

# **“Mother, Living Things Change!”: The Korean Mother/Daughter Conflicts in Bak Wan-seo’s Namok and Eomma-ui Malttuk**

Woo Eunjoo

## **Abstract**

*Korean history influences the Korean mother/daughter relationships and causes their conflicts. Bak Wan-seo presents the various aspects of Korean mother/daughter conflict in her autobiographical novels, Namok (The Naked Tree) and Eomma-ui malttuk 1 (Mother’s Stake 1). Gyeong in The Naked Tree and the narrator in Mother’s Stake 1 are representative of Korean young women who went through the Japanese colonization, the time of Korean enlightenment, and the cruel Korean War. Both of them have conflicts with their mothers due to the generational gap and the different ways of thinking, so they wander to look for their identity. However, both characters in Bak’s fictionalized autobiographies overcome the hardships and succeed to become subjective women. By writing about her life stories, Bak Wan-seo brings out the hidden memories of her past and re-invents the truth, making it acceptable to confront consciously. Also, as a living witness of the turmoils in Korean history, she testifies for the Korean people’s suffering through her fictionalized autobiographies.*

**Keywords:** Korean War, Korean mother/daughter conflicts, Bak Wan-seo, autobiographical novel

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\* I am grateful for insightful comments by Professor Lois A. Cuddy at the University of Rhode Island.

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## Introduction

In terms of presenting the issues of the mother/daughter relationship to the reading public, Bak Wan-seo is one of the most controversial literary writers in contemporary Korean literature by women.<sup>1</sup> She began her literary career with her fictionalized autobiography,<sup>2</sup> *Namok* (The Naked Tree) in 1970. Since then, most of Bak's works reflect her own personal life-stories, including *Geu manteon singa-neun nuga da meogeosseulkka?* (Who Ate All of That Singa?) (1992) and *Geu san-i jeongmal geogi isseosseulkka?* (Was the Mountain Really There?) (1995).<sup>3</sup> Bak subtitles them "A Self-Portrait, Painted by

1. Bak won many awards in Korea such as the Dongjin Prize (1994), the Daesan Prize (1997), a medal of honor in literature by the Korean government (1998), the Manhae Prize (1999), and the Incheon Prize (2000). Also, her works have been translated in English and French.
2. The genre of fictionalized autobiography is also called as "autobiographical fiction." When we call a certain work as a fictionalized autobiography, we emphasize its autobiographical elements. However, when we call it as an autobiographical fiction, we underline its fictional elements. In terms of Bak's works, the incidents and situations in *The Naked Tree* are more fictional than those of *Mother's Stake I*, *Who Ate All of That Singa?*, and *Was the Mountain Really There?*. However, I will categorize all of these works as fictionalized autobiographies in order to stress their autobiographical elements.
3. Many critics classify the characteristics of her works as the literature of war, feminist fiction, the critique of materialism, and the understanding of mother/daughter relationship. For further studies on the works of Bak Wan-seo, refer to the following: Jo Hye-jeong, "Namok-eseo mimang-kkaji jakpum ron IV: Bak Wan-seo munhak-e isseo bipyeong-iran mueosin-ga?" (From *The Naked Tree* to *Illusions*: What Criticism Lies Is in Bak Wan-seo's Literature), *Jakga segye* (Writer's World) 8 (1991): pp. 97-144; Kwon Myeong-a, "Bak Wan-seo," *Yeoksa bipyeong* (Critical Review of History) 45 (1998): pp. 389-410; Yi Gyeong-ho and Kwon Myeong-a, eds., *Bak Wan-seo munhak gil chatgi: Bak Wan-seo munhak 30 nyeon ginyeom bipyeongjip* (The Search for the Road to Bak Wan-seo's Literature: Literary Criticism in Commemorating Thirty Years of Bak Wan-seo's Literature) (Seoul: Segyesa, 2000); Yi Seon-ok, "Bak Wan-seo soseol-ui dasi sseugi: Ttal-ui seosa-eseo yeoseongdeul gan-ui sotong-euro" (Rewriting in Bak Wan-seo's Fiction: From Daughter Narratives to Women's Communication), *Silcheon munhak* 59 (2000): pp. 51-67; and Bak Wan-seo, *Uri sidae-ui soseolga Bak Wan-seo-reul chajaseo* (In Search of Bak Wan-seo, a Writer of Our Era) (Seoul: Woongjin.com Co., 2002).

Fiction," indicating that those are the fictionalized life histories of her childhood and adolescence.

Suzanne Nalbantian points out that fictionalized autobiography comes from the artistic transformation of personal memories "beyond the search for biographical authenticity."<sup>4</sup> In order to differentiate the literal autobiography from the fictionalized autobiography, we have to "move from fact to fiction surpassing elements of confession and embellishment which are a part of the original form."<sup>5</sup> Similar to Nalbantian, Bak defines her own fictionalized autobiography in her preface to *Who Ate All of That Singa?*:

While I was writing, I realized that there were few experiences that had not been used in my works. Because all of my experiences had been transformed somewhat through fictionalization, this time I tried to write as closely as possible to my experiences without any modification just as one builds a house with only given materials. Yet, for the scale and balance of a house of "fiction," I had to choose some pieces from the piles of the memories. Also, I had to link memories with my own imagination for the natural flow of the story.<sup>6</sup>

In my own interview with Bak,<sup>7</sup> she said, "to exaggerate or to eliminate something is a kind of an imaginative creation. That is why I name those autobiographies fiction." Thus, Bak's fiction is more than the memories of her own personal experiences, because she mixes her experiences with her imagination or artistic insights "gained [by]

4. Suzanne Nalbantian, *Aesthetic Autobiography: From Life to Art in Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Anias Nin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 44.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
6. Bak Wan-seo, "Jahwasang-eul geurideusi sseun geul" (Writing as a Self-Portrait), in *Geu manteon singa-neun nuga da meogeosseulkka?* (Who Ate All of That Singa?) (Seoul: Woongjin.com Co., 1992), p. 5. This paragraph is my own translation. Unless noted, the translations in this essay are mine.
7. I interviewed Bak Wan-seo at her home (Achiul, Gyeonggi-do), Korea on the 25th of October, 2000.

the creative process.”<sup>8</sup>

In terms of Bak’s works, one of the central motifs is certainly the Korean War (1950–1953). The experiences and the literary subject of the war transform suffering and silence into the voice that speaks through her books. Bruce Cumings describes the situation of the Korean War as follows:

In 1953 the Korean peninsula was a smoldering ruin. From Pusan [sic] in the south to Sinuiju in the north, Koreans buried their dead, mourned their losses, and sought to draw together the shattered remains of their lives. In the capital at Seoul, hollow buildings stood like skeletons alongside streets paved with weird mixtures of concrete and shrapnel. At American military encampments on the outskirts of the capital, masses of beggars waited to pick through the garbage that foreign soldiers tossed out.<sup>9</sup>

These harsh and miserable circumstances during the Korean War made many Korean people depressed and even insane, and Bak presents this turmoil as Yi Gyeong’s psychological wandering, her mother’s craziness, and Ok Hui-do’s agony in her novel *The Naked Tree*.

Bak’s hometown, Gaeseong, was included in the southern part of Korea before the war, but after the war, Gaeseong was controlled by North Korea. Bak’s parents moved their family to Seoul for their children’s education before the war, and her family remained in Seoul through the war because they could not take refuge from the war. In *The Naked Tree*, Bak represents how she endured the harsh and cruel war in Seoul as a young woman and how lonely and desperate she was during the war.

In the interview, Bak said,

I suffered from the memories of the Korean War even after I got married and settled down. During the war, many people whom I

8. Nalbantian, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

9. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945–1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. xviii.

loved died miserably. While I enjoyed the peaceful family life after the war, I felt that the grudging spirits were still alive inside me. I had an impulse to speak on behalf of them. I also felt sorry for them that I survived and lived happily. So, I desired to have a ritual for the ghosts who died during the war. My writing was that ritual act.

In her book, *Who Ate All of That Singa?*, Bak also articulates her motivation to be a writer:

It seemed to be meaningful that I saw this scene [the cruelty of the war] alone. Have we not been left alone here through so many fateful happenings? Yes, if I had experienced that alone, I was responsible for writing a testimony. That was the proper revenge against the wicked destiny. Should I testify only to the enormous emptiness of life? I was going to give witness to the times of worms. In doing so, I could get away from my own state of being a worm.<sup>10</sup>

She aims to avenge her destiny and the hard times she has been through. For Bak, being a writer means that she becomes a speaking subject who can criticize absurd situations—especially the war—and protest against the hardships in life. She gains her “voice” from experiences of guilt and the desire to do something for those who suffered and died in the war. This represents Bak’s growth as a person and a writer—to go beyond herself and her own feelings and to transcend the conditions and circumstances of her life. In this sense, the genre of fictionalized autobiography is appropriate for Bak’s work, for it recreates her life through a wider and universal viewpoint, not in a narrow and personal point of view.

Another frequent motif in Bak’s works is the attempt “to remember the memories of the past.” In the preface of her novel *Was the Mountain Really There?*, Bak explains that a mountain in her neighborhood is destroyed in the name of urban planning. Though she still

10. Bak Wan-seo, *Who Ate All of That Singa?*, p. 296.

misses the mountain, many people have already forgotten the mountain and even the memory of it:

Some people do not remember that there was a mountain. How can they forget such a beautiful mountain completely? . . . The power of oblivion is stronger than that of a bulldozer. The world is changing like that. Sometimes, I do not believe my own memory of the mountain even though only half a year has passed since it has been destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage, Bak wonders how people can so easily forget the memory of the mountain. According to Kim Hyeon-suk, “the mountain” in the title means the memories, which people want to forget, and the past, which had existed but is hidden in the present.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the mountain signifies something which people want to forget but which should be remembered;<sup>13</sup> it indicates the Korean War. Bak authorizes this novel to re-member “how we have survived in the hard times” (7) and suggests that it is meaningful to “re-member” the memories of the past: remembering the past teaches us who we were, and who we are going to be. That is, Bak reminds readers that, just like the mountain, the Korean War was really there, but it is forgotten and gradually denied so that the memories of the war do not influence the present anymore. The economic development of Korea makes the Korean people forget their hard times, and they seem to deny the memories of the Korean War which made them miserable.

Finally, the relationship between mother and daughter is one of the most important themes of Bak’s works as well. In her works, mothers and daughters love and hate each other at the same time, and this mother/daughter conflict stimulates the protagonists’ search

11. Bak Wan-seo, *Geu san-i jeongmal geogi isseosseulkka?* (Was the Mountain Really There?) (Seoul: Woongjin.com Co., 1995), p. 6.

12. Kim Hyeon-suk, “Yeoksa cheheom geurigo soseol-roui seunghwa” (History, Experiences, and Transformation to Novels), *Seopyeong munhwa* 1 (1996): p. 19.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

to find their own identity. In terms of mother/daughter relationship, Adrienne Rich points out its distinctiveness as follows: “Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other.”<sup>14</sup> Different from the father/son, the father/daughter, and the mother/son relationships, mother and daughter are biological companions, especially because the mother carries and nurtures the baby whose sex is the same as hers inside her body. Then she gives birth to the baby and brings her out to the world which is dominated by their opposite sex. That is why the mother/daughter relationship is more intimate and delicate than any other relationships. Ironically because of that reason, however, mothers and daughters conflict with each other due to their relationship with men and the patriarchal ideology that is dominated by men. Therefore, as Suzanne Juhasz mentions, the mother/daughter relationship can be characterized by “the complex weave of need, expectation, desire, anxiety, idealization, disappointment, loss, hurt, joy” that causes “the tensions between connection and differentiation.”<sup>15</sup>

Also, according to Bella Brodzki, the mother affects the formulation of the daughter’s subjectivity—her power to control or manage herself—through language because the daughter learns language from her mother:

As the child’s first significant Other, the mother *engenders* subjectivity through language; she is the primary source of speech and love. . . . Thereafter, implicated in and overlaid with other modes of discourse, the maternal legacy of language becomes charged with ambiguity and fraught with ambivalence. In response . . . , the daughter’s text, variously, seeks to reject, reconstruct, and reclaim—

14. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976), p. 225.

15. Suzanne Juhasz, “Towards Recognition: Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship,” *American Imago: Studies in Psychoanalysis & Culture* 57 (2000): p. 157.

to locate and recontextualize—the mother’s message.<sup>16</sup>

The daughter learns language and love from her mother starting from birth; therefore, the mother dominates her daughter’s linguistic and emotional arena. Yet, the daughter desires to be free from her mother’s influence and build her own world. Similarly, in Bak’s case, she was influenced by her mother’s language and storytelling to become a writer. Nonetheless, we see that she tries to be liberated from her mother and to create her own representations of life and her own strategies for being.

Bak Wan-seo’s autobiographical fiction, *Namok* (The Naked Tree) (1970) and her fictionalized autobiography, *Eomma-ui malttuk 1* (Mother’s Stake 1) (1980) not only contain all of the themes presented above—i.e., the Korean War, remembering the past, and the mother/daughter relationship—but these works also have the same functions as female writers’ narratives about their mothers which Marianne Hirsch points out: these novels distance and objectify, remember the memories with nostalgia, and celebrate and mystify the mother.<sup>17</sup> For example, in *The Naked Tree*, the narrator, Yi Gyeong, distances and objectifies her mother who is desperately frustrated when she loses her two sons. The narrator describes her mother as the Other who rejects the world around her including her own daughter and criticizes the mother cold-heartedly. Moreover, in *Mother’s Stake 1*, the narrator, Bak, remembers her mother with a sense of nostalgia. Even though the mother’s prejudice and self-contradictory vanity oppress her daughter, the mother’s strong will to educate her daughter makes the daughter a successful woman writer, and her success surely celebrates the memories with her mother and even her mother’s prejudice and vanity.

16. Bella Brodzki, “Mothers, Displacement, and Language,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 157.

17. Marianne Hirsch, “Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kapla (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 93.

In order to study how the mother/daughter relationship influences the protagonist’s sense of agency or establishing her identity during this particular Korean War, I will discuss how the process of finding the protagonist’s identity develops in relation to her mother in *The Naked Tree*. Also in *Mother’s Stake 1*, I will examine how the mother demands that the daughter follow her ideal of New Womanhood and why the daughter consciously rejects her mother’s dream even though the daughter ultimately fulfills that dream of the New Woman by speaking out in her own voice through a literary career.

### ***Namok* (The Naked Tree)**

The mother in *The Naked Tree* represents a traditional Korean mother who identifies herself with her sons. Korean “traditional” motherhood can be examined through the recent psychoanalytic point of view. In Freudian analysis, the mother is attached to her son because she “transfer[s] to her son all the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself.”<sup>18</sup> Luce Irigaray explains this symptom, using Freudian theory:

The desire to obtain the penis from the father is replaced by the desire to have a child, this latter becoming, in an equivalence that Freud analyzes, the penis substitute. We must add here that the woman’s happiness is complete only if the newborn child is a boy, bearer of the longed-for penis. In this way the woman is compensated, through the child she brings into the world, for the narcissistic humiliation inevitably associated with the feminine condition.<sup>19</sup>

18. Sigmund Freud, “Femininity,” in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud), ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1974), p. 22; quoted in Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 42.

19. Luce Irigaray, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

When psychoanalytic theory is applied to understand Korean mothers/women who have been oppressed and have suffered under the Korean patriarchal authority, it is appropriate to think that women's penis envy transforms into "the penis substitute." Historically, for example, when a wife gave birth to a son, she finally became a member of the family, but if she gave births to only daughters, she could be ultimately cast out from the family. Therefore, Korean mothers prefer sons to daughters, for they achieve a sense of self and gain value for their lives through their sons by identifying themselves with their sons. With their sons' penis, the mothers are compensated not only for "the narcissistic humiliation" by their biological condition but also for the sexual injustices and inequities that they have to admit.

In addition, in the Korean Confucian patriarchal social order, which emphasizes filial piety and demands obedience to the male head of the family, the ruling class controls the lower class, including women and children.<sup>20</sup> Because this system also allows the elder women to hold power over younger women through the emphasis on filial piety, women ironically have also maintained and reinforced the patriarchal ideology and social structure. In order to establish their status in the family and to ignore the sexual oppression which they have to endure, Korean women want to give birth to sons.

In *The Naked Tree*, before the two sons die, Yi Gyeong's mother has no problems in her life because her two sons protect her. We see that even her sadness about her husband's death can be mitigated by her sons' affection.<sup>21</sup> The protection and the love of her husband find a substitute in the filial piety of her two sons. According to Choi Kyeong-Hee, the absence of father in the historical and cultural condition strengthened the mother/son relationships in the Korean his-

20. Kim Yeong-ae, "Hanguk yeoseong-ui han-e daehan sangdam-gwa chiyu" (Consultation and Cure for the Korean Women's Han). Available from World Wide Web: <http://cyberchurch.re.kr/counselings/gangza/counselsource/c11.htm> (cited 15 January 2003).

21. See *Namok* (The Naked Tree), p. 138.

tory.<sup>22</sup> In this novel, the mother and her sons love each other deeply, and the daughter is alienated from the strong mother/son relationship: "I liked my mother very much. But my brothers had already said what I wanted to say and had played the baby, too. . . . I wanted to share my mother now, but my brothers didn't seem to notice."<sup>23</sup> When the brothers die during the war, the problems in the mother/daughter relationship show up. That is, Yi Gyeong's mother loses her mind when she loses her sons.

The conflicts between the mother and Gyeong begin when she hears her mother's resentment that her daughter survives her brothers. She murmurs: "The gods are so cruel. Why did they take all my sons, leaving only the girl behind?" (148). When Gyeong hears her mother's murmuring, she feels a self-destructive desire in order to revenge herself against her mother's rejection of her: "I'll make [the people] pity my mother. I'll make her a poor woman without any children, not even a daughter" (149).

According to Sigmund Freud, mourning is "grief over the loss of someone or something beloved" while melancholia is "grief over the loss of the ego."<sup>24</sup> He defines "melancholia" as follows:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all creativity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment.<sup>25</sup>

22. Choi Kyeong-Hee, "Neither Colonial nor National: The Making of the 'New Woman' in Pak Wan-so's 'Mother's Stake 1,'" in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Shin Gi-Wook and Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 169.

23. Yu Young-nan, trans., *The Naked Tree* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 138. All passages quoted from *Namok* in this essay will be from Yu Young-nan's translation.

24. Allegra Wong, "Mourning or Melancholia: Joyce's Death Fixation and the 'Calypso' Chapter in *Ulysses*." Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.etext.org/Zines/Critique/Article/joyce.html> (cited 15 January 2003).

25. Sigmund Freud, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

Gyeong's mother has the same features that Freud suggests as those who are melancholic.<sup>26</sup> Gyeong's mother, first of all, maintains her two sons in her mind and does not let them go. The mother keeps her sons' room just as before they died. The mother sometimes is confused about whether they are still alive: she does not seem to accept their deaths. The mother says: "I was sitting in my room and I heard the guitar. It sounded like Uk playing" (53). As Freud states, Gyeong's mother loses her capacity to love. Gyeong walks home in the snow-storm that night, but her mother does not worry about Gyeong, but instead she is still obsessed by her sons who are no longer alive.

Gyeong, therefore, is furious about her mother's indifference to her. She yells at her mother: "That was the wind. I walked home through that storm and nearly froze to death. It was not the guitar" (53). Gyeong recognizes that her two brothers exist like the ghosts of the house because her mother will not let them go. Hence, Gyeong is practically invisible and silent as she allows her brothers to "live" on. That is why she tries to erase her mother's memory of her two brothers by breaking the guitar. However, her mother has the strength to stop her so that she keeps the guitar safe. Gyeong describes her mother's strength when she fights for the guitar: "She was not a shadow any more. She was a healthy, passionate woman with a strong throbbing pulse once more" (53). Her mother recovers her vitality when she is recalling the memory of her sons because she is attached even to her dead sons; unless she thinks of her sons, she is just a shadow in living death. Therefore, her mother cannot abandon the old house which possesses the memory of her sons: "To her the old house, even with part of its roof blown off, was everything" (151).

Also, the mother represents the image of "gray stubbornness"(5) which embodies her complete hollowness and emptiness. The gray color presents the fact that her mother survives just because she can-

26. Judith Butler explains that "melancholia refuses to acknowledge loss, and in this sense 'preserve' its lost objects as psychic effects." See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 182.

not die: "I hated her mousy grayness. . . . But most of all, I couldn't stand her gray stubbornness" (5). The gray color is connected to her mother's hair, clothes, the wallpaper of the house, and the *gimchi* soup which is the only soup her mother cooks every day.<sup>27</sup> She ignores any changes or vitality in life. She suspends "all creativity" as Freud mentions above. This gray color symbolizes death, meanness, and her mother's attachment to the past. In addition, when her brothers were alive, her mother had well-fixed, shiny, black hair, a pretty face and beautiful teeth, but, in the present, she has tangled-gray hair, a blank face, and an ugly mouth because she never wears her dentures. Gyeong yells at her mother: "Mother, we are still alive. Living things change" (57). Gyeong's voice bursts out, but the mother does not react to anything. The mother refuses to acknowledge change, and she lives only with the memory of her sons from the past.

The falling self-esteem and the desire to punish herself might be represented as the mother's lonely death. In spite of Gyeong's efforts to resist her mother as well as to reconcile with her mother, the mother completely ignores her daughter and dies, leaving her behind alone. Just before she dies, she does not even ask Gyeong for help because she does not need her daughter: "I held my breath and waited for her to call me. At least she could have called me for water or complained about the pain. But I heard neither groans nor moans, much less her voice" (166). The death of her sons signifies the loss of both "self" and the cultural currency of power. Her depression causes her to forfeit self-love and self-respect. Finally, she accepts the death of her sons as her own death.<sup>28</sup> When her mother dies, Gyeong inter-

27. Kang In-suk, *Bak Wan-seo soseol-e natanan dosi-wa moseong* (City and Maternity Appearing in Bak Wan-seo's Novels) (Seoul: Doseo Chulpan Dungi, 1997), p. 98.

28. Kim Su-jin, "Motherhood on the Boundary between Normality and Abnormality: Bak Wan-seo's *Was the Mountain Really There?* and *Mother's Stake 2* and Agnieszka Holland's *Olivier, Olivier*" (in Korean), in *Moseong-ui damnon-gwa hyeonsil: eomeoni-ui seong, sam, jeongcheseong* (Discourse and Reality of Motherhood: Mother's Sexuality, Life, and Identity), ed. Sim Yeong-hui, Jeong Jin-seong, and Yun Jeong-ro (Seoul: Nanam Publishing House, 1999), p. 305.

prets her death as: “My mother had left her daughter’s house, where she had been nervous and uncomfortable, to go to her son’s house where she would be more at home” (171). Her mother had psychologically left her daughter a long time ago. Only her body has been with Gyeong; hence, her mother’s death had started long ago. That is why she is not sad when her mother dies (171).

The mother’s unacknowledging of Gyeong’s coming of age is manifested in the daughter’s sexual and emotional rebellion—her sexual flirtation with an American soldier, Joe, and her love affair with a married artist, Ok Hui-do. First of all, Gyeong plans to use Joe to wake up the mother from her living-death condition. Her mother’s dull eyes show “a stubborn determination that said she was living only because she couldn’t kill herself” (121). When Gyeong confronts her mother’s lifeless eyes, she has an impulse to shock her mother, using Joe: “I should have brought that Yankee home. Maybe Joe will come tomorrow. If I knocked on our gate with my arm hooked in his, my mother’s eyes couldn’t remain expressionless” (121). Gyeong’s flirtation with Joe who is a “Yankee” aims to shame her mother’s respect for her family and even her brothers’ honor. This episode represents that even the Korean mother/daughter relationship is influenced by the circumstances of the Korean War that makes Korean women’s bodies sexualized commodities.

By destroying herself, Gyeong wants to get even with her mother for her rejection. When Joe invites Gyeong to a hotel room, she accepts his invitation. She hopes to abandon the burden of her memory of the past and to be re-born by this affair: “Joe would take off my clothes, and through him I hoped I could rid myself of the tatters of my soul” (131). Through her sexual adventure with Joe, Gyeong wishes to confront her past—the memories of her happy times and the death of her brothers: “I wished I could gaze boldly at the distorted roof without fear. I wished I could look smack at the hole on the ridge and at the splintered tiles. And most of all, I would have liked to have been able to face my mother without hating her” (131). Furthermore, Gyeong expects to be free from the unknown oppressive power by crossing the forbidden line: “I thought it seemed as though I had

wings that could carry me out of that thick cocoon. Wings that could free me from the stifling cocoon. Wings” (133). In doing so, she may confront her painful memories and reconcile with her mother.

The red sheet on the bed in the hotel room, however, reminds Gyeong of the blood of her brothers, which is the memory she has been repressing:

Before looking into Joe’s face, I saw the bedspread dyed in a deep blood-red. . . . Ah, the blood-red sheet. . . . Those gruesome bodies that showed in full horror how tender young bodies could be mangled before their souls departed, the crimson blood, still warm, which had flowed from those horrible bodies (134).

Until this scene appears, the reader does not know what happened to Gyeong in the past, what bothers her, and why she is mean to others. When she sees the red sheet, she suddenly realizes the fact that she wants and needs to face and accept her past and her situation. Also, the reader can now understand the problem tormenting her. At the moment when Joe touches her, Gyeong realizes that she would be destroyed by “the power of darkness which causes her brothers’ death”<sup>29</sup>—the devilish ruinous power. Ultimately, she cannot run away from the memory of her past because the past that she wants to reject is a part of herself. Yelling “Don’t break me” (134) at Joe, Gyeong saves herself rather than destroys herself.

In addition, Gyeong’s love affair with Hui-do is her escape from the harsh Korean conjuncture during the war as well as her mother’s shadowy life. In our interview, Bak told me that Ok Hui-do represents Bak Su-geun, one of the famous Korean artists, who worked at the portrait shop in the PX with her during the war. She insisted that she originally wanted to write about his life—how he suffered from the war and how he had lived as an artist—in the novel. In her article, “Chosanghwa geurideon sijeol-ui Bak Su-geun” (When Bak Su-

29. Yu Jong-ho, “Godanhan sewol sok-ui sam” (The Life in Hardship), in Bak Wan-seo, *Namok, Doduk majeun ganan* (The Naked Tree and The Stolen Poverty) (Seoul: Minunsa Publishing Co., 1981), p. 472.



geun Drew Portraits), Bak states that she was unhappy at that time because she considered herself as ruined as she could be. However, Bak Su-geun let her know that he was a “real” artist, and the fact that he was a “real” artist among those painters liberated her from the feeling of unhappiness (36). In *The Naked Tree*, Bak illustrates her own depression and Bak Su-geun’s agony as an artist during the war through the relationship between Gyeong and Ok Hui-do. Bak defines her relationship with Bak Su-geun as “benevolence” in *Was the Mountain Really There?*: “I almost forgot benevolence in my life to survive in the harsh circumstances, but [in the time when I was with him,] benevolence soaked into my soul just as warm water soaked into a frozen body” (267-268). Bak insists that Bak Su-geun’s kindness makes her recover interests in life and generosity toward others (267). Just as Ok Hui-do denies his sexual relationship with Gyeong in *The Naked Tree*, Bak also said, in the interview, that she fictionalized the love story between them in the novel. No matter how they felt toward each other, however, the relationship between Bak Wan-seo and Bak Su-geun nurtured Bak’s emotional center that had been barren as a result of the mother/daughter relationship during the war and empowered her to create such a masterpiece as *The Naked Tree*. As the artist portrays life through his painting, the novelist speaks through her autobiographical text.

In the novel, Gyeong’s affection for Ok Hui-do begins like an immature puppy love: “I had begun to think I was in love with Ok Hui-do. The thought was painful at times, sweet at others and frightening once in a while. I couldn’t figure out exactly what my feelings were, but I couldn’t drive the idea out of my mind” (27). The “painful, sweet and frightening” feelings do not seem to be an adult woman’s love. Rather, it seems to be the love of an adolescent girl. Moreover, when we see that Gyeong complains to Ok Hui-do about her father’s irresponsibility, we can assume that she admires Ok Hui-do and seeks a substitute for a fatherly love:

I have experienced so many terrible things alone. I asked my father to help me. I prayed so earnestly. Even the devil’s heart would

have been moved. I thought he had become a god. Well, if not a god, a superhuman or something. But, he ignored us. He didn’t do anything for us. How could he? I was so tired of hating him that I decided not to think about him any more (34).

Because Gyeong is psychologically deserted by her father’s death and her mother’s rejection and contempt, she needs a father-figure whom she could depend on, and she desires Ok Hui-do to protect her like a father would. When Ok Hui-do holds her in his arms, she expresses her feelings, using the word “cradle”: “[His chest] was broad and as comfortable as a cradle. A deep feeling of contentment came over me. I didn’t want to lose it” (35). “The cradle” indicates that she wants to identify Ok Hui-do as a family member just like a baby girl who looks for her father’s love.

Gyeong recognizes that her love for Ok Hui-do gives her energy to endure the harsh conjuncture:

I knew I wouldn’t go crazy. I knew I was intent on finding the joy of life, hidden deep in my heart. It lay deep inside, never losing its force, although it sometimes acted as if it were a separate entity, ignoring the fact that I had to pretend to live a dull life because I was not supposed to have any other choice (85).

Gyeong’s relationship with Ok Hui-do rescues her from her barren life during the war.

After all, her mother’s death helps Gyeong to establish her autonomy. She becomes literally free from her mother’s “gray stubbornness” and the painful memories. After her mother dies, Gyeong’s attitude, “What do you think a mirage is made of?” (180) means that she finally accepts her desire for Ok Hui-do was only a “mirage” rather than serious love. Moreover, Gyeong accepts Tae-su’s realistic dreams such as “a boy with red cheeks, a good wife, a fireplace with a simmering stew pot, a window with a curtain” (180). We see that Gyeong identifies herself as a realistic woman who dreams of the real things that she can actually obtain: “. . . like they are being painted right in front of eyes. Everything that’s not a dream, everything that’s

not a vapor" (180).

The important thing is not that she becomes Tae-su's woman but that she decides to be the self-determining woman who can control even her sexuality as well as her lifestyle. She becomes an independent woman who chooses Tae-su (reality) instead of Ok Hui-do (mirage). That is why she can willfully choose Tae-su as her husband and destroy her old house which embodies her mother as well as her guilt. To clear out the past, Gyeong allows Tae-su to remove the old house: he realistically counts the value of the old house with the peddlers. Gyeong identifies the old house with herself when the house is destroyed: "I bravely endured that pain, even though it felt like my own body was being demolished. Perhaps, I, too, wanted to be demolished and rebuilt" (184). This shows that Gyeong does not entirely hate her past but has learned to love it at the same time.

In the end of the novel, Gyeong does not seem to be "the" Gyeong who wanders through identity crisis. Bak skips time; Gyeong appears to be a middle-aged woman in the very next chapter after she accepts Tae-su. The present narrative shows that Gyeong does not give up her memories of the past even though she tries to clarify the past. Rather, she has matured through "re-remembering" the memories of her past. The ginkgo tree, which was originally planted in the old house, still stands in her garden, and she absorbs the vitality of life from the ginkgo leaves: "their [the ginkgo leaves'] light, their whisper, their cries" (185); she confesses that "a secret part of myself still remained, not be demolished" (185). She becomes the woman who can express her opinions to her husband and insists upon going out alone even on a Sunday: "I have somewhere to go by myself" (186).

This autobiographical novel culminates with Gyeong as a grown woman, realizing that the tree in Ok Hui-do's picture is *The Naked Tree*, not the dead tree. She goes to the memorial exhibition of Ok Hui-do, who has become a famous artist since his death. She remembers the picture that she saw in Ok Hui-do's closet several years ago:

The old tree had seemed to be standing in the midst of a dry spell then, but now it was a naked tree. The old tree and The Naked

Tree. They were similar and yet so different (187).

The "old" tree in the "dark" room symbolizes Gyeong's lifeless and hopeless situation during the war. At that time, she has no hope for the future and her soul is almost dead like a dead tree. In the harsh circumstances, the tree looks lifeless to her. In the present, however, as a matured woman, Gyeong revitalizes herself. She can see the same tree in the picture as the tree with a life that yearns toward spring: "The belief in the spring. It was the belief in the spring that made the tree look so brave" (187). Gyeong finally recognizes the positive phase of life in his art. This recognition makes Gyeong look at her husband more lovingly so that she kisses his brow in the garden of the exhibition building.

Gyeong comes to understand that Ok Hui-do draws his hope for the future through this tree—i.e., waiting for the spring and for the peaceful time:

Suddenly, I realized that Ok Hui-do himself was The Naked Tree. During the time when he was unfortunate, during those dark days when the whole population of his country was joyless, he lived like that tree.

I also realized that I was only a woman who had passed The Naked Tree, a woman who had paced around it, foolishly waiting for the green that might soothe my tired body and soul (186).

The development of Gyeong's identity as an independent and dignified woman has been completely established when she realizes the meaning of the naked tree. As far as she is concerned, the naked tree is Ok Hui-do himself who solitarily waits for the spring in the winter. As the tree helps other trees to grow with its fallen leaves, Ok Hui-do and his art help Gyeong to grow up to an adult woman who establishes her subjectivity.<sup>30</sup> I add that the naked tree is Gyeong-a herself

30. Yi Tae-dong, "Seongjang soseol-gwa rieollijeum: Bak Wan-seo-ui geu manteon singa-neun nuga da meogeosseulkka" (Bildungsroman and Realism in Bak Wan-seo's *Who Ate All of That Singa?*), *Soseol sasang* (1993): p. 68.

during the war, who loses her vitality just as the naked tree loses its leaves. Yet, just as the tree has a hope for the spring and survives in the winter, she also desires to be free from the repressed reality and survives the harsh years. Further, the naked tree signifies the Korean people who suffered from Japanese colonization and then the cruel war, but ultimately survived through the miserable past and created a new successful present. Finally, the naked tree indicates Bak Wanseo herself who went through the hardship of life just as Gyeong does, and succeeded in becoming a writer. Bak becomes a speaking subject who can express herself and bear witness to her unfair and harsh conjuncture through her writing.

### ***Eomma-ui Malttuk 1 (Mother's Stake 1)***

Bak's contemporary critics regard *Mother's Stake 1* as one of the best novels presenting the tensions that exist in the Korean mother/daughter relationship. While Korean sons have strong relationships with their parents, it was hard for Korean daughters to fortify the psychological ties with their mothers as well as with their fathers.<sup>31</sup> Bak's works inherit the tradition of "mother's storytelling," and further, her literary representation of the mother/daughter relationship articulates the relationship between the Korean society and Korean women.<sup>32</sup>

Different from the frustrated and insane mother in *The Naked Tree*, the mother in *Mother's Stake 1* represents one of the strong Korean mothers who sacrifices herself for her children and family. When the war breaks out or the head of the family is absent, the strong mother earns money and supports her families.<sup>33</sup> However,

31. Choi Kyeong-Hee, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-169.

33. Sin Gyeong-a, "1990 nyeondae moseong-ui byeonhwa: huisaeng-ui hwasin-eseo yokgu-reul gajin in-gan-euro" (The Change of Motherhood in the 1990s: From Incarnation of Sacrifice to Human Being with Desires), in *Moseong-ui damnon-gwa hyeonsil: eomeoni-ui seong, sam, jeongcheseong*, p. 390.

the strong mother does not deconstruct patriarchy in Korea. Rather, she strengthens it because she aims to succeed in her husbands' families, and she especially sacrifices for her sons' social successes.<sup>34</sup> In the novel, the mother leaves her hometown to educate her children, giving up her right to the family property. She is economically independent due to her needle-work in Seoul. Even though the mother considers her son as her faith or religion, she also has a dream to make her daughter into a New Woman.

In the 1920s, a group called the New Women appeared in Korea.<sup>35</sup> They had been educated in a modern way<sup>36</sup> and studied abroad or went to college in Korea. The educated women carried on the enlightenment movement for women, laborers, and farmers. Kwon Insook defines the "New Women" in Korea as follows:

[T]he "New Women" activists were a group of women who challenged the moral system of Confucian patriarchy, using a new self-identity that they crafted through modern education in Korea or studies and journeys to Japan and Europe. . . . Women who identified with this movement advocated free love (love between men and women regardless of marriage), free marriage (marriage without the intervention of parents) and the destruction of the dominant feminine chastity ideology.<sup>37</sup>

The New Women pointed out the problems of patriarchy and the sexual inequities within the Korean family.

The Korean people viewed the New Women negatively because

34. *Ibid.*, p. 393.

35. About the Korean women's history, see Yi Hyo-jae, *Hanguk-ui yeoseong undong: eoje-wa oneul* (The Korean Women's Movement: The Past and Today) (Seoul: Jungwoo-Sa, 1996); and Hanguk Yeoseong Yeonguhoe (Korean Women's Research Group), *Hanguk yeoseongsa* (Korean Women's History) (Seoul: Pul-bit Publishing Co., 1992).

36. Schooling.

37. Kwon Insook, "The New Women's Movement in 1920s Korea: Rethinking the Relationship Between Imperialism and Women," *Gender & History* 10 (1998): p. 382.

most of the New Women opposed the Korean Confucian patriarchal structure. The male intellectuals thought that women's education was "important [for] their roles as good wives and wise mothers."<sup>38</sup> However, the New Women "challenged the traditional women's consent to male dominance and set up new counter-hegemonic discourses."<sup>39</sup> Because the male intellectuals were puzzled when the New Women group talked about "selfhood" and "women's identity," they accused the New Women as "sinners."<sup>40</sup>

Several male critics at that time attacked the private lives of the New Women and their works in literature and art. Those studies about the New Women mainly "stress[ed] the bourgeois nature of the culture of New Women and their failure" rather than examined "how New Womanhood was received and internalized by ordinary Koreans."<sup>41</sup> Although many male critics denounced the New Women, many Korean women admired and envied them. The mother in the novel is one of the traditional Korean women who wished to be liberated from the repression of women.

One of the motives for the mother's demand that her daughter become a New Woman is that she tries to fulfill her own dreams for the New Woman through her daughter's "success." The mother explains about the New Woman to her daughter as "someone who has studied so much that she knows everything about the laws of the world, and she can do anything she wants to."<sup>42</sup> Because the husband dies due to her mother-in-law who believed in shamanism rather than modern medicine, she has "such a vengeance and long-

38. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

40. Bak Jeong-ae, "Chogi 'sinyeoseong'-ui sahoe jinchul-gwa yeoseong gyoyuk: 1910-1920 nyeondae choban yeoja yuhaksaeng-eul jungsim-euro" (The Entry of the Early New Women into the Society and the Education of Women: a Survey of the Female Students Studying Abroad in the 1910s and 1920s), *Yeoseong-gwa sahoe* (Women and Society) 11 (2000): p. 47.

41. Choi, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

42. Yu Young-nan, trans., *Mother's Stake 1* (Seoul: Taehaksa, 1991), p. 188. I will use Yu's translation in this essay.

ing for knowledge and freedom" (212). She is thirsty for the new knowledge from the West and freedom from patriarchal oppression. Because she is already a mother of two and has to do something for a living, she cannot make herself a New Woman. Therefore, she plans to educate her daughter and make her a New Woman so that her daughter can live free from the social oppression of women.<sup>43</sup>

While her mother wants to liberate her daughter from the oppression of women in the Korean society, the problem is that the mother arbitrarily defines the New Woman by her own standards:

You can't become a New Woman just by living in Seoul. You must study a lot. When you become one, you won't wear your hair like I do in the old way, but in a fashionable *hisashikami* style. You will wear a short skirt, showing your legs, high-heeled shoes, and you will carry a *handobaku* (187-188).

A *hisashikami* style is "a half-modernized hairstyle" which is "a direct cultural import from Japan"<sup>44</sup> and a *handobaku* is a handbag. The mother recognizes the New Woman in terms of appearance that is, the mother has the concept of New Womanhood in terms of fashion.

Traditional female clothing covers "the figure of the female body with long skirts and veils, the binding of breasts, and a sharp distinction between married and single statuses through the style as well as the length of the hair."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the clothing and hairstyles of the New Woman provided Korean women "more physical mobility and exposure."<sup>46</sup> By becoming a New Woman, her daughter may be free from traditional Korean clothing and become fashionable. The fash-

43. Choe Gyeong-hui (Choi Kyeong-Hee), "Eomeoni-ui beop-gwa ireum-euro: Eomma-ui malttuk-ui sangjing gujo" (In the Law and the Name of Mother: the Symbolic Structure of *Mother's Stake*), in *Bak Wan-seo munhak gil chatgi: Bak Wan-seo munhak 30 nyeon ginyeom bipyeongjip* (The Search for the Road to Bak Wan-seo's Literature: Literary Criticism in Commemorating Thirty Years of Bak Wan-seo's Literature) (Seoul: Segyesa, 2000), p. 185.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

46. *Ibid.*

ion of a New Woman symbolized the Korean woman's independence from the oppressive, patriarchal ideology. However, what the mother overlooks in her concept of New Womanhood is the element of national pride. The fashion which she introduces is only a fad imported from Japan. The fact that Korean women wore Japanese clothing means that the liberation of the New Woman was influenced by the colonial power.

On the other hand, the daughter interprets her mother's suggestion for seeking freedom and knowledge as "a net thrown by Mother and the big city" (182). Also, her mother's introduction of the New Woman's fashion is disappointing (188) to the daughter because it consists mainly of black color. Instead of the monotone black, the daughter dreams about the colorfulness of the Korean traditional clothing:

I wanted to drape a deep orange ribbon around my long, long braided hair, and I wanted a long Korean skirt in the same color. So long that only the tips of my white stockings would show. And I wanted a yellow blouse with a purple tie on it. Also a pair of colorful shoes. At that stage in my life I was fond of colorful things, so I didn't become a New Woman, dressed in a black skirt, black shoes, and a black handbag (188).

She is too young to recognize the "confinement, concealment, and constriction" of Korean clothing. The daughter just wants beautiful clothing. This is the starting point for the mother and the daughter conflicts in the novel. Moreover, the daughter thinks that "a New Woman did foolish things" (189) and she calls her mother's concept of the New Woman "an enigma" (200). Yet, she does not "have the courage to say that [she doesn't] want to do anything like that" (189) because her mother's yearning for transforming the daughter into a New Woman is very "intense." In other words, mother's deep yearning for a New Woman silences her daughter. The daughter does not dare to say "no" to her mother's ideal of the New Woman. The reason why Bak does not give the daughter a name is that the protagonist represents the typical daughter in Korea who are repressed and

sacrificed by their mothers' own dreams for their daughter's future.

The conflicts between the mother and the daughter about the ideal of the New Woman are caused because her mother does not really know how her daughter can become the New Woman. She cannot guide her daughter in the right way to becoming a New Woman. Hence, her guidance makes her daughter confused. Most of all, the mother forbids her sewing. The daughter enjoys sewing with her mother's needlework materials, but her mother does not allow her to participate in a traditional Korean woman's work: "Don't ever think of taking up sewing seriously. You should study. If you are good at using your hands, you are destined to live using your hands" (199). By sewing with her mother, the daughter has an opportunity to listen to her mother's story and identifies with her mother, but her mother takes her daughter's pleasures away. Instead, she lets her son teach her daughter Japanese characters. She pushes her daughter away from her world to her son's world and from the traditional Korean world to the Japanese colonial world. The mother, further, enrolls her daughter into a school to educate her in the Western way.

The mother's absurd pride and vanity prohibit the daughter from belonging anywhere. Her mother despises her neighbors, using the words "lowly human beings." Also, she earns money by "making dresses for wine house hostesses" (197) though she disdains such people. In addition, the mother puts her daughter into a school "inside the gates" where the rich people live even though her family lives "outside the gates" where the poor people live. The daughter cannot make friends with those who live inside the gates or outside the gates. Moreover, in the country, the mother is proud of being a Seoulite. Yet, in Seoul, she believes her background in the country gives her superiority over her neighbors (143). These contradictions confuse the daughter because the mother denies her daughter the comfort of a fixed identity either as a Seoulite or as a country girl.

When the mother takes the needle from the daughter, she draws pictures of the New Woman on the ground for fun. Choi Kyeong-Hee insists that the daughter's drawing pictures of the New Woman suggests that she begins to accept her mother's ideal of the New

Woman.<sup>47</sup> I think, however, that her drawing means only her efforts or attempts to accept it, but she never agrees with her mother's ideal until the end of the novel.

Therefore, the daughter eventually denies her mother's yearning for the New Womanhood by refusing to hold the hands with the schoolteacher who is an example of a New Woman. The teacher satisfies her mother's condition of New Womanhood:

The teacher parted her hair in front, and drew the back into a high bun. She wore a white blouse, a black skirt, and narrow black shoes. When she came to school or went home, she carried a handbag. Of course, I believed that she knew the laws of everything. . . . Not only did she know everything, but also she loved everybody in class (215).

However, the daughter does not admire or respect the teacher. She thinks that the teacher's smile is "fake" (216) and the teacher does not seem to recognize that the daughter has never held the teacher's hands, as the other children have. This insistence on the fakeness of the teacher is the daughter's attempt to prove that her mother's New Woman does not exist in this world. That is, the independent and learned New Woman is her mother's fictionalized ideal. In the end of this novel, the daughter describes her mother's ideals for "success" as "hopelessly high ideals" (227) and "snobbish vanity" (227).

In this novel, the daughter rejects her teacher who was one of the representative New Women because she hates the teacher's hypocrisy and the vanity of New Womanhood. This shows that she will become a real new woman who rejects the nominal New Woman. Her subjectivity declares that the word "New Woman" was absurd and meaningless and she will never be one (227). Instead of being a typical New Woman, the daughter becomes a famous woman writer as she desired to be. Indeed, as a writer, her writing itself is the daughter's voice speaking to the world outside and with that voice we see her reconciling with her mother.

47. Choi Kyeong-Hee, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

At the end of the novel, the daughter-narrator accepts her mother as the way she was. When she realizes the destruction of the house where her family lived, she feels like that her mother's old pride is damaged: "Mother's stake had been pulled out, at last" (236). Even though the narrator did not understand her mother's pride, she is not happy that her mother loses her pride in the present. Also, the narrator walks "the paths on which [she] had gone to school" (236) that she hated at that time. This means that she admits the ways of life which her mother presented to her. She sympathizes with her mother who is old: "Strangely, the Mother who missed the good old days lost the dignity she used to have when she had striven to make a living, but was proud considering her neighbors to be 'lowly human beings.' . . . The change saddened me" (224-225). The way the narrator describes her old mother shows that she comes to understand her mother's pride and vanity and finally reconciles with her mother.

## Conclusion

Bak Wan-seo critiques the strong mother figure in *The Naked Tree* and *Mother's Stake 1*. In *The Naked Tree*, the mother influences her daughter in a negative way. She oppresses Gyeong with her own frustration and depression. Her oppression does not allow Gyeong to enjoy the vitality of her life and youth. In this case, we do not find how much the mother loves Gyeong. She seems to lose all affection for everyone. On the other hand, in *Mother's Stake 1*, the mother's pressure has influence on her daughter in a positive way. She forces her daughter to be a New Woman. The mother herself wanders between the patriarchal preference of sons and her desire to make her daughter succeed in order to feel her own success through her daughter, but this mother loves her daughter and desires that her daughter be successful in society, different from the mother in *The Naked Tree*.

Gyeong in *The Naked Tree* and the narrator in *Mother's Stake 1* are representatives of young Korean women who came to age during

the Japanese colonial period, the time of Korean enlightenment, and the cruel Korean War. Both of them have conflicts with their mothers and wander to look for their identity. However, as Bak becomes a successful writer in her real life, despite of all the historical and personal turmoils, both characters in Bak's fictionalized autobiographies overcome the hardships and succeed in becoming autonomous women.

Clearly, by writing about her life stories, Bak Wan-seo faces the memories of her past—i.e., her brother's death, her relationship with her mother, the Korean War, and her psychological wandering. She brings out the hidden memories of her past and re-invents the truth, making it acceptable to confront these memories. The act of writing also allows Bak to reconcile with her mother by using the language she learns from her mother. In the Seoul National Forum for Literature (2000), Bak stated that "I can be free only in my mother-tongue. That is my limitation as well as my identity."<sup>48</sup> Her "mother-tongue" means, first, her native language, second, the language her mother speaks, and finally, the language she learns from her mother. She is free in the language which she learns from her mother, which means that she accepts her mother as a part of herself through language.<sup>49</sup> Finally, when she is freed from language, she becomes "the subject." That is, the act of writing liberates Bak from the conflicts with her mother and also from the entrapment of her self-consciousness.

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48. Bak Wan-seo, "Poseuteu singminji sanghwang-eseo geulsseugi" (Writing in Post-colonial Situation), in *Gyeonggye-reul neomeo geulsseugi: damunhwa segye sok-eseoui munhak* (Writing across Boundaries: Literature in the Multicultural World) (Seoul: The Daesan Foundation, 2000), p. 27.

49. Marianne Hirsch quotes Carl Jung about the relationship between mother and daughter: "Every mother contains her daughter within herself, and every daughter her mother. . . ." p. 209.