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Korean War Widows Through the Works of Pak Kyongni from the 1950s[1]

Abstract: This study examines the situation of Korean War widows during the 1950s, first through the analysis of two official primary sources: the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), published by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea, and the *Report of the First General Population Census* (1955), compiled by the Bureau of Statistics in the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Korea. It then explores how war widows are represented in four short stories and one novel written between 1956 and 1959 by South Korean writer Pak Kyongni (1926–2008), which contains significant autobiographical elements. These literary works shed light on postwar issues such as the social stigma surrounding widowhood, economic hardship and fraud in private investment circles, medical negligence, and corruption in religious institutions, all within the broader context of 1950s Korean society. This paper argues for the value of integrating additional relevant sources, such as literature, to provide qualitative insight into the historical and social realities of Korean War widows, complementing the limitations of official statistical records.

Keywords: war widows; Korean War; Pak Kyongni; 1950s; postwar

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Las viudas de la guerra de Corea a través de la obra de Pak Kyongni de la década de 1950

Resumen: Este trabajo estudia la situación de las viudas de la guerra de Corea (1950-1953) durante la década de 1950. En primer lugar, lo hace a través del análisis de fuentes primarias oficiales, como el *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), publicado por el Ministerio de Salud y Bienestar de la República de Corea, o el *Report of the First General Population Census* (1955), elaborado por la Oficina de Estadística del Ministerio del Interior de la República de Corea. A continuación, se explora la representación de las viudas de guerra en cuatro relatos y una novela de la escritora Pak Kyongni (1926–2008), publicados entre 1956 y 1959, los cuales incorporan importantes elementos autobiográficos. Estas obras arrojan luz sobre aspectos difíciles de documentar a través de fuentes primarias oficiales, como el estigma social asociado a la viudez femenina, la precariedad económica y los fraudes en los círculos de inversión privados, las negligencias del sistema médico, o la corrupción de las instituciones religiosas, todo ello en el marco más amplio de la sociedad coreana de los años cincuenta. El artículo defiende el valor de integrar otras fuentes relevantes, entre ellas la literatura, para aportar una comprensión cualitativa de las realidades históricas y sociales de las viudas de la guerra de Corea, complementando así las limitaciones de los registros estadísticos oficiales.

Palabras clave: viudas de guerra; guerra de Corea; Pak Kyongni; década de 1950; posguerra

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As viúvas da Guerra da Coreia através da obra de Pak Kyongni da década de 1950

Resumo: Este trabalho estuda a situação das viúvas da Guerra da Coreia (1950–1953) durante a década de 1950. Em primeiro lugar, faz-se através da análise de fontes primárias oficiais, como o *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), publicado pelo Ministério da Saúde e Bem-Estar da República da Coreia, ou o *Report of the First General Population Census* (1955), elaborado pelo Gabinete de Estatística do Ministério do Interior da República da Coreia. Em seguida, explora-se a representação das viúvas de guerra em quatro contos e um romance da escritora sul-coreana Pak Kyongni (1926–2008), publicados entre 1956 e 1959, obras que incorporam importantes elementos autobiográficos. Esses textos literários lançam luz sobre aspectos difíceis de documentar exclusivamente por meio de fontes oficiais, tais como o estigma social associado à viuvez feminina, a precariedade econômica e as fraudes nos círculos de investimento privado, as negligências do sistema médico ou a corrupção das instituições religiosas, tudo isso no contexto mais amplo da sociedade coreana dos anos cinquenta. O artigo defende o valor de integrar outras fontes pertinentes, entre elas a literatura, para proporcionar uma compreensão qualitativa das realidades históricas e sociais das viúvas da Guerra da Coreia, complementando, assim, as limitações dos registos estatísticos oficiais.

Palavras-chave: viúvas de guerra; Guerra da Coreia; Pak Kyongni; década de 1950; pós-guerra

1. Introduction

The Korean War brought about a confrontation between two blocs representing the dominant ideologies of the time: North Korea, backed by the Soviet Union and China, and South Korea, supported by the United States and other nations under the framework of the United Nations. The latter joined the fight against communism in the Asia-Pacific region, where Korea holds a geopolitically strategic position.[2] Although the intense military combat lasted for about a year, the conflict continued for two more years through small-scale offensives around the 38th parallel, until the armistice was signed on July 27, 1953. While casualty figures vary depending on the source, it is estimated that over one million people—both civilians and South Korean soldiers[3]—were either wounded or killed, the majority being men between the ages of 18 and 40.[4] Likewise, and as a side effect, there was an increase in the number of widowed women, most of whom were mothers. As a result, they were forced to take on the role of head of household in order to support their children and, in some cases, their own parents or in-laws.

Official sources from the time provide quantitative data on the number and socioeconomic conditions of widows in postwar Korea. Two key documents are the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), published by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, and the *Report of the First General Population Census* (1955), compiled by the Bureau of Statistics within the Ministry of Home Affairs. The *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962) includes estimates of the total number of widows, as well as classifications by type—such as widows of soldiers, police officers, or civilians. It also offers detailed information on their age, education level, economic status, employment sectors, and number of children or elderly relatives under their care. In contrast, the *Report of the First General Population Census* focuses on demographic data for the year 1955, including the total number of widows by age group and by urban or rural residence. While it includes occupational data disaggregated by sex and age, it does not

2 The Revised Romanization of Korean system has been used for the transcription of Korean, except in the case of personal names, for which no standardized romanization style exists.

3 Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Home Affairs, *Daehan Minguk Tonggye Yeonggam [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Korea]* (Seoul,1955), 212–13.

4 Imha Lee, "Hanguk jeonjaengi yeoseong saenghware michin yeonghyang -1950nyeondae jeonjaeng mimanginui salmeul jungsimeuro [The Impact of Korean War on Women's Lives: Focusing on the Lives of War Widows in the 1950s]," *Yeoksa Yeongu* n°8 (2000): 9.

distinguish individuals by marital status, making it less precise for analyzing widowhood specifically. However, these data are insufficient to document the qualitative dimension of their reality: their personal experiences, daily lives, challenges, moral dilemmas, and the stigmas surrounding their social position. Moreover, the demographic figures found in the official sources often contrast significantly with one another, revealing inconsistencies that underscore the limitations of relying solely on statistical data to understand widowhood in postwar Korea. To address these aspects, it is necessary to turn to complementary sources such as testimonies, diaries, magazines, or, as this study does, the literature of the period. This brings us to the long-standing debate on the use of literature as a historical source. While it is true that literature has its limitations, being considered a subjective narrative, many scholars have questioned the supposed objectivity of quantifiable data. As Raun points out: "No historical sources, even such 'hard' evidence as census reports or other public records, are free from bias or error."[5] In fact, prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, it was common for historians to venture into the realm of belles lettres.[6] Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) argued that "history is made with texts,"[7] but as he himself explains:

> We must indeed use texts. But all texts. Not only archival documents, which have been granted a certain privilege—the privilege of extracting from them […] a name, a place, a date […], all the positive knowledge, as concluded by a historian unconcerned with lived reality. A poem, a painting, a play are also, for us, documents—testimonies of a living, human history, saturated with potential thought and action […].[8]

Giner de los Ríos (1839–1915) also emphasized literature as a method for understanding the character of a people, arguing that "the historian can and should make use of literary production as an unparalleled guide for exploring the hidden inner life of a historical moment."[9] According to Giner, if history aims to comprehend not only the spirit of an era or Zeitgeist, but also the spirit of people, this must be sought in art—and in literature in particular—

5 Toivo Raun, "Estonian Literature, 1872–1914: A Source for Social History?," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 12, n° 2 (1981): 120, https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778100000121

6 Walter Laqueur, "Literature and the Historian," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, n° 2 (1967): 6, https://doi.org/10.1177/002200946700200202

7 Lucien Febvre, *Combates por la historia* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1970), 17.

8 Ibid., 29-30.

9 Francisco Giner de los Ríos, *Estudios de literatura y arte* (Madrid: Librería de Victoriano Suárez, 1876), 202.

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where that spirit is expressed more freely, deeply, and individually. Thus, "belles lettres are the flesh and blood of history."[10] Although literature can be a valuable source for social history, as with any other documentary source, it is essential to assess to what extent a given work accurately reflects its time, and whether it conveys a collective experience or an individual perspective. In Korea, critical literary realism emerged as one of the dominant literary currents beginning in the colonial period.[11] Undoubtedly, the literature of the 1950s—the period in which the Korean War broke out—displays a distinctly realist character, reflecting the devastation of war, the cataclysm, social chaos, as well as the ideological conflict that not only led to a fratricidal war but also to the separation of countless families, leaving around 170,000 children orphaned and half a million women widowed.[12] In this way, the literary works of the time portray the harshness of the period, offering insight into the idiosyncrasies of war and postwar life through the author's perspective or recollection. It is not difficult to find the figure of a widow in the postwar prose of the 1950s. The main works on this theme written by male authors include *The Widow* (*Mimangin* 미망인 , 1954) and *Crown of Flowers* (*Hwagwan* 화관 , 1956) by Yom Sangseop (1897–1963), as well as *Sea of Temptation* (*Yuhogui gang* 유혹의 강, 1958) and *The Bell of the Century* (*Segiui jong* 세기의 종, 1953) by Jeong Biseok (1911–1991). On the other hand, among female authors, notable examples include works by Pak Kyongni (1926–2008), discussed below, as well as *Wind* (*Baramnwi* 바람뉘, 1958) by Park Hwa-seong (1904–1988), *The Breakup* (*Eotteon haeche* 어떤 해체, 1956), and *The Golden Grass of Yesteryear* (*Yennarui geumjandi* 옛날의 금잔디, 1959) by Kang Shin-Jae (1924–2001), among others. Women's literature is especially valuable for documenting the lives of these women from a wide range of perspectives, offering crucial insights that should not be overlooked.

As Raun notes, "the historian who combines both literary and non-literary sources in his research may be able to reach a deeper understanding of society."[13] The selection of primary official sources alongside four short stories by Pak Kyongni from the 1950s with significant autobiographical elements—*Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백), *The*

10 Giner de los Ríos, *Estudios de literatura y arte,* 163.

11 Sunyoung Park, "The Colonial Origin of Korean Realism and Its Contemporary Manifestation," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 14, n°1 (2006): 169, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/198639

12 Hyunsoog So, "Jeonjaeng goadeuri gyeokkeun jeonhu -1950nyeondae jeonjaeng goa siltaewa sahoejeok daechaek [Postwar History of War Orphans in the 1950s Their Condition and Social Measures]," *Hanguk Geunhyeondaesa Yeongu,* n°84 (2018): 325.

13 Raun, "Estonian Literature, 1872–1914," 126.

Age of Doubt (*Bulsin Sidae* 불신시대), *Yeongju and the Cat* (*Yeongjuwa Goyangi* 영주와 고양이), and *The Age of Darkness* (*Amheuk Sidae* 암흑시대)—as well as the novel *Drifting Island* (*Pyoryudo* 표류도), aims to provide a general contextualization of the situation of widows through both quantitative data—relating to statistics, educational level, employment or socioeconomic conditions—and qualitative insights, through their representation in literature. This selection is based on two main reasons. First, all these works were written in the 1950s and feature a widow as the protagonist. Moreover, the four short stories display a markedly autobiographical character, drawing from Pak Kyongni's personal experiences and reality as a widow. While literature is not treated here as a direct reflection of historical truth, these texts are nonetheless rooted in lived experience and offer valuable insights into the emotional, social, and economic realities faced by war widows. This approach aligns with what Elaine Showalter has described as the study of "woman as a writer,"[14] which foregrounds the author's gendered subjectivity and lived experience as a key to understanding her literary production. In this sense, Pak's work not only documents the gendered impact of postwar social conditions but also contributes to a tradition of female authorship that challenges dominant patriarchal narratives. The novel, while not explicitly containing autobiographical elements, similarly presents a compelling critique of the stigmatization faced by women working in *dabang* or coffeehouses, with the owner herself being a widow. In this way, the aim is to delve into the reality and representation of widows by examining their situation through the literature of the period—in this case, through the work of Pak Kyongni, one of the most prominent authors of the time.

2. The Situation of Korean War Widows in the Mid 1950s According to Official Primary Sources

Before delving into the specific circumstances of widows, it is useful to examine the terminology used to refer to a widow in Korean. In academic contexts, three main terms are used to designate a woman whose spouse has died and who has not remarried. The first is *gwabu* 과부, derived from the Chinese term 寡婦, composed of two characters: *bu* 婦, meaning "married

14 Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," In *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 131.

woman," and *gwa* 寡, meaning "alone" or "solitary." However, *gwa* 寡 also carries connotations of "deficiency" or "insufficiency" and was traditionally used as a humble expression for referring to oneself. For instance, the term *gwain* 과인, 寡人 was used by kings as a first-person pronoun to refer to themselves modestly, with the meaning of "a person of little virtue."[15] Thus, *gwabu* not only referred to a woman left alone after the death of her husband but also carried a semantic burden associated with insufficiency or a lack of virtue.

More controversial is the term *mimangin* 미망인, derived from the Chinese 未亡人. Unlike the previous term, this word literally translates to "a person who has not yet died." Although the character *in* 人 simply denotes a person, without specifying gender, in Korean society this term has been used exclusively to refer to a married woman whose husband has died, while she herself remains alive. It first came into use during the colonial period (1910–1945), a time when Korea not only lost its sovereignty but also a significant number of men who were conscripted into the Pacific War (1937–1945). Initially, it was used by widows themselves in the first person, referring to themselves as people who had not yet died despite their husband's death. The term conveyed not only mourning, but also the moral obligation to perish alongside one's spouse. Later, especially after the outbreak of the Korean War (1950–1953), its use became more widespread, transitioning from first-person self-reference to common usage in second- and third-person contexts to refer to a widow. The intrinsic meaning of the term *mimangin*, applied to a woman who has not fulfilled the moral duty of dying after her husband's death, clearly reflects the remnants of a traditional and patriarchal society.[16] Although *mimangin* remains the most commonly used term in academic contexts to refer to the widows of the Korean War—since it was the designation used in official records at the time—more recently, the term *yeoseong gajang* 여성가장, literally "female head of household," derived from the Chinese 女性家長, has begun to gain traction. This term emphasizes the woman's role as the head of the family.

15 National Institute of Korean Language, *Standard Korean Language Dictionary*, definition 4, https://stdict.korean.go.kr/search/searchResult.do (Accessed 14/05/2025)

16 Heo Younsil, "1950nyeondae Pak Kyongni soseorui 'geundae' wa 'yeoseong' -jeonjaeng mimangingwa jisigin yeoseongeul jungsimeuro- ['Modern' and 'Woman' of Pak Kyongni in 1950s -focusing on the war widows and intellectual women-]," *Hanguk Munyebipyeong Yeongu* n°36 (2011): 61.

Table 1. *Age of Widows Between 1955–1960*

Year	≤ 19	20-29	30-39	40-49	> 50	Total
1955	5.287	84.381	123.403	148.166	131.354	492.591
1956	4.820	83.464	123.795	147.941	149.689	509.709
1957	4.150	64.120	101.803	124.402	130.615	425.090
1958	3.846	61.626	101.917	122.509	139.911	429.809
1959	3.367	61.738	113.674	142.989	186.227	507.995
1960	2.726	57.976	118.853	159.640	210.499	549.694

Source: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), 455.

The *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea recorded approximately 500,000 widows during the 1950s, with an average age of around forty. However, it is difficult to determine the actual figures using such indicators. After the outbreak of the Korean War, South Korea strengthened and expanded its anti-communist policies. As a result, casualties among leftist sympathizers were not counted, and wartime widows whose husbands had fought for the communist cause were not officially recognized. Likewise, individuals who defected to the North were excluded from official records. Estimates range from 500,000 to 550,000 widows, though the actual number likely exceeded this figure.[17]

In the same way, the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), published by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea, illustrates the situation of widows in terms of their socioeconomic status, educational level and unemployment (Table 2). First, it is noted that only between 51,000 and 58,000 widows were wives of soldiers or police officers. This figure is significant because, although government aid was limited, it was easier for these women to access a widow's pension. As for their level of education, it was extremely low. In 1955, two years after the signing of the armistice, approximately 47% of widows had not received any basic education, 15% had completed primary education, 1.7% had received secondary education, and only 0.07% had completed college education. A mere 35% could read and write the Korean alphabet *hangeul*, a figure that increased only slightly at the beginning of the 1960s, reaching 206,920 in 1960—approximately 37% of the total 549,694 registered widows. Their standard of living was also far from promising. About 75% were living below

17 Imha Lee, "Hanguk jeonjaeng," 18.

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the poverty line or in extreme poverty. This percentage remained nearly unchanged, with a decrease of only 0.4% over half a decade. Roughly 31% were unemployed, with a 2.6% increase recorded in 1960. According to the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), the population of South Korea in September 1955 was around 21.5 million people.[18] Consequently, widows accounted for around 2% of the total population, with an average of two to three children, and in some cases, they were also responsible for supporting elderly parents (Table 3). Based on this data, their condition can be clearly characterized as highly vulnerable.

Table 2. *Situation of Widowed Women Between 1955–1960*

Differentiation			1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960
Type of widow	Widows of soldiers or police officers		53.313	59.914	51.158	54.481	58.719	62.059
	Widows of civilians		439.278	449.795	373.932	375.328	449.276	487.638
	Total		429.591	509.709	425.090	429.809	507.995	549.694
Educational level	No formal education		234.144	230.860	182.837	173.366	210.823	235.092
	Literate		174.736	187.058	158.870	168.376	198.679	206.920
	Primary education		74.683	80.730	71.832	76.461	83.604	92.804
	Secondary education		8.689	10.396	11.040	11.138	13.884	12.993
	Tertiary education		339	665	511	468	1.005	1.885
	Total		492.591	509.709	425.090	429.809	507.995	549.694
Socioeconomic status	High	Nº	21.992	19.004	18.187	18.925	20.259	20.826
		%	4.5	3.7	4.3	4.4	4.0	3.8
	Medium	Nº	99.938	100.477	93.075	91.439	114.861	117.641
		%	20.3	19.7	21.9	21.3	22.6	21.4
	Low	Nº	370.661	390.228	313.828	319.445	372.875	411.227
		%	75.2	76.6	73.8	74.3	73.4	74.8
	Total		492.591	509.709	425.090	429.809	507.995	549.694
Employment status	Unemployed		152.139	165.407	130.355	134.131	156.052	183.873
	%		30.9	32.5	30.7	31.2	30.7	33.5

Source: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), 454-459.

18 Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Bogeon sahoe tonggye yeonbo [Year Book of Public Health and Social Statistics]* (Seoul, 1962), 537.

Table 3. *Number of Children per Widow Between 1955–1960*

Year	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children	5 children	6 children	No children	Support for eldery parents
1955	65.024	90.240	97.966	75.735	55.772	38.682	31.284	37.924
1956	58.721	89.836	97.861	80.940	59.784	44.874	34.971	42.722
1957	48.935	73.576	80.867	66.278	50.859	38.220	26.327	40.028
1958	48.148	71.876	91.904	71.537	52.833	39.118	26.530	37.863
1959	56.993	86.558	96.160	83.391	61.456	52.164	30.093	41.180
1960	62.706	94.869	106.360	91.049	68.969	54.289	30.673	40.779

Source: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), 458-459.

The Korean War encouraged the incorporation of women into the workforce. As shown in Table 2, approximately 70% of widows engaged in some form of economic activity. According to the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), 46% of widows were engaged in agriculture or fishing in 1955 (Table 4). Although the yearbook does not specify the exact percentage of widows living in urban versus rural areas, it does indicate that only 49,604 widows (around 10%) resided in Seoul city at the time.[19] This suggests that the vast majority lived in rural areas, which explains why agriculture and fishing was the most common sector of employment among widowed women. Considering that 31% were unemployed, the second-largest group fell under the "other" category, at 13%, which included work such as domestic service or home-based sewing done informally and on commission—often with workdays that stretched from dawn until nightfall.[20] The third most important sector was commerce, with approximately 7% of widowed women employed in the commercial sector in 1955. Although the specific types of commercial activities are not specified, according to Lee Imha, a small minority of widows with access to capital opened coffeehouses or *dabang*,[21] clothing shops, cosmetic or tobacco stores, or small restaurants. However, given the unfavorable socioeconomic conditions faced by the

19 Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Bogeon sahoe*, 454.

20 Imha Lee, "Hanguk jeonjaeng," 43.

21 The term *dabang* (다방 茶房), refers to stores where tea or coffee were served. These places were especially popular among middle- and upper-class men, functioning as meeting spots with the waitresses. This created a stigma around *dabang* as spaces of male entertainment.

vast majority, street vending was a widespread practice.[22] The widespread destruction of industrial infrastructure following the Korean War led to generalized job instability, forcing many widows to survive day by day. This precariousness drove some—particularly those who had migrated from the countryside to the city—to resort to prostitution as a means of subsistence.[23] In other cases, when income from other activities proved insufficient, they supplemented it by working in *dabang*, where they had direct contact with male customers. Some worked as dancers or hostesses in men's bars,[24] which further intensified the social stigma associated with female widowhood.

Table 4. *Sectors in Which Widowed Women Contributed (1955–1960)*

Year	Agriculture Fishing	Mining	Manufacturing Industry	Commerce Finance	Transport Storage	Services	Other	Unemployed
1955	227.912	480	4.031	35.676	1.190	7.776	63.387	152.139
1956	236.612	1.424	2.577	41.717	915	8.128	52.923	165.407
1957	206.929	957	2.287	34.260	713	5.075	44.514	130.355
1958	212.206	1.207	2.571	33.616	848	6.761	38.464	134.131
1959	255.479	1.177	3.103	39.666	639	5.373	46.506	156.052
1960	264.381	587	2.806	44.196	821	5.660	47.370	183.873

Source: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962), 456-457.

On the other side, the *Report of the First General Population Census* conducted in 1955 by the Bureau of Statistics in the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Korea focuses on demographic data for the year 1955, including the total number of widows by age group and by urban or rural residence. While it includes occupational data disaggregated by sex and age, it does not distinguish individuals by marital status, making it less precise for analyzing widowhood specifically. It is worth noting that the census conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs recorded 1,087,716 widows in 1955—a figure significantly higher than that reported in the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea, which listed 492,591 widows for the same year. The main reason

22 Ibid., 40-42.

23 Yeonbok Lee, "Hanguk maemaechun munje oneurui siltae [The Current State of Prostitution in Korea]," *Yeoseonggye* (March 1958): 75-77.

24 Jaepan Seo, "Jeonjaenge sangcheo badeun yeoindeureul bora [Look at the women scarred by war]," *Yeowon* (June 1964): 105.

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for this discrepancy is that the *Report of the First General Population Census* was based on a door-to-door survey, whereas the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* relied on reports submitted by widows to local administrative offices.[25] It is therefore very likely that many cases went unreported, explaining the numerical gap between the two sources. According to this census, a total of 844,226 widows resided in rural areas, while only 243,490 lived in urban settings (Table 5). In other words, 22% of them lived in the city, compared to 78% who remained in the countryside. This significant demographic discrepancy between the two sources raises important questions regarding the reliability and objectivity of statistical data as historical evidence.

Table 5. *Census of Widowed Women in Rural and Urban Areas in 1955*

Type		Total
Nationwide	Census of women	6.754.846
	Census of widows	1.087.716
Urban areas	Census of women	1.661.479
	Census of widows	243.490
Rural areas	Census of women	5.093.367
	Census of widows	844.226

Source: Ministry Home Affairs Bureau of Statistics, *Report of the First General Population Census* (1955), 71-75.

3. Social Stigmas Surrounding Female Widowhood: From Protection to Discrimination

Since the opening of the country in the late 19th century—and especially during the period of Japanese colonization (1910–1945)—the Korean Peninsula embraced new currents of thought, many of them introduced through its Japanese neighbor. During this period of enlightenment, not only were aspects of modernity imported, as reflected in the notion of the "new woman," but traditional ideals were also reinforced, such as that of the "good wife and wise mother" or "*Hyeonmoyangcheo* 賢母良妻," which had predominated during the Meiji era. This term was first used in Korea

25 Imha Lee, "Hanguk jeonjaeng," 16.

in 1906,[26] positioning Shin Saimdang as the model of the exemplary wife and mother.[27] This ideology exalted the educated and cultured woman with a modern education who, while confined to the domestic sphere, played a dual role: as a supportive wife to her husband and as a wise mother whose purpose was to conceive a firstborn son to continue the family lineage.

After the Japanese ruling and the establishment of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), American culture became the primary reference for modernity, especially among the middle class. This, combined with the social, political, and economic cataclysm of the postwar period, led to the collapse of traditional values. From this crisis emerged the figure of the "après girl"[28]—a type of woman who, in contrast to tradition, embraced sexuality from a more permissive perspective, influenced by so-called "American hedonism." Under this derogatory label—synonymous with worldliness, licentiousness, promiscuity, and vanity—were grouped young women who did not remain chaste until marriage, adulterous women, those who engaged in sex work near U.S. military bases, or even simply highly educated students, working women, single women, and widows—anyone who deviated from the traditional model of the "good wife and wise mother," a role deeply tied to patriarchal subordination.[29] As a result, female widowhood was approached from a dichotomous perspective. On the one hand, widows were recognized as victims and therefore deemed deserving of protection, as they were clearly in a vulnerable position. On the other hand, they were also seen as potential threats to traditional social values. This perspective was based on three main arguments. First, the absence of a husband was believed to encourage sexual immorality. Second, employment granted women a degree of economic autonomy which, not being regulated by a male figure, was perceived as a gateway to disorder and moral corruption. And third, since they were responsible for raising their children, widows were feared to transmit their "distorted" ethics to the next generation. Thus, rather than truly offering them protection—which was typically reserved for widows of soldiers or police officers—the focus was on restricting and controlling

26 For further information, see the *Encyclopedia of Korean Culture*, https://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Article/E0079697# (accessed June 12, 2025).

27 Soojin Kim, "Vacillating images of Shin Saimdang: the invention of a historical heroine in colonial Korea," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15, n°2 (2014): 275, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2014.911440

28 From the French après-guerre, the word "guerre" was replaced with "girl." Likewise, "après" connotes "licentiousness" or "debauchery," thereby describing a woman who is libertine and promiscuous.

29 Eunha Kim, "Jeonhu gukga geundaehwawa "Après-guerre (jeonhu yeoseong)" pyosangui uimi [The Postwar State-Leading Modernization and the Meaning of the Representation for "Après-guerre"]", *Yeoseong Munhak Yeongu,* n°16 (2006): 178.

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them. This is reflected in the common use of the term *mimangin*, or "a woman who has not yet died despite the death of her husband," to refer to them.[30] In this context, the only possible way to escape such discrimination was to remarry. However, this was extremely difficult for a widow, due to the reduced male population caused by the war and the social stigma attached to widowhood. Furthermore, as shown in Table 3, only about 7% of widows were childless, which further worsened their situation. In the case of military and police widows, they were also required to forfeit their widow's pension upon remarriage. All this further reduced their already limited chances of marrying again.

This social perception of widows is evident in the newspapers, magazines, and literature of the time. It is reflected, for example, in Jeong Biseok's novel *The River of Temptation* (*Yuhogui Gang* 유혹의 강), published in 1958, where widows are portrayed as mere objects of desire: "Aren't widows ownerless objects that anyone can possess? In other words, they can be a world of possibility, hope, and pleasure."[31] Another author, Yom Sangseob, with a different approach, also conveys the same negative perception: "Shouldn't war widows be pitied? Shouldn't something be done to stop them from going down the path of transgression?."[32] In this way, most of the novels from the 1950s written by male authors emphasized the immorality of widows, portraying them as "objects of desire" or as "broken vessels"—the latter being a metaphor used to describe someone worthless or impure.[33]

4. The Representation of Widows through the Literary Works of Pak Kyongni

In order to examine the representation of war widows, five works by the writer Pak Kyongni (1926–2008) from the 1950s have been selected for the following reasons: a) the author herself lost her husband during the Korean War and, therefore, became a widow; b) the narratives contain

30 Imha Lee, *Yeoseong, jeonjaeng-eul neomeo ireoseoda [Women Rising Beyond War]* (Gyeonggi-do: Seohaemunjip, 2004), 26-27.

31 Biseok Jeong, *Yuhogui gang [River of Temptation]* (Seoul: Sinheungchulpansa, 1958), 233.

32 Sangseop Yom, *Mimangin [The widow]* (Seoul: Geulnurim, 2017), 162.

33 Eunha Kim, "Jeonhu gukga geundaehwawa wiheomhan mimanginui munhwajeongchihak – Jeong Biseok ui Yuhogui gang(1958)eul daesangeuro [Postwar National Modernization and the Cultural Politics of the Dangerous Widow: A Study of The River of Temptation (1958) by Jeong Biseok]," *Hanguk Munhagirongwa Bipyeong* 14, n° 4 (2010): 226.

strong autobiographical elements, with Pak projecting herself through widow protagonists to portray experiences of her personal life; c) the temporal proximity of the stories to the Korean War (1950–1953); d) and finally, the author's recognition and standing in South Korea.

In her influential essay *Toward a Feminist Poetics*, Elaine Showalter (1985) offers a foundational distinction within feminist criticism by separating two approaches: the woman as reader —known as feminist critique— and the woman as writer, which she terms gynocriticism.[34] While feminist critique examines how women have been represented in literary texts authored by men —often uncovering stereotypes, marginalization, and implicit or explicit misogyny— gynocriticism shifts the focus toward the study of women as producers of literature. It emphasizes the importance of analyzing women's writing as emerging from their lived experiences, social positions, and subjective realities. In this way, gynocriticism values women's personal experiences as central to the creation of meaning and recognizes these as essential components of literary analysis.[35] From this perspective, the work of female authors such as Pak Kyongni becomes particularly significant, as it provides a situated account of widowhood in Korean postwar grounded in women's lived experience, not as a passive reflection of external conditions, but as something actively shaped through the embodied existence of the female subject within a specific socio-historical context.[36] As Lanzuela points out, in order to understand the representation of reality in literature, it is necessary to consider various factors that influence an author's production—such as their life experience (family, education, personal circumstances), the cultural context, and the ideological currents of their time—as all of these elements shape their "artistic expression."[37] In this regard, Pak Kyongni's strong educational background stands out as a distinctive trait, especially given the high rates of illiteracy and the limited access to education for most women of her time.[38] In Pak's case, she not only completed secondary school, but also earned a higher education degree from Seoul Women's Teachers College (now Sejong University) in 1950. After finishing high school, she got married and had a daughter and a son. Her mother lived with her throughout her life,

34 Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics," 128.

35 Ibid.,131.

36 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

37 María Luisa Lanzuela Corella, "La literatura como fuente histórica: Benito Pérez Galdós." In *Actas del XIII Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas: Madrid 6-11 de julio de 1998*, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Castalia, 2000), 260.

38 The literacy rate recorded by the Japanese Government-General of Korea for the year 1930 was 92.04% for women and 63.9% for men. Cf. Yongseok Noh, "Iljesigiui Munmaengnyul Chui," *Guksagwan Nonchong* n°51 (1994): 107-157.

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as her father had abandoned them when Pak was a child. After completing her studies, she worked as a teacher at Yeonan Girls' Middle School —in Hwanghae Province, present-day North Korea. However, the war marked a turning point in her life: it interrupted her teaching career, she lost her husband —accused of being a communist— and later, her son died due to medical negligence after an accident.[39] All these personal experiences deeply shaped her literary work.

Pak Kyongni made her literary debut in 1955 with the short story *Calculations (Gyesan 계산)*. Over the course of her prolific career, she wrote around forty short stories, thirty novels, two poetry collections, and seven essays.[40] Among all her works, the *Toji* saga —comprising twenty-one volumes[41] published between 1969 and 1994— established her as one of the most important figures in contemporary Korean literature, and the work was included in UNESCO's Collection of Representative Works. Pak Kyongni's literary work is commonly divided into three stages.[42] The first stage, which is the focus of this study, corresponds to the years of her debut between 1955 and 1959, marked by the publication of short stories with autobiographical components. Of the fifteen[43] short stories written during this brief period, four feature a widow as the protagonist: *Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek 흑흑백백*), *Yeongju and the Cat* (*Yeongjuwa Goyangi 영주와 고양이*), *The Age of Darkness* (*Amheuk Sidae 암흑시대*), and *The Age of Doubt* (*Bulsin Sidae 불신시대*). All of them clearly reflect autobiographical elements: husbands who die in the war, widows who become heads of household and support their loved ones —typically her own mother with a daughter and a son— the latter of whom dies due to medical negligence, just as Pak experienced in real life. Likewise, out of the two novels she published in the 1950s, *Drifting Island* (*Pyoryudo 표류도*) also features a widow as its main character.

39 Kyongni Pak, *Qssiege [To Mr. Q]* (Gyeongido: Dasanbooks, 2025), 200.

40 Seungyun Lee, "1950nyeondae Pak Kyongni danpyeonsoseol yeongu [Study on the Short Stories of Pak Kyongni in the 1950s]," *Hyeondae Munhagui Yeongu,* n° 18 (2002): 230-231.

41 The number of volumes may vary depending on the publisher. In the case of Nanam Publishing, the work is divided into five parts, comprising a total of twenty-one volumes.

42 The first stage (1955–59) focuses on the publication of short stories with an autobiographical tone. The second spans the 1960s up to the release of the first volume of the *Toji* saga in 1969, a period marked by longer novels with greater thematic diversity. The third stage covers the period from 1969 to 1994, during which Pak devoted herself to the *Toji* collection.

43 Twenty-one works were published during the 1950s, among which *Hosu* (1957), *Eunhasu* (1958), and *Sebyeogui Hapchang* (1959) are illustrated stories for children; *Jaegwiyeol* (1959) is a medium-length novel; and *Aega* (1958) and *Pyoryudo* (1959) are full-length novels. Thus, over the course of the 1950s, she published a total of fifteen short stories.

Table 6. *Guideline Table of the Widows in the Selected Stories*

Title	Protagonist's name	Type	Educational Level	Employment Status	No. of Children	Care for Parents	Socioeconomic Status
Black is Black, White is White	Hyesuk	Civilian widow	High	Unemployed	1 daughter	Mother	Very low
The Age of Darkness	Sunyeong	Civilian widow	High	Store owner	1 daughter 1 son	Mother "Grandpa"	Very low
The Age of Doubt	Jinyeong	Civilian widow	High	Unemployed	1 son	Mother	Very low
Yeongju and the Cat	Minhye	Civilian widow	High	Unemployed	1 daughter 1 son	-	Very low
Drifting Island	Hyeonhee	Civilian widow	High	Dabang owner	1 daughter	Mother	Very low

Table created by the author

As shown in Table 6, the protagonists of the selected works are widows of civilians —that is, women who receive no form of state support. Despite living in conditions of extreme poverty, they all have a high level of education and take on the responsibility of raising one or two children on their own, usually with the help of their mothers. A common trait not reflected in the table, but emphasized by the author in the narratives, is the protagonists' unwavering ethical integrity. In addition to these shared features, the works explore three main themes: economic hardship and the use of *gye* (계/契) or private investment circles as a savings and investment strategy among widows, pervasive social corruption, and the social stigmatization of widows.

5. Economic Hardship and the Use of Gye (계/契) among Widows

South Korea in the 1950s was marked by extreme poverty and social collapse, where deprivation and hardship were widespread across all levels of society. As Bruce Cumings mentions, orphaned children roamed the

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streets, beggars —many of them disabled or injured by the war— begged for money in the streets, and impoverished women often turned to military bases in search of survival "to sell whatever services they had."[44] According to official estimates, South Korea's GDP per capita in 1953 was only USD 67,[45] highlighting the extent of economic devastation in the immediate postwar period. This historical context of postwar devastation is directly reflected in the lives of the widow protagonists in Pak Kyongni's early works. In all five selected works, the main characters live in conditions of extreme poverty, with no access to institutional support or inheritance, and are left to care for their children and elderly relatives on their own. This harsh reality is poignantly portrayed in *Yeongju and the Cat* (*Yeongjuwa Goyangi* 영주와 고양이), a story in which Pak directly references her daughter—also named Yeongju in real life—shortly after the death of her son. The narrative focuses on the protagonist's daily struggle to survive alongside her ten-year-old daughter, following the loss of both her husband and son. Through this lens, the story highlights the extreme material deprivation faced by many widows and the emotional toll such conditions took on their children. In a symbolic gesture, the mother buys her daughter a cat to ease her sorrow. Both *Yeongju and the Cat* and *Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백) hint at prostitution as a desperate option for survival: "Minhye thinks of those who, before taking their own lives, first end those of their children […] and even of the possibility of selling her own body."[46] Although the protagonists never ultimately resort to this path, the very contemplation of such an act underscores the despair and poverty endured by women left to fend for themselves in the aftermath of war.

Although in *The Age of Darkness* (*Amheuk Sidae* 암흑시대), the protagonist appears to run a store that also serves as her home (*gagetbang* 가겟방), the street where the house is located floods every summer during the monsoon, worsening their already precarious situation. As the narrator states: "Displayed in the shop were cheap snacks, some fruit, and a few bottles of alcohol. The fact that five people had to tear into and live off such a meager shop was rather a sad story."[47] A similar situation appears in *Drifting Island* (*Pyoryudo* 표류도), where the protagonist owns a *dabang*, but far from ensuring financial stability, she is heavily in debt. One particularly striking element that appears

44 Bruce Cumings, *Korea's place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 303.

45 Bank of Korea, *Economic Statistics Yearbook 1955* (Seoul: Bank of Korea, 1955).

46 Kyongni Pak, *Hwangsangui sigi [The Era of Fantasy]* (Seoul: Nanam, 1994), 90.

47 Kyongni Pak, *Bulsin Sidae [The Age of Doubt]* (Seoul: Munhakwajiseongsa, 2021), 48.

in three of the stories —*Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백), *The Age of Doubt* (*Bulsin Sidae* 불신시대), and *Drifting Island* (*Pyoryudo* 표류도)— is the use of private investment circles, commonly known in Korea as *gye* (계/契), which was one of the most common savings and investment strategies among widows at the time. The *gye* involved the formation of a group —typically composed of acquaintances or trusted individuals— in which each member contributed a fixed amount of money at regular intervals. In each round, usually held monthly, one member would receive the total sum collected. This system of saving and investment was particularly popular among women of the time, especially widows, since —prior to the enactment of the new Civil Code in 1960— they faced legal restrictions and required their husband's authorization to access bank loans. As a result, they turned to private investment circles or *gye*, which enabled them to obtain and accumulate capital without the need for guarantors, often with the aim of starting small businesses. Moreover, these investment circles operated under strict confidentiality, providing widows with an effective way of protecting themselves from taxation and other financial demands imposed by the government.[48] However, as a system based entirely on mutual trust and lacking formal legal contracts, *gye* circles were often vulnerable to fraud. Cases of members absconding with funds or the rotation collapsing due to mistrust or financial instability were not uncommon, which gradually contributed to the negative perception of *gye* in society. Nevertheless, for women without husbands, it remained one of the only viable means of obtaining capital. This dynamic is clearly illustrated in *Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백) and *The Age of Doubt* (*Bulsin Sidae* 불신시대), where the protagonists' investment plans are undermined —although they ultimately manage to recover at least the capital they had invested: "The fund's manager took the money and gave her only fifty thousand *hwan*."[49] In this way, the stories reveal not only the harsh economic conditions faced by widows and the strategies they employed to generate income, but also the pervasive corruption and fragility of informal financial networks during this period —an issue that connects directly to the next theme.

48 Imha Lee, *Yeoseong, jeonjaeng-eul,* 250.

49 Kyongni Pak, *Bulsin Sidae,* 33.

6. Corruption in Postwar Korean Society

It is widely recognized that in the years following the Korean War, South Korea was among the poorest countries globally. During the 1950s and early 1960s, its per capita income was on par with —or in some cases even below— that of several Sub-Saharan African nations. [50] In this context of economic devastation and institutional fragility, corruption emerged as a pervasive force shaping many aspects of daily life. Pak Kyongni's early narratives try to reflect this social reality, portraying a world in which even basic survival is complicated by moral decay, fraud, and widespread institutional failure. *The Age of Darkness* (1958), written shortly after Pak left her deceased son at the crematorium in Hongje-dong,[51] denounces the negligence that took place at the country's most prestigious hospital.[52] The text reveals the systematic irregularities of the postwar Korean healthcare system: blood trafficking, bribery, and life-or-death procedures conducted without prior diagnosis, X-rays, or family consent. Lacking experience and unaware of the internal bribery practices, the protagonist fails to obtain blood in time, delaying surgery by over six hours. In such context, only those with money and "insider knowledge" are able save their beloved ones: "That's because you don't have any experience. We've already bought blood seven times today. […] I slip a wad of a thousand *hwan* into their pocket along with some cigarettes. Then they change their story and say they had something reserved for tomorrow and hand it over."[53] With the statement "The hospital is hell for the poor,"[54] Pak condemns the medical system as a corrupt and hostile space for those unable to afford its hidden costs. A similar critique is reiterated in *The Age of Doubt* (1957), where Pak portrays clandestine clinics, dosage manipulation, and the illegal reuse of medical supplies. These narratives highlight the extent to which corruption permeated not only state institutions but also everyday practices in the private healthcare sector, revealing a society where even access to medical care was shaped by inequality and systemic malpractice.

As Pak herself revealed in the essay *To Mr. Q* (*Qssiege Q*씨에게), both *The Age of Darkness* (*Amheuk Sidae* 암흑시대), and *The Age of Doubt* (*Bulsin Sidae* 불신시대) were written based on events that had occurred in her

50 World Bank, World Development Indicators.

51 Kyongni Pak, *Qssiege*, 201.

52 Kyongni Pak, *Bulsin Sidae,* 89.

53 Ibid., 73.

54 Ibid., 84.

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real life.[55] Therefore, while these works remain fictional, it is nonetheless significant that they draw directly from Pak's lived experience. In *The Age of Doubt* —published a year earlier but conceived as a direct continuation of the previous narrative— Pak revisits the traumatic experience of her son's death to formulate an explicit critique of the lack of genuine religiosity and the profit-seeking tendencies of religious institutions, in this case Catholic and Buddhist. Catholicism, a relatively recent religion that entered the Korean peninsula in the 18th century, has stood out —along with Protestant Christianity— for its proselytizing nature. This trait is reflected in the character of the woman from Galwong-dong, who urges the protagonist to attend mass to mourn her son. However, far from offering any comfort, the liturgical experience only deepens her skepticism as she observes, for instance, how worshippers remove their shoes before entering the church and take them inside —rather than leaving them at the entrance, as would normally be done— for fear of theft by fellow congregants,[56] or how offerings are collected before the mass concludes.[57] The text also draws attention to how religion becomes, to some extent, a type of guarantor for the formation of private investment circles that ultimately turn out to be fraudulent.[58] The critique extends to Buddhist practices when the protagonist decides to place a tombstone for her son in a nearby temple. There, too, she encounters a form of instrumentalized faith, where the quality of the ceremonies is determined by the amount of the donation, and the monks justify their pursuit of profit with materialistic reasoning: "Like everyone else, monks have to eat too;"[59] "The offering is too small. […] Don't you think he'd like to have some fun with his friends before his departure?"[60] Through this personal experience —described by Pak in her essay *To Mr. Q* (*Qssiege Q*씨 에 게) as the most tragic period in her life as a woman[61]— she exposes the corruption and commercialization of religious institutions, driven more by economic than spiritual interests, and questions the legitimacy of such practices, which, far from offering solace, only deepen the protagonist's skepticism.

55 Kyongni Pak, *Qssiege*, 200.
56 Kyongni Pak, *Bulsin Sidae,* 97.
57 Ibid., 99.
58 Ibid., 118.
59 Ibid., 111.
60 Ibid., 109.
61 Kyongni Pak, *Qssiege*, 201.

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7. Social Stigmatization of Widows

As mentioned above, the dominant gender ideology in postwar South Korea was shaped by the ideal of the *hyeonmo yangcheo* (현모양처)—the "wise mother and good wife." This model celebrated women who, though modern and educated, remained confined to the domestic sphere, fulfilling their duty by supporting their husbands and raising sons to continue the family lineage. Within this ideological framework, widows occupied a precarious position: they no longer fit the mold of virtuous womanhood, yet they were still subject to strict moral scrutiny. Male-authored fiction from the postwar period portrayed widows through the lens of sexualization as "objects of desire" and "broken vessels." In contrast, Pak Kyongni's portrayal of widows offers a sharp and conscious departure from this dominant male gaze. While she does not ignore the weight of social judgment or the vulnerability of her protagonists, she clearly denounces the stigma imposed on widowed women and exposes the mechanisms of exclusion that define their place in society. Rather than sexualizing her characters, Pak gives them emotional depth, ethical agency, and a capacity for resistance—qualities that challenge the reductive and patriarchal portrayals common in the literature of the time. In line with this, *Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백), offers a clear critique of the double standards of a patriarchal society that stigmatizes widows under the suspicion of sexual immorality. This critique is conveyed through the contrast between two characters: Director Jang, a corrupt and adulterous male figure who engages in extramarital relationships with former students—one of whom he left pregnant— and Hyesuk, an unemployed widow who embodies ethical integrity and moral uprightness, who seeks employment at Director Jang's high school. Ironically, it is Director Jang who rejects Hyesuk during the interview, mistaking her for a promiscuous woman. "You should keep a closer eye on that widowed cousin of yours. If my eyes don't deceive me, I'd say that woman is having an affair with another man."[62] In this way, the story highlights how widows are constructed as subjects in need of constant supervision, associated with morally questionable behavior. Yet the protagonist's impeccable character stands in stark contrast to the societal prejudices projected onto her, thereby exposing the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of such assumptions.

62 Kyongni Pak, *Bulsin Sidae,* 46.

Drifting Island (*Pyoryudo* 표류도) continues to explore the association of widows—and single women—with forms of moral deviance. The protagonist is the owner of a coffeehouse or tearoom, known in Korean as a *dabang* called Madonna, located in the Myeongdong district. This is particularly significant, as Madonna was a real and well-known establishment in that neighborhood at the time the novel was written. In the post-Korean War period, *dabang* began to be run by women and were known for employing waitresses who not only served drinks but also engaged in conversation with male customers, giving these venues an ambiguous character closely tied to male entertainment. In this novel, the author reclaims this stigmatized space to expose the double standards of its clientele: married upper-middle-class men seeking extramarital affairs, pseudo-artists who seduce women, or opportunistic, lecherous intellectuals. In doing so, she sheds light on a society in which men enjoy moral impunity, while women's freedom is systemically repressed. "The women in these kinds of places aren't ladies. They're easy and don't give you trouble afterward;"[63] "That woman is actually mine (referring to the protagonist), but depending on the circumstances, I might be willing to share her."[64] The customers' conversations evoke the works of Jeong Biseok, in which widows are portrayed as unclaimed objects, available to anyone. However, in Pak's works, the focus of the critique does not fall on the women themselves. The widow who owns the café is portrayed as honest and ethically upright, despite the social stigma attached to their profession. Instead, Pak condemns the hypocrisy, corruption and double moral standard of the male clientele:

> Truly, there is no place more bizarre than the counter of a *dabang*. Standing behind it feels like being on a platform overlooking all of Seoul, from which you can clearly see all kinds of philistines shamelessly exposing even their innermost guts. You see the schemes of those who treat politics as a business; the types who wear the badge of 'artist' like a name tag, trying to make a quick profit; the intellectuals who, like monkeys performing tricks in a circus, confuse love or ideology with something to show off for effect; and the public officials who live off government salaries, surrounding their chairs with shady business tactics[…].[65]

63 Kyongni Pak, *Pyoryudo [Drifting Island]* (Gyeongido: Dasanbooks. 2023), 271.

64 Ibid*.,* 271.

65 Ibid*.,* 113.

In this sense, Pak's writing resonates with what Elaine Showalter defined as the "woman as writer"—a key dimension of gynocriticism that shifts the focus from how women are portrayed by male authors to how women themselves articulate their own realities. Pak's early works not only challenge the sexualized and stigmatized images constructed by her male contemporaries but also asserts the authority of female experience as a valid and necessary source of literary meaning.

Thus, these five works—the first four with a greater degree of autobiographical content, and the last with significantly less—offer valuable insight into the representation of widows of the Korean War. They also serve as a complement to the quantitative data provided by the main accessible primary sources from the period, such as the *Yearbook of Public Health and Social Statistics* (1962) published by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs of the Republic of Korea, and the *First General Population Census* (1955) issued by the Bureau of Statistics in the Ministry of Home Affairs of the Republic of Korea.

8. Conclusion

The Korean War resulted in over a million casualties—both civilian and military—in the newly established Republic of Korea. Most of the deceased were men of military age, between 18 and 40 years old. Although official records vary, it is estimated that the war left behind approximately half a million widows, the majority of whom were mothers with two to three children. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this period, it is required to turn to the texts. Institutional records have their limitations, which is why it is essential to consider what Febvre referred to as "human texts."[66] While literature does not offer empirical evidence —namely, data that can be verified through quantitative methods—it serves as a vital tool for accessing experiences that are often absent from official records.

Postwar Korean literature, marked by a raw and realistic style—and particularly the early work of Pak Kyongni, which contains autobiographical elements—allows us to uncover the personal dimension of the author as a widow of the Korean War. In other words, it addresses aspects that

66 Lucien Febvre, *Combates por la historia*, 29.

quantitative records fail to capture and thus complements statistical data through a qualitative lens. In this way, the four selected works— *Black is Black, White is White* (*Heuk-heuk Baek-baek* 흑흑백백), *The Age of Doubt* (*Bulsin Sidae* 불신시대), *Yeongju and the Cat* (*Yeongjuwa Goyangi* 영주와 고양이), and *The Age of Darkness* (*Amheuk Sidae* 암흑시대)—offer firsthand accounts of issues such as the stigmatization of widowhood, the fraudulent practices of private investment circles, medical negligence, and corruption within religious institutions in 1950s Korea. In addition, although from a less personal and more distanced perspective, *Drifting Island* (*Pyoryudo* 표류도) explores societal perceptions of women working in *dabang* or coffeehouses, featuring a widow as its central character.

This study highlights the importance of integrating different types of sources into historical and social analysis. Many questions remain to be explored regarding the role of widows in postwar Korea—their representation in women's magazines, as well as in the literature of the 1950s by other female writers such as Kang Shinjae (1924-2001), Pak Hwasong (1904-1988), Han Moosook (1918-1993) or Kim Malbong (1901-1961). Analyzing these narratives may allow us to recover representations based on experiences that have been marginalized or omitted from official records, opening new avenues of research into the reality and representation of widowhood in Korean society at the time—an area that future contributions may continue to explore in greater depth.

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