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Pak Wansŏ's "The Dreaming Incubator": An Application of Western Literary Theories to a Major Work of Korean Fiction

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ABSTRACT: The essay discusses themes in twentieth-century Korean fiction, including contemporary topics such as abortion and infanticide. The essay then focuses on Pak Wansŏ's short story "The Dreaming Incubator" (1994), which discusses abortion from the mother's perspective. The essay uses formalist, feminist, and Marxist literary theories to explicate the story. Finally, the essay demonstrates that the narrator of the story manifests post-abortion syndrome.

DISCUSSING KOREAN LITERATURE before an American audience forces one to address several obstacles, especially if the audience is comprised either of American college or university students or the general public who know virtually nothing of the author under consideration here. A lack of cultural knowledge, certain scholarly perspectives or biases, and even problems of orthography can impede appreciation of an author like Pak Wansŏ. Thus, literature professors and others who wish to share the didactic and literary values of her work must remove these obstacles first.¹

Perhaps the easiest challenge to address concerns orthography,

¹ The didactic function of modern Korean literature has been noted by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon, who write that Korean writers hold "the belief that fiction writing is essentially a serious undertaking, and one with ethical overtones. Writers will not be condemned for didacticism," *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology*, edited by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), pp. xi-xii.

where the Romanization of the Korean alphabet following the McCune-Reischauer or Revised Romanization systems fails due to translator or publisher variation.² Publications in the last two decades use several variants for “Pak Wansō,” including the hyphenated variant “Pak Wan-s” (used by Kim in a 1990 discussion and by West and Suh in a 2001 monograph³), “Park Wan-so” (used by Suh in a 1998 anthology⁴), and “Park Wansuh” (the spelling used in the translation of the short story discussed here as reproduced in Choi’s 2002 anthology). This paper follows the most recent orthographic rendering of “Pak Wansō” as used by Fulton and Kwon in their 2005 work.

A much more challenging obstacle, however, is the ignorance that American audiences have of international history, the vocabulary of movements that have shaped world events, and the canon and lexicon of literature. Scholars writing for the academic world and for the general reading public have commented on American ignorance of world cultural values for decades now.⁵ Perhaps Harold Bloom’s comment about student attitudes toward literature, albeit sarcastic, identifies three reasons why they cannot appreciate it:

Precisely why students of literature have become amateur political scientists, uninformed sociologists, incompetent anthropologists, mediocre philosophers, and overdetermined cultural historians, while a puzzling matter, is not beyond

² See, for example, In-sob Zong’s commentary on the translation of Korean works, *A Guide to Korean Literature* (Elizabeth NJ: Hollym International, 1982), especially pp. 276ff.

³ *Remembering the “Forgotten War”: The Korean War Through Literature and Art* (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2001).

⁴ *The Rainy Spell and Other Korean Stories*, revised and expanded edition, translated by Suh Ji-moon (New York NY: M. E. Sharpe/UNESCO, 1998); a translation of *Changma oe Han’guk tanp’yon sonjip*.

⁵ Consider, for example, the seminal work of E. D. Hirsch in his *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and Stephen Prothero’s *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know--and Doesn’t* (New York NY: Harper San Francisco, 2007).

all conjecture. They resent literature, or are ashamed of it, or are just not all that fond of reading it.⁶

Finally, sometimes academics themselves have contributed to this cultural ignorance. Many scholars have reiterated the same themes that inform post-war Korean literature: the national trauma experienced since the Korean War, the disillusionment of the 1950s that culminated in student uprisings and militia control of the government in the early 1960s, and the tension on the social fabric created by the immediate and successful industrialization of South Korea in the last third of the twentieth century.⁷

While similar identification of themes testifies to the consistency, if not integrity, of the scholarship, an educated reader might think that only certain topics inform Korean literature. The trauma of the Korean War is still being negotiated by Koreans themselves, a psychological factor in the national consciousness that Americans, for example, simply cannot understand.⁸ But newer, more controversial topics in contemporary Korean literature exist. Often, these newer themes are suggested by scholarly commentators but they have not yet been explored in detail and not categorized. This paper attempts to address some of these more contemporary themes and to apply some of the major literary theories to

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages* (New York NY: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 521.

⁷ See, especially, Chong-un Kim, *Postwar Korean Short Stories: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Seoul, Korea: Seoul National Univ. Press, 1983, pp. ix-x).

⁸ Except for the trauma created by the partition of Palestine in 1948 to create Israel, no other recent historical event can approximate the trauma created by the division of the Korean peninsula into two nations. The dissolutions of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the past three decades have occurred peacefully or with minimal military action. Examples of separatism cannot help one to convey the Korean trauma since most separatist movements are proceeding legislatively; the efforts of the Parti Quebecois in Canada and separatist movements in the United States are prime examples.

Pak Wansŏ's short story "The Dreaming Incubator"⁹ for the express purpose of helping Western audiences to appreciate her fine work.

THEMES IN KOREAN LITERATURE

Commentators have categorized various themes of Korean literature since the war. The division of the peninsula into two nations, the permanent separation of families caused by that division, and the fratricide caused by family members caught behind the lines of the respective countries who then fight against each other are standard themes in Korean literature. Other scholars have identified more contemporary topics that have recently been coming into prominence: the clash of traditionalism and modernization, the influence of Western political and religious ideas on Korean society, and the effects of a strong capitalist drive on the Korean family—topics that the author under discussion here has addressed. Fulton and Kwon summarize Pak's biography by saying that "she has written profusely, focusing in turn on wartime trauma..., the ideological and territorial division of the Korean peninsula..., and changing women's roles and self-perceptions."¹⁰ West and Suh affirm that Pak's work addresses not only the standard themes, but also the newer topics in Korean literature, noting that Pak herself

says that she wanted to prevent the Korean War and its aftermath from becoming a mere historical record of territories lost and gained, and the death of a family member from becoming just a number in the wartime casualty toll.¹¹ She wanted to record the personal meanings and consequences created by the war.... Pak believes that the breakup, or weakening, of kinship ties, aggravated by the influx of the idea of individualism from the West, has made the Korean people self-centered.¹²

⁹ Wansuh Park, "The Dreaming Incubator," *Unspoken Voices: Selected Short Stories by Korean Women Writers*, edited by Jin-Young Choi, translated by Jin-Young Choi (Dumont NJ: Homa & Sekey Books, 2002), pp. 101-42.

¹⁰ Fulton and Kwon, p. 291.

¹¹ Pak's beloved uncle and brother were killed during the war.

¹² West and Suh, pp. 94, 101.

Other specific topics are only now beginning to emerge in Korean literature, both of which emanate from the subjugation of women: abortion and infanticide.¹³ Admittedly, mention of these topics is often couched in ambiguous or secretive terms, and infanticide is mentioned much more frequently than abortion. Several examples of the secretive nature of possible abortion or infanticide can be mentioned here. A character in Kang Sok-kyong's "Days and Dreams" mentions how, if she had "known better," she "wouldn't have done it." Here "it" meaning give birth to her second child; the possibility could either mean abortion or infanticide.¹⁴ A character in Kim Yongha's short story "Lizard" speaks of a lost "baby" who had been killed either while in the womb (abortion) or once born (infanticide), and any verification of the child's death is frustrated because the event is recounted as a dream.¹⁵

Infanticide is clearly mentioned in several other stories. A young

¹³ Both of these newer topics demonstrate the tension created by the importance that Koreans place on children and the contradiction of that value as evidenced in abortion. The value of children is especially noted by Kim Taekil in *Values of Korean People Mirrored in Fiction*, translated by Kim Heungsook, 2 vols. (Seoul, Korea: Dae Kwang Munwhasa, 1990), who writes: "Childless people are often lamented," primarily because they have no one to continue the practice of ancestor worship (vol. 1, pp. 79-80). Writing in 1990, the author comments further on a corollary of infanticide practices: "Sexual discrimination not only affects women but the whole population of Korea. It is widely known that the general tendency of neglecting girls and favoring boys is making the imbalance of population a very serious problem in Korea" (vol. 2, p. 122). Despite the apparent love for children in Korean culture, casual references to abortion abound in Korean fiction; see, for example, Chong-un Kim's discussion of So Kiwon's "The Unchartered Map" in *Postwar Korean Short Stories: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (Seoul, Korea: Seoul National Univ. Press, 1983), pp. xvi-xvii.

¹⁴ *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*, trans. Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton (Seattle WA: Seal Press, 1989), pp. 1-27, here at p. 5.

¹⁵ *Modern Korean Fiction: An Anthology*, edited by Bruce Fulton and Youngmin Kwon (New York NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 371-82, here at p. 379.

woman in Park Kyongni's short story "Youngju and the Cat," reflecting on poverty, exclaims: "I understand why people kill their children first before they commit suicide."¹⁶ Another possible case of infanticide is alluded to but not depicted in O Chong-hui's short story "Evening Game."¹⁷ A young woman in Han Kang's "Nostalgic Journey" recounts a childhood event, where her father, who had already thrown her sister into the sea, attempted to kill her also; the narrator has taken years to acquire the courage to reveal the event.¹⁸

One clear instance of abortion can be found in Pak Kyong-ri's short story "Pyoryudo," and critics have pointed out the disastrous effects of abortion on the main character in terms that match those used by scholars who document cases of post-abortion syndrome:

Kwang-hi meets Min-u while working as a waitress at a tearoom and conceives his child. She solves the problem by having an abortion, but suffers mentally. She feels that all the people around her despise her and she thus abhors others. She thinks she is the lowest woman in the world. She leaves the tearoom in agony and becomes a prostitute in the red-light district in Seoul. At the end of the self-depreciation, she is mentally deranged and kills herself.¹⁹

Both abortion and infanticide are well discussed in Pak's work. "The Dreaming Incubator," in fact, is summarized by Choi as "a savage criticism...of Korea's prejudice against girls that used to force women to abort female fetuses."²⁰

¹⁶ Park Kyongni's short story "Youngju and the Cat" p. 54.

¹⁷ Chong-hui O, "Evening Game," *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*, translated by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton (Seattle WA: Seal Press, 1989), pp. 181-201, here at p. 193.

¹⁸ *Unspoken Voices: Selected Short Stories by Korean Women Writers*, edited by Jin-Young Choi, translated by Jin-Young Choi (Dumont NJ: Homa & Sekey Books, 2002), pp. 219-51, here at pp. 247-48.

¹⁹ Kim, *Values*, vol. 2, 144.

²⁰ Choi, p. 9. Educated readers, of course, know that the practice of female infanticide is common in India and, especially, China, where a draconian forced abortion policy is part of the nation's population control efforts.

APPLICATION OF LITERARY THEORIES TO "THE DREAMING INCUBATOR"

"The Dreaming Incubator" is a first-person narration of a relatively simple event in the life of an unnamed woman. The narrator goes to her nephew's school play to videotape the child's performance. There she meets the father of another child in the production. When she is having trouble working the camera, the man offers to record the performances of both children. They go to a tearoom after the performance, ostensibly so that she can thank him for his kindness. During their ensuing discussion, the narrator is amazed that, while he was disappointed on the birth of his second daughter, the man rejects the accepted view regarding preferring sons over daughters. The narrator finds this extremely difficult to believe. On their second meeting, when she broaches the topic again, the narrator self-discloses at least two abortions and hatred of the in-laws who coerced her into aborting. The story ends with the narrator criticizing her family's support of patriarchal practices, questioning her husband's role in the abortions, and driving aimlessly away from her home.²¹

Other commentators have not been as direct in categorizing Pak's works. Ji-moon Suh writes: "With surgical precision, she exposes the vacuity of prosperous middle-class existence, the enormous cost of maintaining mistaken values, and the unintentional cruelty of people toward themselves and one another. In her stories, the delight of the critic in exposure coexists with the humanitarian's pity and horror at the discovery" (p. 204). It is curious that Peter H. Lee does not include any work by Pak in his *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology* (Honolulu HI: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 1990), while other lesser lights are included.

²¹ While the sense of a closure at the end of a work of fiction is a formalist concern, it is intriguing that the narrator should choose to drive away from her home, thus illustrating in the denouement a significant element of Korean social philosophy: "Because of Korea's rigid social structure, the person who does not fit in is at a greater disadvantage than he or she would be in the more individualistic societies in the West. For in Korea, one's identity is determined almost exclusively by relationships with others, whether family, clan, classmates, or colleagues. In extreme cases, misfits are virtually nonpersons—people without a society, internal exiles. It is the status of such

If the plot of the story is simple, what is not simple is the narratological flow of the reminiscences that are interspersed and the interpretative skills demanded of readers as they proceed through the story. Thanks to decades of college attention to literary theories, although they may not be masters of the vocabulary, Western readers are familiar with key concepts from the major literary theories and know when specifics of any given theory can be applied to works with which they are completely unfamiliar. Western readers have been trained to apply feminist, formalist, and Marxist theories to American and British works for the past four decades since their secondary education, formalism having been the dominant mode of literary study much longer. It would be interesting to determine the applicability of these literary theories to an example of Korean literature as well. To make an analysis of the story as concise as possible, the following will expand on this basic plot summary vis-à-vis several literary theories.²²

individuals that lends tension to a great deal of contemporary Korean fiction.” Pihl, Fulton, and Fulton, *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction* (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. xiv.

²² A word of caution must be injected here. Some commentators object to the application of literary theories to international works on the ground that doing so obscures the primary functions of literature (to teach and to entertain). M. M. Badawi thus challenges the tendencies of most literary theories to divert attention away from the entertainment and didactic purposes of literature while succinctly challenging the more prominent literary theories in the following passage: “At a more fundamental level, I cannot dismiss as irrelevant the question of value.... Nor am I capable of reducing to the status of a mere game of words, however intricate the rules, a work that grapples with the baffling mystery of human existence, exploring the dark recesses of the mind, trying to make sense of the intensity of human passions and suffering, or even endeavouring to lessen the misery of the wretched of the earth by advocating political or social action. Literature is much more than entertainment: this was once regarded as a truism, but sadly it has to be repeated now, even at the risk of sounding too solemn. Modern fashionable French-inspired academic literary criticism, particularly in the United States of America—what Frank Kermode recently described as “high-tech, jargoned and reader alienating”—has, in my opinion, with its neo-scholasticism done a considerable disservice to literature

FORMALISM

According to Western formalism, a story should immediately frame the exposition, the essential elements of the plot or the matter to be discussed, so that the reader can understand the events to follow. Early criticism of post-war Korean literature identified a clear break from the concise formalist exposition of plot development. While the concern of Korean writers during the Japanese occupation “was story, conceived in chronological terms,” Lee writes:

What the new generation discovered was the inner world of the protagonist, his psychological and philosophical dimension, in fine, his stream of consciousness. Skeptical of inherited techniques and established reputations, the new writers subjected the leading names and achievements in modern Korean fiction to a fresh valuation. They freed Korean fiction from its well-knit formalism and made it a medium adequate to contain the quality of complex, contemporary experiences.²³

Reading the first paragraphs of Pak’s story makes it seem as though it will concern resentment between sisters, one who cares little for domestic chores and her big sister, the narrator, who seems to be a contented wife and mother of three children. This statement of the problem to be discussed in this story, however, changes dramatically halfway through when the narrator mentions “the secret [she] hid away deep inside.”²⁴ Four pages later it is evident that an abortion that the narrator had ten years earlier will control the discourse of the balance of the story as much as it has controlled her life. The abortion episodes and the narrator’s reflection on them develop the story further, moving the

by robbing it of its seriousness, even though as a rule it suffers itself from unbearable solemnity. “Perennial Themes in Modern Arabic Literature,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 20/1 (1993): 3-19; here at pp. 5-6.

²³ Peter H. Lee, *Korean Literature: Topics and Themes*. Association for Asian Studies: Monographs and Papers 16 (Tucson AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 1965), here at p. 116.

²⁴ Pak, p. 124.

plot away from an analysis of sisterly relations to the deep psychological hurt of a forty-year-old woman suffering from abortion. The first abortion is responsible for the narrator's hatred of her mother- and sister-in-law, both of whom compelled her to abort because the child she was carrying was a daughter and not a more valuable son. A second abortion, disclosed only seven pages from the story's end, changes the character of the narrator even more dynamically; she had never told her mother-in-law about an abortion performed three months after her first child was born, indicating the disastrous effects on the family created by events shrouded in secrecy.

What is especially interesting about the arrangement of details of the abortion episodes is that the narrative, which had proceeded chronologically according to formalist theory before the abortion was mentioned, careens wildly throughout the balance of the story after the abortion is disclosed. Once the man leaves the coffee shop (the location of their second meeting), the narrator recalls significant details about the abortion ten years earlier. In the next paragraph she returns to the present. On her way home, the narrator is forced to drive through a newly-developed area where "On both sides, raw red earth was exposed on the sloping cut.... The two sloping cuts looked like two widely spread legs of a woman in a hospital stirrup."²⁵ This recollection does not keep her in the past, however; she drives against oncoming traffic and, in a battery of interrogatives, questions whether her husband is as much an accomplice in the abortion as the man with whom she had two dates suggested that all men who brought their wives to the abortion clinic were. This reflection returns the narrator to the time surrounding the conception of her third child, a daughter, from there to the present, from there to the time of her son's birth, then back to the abortion episode, back to the time after her first child's birth, and ultimately to the present. The byzantine chronological ordering effectively suggests a stream of

²⁵ Pak, p. 130.

consciousness technique to mirror the narrator's confusion.²⁶

FEMINIST THEORY

While it is common knowledge that feminist literary theory is concerned with patriarchal oppression of women, especially by men, what is striking is that neither of the two male characters with whom the narrator interacts manifest patriarchal tendencies. The man with whom she has two dates certainly does not. He advocates a greater equality between men and women when arguing that the Korean preference for a male child is morally wrong. Similarly, he views abortion as a clear violation of the right to life of an unborn female child. The man bases his position on the fact that Korean reproductive agencies guaranteed that parents would have sons by aborting any unborn child who was female.

To a lesser degree, since her relationship with him is not portrayed but related from her perspective, the narrator's husband manifests patriarchal oppression only insofar as he agrees to his wife's abortions. Whether he provides full consent, however, is debatable, as is evident by the lengthy consideration that the narrator herself makes regarding whether her husband can be considered an accomplice in the abortions or not. Conveniently, the husband is not an active character in the story; he is either out of town on business or has a phone conversation relayed to the reader through the narrator's perspective.

²⁶ In the biographical introduction of Pak in their anthology, Pihl, Fulton, and Fulton ratify this interpretation of authorial intention: "Her language, enriched by the skillful use of irony and metaphor, implies much about the characters and their world with a minimum of authorial intervention. Like many Korean writers of fiction, Pak spends more time on people and their attitudes than on physical description. While using objective description to establish a physical setting, she conveys most of her information through the language of her characters and, in her first-person narratives, the attitude of her narrator. We are told less about how things *appear* to the narrator and more about how they make her *feel*." *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction*, edited by Marshall Pihl, Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 150, italics in original.

In contrast, the most patriarchal characters are the narrator's mother- and sister-in-law, both of whom are the primary agents of persuasion, if not compulsion, for the narrator to abort, and who seem to collaborate with the abortionist while the narrator is silent during the procedure. The narrator's attempt to bond with her unborn daughter (humanizing her by calling her "Princess Little Thumb") is thwarted by two narratological effects: first, the humanization occurs as she "slowly went under anesthesia"; second, her in-laws immediately occupy the dream in which they force the substitution of Princess Little Thumb by "a big fat baby."²⁷ The mother-in-law is especially egregious in her patriarchal perception of society; she states outright that, unlike "a girl's ugly lower part," which should not be shown to any husband, "a boy's little pecker is something to be shown proudly."²⁸

A final insult to the narrator from a feminist perspective is her dehumanization. She moves from "Big Sister" at the beginning of the story, to "a crazy bitch" (as she was called by angry motorists whom she cut off on the road) to a non-human machine: "I was indoctrinated from my diaper days to serve as an incubator."²⁹

MARXIST CRITICISM

While Pak and her contemporaries have addressed the impact of political Marxism on Korea, the principles of Marxist literary criticism can help readers understand several important elements of the story. An initial application of Marxist criticism would investigate the ideologies and power structures of the characters. The narrator's contest with her sister over domestic duties is relatively innocuous when contrasted against that which exists between the narrator and members of her family who compel her to abort the third daughter. The man whom she meets at the school play functions as a catalyst for change, and it is entirely proper that the man was once a college revolutionary—a character type with an

²⁷ Pak, p. 139.

²⁸ Pak, p. 141.

²⁹ Pak, pp. 101, 130, 141.

even greater symbolism in Korean literature than it does in the West, especially since student demonstrations helped to topple dictatorships.

An essential element of Marxist criticism concerns economic forces on characters' actions. Moreover, the narrator's statements that her first abortion occurred in times of poverty ("when my husband had just quit his job with no alternative plans. We were at the end of the rope"³⁰) lose their rationalizing force quickly. The husband is set to inherit significant real estate from his mother; he has traveled to Japan and China on, as the narrator herself affirms, business. More importantly, the narrator's sister and brother-in-law discuss at length how she is "a real estate jaebol [business family or monopoly], definitely several cuts above those small businessmen who have to plug a big deficit hole with small profit all year long."³¹ Granted, the abortions occurred ten years earlier, but economic factors should not have been a consideration in the abortions, except that the materialistic tendencies of the family (the mother-in-law especially) contributed to the compulsion towards abortion.

OTHER LITERARY THEORIES

One can apply historical criticism to this short story only insofar as it is a testament to the lives of women affected by abortion at the time of its writing. Whether there is a political motive behind the writing cannot be ascertained. There is no compelling passage in the short story demonstrating that Pak is agitating either for or against abortion laws.³² What

³⁰ Pak, p. 136.

³¹ Pak, p. 115.

³² A political statement on abortion in South Korea is possible, of course. Even though abortion is legal in the United States throughout the nine months of pregnancy for any reason whatsoever, it is significant that the number of abortions in South Korea is comparable to that of the United States: "In Korean law, an induced abortion, defined as the removing of a fetus before the 28th week of gestation, is allowed in cases of genetically inherited diseases, transmitted diseases, incest, rape, and those cases that may greatly harm maternal health. However, it has been used as a form of contraception in Korea, and the number of induced abortions runs between 1.5 to 2 million cases

is significant from the historical perspective is that Pak would write about such a personal topic when many other Korean authors still focus on the disastrous effects of the Korean War on the nation.

Psychological criticism could also enhance one's reading of the story, but an adaptation of the general principles of the theory as transmitted to students of literature would need to be made. Arguing a Freudian or a Jungian interpretation of the story would yield a tortured reading, leading not into mere speculation but fantasy.³³ Besides, the

annually. There are 600,000 newborns in Korea each year, and the number of abortions is nearly three times the number of deliveries. The total number of abortions in Korea is the second highest in the world. One out of two married women has experienced an abortion. Eighty percent of abortions are done for gender-selection purposes, using an ultrasound scan to ascertain the gender, and then selectively aborting female fetuses. Those who seek abortions for reasons defined by the law account for only 20% of all abortions. Unmarried women have 18.5% of the induced abortions; 26.5% of these women were between ages 16 and 20. The overwhelming majority of women who had an abortion, 77.9% of married women and 71.3% of unmarried women, reported satisfaction with the results of the abortion. This reflects, perhaps, the fact that abortion has become commonplace in Korea." Hyung-ki Choi, et al., "Abortion," *The Continuum Complete International Encyclopedia of Sexuality, Updated, with More Countries: South Korea* (New York NY: Continuum, 2004), p. 953.

Despite this possibility of a political statement, one can argue that Pak is more concerned with the effect of abortion on the culture and tries to demonstrate that through different perspectives. "Three Days in That Autumn," a short story published in an earlier anthology, *My Very Last Possession and Other Stories*, trans. Chun Kyung-Ja et al. (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), pp. 156-97, where she recounts the last three working days of an abortionist before she retires. The story weaves between historical reminiscences of the abortionist and her own thwarted desire to assist in the birth of a child—all in a narrative style which would severely challenge the most astute reader eager to find anything preachy in the writing.

³³ A traditional psychological critical evaluation could be created. On giving birth to a son, the narrator states, "I gave them an heir and I could be as grand as I wanted to be. In fact, I became a man. My son was my newly acquired male organ" (p. 133). As one can imagine, an interpretation along the

commentary about post-abortion syndrome above suffices to disclose the psychological bereavement of the narrator.

As much as there are difficulties which must be resolved before they can appreciate her work, Western readers will find that Pak Wansō herself challenges them to view the world much differently than they currently may. In “The Dreaming Incubator” those who should stand for women’s rights and the freedom of choice much vaunted by some women’s rights activists vis-à-vis abortion act like those in China who implement population control measures by forcing mothers to abort. The narratological style of the second half of the story breaks Western narrative conventions in two significant ways, thereby allowing the narrator the space not only to explore the causes behind her two abortions, but also to investigate who is to blame; these are questions that are not aired well in Western democracies, where abortion legalization is merely agitated for by certain groups. Moreover, Western democracies are laboring under a stifling political correctness; one thinks of the efforts of some professional organizations that discount the existence of post-abortion syndrome even when research has documented its existence since the publication of David C. Reardon’s seminal research on the topic in 1987.³⁴

Another significant challenge that Western readers must overcome is the familial breakdown that occurs when abortion infects the institution. Western readers are raised in societies that lack the cohesiveness of the Korean family structure, a structure that contemporary Korean writers are now warning is in danger because of Western influences. Thus, having become accustomed to the fragmentation of the nuclear family, Western readers may not understand why Pak’s narrator suspects virtually all of her family members after her abortions.

Finally, the most significant challenge that Western readers may

Freudian lines of penis envy or a possible application of the Oedipus complex of these few sentences could be entirely coherent, yet ridiculous.

³⁴ David C. Reardon, *Aborted Women: Silent No More* (Westchester IL: Crossway Books, 1987).

have involves the subject of the short story. “The Dreaming Incubator” is not about political commentary or criticism of the economic system in Korea. It is not about a family struggling to cope with the disasters wreaked upon it by the Korean War. It is about abortion, a premier example of world literature on the subject that compares to other major works that address this issue. If Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”³⁵ presents the American view on abortion in fiction, if the Sudanese Leila Aboulela’s “Make Your Own Way Home”³⁶ presents the Arab world’s view on the issue, then Pak’s depiction of abortion in “The Dreaming Incubator” adds the much-needed Asian perspective.

³⁵ Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants” in *Men Without Women* (New York NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), pp. 69-77.

³⁶ Leila Aboulela, *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh UK: Polygon, 2001), pp. 83-97.