Chapter 6

Women, disability and Buddhism in Kim Iryŏp's (post)colonial literature

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing attempt by scholars to reconsider postcolonial theory in light of disability studies and to explore (post)colonial relationships, politics and experiences through the framework of disability.[1] In a groundbreaking study, Kyeong-Hee Choi proposes a reading of Korean colonial literature and history from this new perspective.[2] As the detailed examples of literary works she has listed demonstrate, the theme of the impaired body and mental disease is overwhelming in colonial literature. She argues that there is an inseparable relationship between this literary imagination and the historical and political situation Koreans experienced as colonial subjects. The Koreans felt lack of mobility and control over their lives, being disrupted and dislocated by the pressures of colonization, commercialization, modernization and urbanization. Their colonized nation was imagined as the community of the metaphorically disabled. According to Kyeong-Hee Choi's analysis, many Korean writers sought to capture the experience of colonialism using disability and illness as a metaphor, to reveal colonial political violence, and to impart anti-colonial messages of protest.

Choi's postcolonial reading of disability inspires us to revisit one of the most iconic women in the early twenty century, Kim Iryŏp (金一葉, 1896-1971), and reconsider our understanding of her life, experiences, and works. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Kim is known as a New Woman (*sin yŏsŏng*) who preached free love, envisioned sexual freedom and advocated women's rights in the early 1920s. However, she remained active until her death in 1971. During this long period after the 1920s, did she only cling to the one single subject of free love and have the same opinion and view of it as expressed in the early period? A close examination of her literary representations of disability will reveal how she dealt with many diverse experiences, many different identities and emotions and how her own colonial experience had many implications that are essential for understanding the colonial society of Korea.

In this chapter, I will explore the pervasive theme of disability that Kim elaborated upon to capture the colonial experience in her works. Her narratives on disability will add more diversity and complexity to Ch'oe's

[1] Mark Sherry, "(Post)colonizing Disability" in *Wagadu* 4 (Summer 2007): 10-22; Michelle Jarman, "Resisting "Good imperialism": Reading disability as radical vulnerability" in *Atenea* 25.1 (June 2005):107-116.

[2] Kyeong-Hee Choi, "Impaired Body as Colonial Trope: Kang Kyŏng'ae's "Underground Village" in *Public Culture* 13:3 (Fall, 2001):431-458.

analysis presented above. Kim's descriptions of disability do not represent the colonial experience of the nation, the national body, national disablement, national aspirations, the evils of colonialism, and colonial pressure. They represent her own colonial experience as a woman and individual, beyond the national/colonial binary. Through her autobiographical narratives, Kim shows how diverse social agents felt their disablement, marginalization and lack of control over their lives and reveal that colonialism was not the only power that created disablement and disrupted the lives of Koreans, but that many more sociopolitical factors, from gender to the free love trend, and national politics, were implicated.

My examination will also discuss Buddhism as the most distinctive and critical feature of Kim's narrative on disability. She converted to Buddhism in 1928 and became a Buddhist nun in 1933. This was not the end of her career as is widely assumed. Buddhism actually constituted the main part of her life. It was part of a lifelong struggle for her. What she wanted to achieve during such a long time might have been enlightenment as many Buddhist practitioners do. However, I will argue that the focus and goal of her Buddhist practice was very distinctive. It was to overcome personal and collective disability. Her awareness of disability/impairment actually arose after she became a Buddhist. Through the lens of Buddhism, she came to see her life in colonial society as disabled, crippled, and impaired and realized that there were more people like her. She resorted to Buddhist teachings, in particular Sŏn (Zen) meditation, to cope with colonial disability rather than to national politics, nationalism or socialism, which were the refuge sought by many of her (male) Korean contemporaries.

A woman's distorted self-image

Questions what kind of woman Kim Iryŏp was and why she became a Buddhist nun were hot issues among her contemporaries and still lingered as the years and decades passed. Public opinion was always more or less similar, namely, that she was a flamboyant woman known for her expression of controversial and revolutionary views of love and marriage in a conservative Korean society where the idea that men are superior to women was still prevalent and romantic love was criticized and ridiculed. She was labeled as the incarnation of love and lust (*aeyog-ŭi hwasin*) and a proponent of love for love's sake (*yŏnae chisangjuŭija*).[3] A failure in love or disappointment in love was assumed to have resulted in her becoming a nun.[4] Her religious life was seen by many as reclusive and socially dysfunctional. People lamented that she had been like a showy flower in her heyday in society but now had wilted in the Buddhist monastery.[5]

[3] Yi Myŏng'on 李明溫, *Hŭllŏgan yŏinsang* 흘러간 女人像 (Seoul: Ingansa, 1956), pp.23, 34, and 35.
[4] Kim Iryŏp, "Mu-rŭl anŭn munhwain: hŭllŏgan yŏinsang-ŭl ilko" 無를 아는 文化人: <흘러간 女人像>을 읽고 in *Miraese: ha*, pp.286 and 288.
[5] Yi Myŏng'on, *Hŭllŏgan yŏinsang*, pp.57, 70, and 74; Yi Sŏgu 李瑞求, "Sarang-gwa chŏlmŭm-ŭl

The public depiction of Kim Iryŏp however contradicts her own self-perception, her view of her pre-Buddhist life, and the reason of her conversion to Buddhism and the goal of her Buddhist practice. Her life as a New Woman was not her heyday. Kim saw it as a temporary and insecure phase tainted by her ignorance and self-righteousness.[6] She described herself in pre-Buddhist (secular) life as emotionally disturbed, socially dysfunctional, and psychologically disordered. Her recognition of the disabled self was not limited to her love life but associated with more diverse experiences. Buddhism did not disable her socially, but on the contrary restoring the distorted and damaged self, and to revitalizing her life enabled her to realize herself and made her a socially able being.

In her Buddhist-inspired writing, Kim recounted her experience, self-perception and identity using the metaphor of disability. Looking back to her childhood, she described herself as a "fool" (*mŏngch'ŏngi*). She was easily deceived by her friends. Once, she exchanged her gilt quality pencil for a useless picture with a man with a topknot and Western shoes on it because she did not know the worth of modern photographs.[7] Her playmate, Yun Simdŏk,[8] who had entered modern school first, tricked and fooled her time and again. Kim was helpless before her friends' trickery which led her to make a mistake and be scolded by her teacher. She was not clever (*ttokttokhaji mothan*) enough to prove her innocence. Nobody listened to her sluggish voice. As a consequence, she suffered severe emotional disturbance and distress.[9]

Kim lost her parents early in her life. Her life as a parentless and brotherless girl crippled her psychologically, socially and economically. Her mother died when she was at primary school, whereas her father died by the time Kim graduated from Ewha haktang. She received little home education. Her mother as an unconventional woman never taught her womanly conduct or feminine virtues when she was a young girl. Her father who was a pious Christian minister supported her to receive modern education and much sympathized with his motherless daughter. However, the fatherly love and care she received were too limited and short-lived to guard her from a lapse into disbelief. Kim Iryŏp grew up ignorant of the world, living alone in a student dormitory. The dominant feeling of her life as an orphan was loneliness. She felt a lack of close family ties as well as alienation from the whole world outside. As described by herself, she had no clear direction, no identity, and no goals in life.

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pulto-e sarŭgo" 사랑과 젊음을 佛道에 사르고 in *Taehan ilbo* 大韓日報 (29 Jan 1971); "Kain tokssuk kongbanggi" 佳人獨宿空房記 in *Samch'ŏlli* (August 1935).

[6] "Iryŏp sojŏn: na-ŭi ipsangi" 一葉小傳: 나의 入山記 in *Miraese: sang*, pp.257-258; "Sin tonga yŏgija chwadamhoe" 新東亞 女記者 座談會 in *Sin tonga* 新東亞 (May 1932). Republished in *Miraese: ha*, p.216.

[7] "Iryŏp sojŏn: na-ŭi ipsangi" 一葉小傳: 나의 入山記 in *Miraese: sang*, pp.260 and 263.

[8] She later became a famous female vocalist and ended her life with double suicide.

[9] "Chilli-rŭl morŭmnida" 眞理를 모릅니다 in *Yŏsŏng tonga* 女性東亞 (Dec. 1971-Jun. 1972). Republished in *Miraese:sang*, pp.280-285.

She found herself disoriented, not knowing what to believe and what to do.[10]

But Kim was not simply frustrated. She desperately sought to overcome psychological impairments with the form of loneliness and alienation. First and foremost, she thought of free love (*yŏnae*) as the solution to her problem. She tried to find everything – parents' love, brotherhood, peace and harmony in her family life, the meaning of life – in love with a man.[11] She was ready to sacrifice all her personal comfort and reputation to achieve one true love. In public, she advocated that human beings cannot live without love. Love, she claimed, was the raison d'être and goal of life for all human beings. Free love was argued to play an important role not only in one's personal life but also in society. She considered it to be an essential element of one's inner life, a fountain of energy for one's personal life and social activities.[12] But did the power of free love rescue her, heal her crippled mind, create the energy that gave her a new meaning of life, and rebuild the connection with society?

Kim forgot her loneliness while practicing free love, but when love was over she experienced more severe loneliness and depression. Free love gave happiness and joy to her, but also sorrow and despair. Love made her blind, so she could not see and think normally. Kim in love was, in her own words, a silly woman (*ch'inyŏ*, 痴女), a mad woman (*mich'in yŏin*) and a moron (*paekch'i*).[13] There were too many skirt chasers who regarded her as easy prey. Once in love, she could not imagine that one can fall out of love and change one's mind. She cherished the illusion that she was loved by the man she fell for, never questioning whether the man had the same feeling and seriously considered marrying her. She did not know that there is more than romantic love between a man and a woman and that some people regard other persons and other life goals a more important than the beloved and love.[14]

While experiencing love, Kim Iryŏp saw the downside of free love, but in particular after turning to Buddhism, she came to realize that free love was not a solution for all problems as she idealistically thought but in reality itself was a big problem. Free love may have emancipated Korean women like Kim from the patriarchal society and culture of her day, but also took control over their lives and minds. It turned out to be one of the oppressive, destructive, and dehumanizing forces of colonial society. Under its pressure, one's heart and soul were torn apart. One's life was ruined. One felt like a slave to its power, feeling a lack of mobility and self-control. One's spirit was tortured and one's mind was disordered so that one made light of one's life, regarding love as most important and urgent. The later Buddhist Kim even called it a most lethal machine which destroyed both body and soul.[15]

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[10] *Miraese: sang*, pp.268 and 277.
[11] Ibid., p.312.
[12] Ibid., p.312.
[13] Ibid., pp.312, 316, 317, and 322.
[14] Ibid., p.315
[15] Ibid., p.299.

Many of her autobiographical love poems, which was a medium to express her feeling, not her thought, exactly capture how Kim Iryŏp in reality experienced the overwhelming power of free love while she as a free love advocate theoretically enunciated it as an absolute and sacred affair. As long as her experiences were concerned, free love was not as beautiful, sacred, comforting and invigorating as she thought. Poems reveal her vulnerability in her love relationships. Love took first place in her mind, even more important than life. She devoted herself to the beloved, but she still felt loneliness, dissatisfaction, lack of unity and alienation.[16] She wanted to forget all her suffering caused by love and live in free of care but she could not. The uncontrollable feeling of love drove her to tears.[17]

In the long poem "Tchaksarang" 짝사랑 (Unrequited Love, ca. 1928), in particular, Kim Iryŏp portrays herself as a mad woman, whose body and mind have been thoroughly damaged by free love.[18] In the poetic picture, a woman cries alone in a room. She is in love, but her love is not returned. Finding no way to express her love, her soul is wounded and her heart is filled with nothing but tears. Unanswered love wields a demonic power over her. It turns into fever in her body and makes her critically ill. The flame of love burns up her body and soul. She writhes and screams out in pain. Finally she runs out of her house and climbs up the mountains like a mad woman. She cries her heart out, desperately wanting to feel a single stroke of the beloved's hand and to see a single drop of tears he sheds.

The focus of the poem is not the beloved, nor a woman's burning love. This poem presenting physical illness and mental disorder rather reveals the horror of free love Kim experienced and lets us know that she was not always a free love advocate who blindly supported the modern trend. In particular after she became a Buddhist, she critically reconsidered free love as violent and disruptive power and reflected on her previous life and identity as metaphorically disabled, fragile and insecure. But she did not perceive her love experience as failure as widely assumed. One can learn from one's good and bad experiences. In this sense, her terrible love experience was not seen by her as meaningless as the term failure connoted.[19] It was a life, disturbed, confused, distressed and disordered by pressures like free love, which needed to be recovered and resettled by means of Buddhism, as will be discussed later.

Disability in colonial society

[16] "Tangsin-ŭn na-ege muŏsi toeŏssapkie?" 당신은 나에게 무엇이 되었삽기에?" (April 1928) in *Miraese: sang*, pp.36-37; "Nim-gwa kojŏk" 님과 孤寂 in *Samch'ŏlli* (April 1932).
[17] "T'ŭmipcha" 闖入者" in *Tonga ilbo* (6 Dec. 1926).
[18] The date of publication is actually unknown. But in light of her autobiographical experience, this poem seems to have written around 1928. Published posthumously in *Miraese: sang*, pp.72-73.
[19] "Sakpalhago changsam ibŭn Kim Iryŏp yŏsa-ŭi hoegyŏngi" 削髮하고 長衫입은 金一葉女史의 會見記in *Kaebyŏk* (Jan. 1935), p.15.

Kim Iryŏp has been seen as an early proponent of women's rights in the early 1920s whose primary concern was limited to women's experiences of love, marriage, and sexuality and who paid little attention to other social, political, economic problems the Koreans faced during the colonial period. Her lack of concern for politics, i.e. Japanese colonialism, nationalist movements and class disputes, is criticized as proof of her shortcomings or at best is evaluated as a gender specific response to colonial reality.[20] However, there are some counter examples to this general assumption.

Kim's acquaintances testified that Kim was not indifferent to national politics. During the March First Movement (1919), for instance, her house became a base for student demonstrators. Together with them, Kim mimeographed countless leaflets with statements about Korea's independence. The Japanese police discovered this fact and came to search the whole house. She destroyed the remaining leaflets and the mimeograph machine just in time.[21] It is seldom told that Kim was also one of the members of Kŭnuhoe (槿友會, 1927-1931) which was a woman's organization affiliated to the united national front of Sin'ganhoe 新幹會, and which as Kenneth M. Wells argues, enables us to conceive of a female version of nationalism.[22] The (male) Buddhist master Ch'unsŏng even looked up to her as a role model of a patriotic monastic, telling an unknown story; during the Korean War (1950-1951), a North Korean army unit stormed into the temple where she resided. They threatened her at gunpoint and demanded a conversion to turn to communism. But she refused without the slightest fear, saying that her country was the Republic of Korea.[23]

As the evidence demonstrates, Kim unequivocally engaged with nationalist politics and participated in major national events. Nonetheless, her concern with nationalism is underestimated in her personal histories and her role as one of the inconspicuous and female participants is silenced in the narrative of national history as usual. It may be meaningful to restore and reevaluate her nationalist contributions but at the same time, a focus on the national is, as repeatedly warned, problematic because it excludes the possibility of all other reactions to politics and colonial reality. As discussed in the previous chapter, she was critical of nationalism rather than affirmative. A close examination of her narratives reveals that neither her contribution to national politics nor her criticism of it is essential in her social and political experience. Her focus is on social disablement. Although she had a strong social consciousness and was trying to belong to and play a role in colonial society, she remained marginalized from society and felt herself to be socially disabled.

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[20] Jin Y. Park, "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Ir-yŏp and Buddhism" in *Korea Journal* 45.1 (Spring 2005): 114-141, p.136.

[21] Ch'oe Ŭnhŭi 崔恩喜, "Iryŏp sŭnim-ŭi ipchŏk" 一葉 스님의 入寂 in *Miraese: ha*, pp.480-481; *Iryŏp sŏnmun* 一葉禪文 (Seoul: Munhwa sarang, 2001), p.289.

[22] Kenneth M. Wells, "The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kŭnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), p.192.

[23] Ch'unsŏng 春城, "Aeguksim-ŭl chinin hyean" 愛國心을 지닌 慧眼 in *Miraese: ha*, p.450.

Kim Iryŏp shares her experience of disability through a collection of essays. One of them is "1932-nyŏn-ŭl ponaemyŏnsŏ" 1932年을 보내면서 (Adieu 1932, 1932). In this essay, she does not consider herself a full-fledged member of society, calling herself a semi-social member of society (*chun sahoein*, 準社會人).[24] It is not because she had left society and entered the temple. When she wrote this essay in 1932, she was still living in the secular world as a lay Buddhist. Although she physically resided in society, she did not feel she fully belonged to society. Why? She does not answer the question directly but implies that one does not automatically become a member of society because one is born in it. One should be recognized by others as an equal and a member of the same society. In this sense, she felt inadequate.

Kim states that few in colonial society recognize her as a socially responsible adult and treat her with the dignity that goes with it. Once, when she claimed to be a member of society, she was helplessly exposed to ridicule, trickery, and insults. However, she does not express her anger to people who treated her badly. Nor does she try to resist being treated badly because she is too powerless to do so. Rather, she bitterly reproaches herself for not having the qualifications to be socially recognized. She blames her lack of self-assurance and lack of clear ideological orientation. She relates how she is constantly influenced and confused by this and that ideological trend. She associates this with mental disorder and says that she should recover from this mental illness.[25]

Kim's self-reproach reaches its peak when she compares her existence with that of a parasite (*kisaengch'ung*). In her young age, she was cared for by her parents although she lost them early. In her old age, she came to rely on her husband(s) financially. At that time, many women in colonial Korea lived like that. They realistically found it impossible to support their lives by themselves. Marriage was a surefire way for them to have shelters for their heads and financial support. In exchange of for it, they were absolved by their role and work, which were largely limited to domestic household, as a wise mother, good wife and prudent housewife and put their time and effort into raising their children, serving their husbands, and fulfilling household duties.[26] However, Kim was a woman who had a different opinion and conditions. She was aware of the parasitic way of life Korean women including her practiced and, in particular of the broad fact that society benefited them. She claimed that women should enter the business world and take part in social activities to overcome their status quo and to do duties they owe to society.[27] She was personally exempt from women's domestic duties such as childrearing because she had no child. Her family life was quite simple because she had no one else

[24] *Chosŏn ilbo* (21-22 Dec. 1932). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, pp.440-445.
[25] *Miraese: sang*, p.441.
[26] "Yŏgija chwadamhoe" 女記者 座談會 in *Sin Tonga* 新東亞 (May 1932). Republished in *Miraese: ha*, p.215.
[27] Ibid.

but her current husband (Ha Yunsil). So, social participation was in principle a much easier option to her than to other women.

Despite her desire for social participation and her better family circumstance, however, Kim Iryŏp still finds herself as one of those useless to society, disabled and inept. Calling herself a parasite, she just lives off society, doing more harm than good. In reality, she is unemployed and depends on her husband for a regular income. She is physically not strong enough to do manual labor. She has no skill and no special knowledge and is not talented, either. She feels financially, physically and intellectually crippled. Accordingly, she finds no work, no job, and no role in her society. In her thirties she reflects on her age. She is not too young and not too old and her life is probably at its height. Nonetheless, she is simply of no use to society. She feels the frustration of being powerless and regrets wasting half of her life with stupidities. She blames herself for her inability to live an independent life and her inability to function socially.

Social disablement was not just Kim's own personal experience. She shows how it was widely experienced by the majority of Korean people. A parasitic way of life was, in her observation, very common in Korean colonial society. The majority of Koreans relied solely on the income of one or two persons in their family. Some of them lived off a small inheritance. Otherwise, they just went hungry. Many had no ability to manage their lives. They were all useless to society and even directly or indirectly harmful to it, because they cared for nothing but filling their bellies (Hong Sayong, called such people hungry ghosts, using a Buddhist term, instead of parasites). According to Kim's observation, only very few Koreans were able to lead the society and they turned out to be all men. Women held the absolute majority of those who were socially defective and disabled. She denounces that many of them did not know why it is important to be active in society. Their interests seem to have been limited to domestic issues such as a nice house, household items and clothes. They were engaged in consumption rather than productive work. It is also self-evident that they could not live without men financially.

Kim suggests severe social disablement as the main feature of both her personal and the collective experience in colonial Korea, but her awareness expressed in this essay seems not to extend to raising questions as to why not one or two but so many Koreans felt excluded from their own society and became powerless and incompetent, nor why Korean women, in particular, more severely suffered from social disablement compared with their male counterparts. Nowhere she explained that colonialism and its control over the lives and activities of the Koreans made the Koreans feel disabled. She may have suggested implicitly that there were more forms of power than colonialism in colonial society which imposed pressure on particular groups of Koreans. Korean women remained socially disabled because they were doubly marginalized under the colonial and national pressure and their role and activities were limited to domesticity because of the gender politics of concepts

such as *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* (wise mother and good wife).[28]

In "Adieu, 1932," social disablement is basically seen as Kim Iryŏp's and the Koreans' own fault rather than as caused by certain external pressure applied to their lives. Yet, this act of self-blame does not end up accepting the status quo passively and expressing only frustration and depression. On the contrary, Kim shows her strong will to challenge social exclusion and disablement and expresses her determination to be a "full-fledged and powerful member of society."[29] What is the way that she, the Korean women and the majority of Koreans might overcome social disablement? The bottom line is that she and other women should participate in society. She compares Korean colonial society to a carriage and a pair of horses. Korean men and women are supposed to be the two horses leading the cart of society. Current society, which is run by Korean men only, is seen as crippled and dysfunctional. To make society functional, it is critical that the power of the other horse, namely, Korean women, is used. She does not seek change afar but in herself. She determines to settle her parasitic life and struggles to be a socially able being.

Two years later, Kim wrote another notable essay titled "Ilch'e-ŭi seyŏg-ŭl tanhago" 一切의 世慾을 斷하고 (Forsaking all worldly desires, 1934).[30] This essay is noteworthy in the sense that she showed a totally different attitude toward social disablement. Her criticism is much more directed to external pressures, showing how a woman who takes part in public life is indiscriminately criticized and assailed by the people in contemporary colonial society. This essay begins with poignant experiences of regret concerning her social life. She had high expectations for women's participation in the social, political and economic activities. She had viewed it as the solution for the social disablement she, Korean women and Korean colonial society suffered from and romanticized it as the way to construct an ideal society. However, now she realizes that she got it all wrong. Social disablement still has not healed after half of her life has passed. There is no significant improvement in society. She only feels insulted, cheated, and disgraced as a result of her social experience.[31]

In society, Kim was engaged in many diverse activities and organizations ranging from politics and literature to business, mass media, and religion. She accordingly socialized with various people, most of whom were men, because those social domains were overwhelming male-dominated. As specified in this essay, she interacted with socialists, businessmen, and writers.

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[28] For more details on gender politics, see Hyaeweol Choi, ""Wise Mother, Good Wife": A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea," *Journal of Korean Studies* 14:1 (Fall 2009):1-34; Theodore Jun Yoo, *The politics of gender in colonial Korea: Education, Labor, and Health, 1910-1945* (University of California Press, 2008); Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi, *Dangerous Women: Gender & Korean Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1998)

[29] *Miraese: sang*, p.445.

[30] *Samch'ŏlli* (Nov. 1934). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, pp. 463-471.

[31] *Miraese: sang*, p.463.

At first, it seemed that she was well accepted in those social areas and her ability was fully appreciated by her male peers. Socialists praised her as a brave iconoclastic heroine. Writers romanticized her as a glamorous goddess, and business men idealized her as a wise mother and good wife.[32] They all praised her, but why did she feel disturbed? The male social leaders did not directly criticize her in her face but it turned out at her back that they called her names and ridiculed her. Compliments and praise turned out to be all lip service designed to woo her. She was outraged to discover that none of them was sincere in treating her and that she was merely a toy to them. Her social participation did not make her into a socially able being, but on the contrary, badly injured her on the emotional and psychological level.

When entering the Buddhist sangha, Kim more keenly realized how colonial society placed individuals and women like her under control and made them feel disrespected. She had struggled to put an end to her parasitic life and to be a socially able, self-reliant and powerful person/woman. A monastic life she saw as a form of resolution to achieve this, will be discussed later more in detail. She ended her loveless marriage and divorced her husband, whom she lived off, and started a new life in the monastery. As she exclaims in her essay, she then became finally autonomous and able to restore her human dignity. However, society looked askance at her renunciation. She had to face harsh lashings from public opinion, which agreed that she had done something bad and wrong. Conservative elderly people rebuked her for her divorce. People armed with new ideas and ideologies did not support her resolution to end her loveless marriage, either but condemned her as a wicked wife (*tokpu*, 毒婦).[33]

Regardless of ideological differences, people scolded Kim in unison. Few understood her motivation and supported her act of renunciation. In such a situation, she finds herself virtually a "disabled" person (*pulguja*) whose life is cursed by society.[34] She was disillusioned by the overbearing and inhuman response of colonial society. When she wrote the essay "1932-nyŏn-ŭl ponaemyŏnsŏ," she still felt that society has raised her so that she was indebted to it, although she had no ability to repay the debt and did society more harm than good. However, while writing this essay, she realized that it was actually not her but society which was injurious and harmful. Society hurt and devalued her. It should be noted that the social pressure she experienced did not refer to the political and economic pressure created by the colonial power. As far as her experiences were concerned, those who humiliated and victimized her were not the Japanese colonizers but her compatriots, in particular the male social leaders active in politics, literature, and business. These men may have done good for the Korean community and society, benefiting the Korean people and defending their rights against Japanese colonialism. However, Kim Iryŏp

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., p.464.
[34] Ibid., p.468.

reveals the other side of their national agenda; a serious lack of respect for the dignity, humanity and life of individuals and women. The individuals and women were marginalized by colonial society. Their individual needs, voices, freedom and even human dignity were ignored for the nation's sake.

In response to the disablement and impairment created by colonial society, Kim declares that she was leaving the secular world and breaking her relations with the inhumane people who regarded her as their prey or toy. She shows strong determination to pursue her monastic life in spite of criticism and words of contempt. However, she did not mean that she was running away and hiding from the world provoked by fear or worldly failure, simply trying to forget all problems and social affairs, and abandoning social responsibility, as public prejudice judged. She made it clear that her declaration aimed at reflecting on her past secular life when she was at the mercy of those who injured her and starting up a new life, taking her fate in her own hands. It was not an escape from the world but in her own words, a "pilgrimage" to make up for lost time and to save her personality and dignity from the dehumanizing influence of society.[35]

Kim does not turn her back on society altogether. Her renunciation is not to forget social responsibility. On the contrary, she presents a particular vision of new society, different from contemporary colonial society. The society she wants to create is owned by individuals, not by some collective and political powers. In this society, the individual Koreans are not marginalized, manipulated, and dislocated for collective and political reasons, either. Instead, each of them may seek to pursue an autonomous, self-chosen and self-fulfilling life, be able to enjoy freedom, express one's individuality, and develop one's own sense of lifestyle. The most important values in this society are not property, fame, and status, but human life (*saengmyŏng*) and dignity (*ingyŏk*). Nobody in this society seeks to disturb the life of others and ignore other's dignity. Every individual recognizes the importance of ensuring the dignity of both self and others and lives up to the principle of mutual respect for life and individuality.[36]

Such a humanized society is described in terms of a "new form of individualism" (*sin kaeinjuŭi*) or a broadminded individualism (*kŏin-jŏk kaeinjuŭi*).[37] This unfamiliar term seems not to have been invented by Kim arbitrarily. Citing a different essay of Kim, Pang Minho argues that Kim in the early and mid 1920s was influenced by her lover, poet Im Nowŏl, and his view of individualism.[38] Im's main emphasis was laid upon individuals and their character building (*ingyŏk wansŏng*). He basically opposed socialist ideals of

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., p.468.
[37] Ibid., pp.466 and 468.
[38] Pang Minho 방민호, "Kim Iryŏp munhag-ŭi sasang-jŏk pyŏnmo kwajŏng-gwa Pulgyo sŏnt'aeg-ŭi ŭimi" 김일엽 문학의 사상적 변모과정과 불교 선택의 의미 in *Han'guk hyŏndae chakka-wa Pulgyo* 한국 현대작가와 불교 (Seoul: Yeok, 2007), pp.95-103.

material and economic well-being and the importance of collective and group ownership. He was also against reducing individualism to private ownership of property. Instead, he stood for the full development of the personality and character of the individual as the most important indicator of human well-being. He judged that property, fame and status all tainted one's personality and hindered its development, just as Kim Iryŏp also stated in her essay mentioned above. The personal aesthetic expression of individuality was considered as essential to create a man of character and a beautiful society.[39]

Im's idea of new individualism considerably resonates in Kim Iryŏp's thinking but there are also some discrepancies. Im basically proposed a view of art for art's sake, in particular in confrontation with the socialist writers.[40] Kim's concept is not particularly associated with art or literature, nor opposed to socialism. Different from Im, she did not have a particular objection against socialists in the beginning and socialized with them. She also worked with socialist women in the Kŭnuhoe and to some extent sympathized with their point of view where a break with the feudal tradition and the importance of economic matters were concerned.[41] However, when she wrote this essay in 1934, she felt betrayed and outraged by their disregard for her human dignity. Still, her criticism does not target socialists only. What she brings into question is rather the contemporary colonial society in which the dominant sociopolitical powers controlled, used and victimized individuals in the collective name of empire, nation or public.

Kim's new individualism is not limited to her view of art but a sociopolitical discourse designed to criticize the dehumanized colonial society and to speak up for individuals under social pressure. It is noteworthy that her attempt ran counter to the dominant social current throughout the 1930s. As I discuss throughout this dissertation, in particular in Chapter 2, individualism was harshly condemned at the time of preparation for war (against the West). It was seen by the Japanese policymakers as nothing better than egoism, selfishness and decadence, of which the root is Western, and which causes social clashes and breaks the unity and harmony of the Japanese empire. Their basic wartime ideology, *kokutai*, was thus aimed at eliminating individualism and drawing upon Japanese traditions characterized by the display of the sacrificial spirit of individuals on behalf of the public (empire and the emperor).

Many Korean social or national leaders did not oppose the Japanese wartime logic of sacrifice, but reproduced it for their own national agendas. The individual Koreans who pursed their personal interests and goals rather than the good of the Korean nation were harshly criticized for their lack of nationalism or for being harmful to the public good, as Han Yongun, for

[39] *Han'guk hyŏndae chakka-wa Pulgyo*, pp.97-100.
[40] Ibid., p.97.
[41] Some of her works reflect her awareness of economic hardship the Korean people faced. See for example "Chabi" 慈悲 in *Pulgyo* (Feb. 1932); "50-chŏn ŭnhwa" 50錢 銀貨 in *Samch'ŏlli* (Jan. 1933); "Kwitturamisong" 귀뚜라미頌 (Feb. 1932). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, p.58.

example, tried to claim in his novel *Pakmyŏng*.[42] Against this backdrop, Kim does not speak up for colonial and national powers, but for the individual. She reveals what these social and political powers glossed over or kept in silence; individuals whom they tended to describe as egoistic, selfish and indulgent were actually the weak, oppressed and marginalized of colonial society. Using her own social experience, she shows disabled and impaired individuals whose needs, rights and dignity were often ignored and who experienced feelings of humiliation and mortification.

Buddhism as a way to overcome disability

Kim confronted a distorted self-identity and experienced social disablement while living and working in colonial society. Her individual colonial experience was not exclusively her own. It also reflected the disrupted lives of many others (the majority of Koreans, individuals, and women in particular) and revealed the disabling contemporary socio-political conditions. However, her awareness of disability was always accompanied by a strong determination to restore her emotionally disordered mind and regain the lost self-control over her life. She struggled to make herself a socially able being and to find a way for people in colonial Korea to overcome the disabilities colonial and other sociopolitical powers imposed on them.

Nationalism and socialism were popularly seen as the best way to end colonial oppression and to settle the problems of colonial Korea. However, neither was adopted by Kim Iryŏp as a solution. She was critical of these political ideologies, revealing the diverse forms of marginalization and disability they created at the individual and gender level. Instead of politics, she sought to find an alternative way to cope with personal and collective disability. This was creative writing (literature) for the time being, but ultimately her Buddhist belief. She regarded herself as a useless cripple throughout her life, but saw some hope for improvement.

Kim had some aptitude for literature and wanted to develop it so that she could take care of herself.[43] Through literature, she also convinced herself, she could demonstrate her ability to be useful and helpful to society. She was aware that writers play an important role in society. If a writer does not capture people's lives and does not fictionalize their stories, nobody will remember them. The life experiences of many anonymous people are useless and futile unless writers document their lives, share and rework their stories through their literary creations, and transform them to instruct and comfort others.[44] What writers create Kim Iryŏp did not see just as entertaining tales. In their

[42] See chapter 2.

[43] "1932-nyŏn-ŭl ponaemyŏnsŏ" in *Miraese: sang*, p.443; "Sŏjung chapkam" 署中雜感 in *Pulgyo* (Sep. 1932). Republished in *Miraese: ha*, p.258.

[44] "Midŭm-i ssakt'ŭl ttae: sahoesang-ŭi yŏrŏgaji" 믿음이 싹틀 때: 社會相의 여러가지 in *Pulgyo* (March 1933). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, p.254.

works, writers bring people to life and construct a whole new meaning of their existence. In this way, writers become active creators, not passive recipients. Becoming such a great writer was the supreme goal of her life.[45]

Kim struggled to overcome disabilities in her personal and social life and become an able being through creative writing. To improve her literary skills, she labored at her desk writing everyday, line by line, as if plowing a field. She reduced her sleeping time and refrained from going out to concentrate on writing only. It was urgent for her to enhance her knowledge of the world, human life, and social affairs. So, she read widely, books, newspapers, and magazines. She attempted to learn foreign languages among which Chinese.[46] Above all, she made an effort to read Buddhist scriptures and practice Buddhist meditation. Buddhism was still difficult to understand to her but this laywoman and new convert at least knew that Buddha's teachings are worthy of respect and worth promoting among people. She composed her poems, essays, and short stories citing at random words, phrases and sentences from the Buddhist scriptures. She even sought occult Buddhist knowledge (*sint'ongnyŏk*), wishing to become a great writer preaching the profound philosophy of the Buddha's teaching.[47]

However, despite all her literary aspirations and efforts, Kim could not get over her mental, emotional, intellectual, and social disabilities. She had many things to say and her heart was filled with feelings she wanted to convey. Nonetheless, she found it very hard to put her impressions, thoughts and feelings into words. What she expressed was less than one percent of what she thought and felt. She felt as if she had a severe impairment in expressing something in a written form and conveying it to an audience. Although it was spoken and written, her acquaintances and her readers did not listen to her carefully or appreciate her works. Instead, they laughed at her and called her a woman crazy with Buddhism.[48]

The practice of writing could not be an experience that made Kim Iryŏp feel emotionally powerful and strong, more worthwhile as a person and validated as an able being. Literature did not solve the problems caused by disability but added more problems. The problems she faced were partly caused by her lack of knowledge and poor literary skills. Yet, the more she learned and practiced Buddhism, the more she realized that the problems with disability were fundamentally caused by self-ignorance. She had got it all wrong. Buddhism was not an occult power to bring her literary fame. It was not something she could just preach to people without learning and practicing it

[45] "Chilli-rŭl morŭmnida" Republished in *Miraese: sang*, p.334.
[46] *Miraese: sang*, pp.443-444.
[47] *Miraese: sang*, pp.318, 332 and 333; "Sinbul-gwa na-ŭi kajŏng" 信佛과 나의 家庭 in *Sin tonga* 新東亞 (Dec. 1931). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, pp.430-431.
[48] *Miraese: sang*, p.318, 332 and 333; "Yŏsindo-rosŏŭi sinnyŏn kamsang" 女信徒로서의 新年 感想 in *Pulgyo* (Jan. 1931). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, p.436-437; "Hanjari-ŭi toep'uri" 한자리의 되풀이 in *Miraese: sang*, pp.484-485.

seriously. Whether she could become a great writer or not, should not be the primary question. The foremost thing that she needed to overcome disability was the restoration of her sanity (or mental clarity) and establishing a firm view of life. She realized how absurd and stupid it was to aspire to be a great writer without even knowing who she was. Literary works created by such an ignorant person were, in her own words, an illusion and nonsense.[49]

Kim Iryŏp did not, however, discard literature entirely, nor depreciated its value. What Kim realized was that literature/art cannot be the fundamental way to deal with personal and collective disabilities. She saw that a thoroughly awakened view of life and self precedes all other things including literature/art and it ultimately enables writers and artists to create immortal masterpieces.[50] She thus needed to forsake her desire to write poetry and prose for a while and to focus on exploring her true identity of self and awakening to the truth of life. For that reason, she entered monastic life and attempted to concentrate on Buddhist practice. As she repeatedly emphasized in various essays, she became a Buddhist nun to bring her literature to life and to create a masterpiece that addressed the truth of life.[51]

Kim did not understand Buddhism as a religion which simply gave comfort and solace to her. She did not adopt the widely acknowledged goals of Buddhism such as enlightenment, Buddhahood, nirvana, the universal salvation of living beings, and compassion as her own. Buddhism had a very specific meaning and role in her life. It ultimately helped her recognize her personal and the collective colonial experience as a form of disability and prescribed a fundamental solution for it. She was, she said, like a blind man (*sogyŏng*) who had lost his way in life. [52] Through Buddhism, she became able to identify herself as having a psychological, intellectual and social disability and came to be aware of various pressures causing the disability problem. Buddhism became a compass for her to find the right way and fundamental solution to overcome disability and regain self-esteem and mobility in life.

The first sermon Kim heard from Paek Sŏnguk, which led her to believe in Buddhism, used metaphors of disability. It was about Buddha's awakening and teaching; when Shakyamuni gained and preached his awakening to the supreme wisdom, people were as if blind and deaf (*nun mŏlgo kwimŏgŏri*). Their minds were crippled and impaired so that they could not understand the full meaning of what the Buddha said. For forty-nine years, Buddha taught them many things but his message in a nutshell was self-discovery (*cha'a palgyŏn*). Buddha taught that one should first and foremost explore one's true nature which is as same as that of the universe and lead an autonomous (*tongnip-jŏk*) life, unimpeded by all kinds of sufferings, illusions and constraints. Buddha

[49] *Miraese: sang*, pp.333-334.
[50] "Pulto-rŭl takkŭmyŏ" 佛道를 닦으며 in *Samch'ŏlli* (Jan. 1935). Republished in *Miraese: sang*, pp.476-477.
[51] *Miraese: sang*, pp.350-351 and 486.
[52] Ibid., pp.335.

showed the way to acquiring one's true self. It was to concentrate one's mind on a certain object or thought, questioning what nature is. If one solves this question, one can also find one's own true nature, the Buddha had said.[53]

It is easy to notice that Kim did not adopt the ordinary and conventional aspects of Buddhism. For her, the core of Buddha's teachings was not the four noble truths[54] nor the eightfold path as most commonly explained.[55] The main features of Buddhism were sketched by her in terms of disability and self-discovery. She was impressed by the Sŏn (Zen) approach to Buddhism which emphasizes awareness of the true nature of existence and universe through the meditative practice of concentrating one's mind on one thing or holding the *hwadu* (critical phrase). However, self-realization did not mean to her to attain perfect enlightenment and become a Buddha. To her, it meant to create an independent life. Sŏn Buddhism actually underscores the interdependence of all beings (*sasamuae*, 事事無碍) and the mutual conditioning of phenomena, but these Buddhist concepts and their profound meaning were not grasped by her. From the outset, Buddhism was understood by her in particular as a religion in search of full control or ownership over one's own life and self, free from social pressures, dependence on others, the mental delusion of heaven and hell, and space-time constraints.[56]

A second sermon preached by master Mangong 萬空 is important because it more clearly confirms that Kim sought in Buddhism the best way to tackle her disabled life and crippled mind. When she entered monastic life in 1933, her master gave her the following instruction: the aim of leaving home and pursuing a monastic life is to survive and live life. He questioned what the use of food, clothes, society, country and world is if one dies. Because one is alive and well, these things have meaning. However, survival (living) does not merely mean to cling to life. It is to revitalize one's infinite life force in oneself and to restore the original and complete form of one's life force. According to him, she (and many others) had lived depending on a small fragment of her mind and life force and never realized them in their entirety. Like a fool (*paekch'i*) while acting she had never made free use of what she possessed, the full power of her life force. Although her life and mind were her own, she had no power to bring them under her control. Her current secular life without self-control was diagnosed by her master as no life, or no human life. Her master provoked her anger by repeatedly asking why she could not make up her own mind as she liked and why she did not try to live a life worth living as a human by solving this problem.[57]

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[53] Ibid., pp.302-304.
[54] The truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path of the cessation of suffering.
[55] This concept describes the way to end suffering; right views, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation.
[56] *Miraese: sang*: p.303.
[57] Ibid, pp.321-322.

Mangong basically explained to Kim, the novice, what monastic life is. Interestingly, he did not mention any rules in monastery and basic Buddhist doctrines in his sermon. He did not advocate the monastic life as the way envisioned by the Buddha and the surest way to enlightenment. In his sermon, the meaning and goal of monastic life were oriented toward enabling the recovery of one's full life force and bringing one's life under one's control. This explanation seems not to represent Mangong's distinctive Buddhist view. Given that he delivered this sermon specifically for the benefit of Kim, this sermon addressed more what she had experienced in secular colonial society, what kind of problems she had, and what were the cause of and solution to those life's problems. Through Mangong's mouth, her secular life was implicitly and explicitly declared to malfunction; she was disabled, and enslaved. Her master awakened her to the seriousness of losing power over her life and lacking control over her mind, and he moved her to act against it.

Living a monastic life, which was often subjected to social prejudice as confining life to the limited space of the temple and disabling other activities, was on the contrary argued by her master to be a fundamental activity to overcome disability and lack of mobility in her life and to recover (rejuvenate) the unlimited power of life in herself. This was ultimately to make her an able person in her life, society and the world. Mental concentration or meditation was particularly emphasized as most conducive to such a monastic life. Mangong pointed out that to live as a full-fledged human being in the true sense of the word, she first needed to gather together her split and scattered mind. Her mind was dispersed and disordered like the dismembered body of an earthworm of which the broken parts are moving in all directions. If she would bring order to her mind and restores it to its complete form, which is as big as the universe, she would not feel any emotional disturbance, psychological disorder and impaired mobility and lack of control over her life. He did not forget to mention that this original state of mind when fully recovered resonates with the sublime state of mind called compassion.[58]

A Buddhist struggle with disability

Could Kim live up to her master's directions and overcome the problem of disability by herself? In her study, Jin Y. Park opines that Kim could overcome the limitations of modernity represented by love with the help of Buddhism.[59] Park has noted that despite her priesthood, Kim showed great concern with love (liberal love or free love) in her Buddhist writings, which was at odds with her male counterparts' indifference to it. Considering the social and cultural context in which the idea of free love was correlated with modernity or modernization and gender equality, Kim's interest in the issue of love is seen as

[58] Ibid., pp.322-323.
[59] Jin Y. Park, "Gendered Response to Modernity: Kim Ir-yŏp and Buddhism," pp.126-133.

a gender-specific response of a Buddhist woman to modernity. This is wrong. Neither was it opposed to modernity. On the contrary, it provided a philosophical foundation to overcome its limitations. According to Park's observation, it was self-identity and freedom that Kim Iryŏp ultimately pursued. Love as a cultural and social construct could not help her find her identity and freedom whereas Buddhism, in Park's words, as a timeless and universal truth made possible what love (modernity) lacked.

Park's findings have important implications for the study of modern Korean Buddhism. She sheds light on women and their particular (gendered) experience of Buddhism, which has been ignored and silenced in the male-dominated narrative. She also reformulates dominant representations of Buddhism, modernity and gender. However, she fails to see that the problem of love and modernity is still the tip of a much larger iceberg, consisting of Kim's experiences in colonial Korea. There were many more problems Kim faced in her life, such as orphanhood (lack of parents and of spiritual and physical shelter), frustrated literary ambitions and the inability to express thoughts and emotions, social alienation, feelings of uselessness and powerlessness in society, disillusions about national politics, a weak position as an individual and a woman, feelings of humiliation, and the trauma of having been deceived. These experiences resulted in a destroyed self-perception, low self-esteem and lack of control and mobility in her inner and exterior life prompting her to pursue self-identity and freedom. Consequently Kim Iryŏp wanted Buddhism to settle far more diverse and complex colonial experiences than only love and modernity.

Disability represents and captures the richness and complexity of Kim's life events and problems. In her Buddhist practice she strenuously tackled her problems using the metaphor of disability as her autobiographical poems vividly portray. Her poem "Hyangsim" 向心 (Devotional mind, undated), for example, shows how she struggled with love as part of her problems and in which way Buddhism helped her to get through it.[60] Noteworthy is that in this poem, she describes love as having no limitation and boundary unlike Park's interpretation of Kim Iryŏp's love above. Love is a powerful uncontrollable force, which Kim compares to the image of a voracious fire. Like an all-consuming fire, it envelops and overwhelms her body and mind until she is scorched by it, as the ashes in this poem imply. Love out of control becomes dangerous and life-threatening. She needs to survive and bring herself back to life, but how?

As the flame of *samadhi* 三昧火 in this poem denotes, Kim found the solution in Buddhist meditation. However, this fierce and intense meditation is not designed to extinguish the fire of love in a conventional way in Buddhism. She rather attempts to transform the flame (passion) of love into a brighter flame of *samadhi* and bring her from death (loss of self/life) to life. If love

[60] Although it is undated, one can surmise that it is one of the poems written in the beginning phase of her Buddhist practice (ca. 1933). This poem is republished in *Miraese: sang*, p.78.

disrupts and overpowers her body and mind as captured in her poetical vision that her body and mind turn to ashes and its particles are scattered to pieces in the air, her attempt at mindful concentration (*samadhi*) on the contrary helps her recollect the torn parts of her mind and restore the self and life force in its complete form. In other words, her Buddhist approach to love is not to overcome the limitations of love but to harness its formidable power by bringing it under control.

Kim's autobiographical poems were a process, not a finished product, showing her Buddhist struggle with the disabilities caused by colonial life. This is also shown by the fact that she constantly revised many of her poems and tried to improve her works. Her poems "Han nip" 한닢 (One leaf, undated) and "Insaeng-gwa sep'a" 人生과 世波 (Life and its vicissitudes, undated) are an example of this. Since both poems are undated, we do not know which one is original and which is the revised version but it is clear that the two poems share the same poetic structure and vision and show her struggle with social disablement.[61] In the first poem, Kim depicts a leaf's life journey from the mountain to the big ocean. It is a little fragile leaf. It falls into a waterfall and is swept down. The leaf is vulnerable to the formidable power of the waterfall. Its body is helplessly crushed and broken into pieces by the swirling water. However, it is not the end of the leaf's life. She emphasizes the spiritual strength inside the dying body of the leaf. Although the body of the leaf succumbs under the pressure of the waterfall, she sees that the spirit of the leaf is indestructible and therefore, will reach the great sea.

This poem does not simply romanticize nature or express a feeling of empathy for nature.[62] It is a poem in which Kim personifies herself as a single leaf, borrowing the literal meaning of her pen name Iryŏp (one leaf) and dramatizes her life disrupted by social pressure. The second poem makes the metaphorical expressions of the first poem explicit; the fragile leaf refers to her vulnerable life. The hurdle of the waterfall parallels the vicissitudes of life she underwent in colonial society. The dangerous journey of the little leaf is to allegorize her turbulent life course. The two poems metaphorically and also directly state that her life was under heavy pressure from colonial society and that she struggled with maltreatment and the ensuing emotional and psychological injuries as someone who was socially weak and marginalized.

However, Kim does not only talk about vulnerability, social impairment, wounds, miserable fate or distorted social life. At the end of her poems, she shows a strong determination and perseverance to overcome her social disability instead of yielding to it. Her conviction is bolstered by her

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[61] Although these poems are undated, considering the content, they seem to have been written after she entered the monastery.

[62] Kim Yŏngok 김영옥, "1920-nyŏndae yŏsŏngsiin yŏn'gu: Kim Iryŏp, Kim Myŏngsun, Na Hyesŏg-ŭi si-rŭl chungsim-ŭro" 1920년대 여성시인 연구: 김일엽, 김명순, 나혜석의 시를 중심으로 in *Uri munhak yŏn'gu* 20 우리文學硏究 (2006):159-185; Bonnie B.C. Oh, "Kim Iryŏp: Pioneer Writer/Reformer in Colonial Korea" in *Transactions* 71 (1996): 9-30, pp.22-25.

Buddhist belief, as her affirmation of the indestructibility of the spiritual or true body (*ponch'e*, 本體) conveys. Buddhism teaches the true nature of existence as eternal, infinite and indestructible. To overcome social disablement, she firmly holds on to this Buddhist truth and will go her way to reach her true nature.

Surprisingly, the first poem shows how her journey in search of the true nature of life is reminiscent of Bodhidharma 菩提達磨 who crossed a river on a single rush leaf when he went from India to China. Bodhidharma was an Indian Buddhist monk who founded meditational Buddhism and traveled to China around the 6th century to propagate Buddhism there. He was introduced to the Emperor of China. When the emperor, who was proud of his knowledge of Buddhism and his support of Buddhism, asked him how great the merit was of all his works and what the highest meaning of the noble truth is, Bodhidharma stunned him with shocking replies. He stated that there was no benefit at all in the emperor's works and that the noble truth were empty. The emperor did not understand his answers. After his meeting with the emperor, Bodhidharma crossed the Yangzi River on a rush leaf and spent nine years in meditation and became the first patriarch of Sŏn (Ch'an/Zen) Buddhism. His mysterious crossing over the river on a rush is the most popular legend about his life, and depicted in many art works.[63]

There may be another important allusion to Bodhidarma in this poem. It is the disabled figure of Bodhidharma. A legendary story tells that he sequestered himself in a cave for nine years, sitting and meditating facing a wall. He came to lose his eyelids because he wanted to stay alert and cut them off. He was deep in meditation for such a long time so that his arms and legs shriveled off. The Japanese Daruma doll with wide-open eyes, no arms and no legs (*okiagari kobōshi*), for example, comes from this old legend.[64] Bodhidharma did not shy away from having his body deformed, disabled, and distorted. He demonstrated the spiritual power to proceed, against all odds, with his meditation until he achieved spiritual fulfillment. Kim's poem recalls the fierce practice performed by the founder of Sŏn Buddhism and shows how she can also overcome social disablement by following his spiritual path.

However, Buddhism was no ready-made solution for Kim's problems but required painstaking efforts on her part. Buddhism was an arduous path, a hard and long road. She had to struggle hard to get over disability as the state of her life and identity and to get one moment of awakening. It is not surprising

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[63] Jeffrey L. Broughton, *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen* (University of California Press, 1999), pp.2-4; Beatrix Mecsi, "The Power of Images on Texts Re-Examined: The Case of Bodhidharma's Crossing and the Mass-Consumption of Bodhidharma Images in Japan and Contemporary Korea in *Oriental Archive* 76.2 (2008), p.218; Meher Mcarthur, *Reading Buddhist Art: An Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p.85.

[64] H. Neill Mcfarland, "Feminine Motifs in Bodhidharma Symbology in Japan" in *Asian Folklore Studies* (45.2) (1986):167-191, pp.169-171; Beatrix Mecsi, "The Power of Images on Texts Re-Examined", p.232; No Mirim 노미림, "Kim Iryŏp-ŭi yŏsŏngsŏng koch'al" 金一葉의 여성성 고찰 in *Yŏsŏng yŏn'gu* 67.2 여성연구 (2004):291-313, pp.300-301.

that the majority of her poetic works reflect her spiritual struggles rather than enlightenment experiences. More concretely seen, there are only three poems which are recognized as enlightenment verses among the dozens of her poems.[65] Needless to say, the outcome of awakening and its poetic expressions are important matters. However, the process of struggle and its expression are no less important than the outcome. The numerous efforts she made may be more valuable than solving the problems. This is the reason why I want to discuss one or two poems that illustrate her Buddhist struggles with disability rather than her enlightenment poems.

Kim's poems "Nim-ege" 님에게 (To you, my beloved, 1932) and "Haengnonan" 行路難 (A rough path, 1932) are two related poems. She first wrote "Nim-ege" in the *sijo* style and published it in *Samch'ŏlli* magazine with four more *sijo* poems (interestingly, the magazine company singled out this poem and republished it in 1937). On the same month, April 1932, she revised it into a freestyle poem and published it in a different magazine, *Pulgyo*, under the different title of "Haengnonan." She changed the poetic style and the title in order to publish them in two different publications. She did not touch the main content but largely change the style of the original poem, inverting the order of the first and last stanzas and adding one more stanza. Her elaborate revision of the poems is directly proportional to her painstaking struggle to acquire Buddhist insight into the issue of disability.

In the poems, Kim likens herself to a pilgrim who traverses an arduous, almost ascetic path to get closer to the beloved object called *nim*. The pilgrim hears the beloved calling and sets out on the road. She steps forward, one step after another, like a toddler, but it is no easy walk. She describes herself as mentally and physically weary. The bigger problem is that she is like a blind pilgrim, who can hear but cannot see the beloved. Whenever she hears the voice of the beloved, she feels that the beloved is near. However, she actually does not know where the beloved is and from which direction his voice reaches her. In her expression, he might be located a thousand or ten thousand (light-)years away from her. She is at a loss which way to go. Although she tries to walk and walk, she eventually realizes that she is still in the same place, uselessly covering the same terrain again and again. The pilgrim's way is not only physically tiring but also mentally draining. Moving forward with tired feet, she is swayed by different emotions, sometimes despair and sorrow when she cannot find her way and gets lost and sometimes rapture when for an instant she senses the voice of the beloved. She is confused or exhausted. The poem "Haengnoran" ends with her crying in frustration, asking when she can see him.

One might think that the beloved is the central theme in these poems, like in Han Yongun's *Nim-ŭi ch'immuk* (Silence of the beloved, 1926) and that

[65] The first enlightenment verse "Chasŏng" 自性 (The nature of the self, ca. 1943) was the outcome of her ten years of meditation. The second enlightenment came on the first day of 1957. The third poem "Illyŏm" 一念 was written about a year after, when she had a birthday.

finding what the beloved signifies is key to understanding Kim's poems.[66] However, her poems are not all about the beloved. In her poems, the significance of the beloved is actually quite simple. It relates to Buddha or the personified truth of Buddhism. The most pervasive theme in her poems turns out to be disability. In her poetic works including these two poems, she describes herself as deaf-blind and impaired, and also as emotionally vulnerable and disturbed. These physical and mental disabilities are of critical importance in her poems.

Kim's poems actually show that the beloved as an allegory of the Buddhist truth manifests itself in and through all phenomena. He is not far away from her but on the contrary, everywhere and ubiquitous. Besides, the beloved is not a passive bystander. He ceaselessly calls her. In other poems, he even stretches his hands out to her and shouts that she should take them.[67] Thus, the beloved is not difficult to find. But why does Kim Iryŏp still desperately seek the beloved? It is because she is unable to see and find him, being like a blind person. Unless she overcomes physical and mental disabilities, she can never receive the omnipresence of the beloved and feel his compassionate hands. Buddhism represented by the beloved does not save her. It rather constantly motivates her to work for her own salvation. Her struggle with Buddhism is ultimately associated with overcoming her state of disability/impairment on her own. Her poems show how she arduously pursued and eventually perfected her lifetime wish of restoring her true sense of self and life as an able human being.

Conclusion

Kim Iryŏp was a woman who did not cease to change, evolve, and refashion herself throughout her life time. Her life was a process in which she constantly looked back upon her experiences, re-examined her thoughts and ideology and explored her identity and the meaning of life. She experienced life as a process, which means that we also need to understand her life, literature, thinking and activities as a process having various phases rather than being fixed. She is probably best known as a pioneering New Woman, an early advocate of free love and romance, active in the 1920s, but this activity constitutes only one part of her early experiences. For a while she was in thrall to the cult of free love, believing this would liberate women like her, improve her life and give meaning to it, but later on, she reconsidered it critically, realizing that the force of love made her lose control over her life and distorted and ruined it.

Disability was a powerful metaphor or literary device which revealed Kim's nuanced and complicated experience of love. But more importantly, it

[66] Kim Hyŏnja 김현자, "Kim Iryŏp si-ŭi chaŭisik-kwa kudo-ŭi kŭlssŭgi" 김일엽 시의 자의식과 求道의 글쓰기, *Han'guk sihak yŏn'gu* 9 한국시학연구 9 (Nov. 2003):31-58, pp.46-48.

[67] "Nim-ŭi sonkil" 님의 손길 in *Pulgyo* (May 1932); "Chabi-ŭi sonkil" 慈悲의 손길 in *Miraese: sang*, p.61.

reminds us that her colonial life experiences were not limited to the problem of love. It is not true that she was concerned only with her own personal affairs, and showed complete apathy toward colonial reality, the lives of the Korean people, national movements for freedom, and sociopolitical discourses. The truth is that she participated in nationalist movements such as the March First Movement and Kŭnuhoe and cooperated with many political, economic and literary leaders. She also felt empathy with her compatriots. Her literary representations on the theme of disability, however, also reflected the other side of the truth. She received bad treatment from her fellow workers and compatriots. Her individuality, liberty and human dignity were often disregarded and infringed on by colonial society in pursuit of collective goals such as nation-building and national liberation. She felt unfree or restricted as a colonial subject, but also as a socially marginalized individual and woman within the Korean community.

The role and influence of Buddhism in Kim's life cannot be overemphasized. It was not a refuge she sought to forget her worldly problems and to escape from social responsibility, as common prejudice has it. On the contrary, she adopted Buddhism as a fundamental solution for the colonial experience of disability. It was an alternative to the dominant political paradigm. Many of her (male) peers resorted to nationalism or socialism to solve the colonial problem but she did not agree. According to her experience, those political ideologies often became another form of disabling and marginalizing power, in particular against individuals and women. Buddhism pointed the way she could overcome disability, restore her lost self, and become an able and full-fledged human being who had power over her own life, but the struggle was all her own.