifest hysteria in a subtler manner than their Western counterparts of times past. That cultural differences lead to acceptable forms of hysteria explains this discrepancy while allowing

for the illumination of the specifically Korean demonstration of hysteria, which in these stories is seen to be most subversive to the repressive system when brought forth through speech.

1. Scholarly research on Pak Wansô

In order to produce a worthwhile literary analysis it is essential to first review the body of scholarly work that has been presented on this theme, particularly in relation to Pak Wansô. In recent years more literature students are writing about this contemporary author, but as of yet there are only 18 masters and no doctoral theses devoted to a critical analysis of her work. Pak has written prolifically since 1970, including long novels, short stories, contes, and essays. She is one of the most celebrated and well-known contemporary authors in Korea, yet of the literary journals in our library, only about 20 contain articles about her. The National Assembly Library contains 50 plus articles. Many scholars have touched upon her works in segments of books that cover broader topics such as literature of the 70s, 80s, or 90s, or feminist literature, for example.

Pak’s works are worthy of attention particularly in the way they reflect the plight of Korean women in a patriarchal society that is based on a Confucian system hundreds of years old. She writes realistically, without apology, lending readers a key to unlocking the inner struggles of Korean women and the issues they deal with. The impact of these issues expands to women’s images of themselves or each other and to the interwoven fabric of families. There has been much analysis of Pak’s well-known novels like Ômmaûi Maldduk (My Mother’s Stakes), Naked Tree, or Sô imûn yôja (Woman Standing
Short stories that have received much attention include “Kû manhdûn singanûn nuga da mögôssûlgga,” (Who Ate All the Singa?) “Kû sani chôngmal chôgi issossûlgga,” (Was that Mountain Really There?) and “Han malssûm’man hasosô,” (Just One Word) all of which are at least semi-autobiographical; “Salaitnûn nalûi sijak,” (The Start of a Living Day) “Kûdae ajikdo ggumggugo itnûnga,” (Are You Still Dreaming?) and “Chilôngi ulûmsori” (The Crying of an Earthworm); and two from among the stories I have chosen to deal with, “Kû kaûle sahûl dongan” (“Three Days in that Autumn”) and “Talmûn bangdûl” (“Identical Apartments.”) Scholars have analyzed numerous other stories and novels by Pak as well. Some authors have written on the topic of women’s subjugation as it appears in Pak’s works and the difficult process her characters undergo in attempting to find their identity. Though I discuss this aspect of her work as well, I add an investigation into the critical mechanism by which identity is found or not found. The mechanism of hysteria is the focal point of my analysis and is of key importance in understanding the psychology of Pak’s women in these stories.

The vast majority, if not the entirety, of research and analysis put forth on Pak has been limited to Korea, though several of her stories have been anthologized in translation, and a handful of her novels have been translated into languages like English, French, German, Japanese, Chinese, and Polish. These publications may include an introductory chapter that by describing the stories included lay out a general classification of Pak’s

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2 This is the number of theses found in the National Assembly Library.
work and touch on the themes therein. For example, in *My Very Last Possession and other stories by Pak Wansô*, Chun Kyung-Ja broadly classifies Pak’s stories as ‘family novels’ in which the struggles and moral dilemmas of modern families in relation to society are depicted.

Issues Pak deals with include the breakdown of the extended, and subsequent focus on the nuclear, family; care for the elderly; immigrating families; the subjugation of wives, especially homemakers; families divided by the Korean War; and families dealing with political crises that have a direct impact on their lives, such as student riots. Professor Kim Yeong-Hui points out further themes such as the conflict between city culture and the remembrance of rural life, the itinerant problems of urban capitalization, and materialistic social conditions. This paper, however, will focus on the psychological impact of the societal expectations—including gender roles—placed on women in modern Korean society. Pak often treats other themes like those mentioned above alongside this theme, but for the scope of this paper I will examine only the impact of Korean society’s patriarchal tradition on women. To do this I will first present the background of Korea’s Confucian tradition that has led to the current hierarchical stratification of society and specificity of gender roles and discrimination. The brief summary that follows is intended for readers who may not be familiar with the history of Korean Confucianism and its pervasive and residual impact on contemporary Korean society.

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5 *Hanguk munhak bunyeok keumgo, Koryodae minjok munhwa yeonguwon, Hanguk munhak beonyeok seeji moknok (Bibliographies of Korean Literature in Foreign Languages)* Hong Ilshik 1998.
2. Traditional Korean views of women

A better understanding of the Korean woman’s roles in today’s society requires at least some background knowledge of traditional Korean culture. The social order proscribes women’s roles and maintains fixed ideas of taboos that are not to be broken, which allows women little room for movement and little access to other human beings to whom they can verbalize their frustration. Traditionally, the most outstanding role for women is that of mother, which is often still today considered by Korean society the highest attainment of womanhood.

Trumped-up Neo-Confucian values that created increased strictures on upper-class Korean society in general, and on women in particular, were implemented in the early Chosôn dynasty, 14th century. The hierarchical domination of men over women in the family was mandated by heaven, according to the Chinese cosmological system of yin and yang that Confucianism adopted. Women were neither considered subjects of the king, nor were they allowed any role or participation in affairs of the state. Thus a woman was relegated to duties involving only her husband, his family, and her children.

Regulations concerning the public conduct of women became stricter through time as Neo-Confucian ideals were gradually put into practice by state edicts. According to Deuchler, Chu Hsi’s Chia-li (family rites) was distributed among the noble class for widespread implementation of correct adherence to social familial laws. Gender segregation became severe: boys and girls were separated at the age of seven and forbidden to interact in any way. In addition, the Kyôngguk Taejôn (Great Code of Administration) stipulated that women could no longer make outings to temples or
mountains. Women of yangban status were not allowed to appear alone in public, and could only venture out of the house if wearing a veil and accompanied by a male relative.

Although these practices were engaged in early in the Chosŏn dynasty, they were strengthened towards its end. Some features of the distinctly Korean application of Neo-Confucianism on the family were enforced after 1600, and were reinforced with the advent of Silhak (practical learning) in the 18th century. The Korean application of this philosophical and social system differed from that of the Chinese; it was stricter and included practices not found in classic Confucian texts. Practices unique to Korea included stipulations that yangban widows could almost never remarry, and the sons of concubines were denied equal, if any, access to politics. Legislation enforcing these practices was effective from 1415 to 1894.9

The tightening of these laws and their enforcement came after the Ch’ing invasions of Korea in 1627 and 1636. Korean Confucianists insisted that Ch’ing had destroyed Chinese civilization, so it became their duty to preserve the ancient ways through adherence to ‘pure’ Neo-Confucianism.10 Debates over proper family manners and rites came to the political forefront. Neo-Confucian family ideology spread to the commoners more thoroughly in the 17th and 18th centuries via private academies and the village code. Private academies, which even commoners could attend, proliferated to the extent that the ratio of academies to population exceeded that of any Chinese dynasty.11 The village code was a local social contract of sorts regarding Confucian family ethics.

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7 Pak Yong-ok 24-31.
8 Deuchler 22.
9 Hesung C. Koh, quoted in Yi 69.
10 According to Lee Ki-baik, Neo-Confucianism solidified into dogma at this time. 204-206
11 Palais, quoted in Yi 73.
that focused largely on the punishment of people who violated those ethics. Social rules concerning the proper place of each family member, then, permeated Korean society by the 1700s.

Sexual or romantic love between husband and wife was scorned as weak and destructive, as it could lead to the wife feeling and even acting superior to her husband. In addition, the husband could become distracted from his social or political duties if he indulged in selfish desire for his wife, thus indirectly weakening the state. Bad kings were considered victims of evil wives or concubines. Thus, women were defined as one of two things: the virtuous wife (who need not, or even ought not to be attractive) who facilitates the political success of her husband, or the beautiful woman who by seduction causes the destruction of the man in the public sphere. The harshness of a married woman’s situation is exposed in the language of a document known as the seven instances of extreme disobedience (ch’ilch’ul), which stipulates appropriate reasons for a man to expulse his wife: disobedience toward the parents-in-law, failure to produce a son, adultery, theft, undue jealousy, grave illness, and extreme talkativeness.

The Korean woman of the noble class was afforded the power to control the workings of the home: she disposed of her husband’s money as she deemed appropriate for the improvement or continued well-being of the house and family. At worst, such responsibilities were akin to being maid, nanny, and bookkeeper; at best, the wife may have felt a sense of importance in being allowed to make decisions, as long as her stature

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12 Kim Tu-hon 130
13 Kim 20.
14 Yi 66.
was not negated by the hapless occasion of not bearing a son. The woman existed as an entity only in relation to other people, as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. On the other hand, Korean women of the commoner class had to work in the fields just as her husband and children did. However, it was the strictures of the higher moral code as practiced by yangban that was passed on to society’s concept of ethical conduct when the dynasty ended, and therefore it is this code that continues to effect society today.

A woman’s roles carried over into the twentieth century, even after the official end of the Chosôn Dynasty in 1910 and the introduction of modernization in Korea. One Korean scholar has described the continued subservient role of women thus:

In this model marriage, the wife lives for and through the man in her life; no other choices even dawn in her consciousness. Her identity and meaning are controlled by her husband’s personal needs…her being is nonexistent.16

Continuation of these roles was abetted by what some have called the ‘yangbanization’ of Korean society. The ruling class lost their legal hegemony when Korea was annexed by Japan, thus involuntarily opening yangban society to commoners. After the rise and fall of private academies, this served to further cement the social mores of Neo-Confucian family ethics throughout society. The Japanese used Confucian patriarchy in modern education as an ideological underpinning for the emperor. Gender segregation in public places was maintained, and the legal status of women during the colonial period was actually degraded as the legal authority of the head of the family was greatly increased.17

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17 Yi 88.
This ‘head of family’ law, wherein the oldest male in the family had legal rights over all other members of the family, was not done away with until 1989.18

Today in Korea, societal pressures still dictate that a woman should focus on getting married at least by her mid-twenties, for she becomes a cause of concern to all around her if she has not made her match by the age of twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Sons continue to be valued over daughters—not to the extreme as in the past, but the abortion rate among middle-class housewives is astronomical, and the discovery that one’s first child will be a girl holds a significant place in that rate. In fact, it is illegal in Korea for a woman to find out the sex of her child before it is born. Without directly revealing the baby’s gender, doctors will often give obvious hints about it. The role of mother still appears to be the most taxing of roles for women because of the mandated burden to subsume herself to those in her tri-partite relationships: husband, in-laws, and children. The cost of not becoming a wife or mother in Korea can amount to a heavy psychological burden and alienation from society.

3. Defining hysteria

In order to evaluate the psychological disturbances created by these expectations on modern women as revealed in Pak Wansô’s stories, I must first define my terms. It will also be useful to review the theoretical underpinnings of gendered identity, since the women (characters) caught in a patriarchal web of subjugation necessarily deal with identity issues. A brief exposé of hysteria in Victorian English literature, to use as cases

18 Yi 90.
in point, will follow. First I will describe hysteria as it has been defined and discussed in
the West, touching on the uses of the term ‘madness’ as well.

I propose that hysteria is directly related to issues of individual identity. Some
women are unable to develop a sense of self because of the institutional repression of
their sex. Others may begin down the road of self-discovery only to be thwarted in their
expression of self by the same repression. These circumstances lead to no escape from an
impossible situation other than hysteria. This may be the only tool for the voiceless half
of the population to make a statement concerning their frustration. Women who
unconsciously desire to break through the silence, as well as those who snap mentally
because they are not allowed to express themselves, can only go outside themselves into
an altered mental state in order to break out of the repression that binds them. Here the
word ‘unconscious’ is significant since there are women who make conscious efforts to
dismantle the patriarchy, and they do not inadvertently rely on a hysterical escape to
effect changes.

What exactly is hysteria? It was described as a ‘woman’s disease’ in 1801 and
derives from the Greek word *hysterikos*, a “Greek notion that hysteria was peculiar to
women and caused by *hystera*, or womb.”19 Initially it was believed that the uterus
travelled around the woman’s body causing mental strife and emotional outbursts.
Hysteria became a term used to describe women when they had bursts of what appeared
to be temporary madness or insanity. It was an uncontrolled physical drive—in other
words, it sprang from her unconscious. Women experiencing moments of hysteria were
often termed ‘mad’ during the fits, thus the subsequent interchangeability of terms.
However, ‘madness’ is sometimes used to refer to women who do or say things outside of
the prescribed hierarchical order. A woman who advocated her right to vote in Victorian
times, for example, was often labeled ‘mad’. Men would not understand her reasoning in
attempting to shake up the embedded system, so they concluded she must be mad, which
could be loosely equated with ‘illogical’.

This brings the discussion to a more theoretical view of gender roles as proscribed
by psychoanalysts. Though this paper is largely unconcerned with the formation of
gender identity, it is in this process that Freud spells out the symbol and reality of female
suppression. Operating within the patriarchal structure of his own society, Freud
describes the female in his Oedipal phase of development as discovering that she has
been ‘castrated’ since she does not have the male penis. This is the initiation into her
identity as a person who lacks because of physically inferiority, which also translates to
an emotional ‘scar, a sense of inferiority.’ Here Freud offers up what the men of his
day could view as a logical and scientific basis to support the prevailing notion of
women’s inferiority. Although Freud claimed that babies are innately bisexual and
without gender identity, thus becoming the first to debunk essentialism, his depiction of
the early onset of the Oedipal complex in fact creates a biological determinant for the
inferiority of women.

The idea of the superego, which appears in my analysis of a story below, also
comes from Freud. During the Oedipal stage the young boy and girl alike fear their
father because he brandishes a weapon (which translates as ‘authority’) the boy may one
day develop if he identifies with the father and loses his taboo attachment to his mother.
If he succeeds, presumably his father will not castrate him. The girl has already lost that

19 Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary online at http://www.m-w.com.
battle, but she turns toward the father anyway since the mother is clearly inferior, and at least the father can give her a baby to make up for not having a penis. 21 The father is seen as the “figure of authority and moral law,” 22 which little boys and girls internalize as what may be called a conscience, or the “inner agency of social and moral prohibition.” 23 In women the superego breeds guilt when they attempt to act for themselves in such a way that extends beyond social restrictions. Their guilt seems particularly voluminous because there are so many things society does not approve of for women.

Jacques Lacan focuses on a baby’s entry into language as the stage defining its identity. His ‘symbolic order’ parallels Freud’s Oedipal stage, but with the important shift to language, such that human identity stems from what we can symbolize to ourselves through language. Lacan bases his theory on Ferdinand de Saussure’s well-known work on the structure of language as signifiers (sound elements) and signifieds (images or concepts). Though Lacan, a self-avowed disciple of Freud, describes the ‘symbolic order’ differently from Freud’s Oedipal stage, he uses many of Freud’s basic assumptions to complete his theory. There is still the fear of castration that separates the little boy or girl from the mother. The child is then forced to use language to get across desires that were previously taken care of automatically in their symbiotic relationship with their mother. Language, then, is developed because of lack. Lacan purports that “the phallus is the [transcendental] signifier of this lack since it represents the paternal

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20 Sigmund Freud, ‘Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes’ (1925), in On Sexuality 337. Quoted in Pam Morris 97.
21 There are obvious gaps in such an analysis, and feminist scholars have long pointed out the logical fallacies inherent in Freud’s work. Despite its problems, however, Freud’s theory has had an enormous impact on psychoanalytic criticism, and continues to do so today.
22 Morris 96.
23 Morris 98.
law which imposes the loss of the mother." Thus language becomes what Lacan terms the ‘Law of the Father.’ The ‘symbolic order’ is repressive because the nature of language is repressive, and patriarchal law is encoded from very early in human life.

Lacan’s work becomes important in the world of female hysteria because often women use language itself to break patriarchal barriers. Language becomes a subversive tool when ideas or desires relegated to the depths of the unconscious, known as taboos, are spoken. Words that reach outside prescriptive societal rules may disrupt the Law of the Father by refusing to abide by its enforcement of logically reasoned language. Often the hysteric’s language seems to make no sense to participants in the repressive system; it may be labeled babbling, irrational, or ludicrous. Ironically yet inevitably, language will be used against itself in a hysterical (because it is unconscious) act of breaking taboos, as seen in Pak’s “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House” below, for example.

There is also an example of this in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Pam Morris notes the patriarchal hegemony on rational language and quotes the scene in which the female protagonist, Mrs. Ramsay, dares question the soundness of her husband’s pronouncement that it will rain tomorrow. By so doing, she “challenges the very basis of patriarchal order—its monopoly of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’.” The excerpt from the book reveals Mr. Ramsay’s reaction to such effrontery:

> The extraordinary irrationality of her remark, the folly of women’s minds enraged him...she flew in the face of facts, made his children hope what was utterly out of the question, in effect told lies.

In this case the wife was guilty of no more than doubting her husband’s surety that it would rain the following day, yet this was enough to set him into a rage. How impudent

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24 Morris 104.
25 Morris 106.
of her to question him and thus venture out of the bounds of appropriate marital relations! Immediately she is labeled foolish and extraordinarily irrational—depictions that stand on the borderline between merely silly and ‘mad’. For once a person loses rationality entirely, is this not akin to losing one’s mind? After all, Webster’s second definition for ‘rational’ is “of sound mind: SANE.”

There are well-documented cases of hysteria in the tradition of English literature, especially in the Victorian era. There is literature written by women such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, for example. There is also Freud’s classic case study of Dora and Breuer’s of Anna O. These women became hysterical because of severe repression inflicted upon them by the patriarchal society in which they lived, which disallowed them the use of words in language or writing to provide for themselves a mental/emotional outlet. For some it seemed that falling into one form of madness or another was their only means of escaping the repression that bound them. The use of madness as an escape is a well-debated concept in literary criticism. Often “the central female character is literally driven mad by the obstacles (symbolic and real) placed in the way of her self-expression.”

By extension, they are not allowed to form personalities of their own, but are expected to fit the ideal image of what ‘woman’ is supposed to be. In Pak’s novel *The Naked Tree*, the female protagonist is not driven mad to the point of institutionalization, but she loses her mother’s affection after her brothers are killed in the war (leaving ‘only the girl’) and is unable to find an outlet for self-expression. The combination of these disasters sends her spinning into fits and bursts of madness, or hysteria.

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26 Morris 106.
27 *Webster’s II: New College Dictionary* 919.
Here I will delineate various manifestations of hysteria that I find in Pak’s works and that other critics have found in Victorian literature. There is the senility or amnesia of the old that in some cases seems to be a psychosomatic affliction due to an unconscious desire to break out of a repressive situation, as is the case with the grandmother in “Butterfly of Illusion” and the mother in “My Very Last Possession.” There is full-blown madness, where the woman becomes incoherent in word and/or action, deviating entirely from what is considered sane behavior, as in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Balzac’s “Adieu.” There is the madness, also psychosomatic, where a person ‘loses her mind’ momentarily, performing some act unawares that she would not have done ‘in her right mind’, as in “Three Days in that Autumn.”

Finally, there is the madness that relates to a woman’s use of words that are forbidden in the patriarchal society in which she lives. She spews out forbidden words to break through her repression, and she seems to have no control over what comes out of her mouth. This is seen in an excerpt from Jane Eyre. In the seminal work The Madwoman in the Attic, Susan Gubar and Sandra M. Gilbert describe this phenomenon and indicate its inevitability in Victorian England. They show how Jane unwittingly diverges from her proscribed role as a Victorian child by exploding in anger at Mrs. Reed. Reflecting on that moment later in life, Jane thinks, “It seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control.” Similar outbursts are seen in Pak’s “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House” and The Naked Tree.

28 Goodman 10.
29 qtd. in Gubar 343.
In this paper, for the sake of convenience, I choose to employ the term ‘hysteria’ to refer to two disparate reactions to suppression. The first is a condition in which a woman finds her mind deranged to some extent (like senility or amnesia), and the second is the experience of a sudden unconscious outburst that defies the rules of the patriarchal system. In Pak’s stories, hysteria indicates that societal pressure has become too intense for the protagonists to operate any longer in a rational manner. The source of their hysteria lies in the fact that, unlike Jane Eyre, these women seem to have never been granted the opportunity to find out who they are, in other words, to develop an identity or ego. They live their lives for their husband or children with no thought for themselves because society dictates that it must be so. Then it is only by falling into what seems to others either a fit of madness or general dementia that they have a chance to break out of their predetermined roles. Only then can they begin to recognize what they have been missing by living a half-life, as shadows of existence.

Finally, this hysterical tearing down of superimposed walls or wallpaper or masks settles into one of two different outcomes for Pak’s women. Either they seem to get caught in dementia, unable to recognize their problem for what it is, or they arrive at an awakening and take steps to move their lives in the direction of learning to allow themselves to be real, to actively grow and develop and live. There is only one story of the five treated here, “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House,” in which the female protagonist makes a clear break from her repressive past and proceeds to develop her own identity. The female characters in the other stories remain either in their ‘mad’ escape from the world or in a state of ambiguity as to their total mental health.

30 Jane is aware of her fiery nature, which in her world must be repressed, from the time she is a child. Gubar 444.
Chapter Two: Wearing masks

1. A disturbed mind behind the mask: “My Very Last Possession”

“My Very Last Possession” proves to be stylistically unique among Pak’s short stories. The structure of the story is built around one phone call between a certain (Chang-hwan’s) mother and her sister-in-law, but it takes the form of a monologue, with the sister-in-law speaking only one sentence. Chang-hwan’s mother alludes to dialogue by restating and answering questions. By verbally isolating the narrator, the author skillfully creates an atmosphere of loneliness around her. The monologue is reminiscent of stream of consciousness writing, but the author gives it more direction. The narrator rambles on without seeming to take a breath, revealing her story piecemeal, but the author makes certain that the story is revealed in full by the end.

Chang-hwan’s mother’s apparently cathartic monologue, with its jumpy and yet fluid style, resembles what the French feminist school calls l’écriture féminine. Chang-hwan’s mother’s language resembles that found in certain poetry, as described by French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva:

The modernist poem, with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning.

31 Traditionally, and also currently, a woman will often be referred to by her role as her oldest child’s mother, rather than by her own name. In the story, we never learn Chang-hwan’s mother’s name.

32 Here Kristeva does not describe l’écriture féminine per se, but I find that these elements depict some aspects of the larger concept of it. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, Feminist Literary Criticism, ed. Mary Eagleton (New York: Longman Inc., 1991) 45.
Chang-hwan’s mother abandons the linear manner of speaking by introducing a topic, digressing to a different topic, then suddenly returning to the original topic, making the transition incongruent and awkward. It is as if she sits at the center of a wheel that represents her story, and when she wants to say something, she reaches out more or less randomly to one spot or another on the wheel. By the end of the conversation she seems to have fleshed out every segment of the wheel, and avoids total chaos by coming full circle, returning at the end to a metaphor she had used in the beginning. This closure, however, goes against the grain of *l’écriture féminine*’s espousal of open-ended and non-delimited writing.

The story concerns a mother of two daughters in their late twenties and one son who was killed seven years previous in an anti-government demonstration. The opening paragraph of the story foreshadows the mental distress suffered by this mother with the following off-hand comment: “When your mind’s twisted, it’s easy to toy with all kinds of weird notions, I’m afraid.” At first it seems that this mother simply enjoys talking, but as she reveals her story bit by bit it becomes clear that her incessant speaking acts as a catharsis for her. In fact, it may be said that talking this way to her sister-in-law is the only real-life release she can find from a daily mental burden that continues to afflict her years after the death of her son.

Chang-hwan’s mother represses her pain and tries to appear normal to her friends and relations. She puts up a stoic façade and convinces herself that smothering her grief is the proper way to behave. She often consoles herself by extolling Chang-hwan in her mind’s eye whenever she is confronted with the success of another woman’s son. Her

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33 Chun Kyung-Ja, trans. 198.
life has become an unconscious charade as she plays up to society’s expectations of her as a mother, particularly the mother of a supposed martyr for his country.

The stylistic element that reveals this masking is her use of contradiction. Chang-hwan’s mother seems to be simultaneously acculturated in and opposed to the traditional practice of older parents living with their first son’s family. She protests loudly to her sister-in-law that she intended to let Chang-hwan live on his own when the time came: “I meant even to let Chang-hwan set up a separate household as soon as he got married and never entertained the thought of living with him.”34 She uses the word “even” to emphasize the contrast with the idea of living off her daughters in her old age. Yet she quashes that idea with, “I never thought of living with my own son, so, you see, why on earth would I ever have dreamed of living with one of my daughters?”35 Although her intentions sound progressive, her language grants that it is common practice for parents in old age, especially widows like herself, to live with their sons, and that she would have to defend her decision if she broke away from the custom.

The reason she gives for choosing not to live with her son stems from her desire that he lead a full life. She compares her marriage experience to that of her sister-in-law. “Three years had barely passed since you’d freed yourself from your mother-in-law’s yoke when you became a widow and a mother-in-law yourself, so you wouldn’t know the pleasure shared by a man and wife living alone, the taste of that liberty, would you?”36 Here she praises the freedom of living alone with her immediate family, yet in the following paragraph she turns around and expresses envy for her sister-in-law’s situation. “When I was trudging to the market or cooking in the kitchen with my baby strapped on

34 Chun 203.
35 Chun 203.
my back, your children were nestled in the arms of their grandmother and grandfather like treasured jewels. Their backs never touched the floor, and you know very well how much I envied that, don’t you?^37

Chang-hwan’s mother does not only speak in, but also lives in contradiction to her words. She vehemently states that she would never live off one of her daughters, which is financially viable because of the pension her husband left behind. Yet, hovering around the age of 60, she lives with her two unmarried daughters. The younger blames their mother for her sister’s inability to have found a husband by the age of 30 because she is looking for a man who would be willing to live with and support their mother. In addition, Chang-hwan’s mother uses her husband’s pension for spending money, and allowances from her daughters’ money for food, which leaves one to wonder how she would support herself if each of her daughters married and moved away. She has become stuck between her desire to dismantle filial roles for her children’s sake and her practice of upholding those roles. This leaves her in a state of limbo as to exactly what role she plays in relation to her children.

This story is further riddled with contradiction and discrepancies. For example, the narrator’s inability to remember dates at her age is emphasized as the story begins, but towards the end of the story the reader finds that what Chang-hwan’s mother remembers is more a matter of choice than ability. This selective memory is what I will call hysteric amnesia since it issues from her unconscious desire to cling to her son and forget the distractions of daily life that would rob her of a fantasy world in which she still lives with her son. It seems that her sister-in-law has called to bring out the fact that they

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36 Chun 202.
37 Chun 202.
missed the annual rites for their ancestors. Chang-hwan’s mother retorts, “My, my, it just slipped my mind. You forgot, too? Well, since you and I both failed to remember the date, we couldn’t do the ancestral ceremony. Couldn’t, or didn’t, I don’t know.”³⁸ This admission foreshadows a later confession.

Chang-hwan’s mother continues: “Why, I hate memorizing things. Especially numbers.”³⁹ She tells the story of how she forgot her own phone number one day. Further into the conversation, she underscores her inability to recall numbers in a startling confession that she does not remember her daughters’ ages: “True, I’m not living my life constantly crossing t’s and dotting i’s about my daughters’ ages....”⁴⁰ Later, however, she reprimands her sister-in-law for forgetting the exact dates of certain anti-government demonstrations.

What do you mean, when? In 1987, at the time of the June 10 uprising, I said. Please, sister, don’t ever confuse June 10 with June 29. You can’t help mixing them up, you say? You may be confused about some things, but how can you mix those dates up? You confuse June 10 and June 29, can’t tell April 13 from April 19, and May 16 from May 18 whirl around in your mind. Well, I really can’t stand it anymore. At times I wonder if you’re playing the fool in my presence.⁴¹

Obviously, she is capable of remembering dates. She then confesses the truth, that “the ancestral rites for the great-grandmother are no longer of any importance to me, that’s why I can forget the date,” and continues, “the great-grandmother’s ceremony is one thing that no longer matters to me, but it certainly isn’t the only one.”⁴² There are more examples of contradiction throughout the story, but this confession in particular

³⁸ Chun 199.
³⁹ Chun 200.
⁴⁰ Chun 203.
⁴¹ Chun 209.
⁴² Chun 209.
shows Chang-hwan’s mother in the process of peeling back the layers of pretense that she piled up over the years to hide her grief.

Finally, after seven years, she reaches a breaking point when grief and jealousy overwhelm her at the home of a former classmate forced to live as a 24-hour nurse to her invalid son. The outpouring of her tears become her long-awaited yet unsought catharsis. The tears wash away pretension by exposing the intensity of her emotion. On the telephone now, she confirms the catharsis by recognizing it and repeating it to her sister-in-law. “That outburst of crying liberated me, I felt. It was as if I’d finally freed myself from the stranger I’d forced myself to become with a frightful effort.”

Chang-hwan’s mother had suffered much by prodding herself to be something she was not, thus living in a contradictory state trapped between her perception of what society demanded of her and her actual needs.

2. Shedding Confucian mores: *The Naked Tree*

Approaching Pak Wansô’s novel *The Naked Tree* analytically from the viewpoint of the heroine’s psychological state reveals a paradigm of madness similar in some ways to that seen in her short story “Identical Apartments.” Namely, due to oppressive circumstances in their lives, the female lead characters succumb to an off-kilter mental state akin to verging on a nervous breakdown. Here I will look into clues in the text of *The Naked Tree* that indicate Kyong-a, the heroine, experiences instances of madness or hysteria, and why.

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43 Chun 219.
In *The Naked Tree* Kyong-a lives alone with her mother in Seoul and works at the P/X on the American military base. Her unbearable mental circumstances largely derive from the war, which looms ominously, constantly threatening destruction. Her father dies just before the war, and her brothers get killed by a bomb that lands on a corner of the house. This event plays a key role in Kyong-a’s mental state, as she feels responsible for their deaths. They had been hiding in a secret panel in the house to escape being found by the communists. But when relatives come to their house to hide out, Kyong-a suggests that her brothers move to a closet in the servant’s quarters that has not been touched for years, secretly feeling that this might be the safer of the two hiding places. After cleaning out the closet, the young men move in. That very night a bomb hits and tears them apart in a most gruesome and devastating way. Kyong-a will never forgive herself.

Kyong-a buries this event in the subconscious realm of her mind to avoid the extreme daily suffering it would bring her. As a result she displays symptoms of hysteria such as depression, anxiety, and ambivalence. Ways in which these manifest themselves are in her constant desire to be somewhere else doing something else; the hatred she feels for her mother; and the way she treats the man who is courting her.

In the first case, Kyong-a feels stifled by the monotony of her existence. Her world appears grey to her, totally lacking vibrancy and excitement. She yearns to do something more active, more bold, more full of life. Finishing her studies would probably add spice to her life and open up opportunities, but when her cousin urges her to go back to Pusan with him to continue her studies, she refuses. He tries to sway her by
describing her future life there as ‘brighter’, at which Kyong-a feels her heart beat faster. “My longing for light and joy wrenched its head up inside me.” But she adds,

I was severely torn between the longing for a brighter life and the resignation that I might never escape from my situation. I knew that this feeling, this pain, was obviously meaningless. I would never become a new person through that pain….Once again I realized that layer after layer of chains bound me.

The reader is left to wonder why she denies herself the chance to take back the life she had and enjoy herself once again. Does she prefer to wallow in her misery? It seems that she has some connection, perhaps sentimental, to the Seoul house where she lived for years. Too, she would be leaving her mother behind if she went to Pusan. The main issue seems to be her need to perpetuate her depressed state. The atmosphere she creates reminds one of living in a small room with a ceiling that is too low and lights that are too dim, with a grey uncleanness clinging to the walls. Even she recognizes the enclosed space she withdraws to and from which she operates: “my field of vision [inside myself] was as dark and narrow as that of a snail hiding inside its shell. But it was only there, inside that confined range, that I could feel at ease with the world around me.”

When Kyong-a loses her father she feels some alienation and neglect from her mother, but after her brothers die she feels nothing less than contempt for her. “The gods are so cruel. Why did they take all my sons, leaving only the girl behind?” her mother says once, as if clinging to the traditional notion that daughters are worth nothing in a family. The sting of those words initiate Kyong-a’s hatred for her mother. Upon hearing

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44 Yu 83.
45 Yu 83.
46 Yu 76.
47 Yu 148.
those words, Kyong-a sobs violently for a long time under the yellow gingko trees in her backyard. She remembers, “I avoided my mother as much as possible. Whenever I saw her, I felt so guilty about being alive that I shrank away. The only place I could escape her was under the trees. There, I was cultivating a hatred for my mother without knowing it.”48

Kyong-a’s hatred for her mother also stems from her witnessing of her mother’s mental decline. Since the brothers were killed her mother has not been her old, vibrant self. Whereas she used to bustle around the house cooking wonderful food, brighten up the atmosphere with her singing or joyful banter, or act as the perfect social host, now she shuffles around, cooks the same sour kimchi soup every day, and mumbles to herself reclusively. In her Kyong-a sees everything she does not want to become. She resents her for giving up on life when she herself had to suffer all the same losses. But most poignantly, Kyong-a had always been daddy’s girl, while the boys were always favored by their mother. Here there may be an element of “hatred of the mother [as] the dark underside of oedipal desire for the father,” in Freud’s terms.49

For Kyong-a to live a normal life, she unconsciously represses the memory of her brothers’ deaths. She often wishes that “the angry waves of war would surge over us…reducing people to misery. A violent pleasure swept through me, and I laughed like a witch. I also trembled with the fright that the war would rush over me.” She goes on to say, “The two wishes, forever contradictory, lived in me always, plunging me into a frenzy every once in a while. Soon I would be cut in two.”50 She harbors “a crazed, shrill longing and at the same time a fear of the war; I was always unbalanced and

48 Yu 148.  
49 Jacobus 213.
exhausted because of the conflict that raged within me."  

She tries to take her mind back to the source of her pain, but she is unable to do it. The last thing she remembers is the yellow gingko trees. “Why had I looked up at those leaves, thinking that I wanted to die and then, that I wanted to live?”  

The root of her pain lies in the tragedy of her brothers’ deaths and her mother’s cursing words.

Here begins Kyong-a’s descent into hysteria. The descriptions of her mental/emotional state clearly depict the storms brewing inside her, the worse for having no outlet in which to rage other than the enclosure of her own mind. “I wanted to make [my mother] miserable, to make her feel at least a fraction of the misery I was feeling….I wanted to die. I wanted to die. But the gingko trees were so splendid…I wanted to live. I wanted to die. I wanted to live. I wanted to die.”  

Her inability to either reconcile or learn to live with the extreme contradictions in her mind set her on a path to a repressed madness. “I began to mumble excuses. The war would return soon, and this time nobody wold survive it. I had to make excuses, feeling embarrassed about my survival.” Her brothers’ friends would come and go, offering condolences, and she would mumble that they would not survive the war, either. “My hesitant and somewhat frightened incantations grew in shrillness each time they were repeated.”  

This signifies the spiraling of her hysteria.

Another indication of her tortured mind is how she deals with her contradictory feelings. Part of her hysteric mind stems from her relationship with her mother, and part grows out of herself.

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50 Yu 55.
51 Yu 18.
52 Yu 18.
53 Yu 149.
I thought my mother’s blank eyes were constantly following me. They seemed to be ordering me to sit back and suffer the war. I packed without her knowledge, unpacked, and packed again. It was part of my struggle, more complex and desperate than mere hesitation….I packed and unpacked, torn between my desire that the war would come to kill off everyone and my fear that the war could rush upon me at any moment. …Having inherited the contradiction without its roots, I let myself be torn apart.55

The ambivalence Kyong-a feels about what she wants to do with her life appears starkly in her attitude towards the man who courts her and the way she acts with him. She finds herself attracted to him as she looks up to him sitting nervously atop a ladder, fixing a light bulb in her station at the P/X. When he descends the ladder and she looks at him straight on, she disappointedly realizes he’s just average. He starts to come around and flirt with her; and although she believes herself to be disinterested, she ends up spending time with him. She feels she does not much like him, yet she continues to see him, and it becomes obvious that he is interested in more than a friendship. In fact, he seems keen on marrying her. Kyong-a continues in her disdainful attitude towards him, but she seems to be growing more comfortable with him as well. Finally, due to his lie to his sister that they are engaged and his sister’s meddling ways, they end up on a track to get married. Kyong-a continues to vacillate.

It becomes apparent that Kyong-a will not allow herself to escape her repressive situation. She vehemently does not wish to turn out like her mother, yet she does nothing to change her course of monotony or her fearful surroundings. Herein lies another manifestation of her hysteria. She cannot let go of the guilt she feels about considering herself to be the cause of her brothers’ deaths. She dwells in a lonely world where she cannot say anything to her mother, both because of her hate and because she knows her

54 Yu 149.
mother would be unable to respond or comfort her (perhaps this is another reason for her hate). She has one good acquaintance at work with whom she could talk, but she feels no one would understand her, so she merely listens to her friend’s problems instead.

She complains of her hysterical state: “I was living amidst the cries and shouts of my many selves, selves that I had no control over. I hadn’t thought of sorting them out or repressing them. Instead, the cries and shouts divided me up, spinning me to the point of dizziness.”56 There is no direct referent of her “many selves,” but she seems to refer to her myriad contradictory desires. She claims that she does not repress them, but these are “cries and shouts” that well up inside her, naturally yearning to be voiced. The non-act of not voicing them is in itself repressive, even if unconsciously so.

Kyong-a gradually falls in love with Ock Hui-do, one of the painters that works under her direction in the P/X portrait corner, but he is older and married. It becomes painfully apparent that although their clandestine meetings (which amount to no more than commiseration in front of a toy shop and a burning kiss near Myong-dong cathedral) assuage her desolation, she will not be able to find fulfillment through him. She opens her heart to him in a wordless manner, bringing the focus of the relationship to the physical and the understanding that they find each other exciting people in a war-torn world where most seem lifeless or superficial. She could talk to him about her problems, but she does not. Neither do they talk about their relationship; if they had, Kyong-a would come to know that she merely brightens a dull spot in Ock’s life for a time. He has no intention of deserting his wife and five children for her. To Kyong-a, however, he

55 Yu 150.
56 Yu 93.
is everything. She becomes painfully aware of his attachment to his family when she visits his home one day.

Kyong-a’s symptoms of hysteria also appear in her departure from what are considered normal social interactions. During her visit at Ock’s house Kyong-a develops a hatred for his wife. His wife is so kind and lovely, though, that Kyong-a cannot resist admiring her inner and outward beauty, which results in a conflict of emotions. When she leaves that day, the wife accompanies her to the street to see her off, obviously unaware of her dallies with Ock. Because of this, Kyong-a seems to feel a sense of power over the woman. She assumes that because Ock’s current painting is a dark depiction of a dead tree, his life is barren and his wife does not fulfill him: “Painting is a visual language. In his painting, I see poverty and desperation. You could have given him more of life’s joy.”57 Kyong-a brashly exceeds propriety when she blurts out these thoughts to his wife.

She has a skewed idea of her ability to escape her pain through him: “‘I’d take off my clothes and let him paint me….’ I hadn’t thought before I spoke, but once the words were out, I thought that was what I really wanted and in order to save both myself and Ock Hui-do I really had to do that.”58 Kyong-a retorts to the wife’s reply indignantly and irrationally. She has the audacity and naivete to challenge her, she who has been Ock’s wife for twenty years, by firing, “Who do you think he would prefer?” (ibid). The woman becomes terrified and is at a total loss when Kyong-a finally asks her insinuatingly, “Don’t you realize who I am?” Her words are bizarre and carry no meaning to the woman. They only reveal a frenzied mind. Kyong-a herself realizes that

57 Yu 125.
58 Yu 125.
she has no reason to terrorize the woman, but she “wanted to crush her.” She adds, “And I liked this woman. Still, I had to make her angry with me. I was rebelling against her for no reason.”

The key point in her relationships with the three people closest to her is that she does not feel that she will be able to open up verbally and free herself from her guilt through a verbal act of catharsis. For example, while caring for her incoherent mother after the bombing, she says, “[At night] I could still caress my mother’s delicate hands, and whisper what I was thinking. In fact, I was afraid of my mother when she was awake. I shrank under her apathetic eyes. My affection and my dreams withered before them.” She could only reveal her heart in a realm where she could not be answered or comforted.

If Kyong-a lacks words to describe the unbearable weight of her guilt, it is because the tragedy she witnessed was so great. The reader has no idea what happened to her brothers since the novel is written in first-person narrative, until three-quarters of the way through the story. The incident is so traumatic that Kyong-a has buried the memory of it deep within her psychological recesses. It is no longer possible for her to remember it. At one point she reviews the memories of her life, but she can only think back so far, to the visual imagery of yellowing gingko trees against a fall blue sky in her yard. She wonders why she cannot think further back. It takes another visual image to jog her memory, which occurs when she goes out with an American G.I.

She follows him to a hotel room in the hopes that she will be able to peel off and discard her layers of distress and self-deceit or -repression.

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59 Yu 125.
60 Yu 147.
I wanted to be stripped by Joe. He would certainly take off my clothes. At the same time he would help me get rid of all the layers of taboo….Through him I wanted to step out of all those superfluous layers of myself. I wanted to throw off those selves, the ones that sometimes tore me to pieces, that hid behind myself and transformed with such dizzying speed without ever consulting me.\textsuperscript{61}

It is obvious that she feels she has no control over the hysteria that grips her. She wishes to rid herself of these problems, especially her penchant for hating her mother, but she does not believe she can do it on her own, which is probably true. However, the physical removal of her clothes by a near stranger will break only the taboo of her sexuality, thus her hope in Joe as the savior of her hysteric selves is wrapped up in and warped by another of her fantasized channels of escape. Thus it is sadly ineffectual.

Kyong-a fools herself into thinking that the peeling off of her clothes will free her from the “stifling cocoon” that trapped her. “I had the vague feeling that something was being cast off within me. No, I hoped that it was so.”\textsuperscript{62} She mistakes sexual excitement for a weightless flight in which she is freed from her pain. Yet there is something that keeps her from fully throwing off the weight of her pain, something preventing her from fully abandoning herself to the enjoyment of her senses. Obviously her mental anguish cannot be erased by this her first sexual encounter, and when she sees her blood on his white sheets, her mind goes into a tail-spin. Suddenly she remembers the blood of her brothers on the white sheets she had prepared for their bedding. The horrible tragedy and gruesome vision of that event comes flooding back to her. Her reaction shows just how little the act of removing of her clothes effected a release from her stifling condition. She screams with all her might, and like a frightened mouse refuses any help from Joe, does not even let him approach her. She is afraid he will tear her apart the way her brothers

\textsuperscript{61} Yu 131.
were ripped apart. She acts nervous and maniacal, prompting Joe to ask, “What’s the matter? Are you crazy?”63

Kyong-a’s act of repressing the memory of her brothers’ deaths reveals another aspect of her hysteria. The tragedy is too much for her to handle, so she creates a world for herself in which the incident has not occurred. When her memory comes flooding back suddenly, rather than break down and cry or talk to someone about it, she screams madly and dashes out of the hotel. Her life revolves around “the contradiction implied in living with impossible memories, the need to remember and tell and the desire to forget, memories with an inexhaustible and monstrous power to erupt and overwhelm the mind but which must somehow be laid aside if life is to continue.”64

For Kyong-a this “laying aside” takes the form of psychological self-repression. It mirrors the repression of self under the burden of patriarchal society that occurs unconsciously among other female protagonists in Pak’s works. To the end, Kyong-a cannot let go of her guilt by talking about it with others and allowing herself to receive their comfort. Part of the reason for this is that she mentally cannot even conjure up the origin of her distress. Thus she is left with no other outlet for her torment than periodic bursts of hysteria, which may keep her from going quite insane, but they do not have the power to release her from her chains of anguish.

Chapter Three: Lingering hysteria: flight and self-punishment

62 Yu 131.
63 Yu 135.
64 Keenan 48.
In “Three Days in that Autumn” and “Butterfly of Illusion” I examine two women who suffer hysteric states of mind because the strict dictates of the patriarchal, Neo-Confucian society do not allow them to escape the oppressive situations they have been cast into. Pak treats this theme through an exposé of the sense of loss and guilt her protagonists encounter as they move through life. Each encounters a period of hysteria that clearly bespeaks a disturbed mind. I will analyze “Butterfly of Illusion” in relation to the elderly mother, whose story is told by her daughter. I will focus on how the mother’s psychological burdens are brought to light through the motif of contradiction, after which I will describe the way in which she breaks out of her oppressed state. Then I will add my interpretation of “Three Days in that Autumn” to that of many Korean scholars who have analyzed this work.


“Butterfly of Illusion” tells the story of a grandmother who lives with her first daughter, Yongju, even though she has a married son who, according to the traditional Confucian system, ought to be the one taking care of her. Tension ripples through the family since “what both of them valued was not Mother, but the dated notion that for a parent to live and die at a daughter’s house while there is a son alive is a shame beyond all shame.” Still, the son and his wife do not seem anxious to provide for her, nor do they succeed in doing so when given the chance for a time. The grandmother seems to be phasing into senility: she mutters randomly to herself and others, forgets or mis-remembers past events, and worst yet, wanders off into the city seemingly aimlessly and gets herself lost,
unable to recall the way home. Her amnesia seems to increase, but not everything grandmother does is an act of senility:

One day, Mother went outside at the crack of dawn before anybody else was up. By the time the family finally found her, it was after midnight. After tracking her down, they realized Mother had not simply wandered off and gotten lost. From the outset she had planned to escape. Amazingly, she had taken with her a little bundle and was carrying some wrinkled bills she had been setting aside from her allowance.  

It is obvious by her act of setting aside money that she had been planning for some time to run away. Her state of mind stems from losing vitality as she is forced to live with and be cared for by her daughter, and is worsened by the social pressures for her to live with her son, who does not want her. She seems to forget things that are unpleasant to her, including where she lives, which may be seen as an unconscious desire to be somewhere else. She realizes this desire by creating an alternate reality that is her altered state of mind. The traditional system does not allow her to verbalize her desire to be active and not have to deal with the codified social system, thus she cannot recognize this desire within her. This leads her to experience hysteria, so-called because it is fueled by repressed desire, in the form of selective memory.

When Yŏngju finds her wandering mother, she assumes she is trying to get to her son’s house. Grandmother always complains about wishing to be elsewhere. She packs her bags and waits for her son to take her away. She entreats her daughter to take her to Kwachon. Kwachon is where she lived for ten years with Yŏngju and enjoyed hiking in the nearby mountains, participating in a badminton club, and other social activities. Her desire to be elsewhere surfaces when her Kwachon playground is destroyed by the construction of a tunnel, followed by the family’s relocation to a different neighborhood.

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65 Ryu Youngju, trans. 41.
It could be that the curtailment of her mountain excursions hurls her into hysteric amnesia. Her joy of her life is taken away and she comes to live as chattel in the alternating care of her daughter or son.

Yôngju interprets grandmother’s plea to go to Kwachon as a desire to live with her son, whose house is vaguely in that direction, but “the only thing strange about this wish was that it had not surfaced sooner” (i.e., when they lived in Kwachon). Yôngju feels guilty about keeping her mother at her house, since by tradition she should be living with her son, and about the fact that her brother honestly would rather not take their mother in to care for her. She cannot understand her mother’s plea to go to Kwachon, and this aggravates her to the point where she explodes if anyone suggests that perhaps Kwachon is really what her mother desires. To Yongju there seems to be no reason for her mother to desire Kwachon, and she probably considers it another sign of her mother’s failing mind.

Finally Yôngju imposes on her brother to take in their mother for a time to see if that helps the situation. At her son’s house, grandmother’s condition worsens. For the three months she lives there, she begs him to take her to Kwachon. He interprets this plea as a desire to move back in with her daughter. It becomes apparent to the reader that Yôngju and her brother are missing something important about their mother. The narrator, however, fills in the gap by outlining that which is already apparent to the reader:

The choice between her son and daughter was no longer important to [grandmother]. What she wanted was to be in Kwachon; Kwachon was neither here nor there. From the outside, [grandmother] looked like her mental faculties were deteriorating, but it could have been that they

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66 Ryu 33.
67 Ryu 38.
actually were improving. She had set up a no-man’s land of sorts called Kwachon, away from her daughter’s house, away from her son’s house, and away from having to be shuffled between the two as if she were a chattel. All she was asking was to be taken to this buffer zone.\textsuperscript{68}

However, the narrator gives no indication as to why grandmother would insist on Kwachon per se.

The episode at her son’s house graphically describes the grandmother’s feeling of being trapped. She is still prone to run away, so her daughter-in-law dresses her in pajamas to catch the attention of the neighbors if she happens to slip out. Yôngju describes her brother’s wife as “rational in the extreme”\textsuperscript{69} and mentions her position as head of her building’s tenants association, showing that she symbolizes an authoritarian man (as ‘rational’ is traditionally the domain of men), figuratively acting as the enforcer of the patriarchal system that confines grandmother.

Grandmother’s continued to escapes from the apartment bring her daughter-in-law to further restrict her by getting a new lock for the front door that cannot be opened from the inside without a key. To grandmother there seems to be no end to this confinement. She now wanders from room to room, opening doors and peering in as if each room is a new, empty one. “What sort of a house has this many rooms?” she exclaims.\textsuperscript{70} Her daughter-in-law feels compelled to lock grandmother in her room. Yôngju finally comes to her rescue when she visits one day and finds her trapped in her room, looking at herself in the mirror and shouting, “Who are you? Huh? Out of my way! I’m telling you, get lost!”\textsuperscript{71} Grandmother has lost all sense of identity and refuses to see herself that way, preferring to imagine that the reflection staring back at her is that

\textsuperscript{68} Ryu 41.
\textsuperscript{69} Ryu 42.
\textsuperscript{70} Ryu 42.
\textsuperscript{71} Ryu 42.
of an unknown woman. As soon as Yôngju takes her mother back to her home, however, she recovers from this hysteria “incredibly quickly.”\textsuperscript{72} She returns to her old self, “a person who seem[s] at ease, like a house with all its doors open,”\textsuperscript{73} in obvious contrast to the suffocating place she just came from.

At the end of the story, grandmother has been missing for almost six months. Her daughter finally locates her, finding her living at a small Buddhist temple with one female monk, or priestess. Grandmother is finally able to escape societal pressures only by lapsing into hysteric amnesia and literally running away from the world that enclosed her and deprived her of an identity outside her satellite relationships. The house represents the womb for grandmother, where she is reborn, child-like; it also represents her tomb, where she is dead to all other society, including her family. Not knowing whether her mother has any past connections with this building or the priestess,\textsuperscript{74} Yôngju cannot cross the threshold, unable to believe her eyes at how peaceful her mother appears. ‘No, this couldn’t possibly be real. It is an illusion I am seeing’, she thinks. Her mother looks as though she were experiencing “the freedom of having completely

\textsuperscript{71} Ryu 43.  
\textsuperscript{72} Ryu 44.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ryu 43.  
\textsuperscript{74} There are indications that the grandmother might have lived in that old house once, and that the priestess could have some familial connection with her, based on a brief story grandmother tells her about a widowed woman having an affair. However, the chronology is wrong for the priestess to be her illegitimate daughter, so the connection, if any, is left ambiguous. When grandmother arrives at the house, she goes about cooking in the kitchen as if it were her own—she knows exactly where everything is. In retrospect, it seems as if her desire to go to Kwachon could suggest her desire to return to this traditional house located amongst new apartment buildings. However, this too is problematic because there is no definite indication that this house is in Kwachon. Nor is there any indication of how grandmother came to find the place. There is a parallel story about this house and the priestess in “Butterfly of Illusion,” but I choose to leave it out of my analysis until the stories come together at the end because it does not include
shaken off the weight of life, the wastes of living.” She cannot believe her eyes because they reveal to her that her mother has an identity of her own, a life distinct from playing the role of her mother, which was never able to fulfill her the way she now appears to be fulfilled. The daughter stands in the ‘real’ world of responsibilities, obligations, and most of all, the necessity for a woman to fit snugly into the structured Confucian society. She stands gazing at her mother, whom she can accept in that state of having seemed to renounce all worldly demands only as a mirage of some unattainable fantasy. “Reality and illusion, no matter how close they were, and no matter how transparent, were two distinct worlds, the haze between them absolutely impassable.”

Now grandmother enjoys the peace of being whom she pleases, but only at the expense of breaking her connection with reality, both mentally and physically. There is no other way to escape the burden of a social order that dictates ideas such as “bearing a son who fails to care for you in your old age is the most miserable fate possible.” She seems more lucid now in her interactions with the priestess than she did with her own children, yet the reader is left to question whether she remains in a childlike, innocent state of escapist hysteria, or has come to consciously recognize her decision to break away from her family and the social order.

2. Guilt and societal alienation: “Three Days in that Autumn”

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grandmother until then. Also, I find some discrepancies in attempting to correlate the two stories.  
75 Ryu 61.  
76 Ryu 40.
“Three Days in that Autumn” also concerns a woman whose desires are in the end brought to the surface through hysteria, which is the only way she can break out of the reality of her life. In this case, the woman suffers from a disturbed mind just as the grandmother in “Butterfly of Illusion,” but she experiences a paroxysm of hysteria towards the end of the story that brings her to consciously recognize her repressed desires. The story revolves around a woman who defies the conventional roles expected of Korean women by never marrying. Her rape by an American soldier during the Korean War and her subsequent abortion lead her to set up a career as a gynecologist specializing in abortions. She chooses this profession to help women who are in the painful position, as she was, of not wanting the child they have come to carry.

The protagonist’s rape disturbs her tremendously, but she never reveals it or her abortion to anyone because they are considered shameful. “Sicknesses and pains all elicit pity, but that suffering attracts only accusations and contempt.”77 Her hatred has no outlet, which leads to an overwhelming sense of guilt that triggers her hysteria. She goes about her business removing the item of hatred from other women’s bodies—the unwanted child—but rather than cure her of her pain, it perpetuates it. “The hellish agony of being pregnant with an unwanted baby does not belong to the girl, but to me, resurrected from the deepest, darkest recesses of my heart”78

The office she rents for her practice was a photography studio before the war, and the only thing that remains intact is an overly plush, velvet chair. The first person to sit in that chair, even before she gets her first patient, is her father. Her mother has passed away, and she does not relish this visit from her father. It has been some time since she

77 Ryu Sukhee, trans. 160.
78 Ryu 194.
contacted him, and she has not informed him of her new place of residence. Her brothers pressure her to get married before their father passes away, but implicitly she knows she can never marry because of what happened to her during the war. And she refuses to tell anyone about the incident.

The meeting with her father is brief and uneventful, but his position of authority is apparent. He has to approve of his daughter’s clinic, which she seems to view as a superfluous, paternal act: “Once again, my father was granting his approval of something I had already begun.” He proceeds to lecture her in brief that she should never be concerned with making money because medicine should be a humanitarian art, practiced with compassion. Knowing of the hatred inside her for rape and abortion, her heart grows cold even handling the instruments she will use to operate. She privately scoffs at her father’s injunction, but feels the frustration of not being able to tell him of her horrid experience. “Not a soul would ever be able to guess my secret. Not that episode in the past, not my objectives for the future, not the anguish storming in my heart right now….”

The velvet chair becomes a symbol of her father. On that day he gives her a framed copy of the Hippocratic oath, and throughout her career the doctor can never discard the kitschy chair or, she says, she would have to hang the Hippocratic oath. Despite her lack of desire to see her father, she wants to imprint on her mind the sight of him in that chair. It seems as if she places herself continually under the gaze of her father, this authoritarian figure who approves of her only as long as he does not know the truth. She cannot let go of the burning reminder of this sham approval, and it seems as though

79 Ryu 162.
80 Ryu 162.
she would punish herself by clinging to this knowledge. The chair becomes a metaphor for her father’s watchful eye, or in Freudian terms, the superego that approves or disapproves, punishes or rewards.

In the end, during the three days before her retirement, the doctor seems to believe that she will find release from her cycle of pain and hatred by delivering a baby into the arms of life rather than the jaws of death. She yearns to take on the role of a mother, the role she insistently denies, thus casting herself to the periphery of society. For the three days before her wish materializes, however, the woman has no idea why she has become possessed with this maddening desire to deliver a baby. Finally, when confronted with a young girl who has brought her baby nearly to term but wants an abortion, the protagonist inadvertently delivers a living baby while believing herself to be doing the work of an abortion. Her mind moves her hands to unconsciously perform the opposite act her conscious mind tells her she is performing. This fit of hysteria is caused by the force of her unconscious desire to be a mother. But whence this desire that she never mentions until three days before her retirement? It is fueled by the unconscious guilt that she has not lived up to society’s expectations of a woman’s place in the world. Adding to this guilt is the fact that her choices have alienated her from society her entire adult life.

What she declares as she sees her reflection in a darkened window shows that she suffers from decades of piled-up guilt: “the cruelest of all torturers, who has avenged one torture with another, again and again for thirty years.” She adds that she is “finally tottering on the brink of madness.” In her delirium, she cleans, diapers, and wraps the baby in a blanket without even realizing that she is caring for a live infant rather than leaving an aborted one to die. “Me? Did I really do that?…What I have done, without
knowing it, is to give it the kind of tender care a perfect newborn baby receives."82 Only then does she realize the truth within her:

Ah, I no longer need to hide anything. The truth is I’ve been wanting to have a baby myself. A baby I can raise with love. My inexplicable desire to deliver a living baby for one last time is only a façade masking my longing for a baby. I feel my honest wish bursting forth vividly, ripping off the mask and shredding the shroud under which it lay hidden.83

For the first time, and in a hysteric fit, the woman breaks out of the set course of her reality. Her desire lay dead, under a ‘shroud’, and hidden behind the mask she wore throughout her life as she pretended to be happy performing her important work. She buys into the roles expected of women by feeling that in delivering a baby and raising it, she would lead a more fulfilled existence. This thought stems from the guilt of having denied life to so many babies, just as she denied happiness in life to herself by choosing to thrive on the hatred she nursed from her rape and abortion. She also craves the acceptance from mainstream society that her choices prevented her from having. Her wish to deliver a baby is fulfilled; she appropriates it as her own, but the baby dies in her arms on the way to the hospital. She exclaims, “I think a woman with at least a grave of a baby is more beautiful than a woman who has never had a baby at all.”84 This morbid application of society’s demands that each woman be a mother reflects a disturbed mind, indicating that the hysteric bursting forth of her unconscious desires may be a turning point that leads to the decline of the doctor’s mental health. She becomes fully aware that she is trapped between the reality of her alienated life and her impossible desire to rectify that problem retroactively.

81 Ryu 195.
82 Ryu 196.
83 Ryu 196.
84 Ryu 197.
Although this woman has come to recognize her inner desires, she is unable to escape the suffering imposed on her by refusing to live by social norms. Her conscious burns from all the babies unborn at her hands. “I am going to plant rose moss in the yard where my baby sleeps. Rose moss, tiny flowers like the eyes of the innumerable babies I have killed.” Now that she has left her office and no longer has the velvet chair to remind her of her guilt, she decides to plant flowers that remind her of all the babies unborn at her hands. The ‘eyes’ of these flowers watch over her like her superego, disallowing her to forget the pain of her past—pain she now recognizes but cannot let go.

Cho Nam-Hyun describes this story as feminist in that the doctor’s pain, or han, is recognized as justified by the damaging effects of her rape. He claims that this story cannot be seen only as feminist, however, since Pak also portrays negative images of women therein. Cho misses the point in both of these cases. First, it need not be said that the pain a woman experiences from rape is always justified. For the protagonist of this story, social mores dictate that because of her rape and abortion she must be shunned and cast to the periphery of society. She is also no longer sexually ‘pure’, so it would be shameful for a man to marry her. In this situation the woman chooses to perpetuate her anger and social alienation by becoming an abortionist, thus further embedding her pain. Thus, the justification of her pain is not the issue in this story. Rather, it is that her fragile, hysterical psychological state is caused not only by the agonies of rape and abortion, but also, and perhaps more forcefully, by society’s reaction to these events and its subsequent treatment of her.

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85 Ryu 197.
86 Han is an emotion popularly characteristic of the Korean people. It roughly signifies sorrow at dreams that were not or will not be realized.
87 Cho Nam-Hyun, 1990nyundae munhakui damnon (Literary Discourse of the 1990s) 219.
Second, this story can be called a feminist work precisely because of the negative images of women found therein. This story becomes a social commentary on the destructive way women are viewed and treated by a patriarchal social system—by men and women alike—that requires all women to marry and be mothers if they wish to be regarded as beings of any worth. There is no woman in this story with a positive image, not nearly the protagonist. Pak does not portray so many negative images of women to suggest Korean women should follow them. She paints the faces of many women to objectively reflect real life experiences. She seems to suggest Korean women should rather examine their own behavior, or that of those participating in the oppressive social system, thereby raising their social consciousness and perhaps acting in response to it.

At the end of the story, the protagonist wanders aimlessly, dead baby clutched to her breast, into a church where the early morning service consists of people wailing and crying, releasing the grief in their hearts. A change has come over her, but that she recognizes her desires does not release her from her tortured mind. “No longer is the grief in my heart a hardened mass, unable to produce even a single teardrop. It is merely holding back, as though biting its lips under torture, until I reach a place where it can freely flood forth.”88 Being that she has wandered into a church where just this sort of pouring forth occurs, it would seem she could then let go of the pain she had held in for so long. However, it is apparent she cannot let it go because she remains within the reality of the world that made her this way. The ‘place where it can freely flood forth’ can only be an imaginary place, like that which the grandmother found in her hysterical senility and her complete departure from reality in “Butterfly.” The doctor also seems

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88 Ryu 197.
unable to leave behind her hysterical state of mind, as witnessed in the flowers she plants specifically to serve as constant reminders of her self-imposed guilt.

Chapter Four: Lack of identity

1. Sameness as a metaphor for lack: “Identical Apartments”

In “Identical Apartments” the narrator is a housewife and the mother of twin boys. When the story opens she lives in her parent’s somewhat large house with siblings and their spouses and children. After eight years living there, her husband has saved enough money for them to move into an apartment, considered by the younger generation a step up the social ladder. She is finally able to move out of a situation that had begun to disgust her, into what she considers to be her liberation. However, as time passes she begins to develop a new set of grievances, but with similar symptoms. I will show that her lack of identity other than in relation to her familial duties as well as the reinforcement of that lack cause her to enter into a hysterical state of mind in which she attempts to break a social taboo. She cannot consciously name her desire or the cause of her agitation, but it is clear that she must break out of the system that drives her to her wits’ end.

In the first part of the story the narrator seems to get lost among so many family members: mother, father, two younger brothers, one older brother with his wife and children; husband and twin sons. The usual din in the house verges on pandemonium, and amongst all the noise she is supposed to hear the soft ring of the doorbell so she can
open the gate for her husband when he gets home from work. “It’s dreadful waiting for my husband in the evening,” she complains. For an unexplained reason, her hatred of this daily duty reaches neurotic proportions. The underlying factor that drives her to this extreme emotion appears to be that opening the door for her husband when he rings is her only role in the family. The description of her life in that house is simplified to highlight her seemingly banal existence that claims no other obligation than letting her husband in when he arrives from work.

The narrator is obviously disgruntled with her duty, yet on the face of it, her family situation should give her no reason to feel this way. Her mother is kind to her and her husband: “Actually, everyone in my family is friendly, and I have nothing to complain about….Mother is that good to us. We’re not really put out in any way.” Yet the narrator does not confide her innermost fears or emotions to her husband or anyone. “I wish I could appeal to my husband to ease my suffering. I wish he could be more sensitive to what I go through living with my family. But somehow I’ve managed to put up with seven years of this solitary suffering.” She blames her family for her suffering, even though she admits to have nothing to complain of concerning them. The only complaint she has is of her one and only household duty to answer the gate when her husband rings each evening. It seems that the root of her problem lies in how she feels about herself in relation to her husband, but it takes the form of malaise misdirected to her family. The text does not reveal reasons for the narrator’s seeming inability to release her frustrations by discussing them with another person, even her “accomplice in crime” sister-in-law. However, this fact sets the tone for the second part of the story.

89 Fulton 140.
90 Fulton 140-2.
In her new apartment she is finally alone with her husband and the twins, and the only significant person she meets outside the family is the housewife next door, who is about her age and who also has two children. “Finally—freedom from that dreadful business of having to identify the weak ding of the bell during the early-evening chaos of our extended family,” she exults. However, she passes what seems to be a paltry amount of time in her newly acquired independence before life again becomes stale and unsettling.

Initially this malaise seems to be a symptom of sameness. She likes her neighbor, Ch’ori’s mom, but their apartment layout and décor are the same, they buy the same food at the supermarket, and they serve the same meals to their families since she takes cooking tips from Ch’ori’s mom. She intones, “Although I can cook quite well on my own by now, I can’t escape her influence.” This theme develops as the story continues. It seems that the narrator clings to her neighbor, a woman with whom she can identify, because she is at a loss as to how to steer her new life on her own. Because of the closeness of their relationship there is potential for this woman to become the narrator’s confidante and a cathartic outlet. Since the narrator cannot place her dissatisfaction or recognize that she lacks a sense of individual self, she has nothing to confide to Ch’ori’s mom. Ch’ori’s mom can even be seen as part of the problem in perpetuating sameness. Indeed, perhaps this is why Ch’ori’s mom becomes an object on which to vent the narrator’s frustration with vituperative mutterings such as, “...I’m disgusted with Ch’ori’s mom’s cooking skill.” However, in the next paragraph the narrator’s disgust

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91 Fulton 142.
92 Fulton 146.
93 Fulton 147.
94 Fulton 147.
turns to another situation, one which surpasses in intensity the problems with Ch’ôri’s mom.

After discussing the ‘misery’ of serving the same dinner to her family that Ch’ôri’s mom is serving to hers, the narrator opens a new paragraph with this: “And I still dread the evening hours when my husband returns.”

How odd it seems that having accomplished the dream of moving into an apartment away from the strain of family roles and relationships, she would continue to be bothered most by the same occurrence, that of her husband’s return from work. Naturally this leads the reader to believe that the problem lay not with the struggle to live with her parents and siblings, as the narrator at first led us to believe, but that her husband is the focal point of her problems. The following paragraph depicts the intensity of her emotion:

And I still dread the evening hours when my husband returns. This is my home, and instead of a doorbell that chimes I have a bean-sized peephole in the door. But it’s dreadful having to squint through the lens in that hole and see my husband standing beneath the twenty-watt fluorescent bulb outside our door. Whether it’s exhaustion after a day’s work or the light from the bulb, his face looks so pale and heartless that it frightens me. It’s the face of someone who’s hiding a length of cord in his picket to strangle me with. It’s the apartment murderer that Mother worries about! That’s always my first reaction, but after I’ve jumped back from the door, I realize it’s my husband. Some of that initial fear and disgust remain, though, while I’m opening the door and helping him off with his clothes.

The language of her feelings toward her husband is quite strong: dread, dreadful, frightening, fear, disgust. Her reaction to seeing her husband through the peephole becomes inane in light of the fact that it stands as a daily ritual. One interpretation of her psychological state could be that she is projecting her unconscious desire to strangle him as a way to liberate herself from the daily routine of her life.

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95 Fulton 147.
96 Fulton 148.
Another important theme in this story concerns that very routine of her daily life. The apartment complex she lives in consists of a number of indistinguishable buildings, and each building contains row upon row of apartments that all look alike. As mentioned earlier, the narrator’s home looks just like that of Ch’ôri’s mom, even down to the curtains. “She and I lead a mirror-like existence.” 97 There is no indication of what exactly these housewives do at home all day other than shop and cook. They seem bored to death in their middle-class stagnation. It seems that the only thing to keep them occupied is a sense of competition they create amongst themselves: “one apartment might have a washer, someone else might have a piano—but no one enjoys these advantages long enough to indulge in a sense of superiority. Because someone soon copies her.” 98 The narrator and Ch’ôri’s mom are no different, as will be seen in the episode described below that reveals the intensity of their desire to break out of their sameness.

When the narrator discovers a fresh spark in her neighbor’s eyes, she becomes obsessed with discovering her secret so that she will not miss out on the excitement. She eventually finds that Ch’ôri’s mom’s look of anticipation peaks on Friday, when her husband comes home late, and thus the narrator suspects her of having an affair. She decides to make a surprise visit one Friday evening. Rather than finding Ch’ôri’s mom in a passionate embrace with a man, she finds her glued to her TV set with a lottery ticket in hand. The moment is intense:

Lips parched, one hand clutching the ticket, the other beckoning who knows what, she sits on the floor watching a number wheel on the television, and every time the arrow settles on a number she leans forward as if she’ll jump right into the television and become the arrow herself.

97 Fulton 149.
98 Fulton 148.
and then her fleshy bottom pounds back onto the floor. All the while she
groans in a strange, breathy way.\textsuperscript{99}

The descriptive language of body parts and noises and the elongated sentence that
leads the reader rapidly to the climax are obvious references to sex. The weekly date
with the lottery drawing on TV is Ch’ôri’s mom’s love affair: she keeps it secret, milks it
for all the excitement she can, and uses it as an escape from her mundane life. As the
narrator says, “I realize immediately the reason for this woman’s striking transformation,
for her glow of fullness. It’s the possibility of release from these endless identical
apartments.”\textsuperscript{100} In her mind, the release from the apartments would mean moving into a
Western-style home in the country where she could achieve her dream of being the ideal
mother with flowers, a vegetable garden, and her children reading \textit{A Dog of Flanders}. Obviously this would not liberate her from her current misery, and it is plain that the
potential of a lottery ticket to realize this idyllic image serves only as another item of
competition in the narrator’s eyes. She buys a ticket the following week but cannot stop
thinking about Ch’ôri’s mom’s ticket: “That woman’s going to steal it all away from me
and give it to \textit{her} children.”\textsuperscript{101}

Suddenly it seems no coincidence that the narrator’s offspring are twins. They,
too, become objects of sameness and her dread, which is why she proclaims, when
contemplating the number of identical apartments in the complex, “At such times, for
some strange reason I find myself disliking my boys. I can no longer stand the fact that
they’re twins.…I can’t tell who is the older and who is the younger.”\textsuperscript{102} It seems
incongruous that she should find her dislike of them ‘strange.’ It is their sameness, yet

\textsuperscript{99} Fulton 150.
\textsuperscript{100} Fulton 150.
\textsuperscript{101} Fulton 151.
another reminder of the stale cycle of her existence, that fills her with loathing and disturbs her to the point of no longer being able to tell the twins apart. If her mind seemed unstable before this, it lapses for certain into hysteria now. Suddenly after years of raising twins she can no longer tell them apart. Something in her unconscious is creating a large enough disturbance to begin shaking her reality. I would call it the feeling of displeasure at not being her own person—recognizing her own identity—mounting to destructive proportions.

As an extension of her thoughts about the boys, she suddenly entertains an idea about herself: “But if the boys can be interchanged, does this mean that I, their mother, can be interchanged with another I, just like that? I shudder at this dreadful prospect; I can never let that happen. I’m swallowed up in chaos. What a cursed life if you’re the mother of twins!” 103 Such wild ruminations betray her struggle with identity. Replacement by “another I,” likely spoken as a euphemism to avoid the more painful “another woman/mother,” would result in the narrator being butted out of her role as mother and wife. It is ironic that she would call this dreadful when in fact it could serve as the very liberator of the dreadful state of her current life. However, she has no inkling of how to operate outside the roles of wife and mother that have been handed down to her through the generations, and that is why the prospect of being on her own would be dreadful—she lacks an independent identity. Thus her replacement would make her obsolete, a nonentity, the ultimate expression of the horrid sameness that consumes her.

The final episode in the story that plays on these themes of sameness and dreadfulness begins as an idea in the narrator’s head that could deliver her from her

102 Fulton 152.
103 Fulton 153.
insipid daily routine. Hearing Ch’ôri’s mom refer to her husband as “that creep of mine” leaves the narrator with an impression inconsonant to the negative appellation: “A hunch runs through me like a surge of electricity, and I shudder violently. The sensation is painful and pleasurable at the same time.” This hunch turns into a plan that she feels could free her from the tired circle of her existence. Interestingly, between the narrator’s description of this ambiguous hunch and the spelling out of its exact nature, she inserts a paragraph to reiterate the dreadfulness she has illustrated elsewhere concerning the identical apartments, her inability to distinguish the twins, and most of all, the peering at her husband through the peephole and mistaking him for the “Apartment Murderer.” She follows this with

One thing is not dreadful: my hunch that I will have an affair with Ch’ôri’s mom’s “beastly creep.” I love that hunch. I love it for colliding violently with my tedious life and for the sparks that collision produces. I love the way that ordinary things change colors in the light of those sparks.

The contrast of these juxtaposed paragraphs underscores her desire to break out of her tedium. Justification of her plan begs nothing more. She does not pretend to have romantic interest in her neighbor’s husband; rather, she believes that having an affair would deliver her from banal uniformity and proffer the excitement of anticipation and change.

Although the prospect of the affair fills her with rainbows, it seems absurd that she would regard the act itself as something to extricate her from her boredom, given the fact that Chôri’s mom’s husband could never whisk her away to a fresh start on life. His life mirrors her own husband’s, so what new thing could he offer her? But she seems little concerned that the object she chooses for the affair remains tightly woven within the

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104 Fulton 158.
fabric of her tedious world. It is the titillation of adultery itself, of clandestine meetings, of harboring a secret, and of deviously gaining the advantage in her competition with Ch’ôri’s mom that drive her. Ironically, she hatches a plan in which she would sleep with her neighbor’s husband without anyone—including him—knowing it, thus acting out the very replacement of self with another woman (or vice-versa) that so frightens her.

The narrator triumphantly pounces on the chance to bring her plans to fruition when Ch’ôri’s mom goes alone to spend the night with her parents in the country. However, what follows turns out to be anything but triumphant. She goes about the business of running between her apartment and the neighbor’s as she feeds both families their dinner. In doing so, she sets herself up as a proxy for Ch’ôri’s mom. She turns off all the lights and climbs into bed with Ch’ôri’s mom’s husband after he has already fallen asleep, waking him to make love as if she were his wife.

This cannot now be called an ‘affair’, because the husband never realizes he is making love to a woman other than his wife. For her it may be called adultery, but the situation becomes surreal as the sameness enveloping her life is played to the extreme. “Imagine my surprise when I see him wearing the same pajamas I once went out with Ch’ôri’s mom to buy for my husband….His face looks paler and more weary than usual, and it kind of resembles my husband’s.” When she embraces him, she notices that he uses the same pomade as her husband, and that his breath stinks of cigarettes, just like her husband’s. Finally, at the consummating moment of all her scheming and anticipation, she feels nothing:

His lovemaking is nervous, weak, but sadistic. He makes me feel like a public toilet. His skin gives off an unpleasant metallic odor, the kind that

105 Fulton 158.
106 Fulton 159.
makes you jerk back in disgust. In all of these respects he resembles my husband. I don’t even feel like I’m being adulterous. I have a bad habit of fancying myself committing adultery while in my husband’s embrace, but now that I’m actually doing it, I don’t feel that way. No guilt, no pleasure.  

Disappointingly, she finds that even this act of breaking a social taboo cannot release her from monotony. She has no identity, and it may be that she feels no one else does, either. Husbands and wives have become interchangeable. She becomes disoriented in this surreally absurd situation: “I’ve begun to doubt that this is really their apartment.” The only difference remaining between the neighbors is that Ch’ôri’s mom has a son and a daughter rather than two sons.

She goes home and enters the bathroom to examine herself in the mirror under full light, signifying a moment of truth. Finally she comes to face the underlying reasons for her malaise, for the dread she has experienced for the duration of her marriage.

I stand before the mirror. There I am. A woman flush with despairing innocence. A woman who looks like she’s spoken with no one, consummated no relationship, in all her life.

It’s so odd: my mood is one of pure despair, and yet I feel like a virgin. Here I’ve played the role of a wife for almost ten years, I have two children, just now I’ve committed adultery, and I feel like a virgin. A virgin like that is dreadful, but that’s how I feel.

She recognizes that she is a blank slate. Her identity is absent other than in relation to her husband and children, who she has just discovered are all virtually interchangeable, as is she. Her despair stems from the fact that she never spoke her heart to her husband, nor did she ever allow herself to open up completely to her sister-in-law or her closest friend. Had she done so, she would have taken an initial step in forging an independent identity

107 Fulton 159.
108 Fulton 159.
109 Fulton 160.
by naming the things that disturb her, thus opening the path to uncovering her inner desires.

The contrast of an adulteress who feels like a virgin throws into stark relief her feeling that she has never really lived. Rather than shape her world and her relationships by building them around an already intact structure of who she is as a woman, she lived by passively allowing others to build on her undeveloped ground, cementing her body into blocks called mother and wife. Her discovery informs her that as long as there is a body in that framework, it does not matter whose it is.

It is indeed dreadful at this point in her life to break down the walls that enclose her and attempt to create a new structure. This is what she had been attempting when she appropriated her neighbor’s cooking, décor, and so many other things. She was searching for her identity, but had no knowledge of how to discover or invent it, nor did she realize this was the root of her problem. Rather, she cut and pasted pieces of her neighbor’s life onto her own in a desperate attempt to grasp at something. If she had ever essayed to reveal her inner feelings to her husband or confidante, she would have heard herself talk about herself in such a way that she might have recognized then what she lacked. Instead, it took hysterically raising her imitative activities to a fever pitch to explode her pretenses and expose barren ground. Now she stares in dread at her flat reflection in the mirror, wondering how she can build on that virgin territory.

2. Positive awakening: “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House”
In “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House,” Pak spells out the psychological impact of societal pressure on the woman of a certain middle-class family. Interestingly, the point of the story is obscured in the first part, revealed in the second part bit by bit as if someone were peeling an unknown fruit. This style of writing complements the action in the second part of the story, in which the first-person narrator compares her actions to unwrapping a gift. The two-part structure of the story emphasizes the contrast between the “peaceful, respectable” exterior and repressed interior of the family.

The two main sections of this story pivot around the time when the husband leaves the house for a few weeks. In the opening of the first part, the wife peeks timidly into the living from the kitchen where she is doing her wifely duties of making tea for an uninvited guest. She refers to her husband as “Professor Min,” instantly setting him up as a dignified, respectable man who maintains an appropriate distance from his wife. The home revolves around his patriarchal sense of order, by which everything is confined to its proper place. The house itself is small and provokes images of confinement: the wife speaks of “a narrow space—no wider than an alleyway, really” sandw iched between their front gate and front door. Their living room doubles for her husband’s study.

The wife is nervous from paragraph one, where she intuits that the man visiting her husband may be from the authorities. The setting is the 1970s, when men were being dragged in for questioning in sweeping purges of dissidents. Nearly the whole first page is taken up with her worries about letting the visitor in and regretting having done so. This sets the tone of her fear of disturbing the household. Already we see the husband and wife have a “tacit” understanding about not letting in visitors when her husband is busy—no words are necessary to keep the peace of the house. The wife commands little
power in the house. Their tacit understanding allows her some decision-making power in
minutiae, yet she says, “although I have to admit to a minor satisfaction in wielding this
power, I never abused it to suit my own moods.”111 She takes no notice of herself and
goes about tending the home with an undeveloped ego.

It seems that the uninvited guest has made her nervous. The first part of the story
plays out a tense scene in which the husband is politely interrogated by the stranger, and
then informed that he will be taking a short ‘trip’ of perhaps two weeks. The stranger’s
obsequious politesse covers his intention of being no less forceful in completing his
mission. Her husband displays the same care in tending his bonsai trees, lest one branch
grow askew and deform the appearance of the tree; this acts as a metaphor for the way he
neatly packages his family into a façade of respectability. The guest’s “voice was gentle
but charged with a strange force that preempted the slightest objection.” The wife’s
reaction to this mirrors her unconscious feeling about living with her husband’s
controlling behavior: “I feel the strength slowly seep from me, like air from a balloon,”
until she reaches a flattened state of non-living, no air to breathe, going about life totally
deflated, defeated. “Though terrified, I lacked the energy to figure out what was
frightening me.” She reveals that “fear, tension, and a sense of compulsion drove me
on.”112 These are the feelings that keep her going in her daily life with her husband,
though she does not recognize them until after leaves.

Facing the stranger, her husband is typically emotionless. His indifference and
calmness disallow the possibility of fear or disruption raising their ugly heads. She finds
it impossible to voice her negative feelings in the face of his impassivity. As he is getting

110 Stephen J. Epstein, trans. 98.
111 Epstein 97.
ready to go, he asks for his wife’s help putting on his necktie as matter of factly as if he were going out under normal circumstances. During a passing moment of mental frenzy she wants to choke him because he refuses to connect with her or acknowledge the danger and family disruption they are about to enter. She is angry at him for not showing his true face, for refusing to remove the mask of his calm exterior.

The restrictive order superimposed on the house by her husband and her acceptance of it through repression of her self-identity are played out by the interaction among the three characters in the first part of this story. Taking it deeper than surface level shows that the interaction between the stranger, the husband, and the wife graphically depicts the relationship between the husband and wife and her struggles with her ego or identity. The scene can be viewed as a play of sorts, in which the stranger takes on the role of the husband, the husband takes the role of his wife, and the wife represents her ego or identity.

In this ‘play’, the stranger’s “frosty” and “icy” overt ordering is the outward expression of her husband’s subtle repression of his family. He arranges things ‘just so’ in the name of maintaining a “peaceful and respectable” family. The husband is weak and helpless before the stranger, but maintains a calm façade. His wife’s thoughts towards her husband and the stranger betray her frustration at denying herself a sense of identity, as well as at the way her relationship with her husband has been.

Her husband grovels before the stranger and acquiesces to the man’s every command or suggestion. The stranger commands in the most polite fashion: “Pardon me, ma’am, but would you be so kind as to bring me a cup of tea?” The wife has no choice but to obey because of the stranger’s aura of authority, which again mirrors her

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112 Epstein 99.
husband’s in day to day life as his ‘pleasantness’ covers up the welt of his controlling rigidity. “I had no idea why this man…was bossing us around, but it certainly seemed his primary goal was to take our happiness hostage.”\textsuperscript{113} The wife is still in the mode of believing and maintaining the family façade. Later she recognizes she has suppressed her unhappy and disturbed self.

Her husband puts up a front to cover his nervousness. He refuses to assert himself, just as she refuses assert her identity with her husband. He also refuses to combine forces with his wife to fight against the tyrannical stranger. Helping him with his necktie, his wife finds herself wanting to choke him until he cries out like a wounded beast—she craves some recognition, some reaction. She longs for him to caress her in front of the stranger as a show of strength. If she represents her identity in this ‘play’, then she wants herself to ‘caress’ her identity, to feel it, or even to choke herself until she jumps to action in concert with her repressed identity. She will not do it in front of the ‘tyranny’, or watchful superego of her husband (represented by the stranger), although it would be the only way for her and her ego “to make a concerted show of resistance.”\textsuperscript{114}

In the second half of the story, following the departure of her husband, she is freed from his watchful eye (the superego which does not allow her to look inward at herself) and quickly discovers the presence of negative emotions that she suppressed in her efforts to be a model wife of a “respectable” family. She begins the process of self-discovery by allowing negative feelings, first concerning her mother-in-law, to surface. The discovery of that which is repressed comes more easily to this protagonist than to most women in Pak’s other stories. In other words, in the absence of her husband she

\textsuperscript{113} Epstein 99.
\textsuperscript{114} Epstein 100.
finds and is able to identify her repressed feelings, which is more than the other women in Pak’s stories treated here are able to do. She describes the feelings for her mother-in-law that she had successfully repressed until that moment: “I couldn’t help but be aware of a loathing toward her that was lodged deep within me. This emotion occupied but a small part of my feelings toward her, which for the most part were appropriately high-minded and moral; nonetheless, that hatred was like a pocket of compressed air. Firm. Dangerous.”115 It was compressed because of years of suppression. She admits to the presence of this negative emotion despite her seeming desire to cling to ‘appropriate’ behavior.

No sooner does her son leave the house then the mother-in-law starts screaming out for her lunch. The fact that the bedridden grandmother has grown senile is uncovered. Another layer is peeled back and we see that her ravings and verbal abuse fill the house on a regular basis. Until now, however, the screaming has seemed to the narrator like a normal part of everyday life in their ‘respectable, peaceful household’; indeed, she had felt a sense of moral pride at caring for this disabled relation. But now the narrator describes her condition as “walking on a tightrope in a precarious attempt to maintain my sense of day-to-day calm” in the wake of her husband’s arrest. Not knowing what the future would bring, and sure she could not tell her teenaged children the truth without supplying supporting reasons, she keeps the truth a secret and suffers alone. Suddenly the cries of her mother-in-law seem more intrusive than ever.

The verbal abuse of the raving mother-in-law finally brings the wife to a boiling point. “This…is in no way compatible with day-to-day peace in our family. Well, what was the everyday peace we were blessed with, anyway?” Her questioning gives way to

115 Epstein 104.
an unheard-of outburst aimed at her mother-in-law, which by breaking the boundary of decorum frees her and everyone in the household from their fetters. She lost control, she says, but she has no regrets: “If I hadn’t allowed [my suppressed emotions] to explode at last, I’d have gone crazy.”\textsuperscript{116} Her mother-in-law’s invectives become increasingly acrid, but the wife allows herself to nurse the hate she feels for this woman she has had to put up with her entire married life.

The next layer that gets peeled back deals directly with her husband. She tells the reader that their relationship is good, but that there’s been a wall between them, a forced distance that she had not wanted to acknowledge because, she realizes, it is he who first “established the boundaries.”\textsuperscript{117} She would not want to disrespect him by complaining that he created distance between them or inadvertently did something hurtful to his family. She backs down from this mental assertion, however, by stating that perhaps she is picking on her husband because she feels inferior in dealing with her husband’s inscrutable absence.

Her actions show, however, that her evaluation of the distance between them is correct, and that he has hurt the family by keeping everything under tight wraps. Her husband’s collection of prize bonsai trees provides a clear image of the state of his family. She realizes that her husband coils and deforms the family in the name of respectability just as he tames his trees for a lovely outward appearance: “Had my husband also been grooming his family into a showpiece of calm and respectability as nothing more than a hobby?”\textsuperscript{118} Her final act of defiance, letting the trees shrivel from neglect and then intentionally chucking them out the window, is emblematic of her

\textsuperscript{116} Epstein 107.  
\textsuperscript{117} Epstein 105.
having completed the tearing away from pretense, and shows her conscious decision to face her husband on real terms when he returns.

She next peels back layers of falseness that had built up between her and her children. She calls this “instilling hatred” in them against their common enemy, the mother-in-law, who has become both a scapegoat and a channel for opening up honest communication between the wife and her children. She observes that now “our home truly was no longer peaceful or respectable.” She purges the last vestiges of the old, stultified ways by tossing out the now shrinkled and untended bonsai trees.

When her husband returns, she says she may end up helping him re-wrap the family into respectability, but in the next paragraph she contradicts herself and says no, she could not bear it. She needs to expose the realities of life to make it worth living, not cover them up to maintain zombie-like false appearances. “He wants to wrap; I want to tear away.” She recognizes that she was able to uncover the forbidding wrappings on her own, that the repressed state of her family is what bothered her all along, and that she has effected a change for the better in all of their lives, even if it be infused with a higher degree of challenge. She relishes the conflict of days to come. She succeeds in moving through her uncontrolled, hysterical outburst to a conscious resolution about how she wants to live her life vis-à-vis her husband and family.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

118 Epstein 106.
119 Epstein 109.
120 Epstein 110.
121 Epstein 110.
Psychoanalysts and feminist literary critics have defined hysteria as the unconscious manifestation of repressed desires. These instances of hysteria extend beyond what is considered socially acceptable behavior or speech. Often they represent the unutterable desire of women to break out of a social structure that represses them. Research on hysterical behavior in women and men is well developed in the West, beginning in force in France with the pre-Freudian psychoanalytic doctor, Charcot, and culminating, perhaps, in Freud’s famous case study of Dora. Western feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s took up hysteria as a major topic of inquiry and revision, changing the view of hysteric women from derogatory to celebratory, going so far as to proclaim all women hysterics. It is the relatively recent spate of research on hysteria in women and literature that prompted me to use this topic as a springboard for delving into the portrayal of Korean women in their own literature.

I have found that specific demonstrations of hysteria hinge on cultural determinants. Comparing well-known accounts of hysterics and their literary counterparts in Victorian England with hysteric behavior in the characters of Pak Wansô’s fiction brings this to light. Symptoms at the turn of the twentieth century in England and Europe included fainting spells, a cough with no discernable physiological cause, a limp or numb limb, babbling, and others. These symptoms became widely known as physicians publicized them, even going so far as to present public demonstrations for crowds on the street (as in Charcot’s case). Hysterics became more or less common phenomena. The women in Pak’s stories demonstrate less flagrant hysteria.

In “My Very Last Possession,” the protagonist’s inability to cope with the tragedy of her only son’s death and the itinerant social expectations placed on her to be stalwart is
played out in the background of her incessant stream of conversation. Her hysterical state is represented well in the rapid pace of her continuous talk, but the true manifestation of hysteria, of unconscious and repressed desires, rises to the surface in the form of selective amnesia. This woman remembers only things that are important to her, like political dates tied to her son’s death in an anti-dictatorship demonstration. Confucian mores have an impact on her in her attitude towards not losing face socially and in her ignoring the needs of her daughters now that the center of her family, her son, has passed away.

Kyong-a, the young protagonist of *The Naked Tree*, also experiences selective amnesia, in that her memories reach back only a few years, stopping always at a moment of acute pain in her life. This moment was when her two brothers were destroyed by a bomb that hit their home during the Korean War. She blames herself for their deaths, and to compound things, she is wounded deeply by her mother’s ensuing lack of desire to live and her bemoaning the fact that her sons were ripped from her, leaving ‘only’ the girl. In her search for herself in a world that does not value unmarried girls, she often acts impulsively, unconsciously breaking taboos, for example, by brazenly hinting about her affair with a man to his wife. She does not know what possesses her to say such things, but it is her unconscious desire to be recognized. In the end she represses her youthful ideals and succumbs to the requirements of her society by marrying. By so doing she seems to escape further bouts of hysteria, but only at the cost of sacrificing greater happiness and fulfillment.

A more protracted senility is seen in the grandmother in “Butterfly of Illusion.” She unconsciously wanders from her daughter’s house, where she lives, towards
Kwachon, unable to find her way back. She babbles about going to Kwachon, where they used to live, and her daughter mistakenly interprets this as a plea to go live with her son, as Confucian values dictate she should. The grandmother is unable to clearly state her desires, which then surface in her unconscious acts and words. She makes her final escape to Kwachon one day and ends up living with a single female monk in a traditional, tile-roofed house. In order to live where she feels useful and at peace she has had to shrug off Confucian societal expectations by utterly divesting herself of family obligations.

The protagonist of “Three Days in that Autumn” chooses a path in life that ostracizes her from society. She feels compelled to work as an abortion doctor because of the abortion she herself went through after being raped by an American soldier. However, her role is fueled by hatred, and she suppresses her inner desires to enjoy family life by never marrying. At the close of her career, she cannot understand her hysterical desire to deliver a living child. When ostensibly performing her last abortion she delivers the baby intact without realizing it, she suddenly recognizes her desire to have a baby of her own. Even after this epiphany she is unable to escape from the mental punishment she inflicts upon herself for not living according to patriarchal norms.

Lack of identity outside the functions of her role as mother and wife seems to be the driving problem of the housewife in “Identical Apartments.” She does not seem to recognize this as the root of her troubles, but the overarching metaphor of the story, which points out the lack of difference between her an any other housewife, clearly indicates otherwise. Her hysterical derangement climaxes when she decides to take the similarities to the extreme by pretending to be her neighbor’s wife as she sneaks into a
darkened bedroom where he is sleeping and has sex with him, no one the wiser. She hopes this action will make her life exciting and give her an advantage over her neighbor. What she finds instead is that she was searching in the wrong place to bring meaning to her life, and now she sees herself as she is, a woman whose personal life is like a clean slate, with nothing written on it.

The housewife in “Thus Ended My Days of Watching Over the House” also makes a conscious decision to change the direction of her meaningless life, but only after she has unconsciously broken the social taboo of losing her composure and yelling at her ailing mother-in-law, for whom she ought to display respect. Once she has broken through the façade of living as a ‘respectable’ family she determines to peel off the false layers of decorum and live with real purpose. She is only able to do this when freed from her husband’s controlling hand for a few weeks, but the fact that she does it at all places her in a category apart from each other woman in these stories. Though her watershed comes in some form of hysteria, like the others, she is able to overcome it, recognize her inner desires, and act to fulfill them.

These stories share the common thread of the Korean woman feeling trapped by society’s expectation of her to fulfill the role of a mother, never taking care to work out her own identity along the way. There seems to be no way for her to break out of the reality of this social order without experiencing hysteria on one level or another. Only thus can she escape the burden of her reality and allow herself to search her innermost desires, if she is able to progress that far. Each protagonist in these stories struggles with who she is as a person in contradistinction to the roles imposed on her by society. Pak Wansô’s treatment of the crises these women come to by being too tightly twisted into
place by patriarchal dictates illuminates their psyche and the possibility for catharsis, although the feasibility of complete liberation from mental subjugation remains remote.

The exposure of hysteria, or the manifestation of unconscious desires, in these stories can have wide-reaching effects on Korean readers as they see themselves in the women depicted by Pak. This study has focused merely on one author’s work, whose style reflects reality in unforgiving candidness. This topic would be well served by further study and analysis of female characters in stories written by other contemporary Korean authors. Further research might include a comparison between reactions to Korean Confucian patriarchy by contemporary women and pre-World War II women living under the Japanese Occupation.
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