3. Even in a union based on love, if the woman is a second wife, she should make an effort to break off the relationship because the angst or guilt will be greater than the private pleasure of a passionate love.

41 Pak Indök—Korea’s Nora left the doll’s house

"Chosôn üi Nora ro inhyŏng üi chip ül naon Pak Indök ssi," Samch’ølli 5, no. 1 (1933): 73–74

There may still be many people who have not yet read Ibsen’s play, A Doll’s House, but I imagine those of you who have read it probably have a strong impression of its protagonist, Nora, as a very brave woman. This masterpiece has had a significant impact on women in transition all over the world.

Nora, who has not yet found her individuality, leads a happy life as a beloved wife and mother to her children. She sincerely adores her husband with every fiber of her being. Her husband, Torvald Helmer, loves her in return; however, once she realizes that her husband’s love is not true, she leaves home, abandoning the husband she had greatly respected and the children she still loves. Nora begins to believe that she should be a human being before she is a wife and mother. In the end, she courageously leaves the house with a single bag on a rainy, desolate day.

I think that some of you feel complete sympathy for Nora, whereas others criticize her for her callous act. You may ask, “How could she abandon her own children, even if her husband treated her badly?” You may also think that such things only happen in fiction. You should not simply dismiss it as a fictive tale because we can see numerous examples in Korea, just like in Ibsen’s play. I believe that Pak Indök, who we all have a vivid recollection of, is no less noteworthy than Nora in A Doll’s House.

Born in P’yöngan province, Pak lost her father at an early age and was raised by a lonely mother, struggling through poverty. It is said that, from childhood, she was exceptionally bright, pretty, and well spoken, and that people were mesmerized by her. After finishing her elementary- and high-school education, she entered Ewha Women’s Professional School. By the time she arrived at Ewha, she was in full bloom. She blossomed with natural beauty, which made the flower-filled campus of Ewha even more splendid. Her teachers and friends loved her. She had many admirers—not only decent young men, but also notorious philanderers, all of whom helplessly dreamt of becoming the spouse of Pak Indök.

At that very moment, along came Kim Unho, a young man whose wealth was widely known. He grew to know her quite well, and they became close. It is said that she eventually made a commitment to him because he had used a variety of tactics to win her heart, such as purchasing a piano for close to 10,000 won and giving her clothing and an expensive ring, delivered by his sister (who was attending Ewha with Pak).

No one could have been happier or more satisfied than Kim, who could claim victory among the multitude of Pak’s pursuers. For a while he made the utmost effort to please Pak; however, his love did not arise out of respect for her. He held the same beliefs that all men hold. In other words, just as Torvald loved Nora, so Unho loved Indök; however, neither man attended to the individual character of his wife. Indök would often break down in tears in the face of the contradictions between her real life and her ideals. Her sadness only grew when she remembered the happiness of her life before marriage. She patiently waited for a change of heart in him, but it was in vain. She eventually went to the United States to study, leaving her husband and two daughters at home. During her six-year stay in the United States, she hoped that her husband would change, all the while feeling sorry for her daughters and their loneliness without her.

However, Unho did not change a bit. In one of his letters to Indök, he wrote: “Come back home immediately because it is a woman’s primary duty to honor her husband and raise her children.” As a woman awakening to her own individuality, she was outraged and disappointed whenever she received his letters filled with archaic ideas. Indök was a human being and a mother. How could she not love her children? While in the United States, she made repeated efforts to get any news about the well-being of her children. She considered sacrificing herself for the sake of her children. Yet, when she saw how little Unho had changed, she reluctantly gave up her beloved daughters.

Just like Nora in A Doll’s House, Indök broke the shackles of her marriage to a man of antiquated thinking, believing that “before I am a wife, before I am a mother, first and foremost I must be a human being.”

42 Na Hyesök: A confession about my divorce: To Ch’ŏnggu

"Ihn kobaechhang: Ch’ŏnggu ssi ege" Samch’ølli 6 (August, 1934): 84–96 and “Ihn kobaeksŏ (sok) Ch’ŏnggu ssi ege” Samch’ølli 6 (September 1934): 84–94

We are close to forty or fifty years in age. We both received college education, had the usual opportunity to travel to Europe and the United States, and are in a position to guide our junior colleagues. Nonetheless, we have been immature and have failed to lead a solid life. We feel not only ashamed but obliged to apologize to society.

Dear Ch’ŏnggu:

I’m utterly shaken and hurt by a kind of shock that I have never experienced before. With sorrow, lamentation, anxiety and agony, I’m wondering about life, and once again I’m calling upon you, who threw me into this pit of mayhem. I’m in tears when I call you, Ch’ŏnggu. Would people call me “the weak” (vakcha) for this emotional behavior?
We were proud of our relationship, which was filled with deep understanding and thorough knowledge about each other in coping with everyday life. Back then, how could we possibly understand this wretched destiny that we could not even have dreamt of? All this must be a dream, no ... a nightmare. It expresses my honest feeling to call this tragedy a nightmare.

When I think about you in our past life together, I remember you as a decent husband. After the incident, I tried to deny this, but even amidst all my hurt feelings, the thought that comes back to my mind is that you were a decent husband. In my heart, shaken by that incident, the memories and experiences of our eleven-year marriage still flicker. There was nothing of dissatisfaction, complaint, or anxiety in our life together, was there? You were never inconsiderate or unpleasant to me in everyday life. You never came home late after work and always greeted our children and me with a benevolent smile. You smoked a little bit, but you didn't drink alcohol. In this sense, no one could deny that you were a very rare example of a decent husband. Because of that, I could not help but trust you. I trusted you absolutely. Yet, who could possibly dream that somewhere hidden inside you, you could be so scarily rigid, cruel, and contemptuous, rejecting me with spite and malice. You didn't even give me a split second to reflect upon myself and repent, did you? And I was foolish enough to earnestly and desperately beg you for your forgiveness.

Because of this unprecedented tragedy, I lost trust in everyone, I had to deal with public shame and ridicule, my parents and relatives abandoned me, and good friends turned their backs on me. Of course, I am miserable, but I imagine you can't escape sorrow and sadness for your part in this whole affair. I'm left wandering in the wilderness, lost in the darkness, staring at the emptiness. Am I walking in the darkness with a brush and palette in my trembling hands, seeking one last beam of light? This enormous, serious wound has had a devastating impact on me. Every second, I feel that my heart will explode as I hear this desperate and lonely outcry for life, unable to stop myself from crying and losing consciousness.

Was our marriage an empty shell from the start? Or did our marriage stray from the path of love and common interests to turn into a lie as time passed? I can't think of our marriage and life together as fake because when we got married, we prepared and pledged [to take up the duties of our life together]. And we did follow our promises.

Dear Ch'ónggu! I've lost everything. Standing here frozen, my mind blank, I feel a need to reflect on myself very carefully once again. Through my grief, I'm ready and determined to take on this task. I will bear this cross and accept all the criticism that people direct at me. I'm determined to continue my journey of renewal, listening to the gentle whisper of life that has come from profound agony.

History prior to engagement

A long time has already passed. I was nineteen years old when my fiancé [Ch'oe Súnggu] died from a fatal illness. At that time, I was so devastated.

My suffering was so severe that I almost went mad and certainly had a severe nervous breakdown. In the summer of that year, I came home from Tokyo. One day, you came to our home to visit my brother and also to see me. Your wife had died three years earlier, and you were very lonely. I was playing with my niece in the outer chamber when we ran into each other, and my brother introduced me to you. You returned to Kyónghóng [Seoul] a few days later and sent me a long letter filled with honesty and passion. In the letter, you talked about your circumstances and loneliness and your desire to remarry. You actually proposed to me in that letter. Of course, I didn't reply because I wasn't ready to think about such matters. A second letter came, which I did respond to briefly. You came to our house again a few days later with a gift of pineapples and other fruit. I didn't see you at that time. After you had gone back to your hometown, you conveyed your wish that I send you a letter when I returned to Tokyo.

When I did go back to Tokyo, I sent you a postcard without really thinking much about it. One night, on a train passing through Osaka, a student wearing a square hat greeted me. I didn't recognize him at first, but it was you. Together, we rode all the way to Kyoto, where you got off, and I continued on with my friends.

When I was living in Tokyo, near the Kyoto Imperial University, with my roommate, you visited me, bringing me the native Hatsubashi. At the time, you had come to Tokyo to participate in a youth speech contest at the Tokyo Imperial University. During the day, you would sit at my desk and compose the draft of your speech. In the evening, you would return to your place and send me a letter. One evening at the train station, when you were about to leave, I held out my hand to you. You shook my hand passionately, and then suggested that we go to a wooded area nearby, where you prayed to God to express your gratitude.

Your words, your letters, and your behavior conveyed raw emotion and passion beyond any reason. Feeling your ardor made me happy, and before I knew it, I was immersed in your passion. I was living in Tokyo, and you were in Kyoto. You visited me once a day; we took long walks, sometimes getting warnings from policemen; we had a delightful time just lazily floating in a boat; we traveled to the snowy countryside.

Over those six years of dating, you pleaded with me to marry you several times, but I had no interest in marriage at that point. It was mainly because I had not fully recovered from the wound no one could see deep inside my mind. I also thought your love was nothing more than a blind love, instinctive and beyond reasoning, and I doubted if you could understand my unique character. If your love was based on pure instinct, any woman could satisfy it. It would not have to be me. Early on, I had the realization that the only lasting and happy marriage was one in which each spouse felt the other was so indispensable that he or she could marry no one else in this entire world. Nonetheless, I didn't want to lose you, and you didn't give up. But somehow we just couldn't take the final step.
Love, marriage, and divorce

Eventually, we decided to get married because we felt responsible for each other, and our families had urged us to do it. At that time, I demanded the following:

- Love me as you do now for the rest of your life.
- Do not try to stop me from painting.
- Do not make me live in the same house with your mother or the daughter from your previous marriage.

You accepted all of these conditions without complaint or qualification. As I had demanded, for our honeymoon, we went to the grave of my deceased lover, buried in a remote place in the countryside. You even helped me build a monument, which I will never forget for the rest of my life. It was clear to me that you loved me with all your heart.

Ten years of married life

We lived in Seoul (Kyöngsông) for three years, in Andonghyón20 for six years, in Tongnæ21 for one year, and in Europe and the United States for one and a half years, producing four children—one daughter and three sons. We had a dynamic life, moving from place to place—you as an attorney, diplomat, tourist, son, and father, and I as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. We had a happy life. We were comfortable economically, and so we could do what we wanted and accomplish what we intended. But you were so emotional and irrational that you couldn’t see even the most obvious developments coming. I wanted to have a full life as a housewife, a member of society, and a human being. In order to achieve this, we needed money, time, effort, and hard work. I’m sure I also had many shortcomings, but I was deeply driven by the lofty ideal that I should lead a worthy life as a human being. [As might be expected, our different personalities led to frequent conflict.]22 The unexpected result was that a new baby was born out of every marital conflict.

Both housewife and painter

When my paintings won special awards or grand prizes in competitions, he was as happy as I was. People complimented me for having such a supportive husband and all the good things that happened because of his support. I was content and joyful. Having the understanding and support of one’s husband and friends is necessary, but it’s also important to make them understand. Everything starts from oneself. No one will oppose a woman who utilizes her leisure time if she has ably finished all the household chores. I’ve never taken housework for granted in order to paint. I’ve never worn a silk dress or played around for even a minute. The most important matter to me was money and time. Reflecting upon the past, I wonder if it wasn’t my art that brought me happiness in my family life. Without art, there was nothing that pleased my heart.

A tour of Europe and the United States

Some of the sponsors of our trip to Europe and the United States were hoping not only for my husband’s success but also for mine. Therefore, our tour was unexpectedly easy. One’s life expands and gets richer in proportion to its exposure to new things. After the tour, my husband developed certain political viewpoints, and I was better able to put ideas about life in perspective. [Below is what I came up with.]

1. How could we live a better life? People in the East long for the West and envy the Western lifestyle. But, if you go to the West, you find that they adore the East and the Eastern lifestyle. It seems that no one is satisfied with the life that’s available to them. Everything depends on the state of one’s mind. One learns how to find satisfaction in life while engaging in the day-to-day tasks of earning money, doing business, or acquiring knowledge. That is, one feels content only when one sees the presence of God between people and objects.

2. How can a married couple live in harmony? When one individual is united with another, that person can’t insist on his or her own way only. The key to this situation is to remember self-restraint. It seems to me that there are three periods in a married life. The first period is when the couple are dating. They don’t have the distance between them to see the shortcomings in their partner. They only see their respective merits. Everything is beautiful and seems wonderful. The second phase is a period of inertia. Unless the couple have a baby within the first three or four years of their marriage, a sense of fatigue with each other sets in and may begin to grow. They begin to see the weaknesses of their partner and grow tired of each other. From statistics, we know that the divorce23 rate is highest during this time. The third phase is one of growing understanding. By this point, the couple has grown to know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. In the process, their affection grows deeper, and they develop a new sense of love, in which they accept each other’s faults and encourage each other’s strengths. Once their relationship reaches this level, the couple is inseparable, overcoming any barriers in life. At last, married life is filled with actual beauty and goodness, which should be the standard state of marriage.

3. What is the status of women in the West? The general sentiment among Westerners is to show consideration for the small instead of the big and take care of the weak rather than the strong. In any gathering, there is no hub if women are not present. Furthermore, they set a harmonious mood. Women establish the essential quality of a society. They are the queens of the family, and they are their own persons. This isn’t only because the supposedly big and strong men advocate for them, but also because women themselves hold great charm and mystery. We must recognize that women have equality and freedom inherently. These rights belong to them.
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from birth. Demanding them just feeds the idea that they are not our rights already. We Eastern women have not yet realized this truth: the power of women is enormous. As a society becomes more civilized, it is only women who can control civilization.

4. What else is there? There is dessin. Dessin is not only about contour but also color and harmony. A subject can be sufficiently rendered through dessin [technique], but perfecting it becomes a lifelong occupation.

With certain limitations, I was able to resolve the above-mentioned four questions for myself. I felt that my life would unfold naturally from that point, and that my work was the best starting point. I had great ideals and concrete plans. Whereas I was infinitely optimistic about the future, I now feel embarrassed about the outcome. [. . .]

Relationship with C

I had learned of C’s reputation early on, but it was in Paris that I met him for the first time. He had been invited as our guest for dinner, and I was cooking. When he arrived, he greeted me, and I felt an immediate spark in that initial meeting. After my husband left for Germany, C and I spent time together, going to restaurants and the theater, enjoying a boat tour, and sightseeing in the suburbs, always accompanied by a translator, as neither of us knew French. We talked about matters of the past, the present, and the future, finding that we shared many opinions and understood each other well. After a trip to Italy, he returned to Paris, and then left for Germany. We met again in Köln. At the time, I told him, “I love you, but I’m not going to divorce my husband.” He patted me on the back and said, “That decision is in perfect keeping with your character. I wouldn’t expect you to act in any other way.”

In Geneva, I told one of my Korean friends that having a lover can improve your relationship with your spouse. My friend agreed. I never intended to deceive my husband or to fall in love with C. One might wonder if this way of thinking is just self-deception. Frankly, I did believe that my relationship with C would inspire a deeper love for my husband. I had seen that husbands and wives in the West often take lovers. It is an open secret, taken for granted. As long as one does not cause any harm to one’s spouse, having a lover is neither a sin nor a mistake. I think that most progressive people should have this natural emotion. When one is asked to pass judgment in such cases, it’s best to simply laugh and refuse to offer an opinion. There’s no need to call it by any particular name. I am reminded of Jean Valjean, who was jailed for nineteen years for the crime of stealing one piece of bread from his neighbor because he could not bear to see his young nephews starve. His motives were beautiful. Yet, there was morality and law, and, based on those, he violated his conscience. Cause and effect have nothing to do with each other. How many deplorable deaths and how many sorrow-stricken people exist owing to the strictures of laws and socially prescribed morals?

Family fortune in trouble

The wealth we had during the time my husband worked as a government official was spent on building a new house in our hometown and acquiring land. We spent about 20,000 won during our travel in Europe and the United States. The 2,000-won honorarium that we received was used to open my husband’s new law office. We didn’t have any income, and the economy was getting worse. There was no other way to cope with the situation except for me to find a job; however, even this possibility was blocked by my unfortunate destiny.

For eight months after returning from our overseas tour, I was debilitated by physical and mental fatigue. And my space [for life and work] is in Seoul; however, because of our financial difficulties, we couldn’t afford to live there. I could neither leave my children at home nor abandon the household. Trapped in such a dangerously desperate situation, my anxiety grew. If I had not had a baby to take care of, if I had had a job outside the home, the tragedy that ensued might have been avoided.

It was at this very time that the so-called letter incident took place. In this time of turmoil, I had thought that only C could help pull me out of the despair I was feeling, and so I asked him to come and see me. I wanted to discuss with him whether I could start a business. I also wrote in the letter that I wished to renew our relationship. However, the letter was intercepted by some scoundrels who told my husband that I had expressed complete and lasting devotion to C. Of course, my husband was outraged. By then, our affection and trust were already waning, and so he chose to take the word of these rats rather than to believe me. After that, he began to change.

In Korea, the competition to survive was getting severe. The tendency for the strong to prey upon the weak intensified. Also, it is human nature to enjoy the failures of others, rather than their successes. When my husband verbally declared his intention to divorce me, those gossiping scoundrels compounded their insults by calling him an idiot for continuing to live with such a woman. Among them were several prominent individuals who, out of some weird curiosity, wanted to see how I would survive on my own. They strongly encouraged my husband to divorce me, tried to find a suitable candidate to be his new love, and suggested things he should consider. Rather than having simple human sympathy for the destruction of my family and the future of my children, all they were truly interested in was seeing how my relationship with C would unfold after my divorce. It was entertainment for them. They wanted to watch the miserable fall of a woman who had been strong and persistent, as if it were a play in a theater.

Just as one knows the state of one’s own happiness the best, one is also the best judge of one’s own unhappiness. A reasonable person would not ask others what they think about his own divorce, nor openly declare the shortcomings of the wife with whom he had lived for more than ten years. It is unreasonable for a man to be convinced to divorce his wife at the urging of others.
In any case, his family was facing dire circumstances, and he was at the height of his own problems. Even if he had managed to find some legal cases, he wouldn’t have been able work on them owing to a lack of money. He was ashamed because he was unable to pay rent for months. He lost face as the rumors of his divorce spread. He was naturally disinclined to commit to a decision, and so he was reluctant to act at all in this case. He agonized. His cheeks hollowed from emaciation, and his eyes sank from sleepless nights. On those sleepless nights, as he contemplated his situation, his calm would give way to jealous anger. He also realized how difficult it was to make money, so he regretted how wasteful we had been when we lived in Andonghyŏn, and he griped about all the money his wife had spent on painting tools and supplies.

A person’s mind is just like the sail on a sailboat, shifting with the direction of the wind. Once we begin to think along certain lines, everything will follow along that path. The more my husband thought about our situation, the more heated he grew in his decision to divorce me. At the same time, he saw one of his friends enjoying a playful, comfortable life as the husband of a kisaeng [female entertainer]. This became the strategy by which he could escape from all of his difficulties. After the rumor of our divorce had spread, wealthy prostitutes wished to become his lover, and ultimately he chose one. He finally asked for a divorce, and, in case I was unwilling, he threatened to sue me for adultery. Ah, isn’t man such a coward and an abuser? He thoroughly enjoys the love of his wife in normal times, but once he is threatened by the law or a bad reputation, he forgets the physical indulgences he enjoys and pretends to be a true gentleman (kunja). We women should stand up and curse men.

Divorce

I was in Tongnae with my children. My husband, who was in Seoul at the time, sent me a wire saying that he would be visiting. I took the trouble to wait outside the gate to greet him upon his arrival. Sullen, he looked at me with hostility. He was pale and angry. I was shocked. My heart was beating hard as I sensed that he was about to deliver some sad news. He went to a side room and called me in.

“Please, come over here,” I went over and sat down, silently checking his mood. And then he delivered the news. “We need to divorce.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “Just like that? So suddenly?”

“You wrote a letter to C, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And in that letter, didn’t you tell him you would devote your entire life to him?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Why are you lying?” he said. “In any case, I want a divorce.”

He pulled our important documents out of my dresser, divided them, and left them in the hands of his mother.

He directed me, “Ask my mother, aunt, and uncle to come here.”

After a short time, one by one, they had gathered.

“I am going to divorce her,” my husband announced.

“Son, what are you talking about? What about the children?”

My mother-in-law had grown distressed and had taken to her bed after she received the letter from her son informing her of his intentions the day before. She strongly opposed his desire to divorce.

“That’s nonsense,” his brother said.

“Tell us what you mean [by divorce],”

My husband responded, “How can I continue to live with this woman who had an affair?”

Everyone went silent.

He said, “If you oppose this divorce, it will kill me.”

At this point, everyone started talking all at once. My sister-in-law took the lead in the discussion and made a declaration.

“Do whatever you want, but it will be an unfilial deed to your mother and bring disharmony to our entire family.”

I interrupted:

If that’s what you want, we will divorce. You don’t have to offer any explanations, and you don’t have to reveal any shortcomings you imagine on your part. But I built this house and spent money that I earned by selling my paintings. Since you can’t claim that you alone brought in the income to support the family, we should divide all of our assets down the middle.

“They are not my assets. All of this belongs to my mother.”

“What . . . do you take me for some kind of living corpse? What you’re saying is that you don’t want to give me anything.”

“You’re completely shameless, given your sin,” he scolded.

“Sin? What sin? You made it a sin!”

“This is the only thing I’m going to give you. I want you to sell it and go away.” He put forward the title document for a rice field worth about 5 hundred won.

“I will never accept this.”

He stood up to leave. He was planning to go back to Seoul, but went to his sister’s house to discuss his decision further.

That night I couldn’t sleep. The events of the day and what I needed to do kept going through my head. I said to myself, “No, no, I will have to apologize. I will tell him that I didn’t have any evil motives. No one benefits if this situation gets worse. I will succumb for the sake of the future of our children.”

Suddenly, I found myself on my way to Seoul. I went to the motel where my husband was staying to see him.

“All of this is my fault,” I confessed. “But I assure you that my motivation was not bad.”

“Why are you bothering to tell me this now? Just sign the paper,” he said.

“What are you going to do with our children?”

“Don’t worry. I will take good care of them.”
I pleaded, "Please, don't. If you and I can't resolve this matter ourselves, let's try using the power of religion. Wasn't Jesus Christ nailed to the cross to relieve the sin of people?"

"Shut up!" He cut me off.

I burst into tears, but, in my mind, I laughed. What is the purpose of twisting and knotting the matters of the world? Wouldn't everything become all right if he just chuckled and let go like a real man? But I knew he would never change his mind.

I rushed to someone I knew, a male friend, whose advice I valued. "Brother, my husband wants to divorce me. What should I do?"

"Do it," he advised me. "You have never had hardships in your life. You need to experience some suffering."

"I can't divorce. I have to think of the future of our children."

"According to Ellen Key, children who are raised in a new family after divorce turn out better than those who are raised by unhappy couples," he argued.

"That's only in theory," I replied. "Maternal love is noble and mighty. A woman who has lost her ability to offer maternal love is unfortunate, and children who were not raised by maternal love are also unfortunate. As long as I know this, I can't divorce. Brother, please act as a peacemaker for us."

"Then are you absolutely willing to be a wise mother and good wife (hyŏnmongyangch'ŏn)?"

"I have never been anything but a wise mother, good wife, but I will do anything my husband demands."

"Then I will try to mediate."

My friend called the president and the director of the marketing department of a company, trying to enlist their help in mediating for us. I received a follow-up telephone call, urging me to give up on the marriage because there was no hope for a compromise. My friend urged, "Why don't you go ahead with the divorce? What's the point of resisting your husband's relentless demands?"

My friend is a novelist and was more interested in the unfolding drama of the event than the deep suffering that I was actually experiencing.

I wasn't satisfied with his answer. That night, I couldn't fall asleep at the inn where I was staying. I kept hearing chuckling from the outer chambers, where the male guests had brought their kisaeng to entertain themselves. What a contradiction here! When a man accuses a woman of misbehavior, his behavior should be impeccable. Yet men think that they have the right to play around and sleep with any woman they like, simply because these are the privileges of men. I couldn't help laughing, not only at the social system that supports these ways of thinking, but also at the shameless attitude of men. They act like little children: "You did this, so I will do that." My husband never experienced or even imagined very complicated issues in life, so I supposed that he may regret that later. But I also knew that there was nothing I could do to change his mind because he had already indulged in a relationship with his kisaeng and stubbornly insisted on divorce, with the excuse that I had made a mistake.

I reluctantly left for Tongnae. Should I run away to Pongch'ŏn? Should I escape to Japan? I was sure that it would be just fine if I could just pass this critical moment. Unfortunately, I didn't have the money to travel. Unable to bear the pain, I stopped at Taegu. I visited Y's house, where he and his wife welcomed me. They took me to the theater and restaurants. The three of us drank, smoked, and talked until morning. The friend was concerned about finding a prospective son-in-law, and he was asking me to identify a talented man. But the pain only I could feel was constantly swirling around in my mind. Finally, I decided I had run out of options. I had to return to Tongnae.

Once I was there, my husband sent me a letter every other day, urging me to sign the divorce document. "Sign the divorce papers," he wrote. "If you do not sign within fifteen days, I will sue you." I replied:

It's a natural law that two strangers are united or separated. There are four reasons why we should not divorce. First, we have an elderly parent in her eighties, and our divorce would be unfilial to her. Second, we have four children. Since they're young and still attending school, we are obligated to watch over them. Third, a family is based in the collective life of the husband and wife, and both engage in the production together. If they separate, there should be resources for two households. I think it's your duty to provide these resources. Fourth, at our age and with our experience, we should be making our lives together through understanding and righteousness, not through pure love only. I have already apologized to you. My motivation was by no means bad, and I've promised to become a wise mother, good wife, as you demanded.

His reply was as follows:

I do not think about the past or the future. I live only in the present. If you really can't forget your children after the divorce, I don't mind if you choose to live with them as you once did.

It was such a shameless response, whether it was to lure me [to sign] or to conclude the case of divorce. For almost a month, we went back and forth, with him urging me to sign and me declining to do so.

One day, an angry uncle came with other relatives and strongly pressed me. "Sign the paper as a gesture of apology," he said. "We will work out all of the details afterward." I told him, "We are the two who married, and we are the two who will work out the divorce. This is not your concern. Just leave us alone." I spent another sleepless night in contemplation. I told myself, "It's over. He has a lover, his relatives agree, and it's futile for me alone to resist." Then I suddenly came up with an idea and wrote a two-party pledge.

PLEDGE

Both husband XXX and wife XXX pledge not to remarry for two years and possibly be reunited if each finds the other's behavior during that period acceptable.
I feel great pity for the men of the educated class (yusik kyeugp) in Korea. They aren’t allowed to enter the political arena, which should be their primary arena. There’s no way for them to use the knowledge they have acquired and developed. Society isn’t ready to understand this theory or that theory. The only hope they might have is to live for love. But family is constrained by the system, and their wives are ignorant. So these men are sullen, and their lives are hard and bitter. With no outlet for their intellect or energies, they can only go to restaurants, get drunk, and indulge with shameless kisaeng. Even these lives do not satisfy them. So they try this and that, meet this person and that person, searching for a better life, only to end up lonely.

I also feel pity for the women of the educated class, that is, New Women (sin yösong). They still spend their childhoods and married lives within the feudal family system, so that their lives are incredibly complex and chaotic. Half-baked knowledge doesn’t help them strike a fine balance between the old and the new. It only serves to provoke temper. They learned a philosophy of life in college and had an opportunity to observe family life in Tokyo or the West, didn’t they? They have a will and ideals as high as the sky, but their bodies and work remain on earth, don’t they? They married based on sweet love, but soon the husband and the wife went their separate ways, and then they could not find any meaning in life together. The wives’ only concern from morning to evening is what to prepare for dinner. In extreme cases, they suffer nervous breakdowns, envying unmarried women and advocating singlehood.

People often say that women are weak, but women are strong. Women may be small, but it’s women who are truly powerful. Happiness depends on the ability to control everything. Women! Control your family, your husband, your children, and society. Then, the ultimate victory will come to women.

The psychology of Korean men is absurd. They don’t have any concept of chastity for themselves, but they demand chastity of their wives and other women. Despite their requirement of chastity for any viable partner, they pour their energies into taking the virginity of still more women. Men take pleasure in playing with loose women, but in doing so they destroy women’s chastity. What kind of primitive immorality is this? If men stress the importance of women’s chastity, isn’t it reasonable to expect them to try to protect women’s chastity? In the West and Tokyo, if a man doesn’t value chastity, he doesn’t expect others to maintain chastity.

The general sentiment of the Korean public is in a transitional period. People don’t have the courage to move forward, and yet deep inside they want to do so. Constrained by the economy, they cannot leap forward and have no outlet for their deep frustration. Under these circumstances, they vent their criticisms at anyone who is actually moving forward. They don’t have the ability to solve problems because they don’t have a resolute view of life. Without sympathy or understanding, they are driven by the trend of the times. Far from trying to find solutions or help those in trouble, they instead take pleasure in observing other people struggle with their problems, as if it were some kind of film or play. They ridicule and scold any promising young person who has foresight.

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Love, marriage, and divorce

Husband XXX signature
Wife XXX signature
My brother-in-law, who had gone up to Seoul to mediate, returned to Tongnae holding the divorce decree bearing my husband’s signature. He told me,

Sister-in-law, let him have your signature. What value could this mere piece of paper have? How could your rights in this household disappear when you have four children together? My brother only talks [about divorce], but I doubt he’ll actually file the document.

My mother-in-law, who was sitting next to him, said, “I couldn’t agree more. I’m really worried that he might get sick. Sign the paper. Don’t pay attention to him, whether he has a lover or not. You and I will live together with your children.”

I laughed in my mind, disgusted and frustrated. I immediately passed my seal to them. “There’s no reason to delay. Why don’t you just stamp it? Stamp it ten times!” I realized how a piece of paper could affect one’s mind. Unexpected things began to happen. Should I watch matters changing with tears or laughter? I adhered to the principle of nonresistance, tried to endure in silence and cope with the emotions and issues that came with the passage of time.

Popular sentiments of Korean society

Upon returning from our tour of Europe and the United States, we definitely noticed that the overall level of culture had been significantly raised in the time we were gone. There were a lot more educated people around. The competition for survival had gotten much more severe. There are about 20 million grass-roots people on the frontlines of everyday life. They did not have jobs, savings, or credentials. In their desperate effort to survive, many of them reluctantly set out for Osaka or Manchuria on a wandering life. As a result, now, in Korea, only those who have either money, credentials, or special talent are able to survive.

These days, international figures are widely known in Korea, and so all kinds of ideology and thought are imported. But, if people have only a narrow range of knowledge and do not have a broader perspective, it’s natural for them to lose their way in pursuit of their desires. In other words, when they eat pibimpap,27 most of them don’t enjoy its particular flavor and taste. They just eat it. They play around with one ideology today and another tomorrow. They peacefully interact with this person today and that person tomorrow. As they have not established their own ideology or particular view of life, they end up spending their lives like reeds waving in the wind. It’s mostly because they’re barred from politics and restricted by financial problems, and so they really can’t decide what they want to do. But the main cause has to do with the fact that they’re very unfocused.
and is willing to go forward, turning this man or woman into a withered, handicapped person.

Look at the European countries and the United States, where they encourage those who try extraordinary things and call them "talents" or "geniuses." As a result, people innovate. Can't you see the constant progress for a society that comes out of such a practice? What do we see in Korea? Even the slightest deviance in behavior invites action to obliterate it and destroy the person, with no hope of revival. Look at the examples through the ages. Genius isn't satisfied with the conventional customs of the time. Genius is able to predict what's coming and create a new future. Then, how can we possibly look down on people trying new things? The worst thing would be to cut off genius at its roots. Therefore, from now on in Korean society, we need not only pioneers working at the forefront but also those in the second and third fronts who can support young people as they meet and seriously confront challenges. We need people who rely on rigorous examination of the causes and motivations for things, rather than on a useless law or morality that unfairly judges people as grave sinners.

To Ch'önggu

Dear, by now you must know what I think and how my life has changed during our separation. My Dear, I still haven't found what my life's happiness is. Was it happiness when we were raising our children and making our home, sometimes in conflict and without a plan? Or is it happiness to live as I do these days, wandering around and engaging in my art?

I don't think life is about the choice between family and art. Life is about combining family and art, just as water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen. Listen to me; this is what I believe. Let's say that there are two kinds of people—those who live ordinary lives and those who live extraordinary lives. Those who live a more than ordinary life have more passion and individuality (kaesŏng) than ordinary people. The ultimate ideal for a modern man or woman is to develop his or her own unique characteristics with a zeal that remains after completing the ordinary things that everyone does. We have not only theories but also concrete examples to support this argument. The lives of great heroes are like this. In other words, the expression, "cultivate yourself, manage the family, govern the country, and conquer the world in peace" (salin chega ch'iguk p'yŏngch'onha) should be as true now as in old times. With this ideal, I have led our family life for ten years while continuing my work. I'm confident that I can continue to do all of these things. Any partial life would be far from happiness for me. My path to happiness requires that I have a full life.28 What a pity it is to see this ideal destroyed.

Emotional changes take place every ten years. Someone once disliked can become a friend, and someone I liked can fall into disfavor. Someone I was close to at one time can become distant, and vice versa. A good person may become bad, and the other way around. I wonder how your emotions will change in the next ten years. As I said earlier, the true meaning of married life comes only after a husband and a wife have passed through the three stages. I already know all of your strengths and weaknesses, and you know all of my merits and flaws. In that case, shouldn't we live together, helping and complementing each other?

This divorce wasn't in my plan; it came out of your forceful demands. I yielded to your desires without resistance. No matter how many times I think about this result, I always feel ashamed because we failed to unite our personalities and lives. I also hold the hope that you'll make your eighty-year-old mother feel comfortable for the rest of her life, that you will pay close attention to our four children and their growth, and that you will keep your good health.

Notes

1 In the original, it was "denial of life" (insaeng pujŏng), but I have translated it here as "denies the pleasures of life."
2 In the original, the German doctor's name is rendered in Korean characters that indicate its pronunciation as "P'elsūt'a."
3 Chongno was the major thoroughfare in Seoul.
6 The Story of Ch'unhyang is a well-known Korean folktale that epitomizes woman's unbinding will to keep her chastity for her husband, even in the face of imminent death.
7 Yun Simdŏk was a prominent singer and performer educated in Korea and Japan. While studying in Japan, she came to know Kim Ujin, a fellow Korean student and playwright. He was already married, but they became romantically involved. They eventually committed suicide together while crossing the Korea Strait in 1926.
8 Yŏn was a socialist magazine published by Pip'ansa. The text translated here is from Yi (2004), vol. 5, pp. 241–243.
9 The Seven Sins (ch'ilgŏ ch'ak) include talkativeness, lewdness, stealing, no son, envy, mistreatment of parents-in-law, and deadly illness.
10 The author mentions only five sins in the text. The two missing sins are stealing and deadly illness.
11 The original reads literally "unnatural life or sex life" (pujavŏn han saenghwal naegi sŏng saenghwal).
12 "Second wife" refers to one who is in a loving relationship with a married man but has no legal recognition or privileges.
13 In the original, the term "marriage" appears, but I translate it as a "union" because the status of "second wife" does not allow her to have legal marital status.
14 Pak first met Kim Unho when she visited her classmate, who was Kim's sister. Pak spelled her name Induk Pahk when she published books in English. See Pak (1954).
15 Won is the unit of Korean currency.
16 Na's "Confession" has two distinctive narrative styles. One takes the form of a direct address to her former husband, Ch'ŏnggu, and the other is her own reflection and social and cultural critique. Depending on the style, I have translated "ssi," referring to Ch'ŏnggu, as either "you" or "he."
17 "Ch'ŏnggu" refers to Na Hyesŏk's ex-husband, Kim Uyŏng.
6 Politics of the body—chastity, birth control, and fashion

Editor’s introduction

The influx of Western culture and material artifacts in the 1920s and 1930s had a significant impact on the ways in which the modern body was imagined, practiced, and challenged. Those who actively absorbed new and modern ideas from Japan and the West considered the body to be the domain of individual will, desire, and consciousness. This set them in stark contrast to adherents of the Confucian-prescribed norms that mandated strict compliance to social codes of chastity, purity, and modesty. To critics, women’s bold challenge to the old norms was motivated by a dangerous desire to imitate anything foreign and modern. Debates about what constituted the ideal body emerged as a popular and sensational topic in the media.

Prominent women intellectuals such as Na Hyesuk and Kim Wönju publicly challenged the ideology of chastity that had been imposed on women only for centuries. Na Hyesuk argues that chastity is neither a moral obligation nor a law. It is merely the product of taste (Source 46). Her challenge to the old notion of chastity is not intended to promote careless, casual sex but rather to draw attention to the tyrannical nature of the man-made norms that had been used as a way to control and restrict a woman’s body, treating it as the property of her husband. Her essay was written after she had gone through a highly public divorce brought about by an extramarital affair she had had with Ch’oe Rin in Paris. In the essay, she counts the affair as a necessary process for her growth into a mature person. She interprets her temptation and eventual submission to it as a force of nature. Na’s colleague, Kim Wönju, further elaborates that “chastity gains its meaning only when one loves someone,” interlocking chastity with modern love, rather than taking it as a separate, normative rule of morality that needs to be closely adhered to (Source 43). She concisely criticizes the oppressive nature of the traditional chastity norm as a biased convention that was imposed on women exclusively. Her challenge to the very idea of “purity” fundamentally shifts the discourse on the body away from the idea of the woman’s body as a limited and fragile entity to something that was unlimited, resilient, and creative. The new discourse on chastity was joined by some male intellectuals such as Paek Ch’ol, who argues...
New Women in Colonial Korea
A sourcebook

Compiled and translated with an introduction by Hyaeweol Choi