Korea as a New “Home”: The Sense of Homelessness of the Immigrant Wives

The term “multicultural” has become a familiar one in Korea. Used as a descriptive adjective—multicultural family, multicultural society, multicultural education—the term has become a popular catchword to describe Korean society today. This popularity is principally due to the increased influx in recent years of immigrants and other foreigners. According to E-National Indicators of Statistics Korea\(^1\), the foreign population in Korea first exceeded 1 million people (1,066,273) in 2007 and has been consistently increasing, reaching 1.4 million (1,395,077) in 2011. With its additional estimated 277,596 illegal immigrants, contemporary Korean society is experiencing a new cultural diversity. Nonetheless, the discourse of Korean multiculturalism is still ambiguous and unclear. The society is playing catch-up to the rapid series of changes, with the result that many unsolved problems continue to exist.

The concept of a nation is often likened to the concept of home. In that sense Korea has also become a new “home” to its immigrants. The question is that how comfortable and welcoming Korean society is to its new members. This essay aims to analyze Korean society

as a new home for immigrants. The issue of the sense of “homelessness” in the society will be examined in terms of Korean immigration history and the concept of the nation-home.

Among the many reasons for immigration is that of international marriage. Unlike work- or business-related moves, the phenomenon of international marriage is more directly and deeply relevant to the topic of “making a home” in a new country. This is because a marriage indicates the beginning of a new family. Among marriage immigrants, women are in the majority. In 2011, more than two hundred thousand (211,458) immigrants were in Korea as a result of international marriages, with 89.2% of them being women.

**FEMALE MARGINALIZATION AND INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE IMMIGRANTS**

In the context of international marriage, social naming and stereotyping is one of the biggest reasons for the marginalization of immigrant women. In her study on married immigrant women, Min Kyeong Kim notes the historical distinction of Korean immigration. Unlike the majority of Western countries, which have a long history of immigration, Korea’s short immigration history really started in the 1990s. As a result, Korean society has not had sufficient time to adjust (Kim 16-17). From the mid-90s, international marriages between Korean men and “foreign women” increased notably, especially in the rural areas. In these situations, policies by government and agencies have simply followed the sudden new demand (Kim 24). The international solution to the marriage problem of marginalized Korean men, mostly in agricultural communities, has created a particular set of social issues. Agencies first began to bring in young “picture brides,” mostly from China and Southeast Asia. The social stereotype of the poor, exploited international marriage immigrant women stems from the “matchmaking” nature of these marriages. In her study on marriage and migration, Lisa Anne Simons points out the side effects of the matchmaking industry’s excessive sexist or racist images that involve the commercialization and commodification of women (Simons 78). Chun Suk Chung also notes the limitations of the previous research on marriage immigration: many studies tend to neglect the subjectivity of the married women by overemphasizing a “victim perspective” (Chung 16). To a certain extent, the international
matchmaking has caused poor matches, with the consequent social problems of abusive husbands and marriage fraud. However, the stereotypical representation of the married immigrant women’s hardship and financial conflict also reproduces negative stereotypes (Ha 103-104). The victimization of these immigrant women is another form of marginalization, however valid the original intention to raise the awareness of women’s rights. In this situation, one needs to balance a consideration of possible wrongful treatment with the danger of negative generalizations. The stereotype of the immigrant wives of an abusive Korean farmer alienates and sometimes excludes immigrant women from different social and class backgrounds.²

The names given to these women also represent a form of alienation. They tend to reinforce existing stereotypes by emphasizing the “foreignness” of the women. Terms such as “international marriage immigrants” or “married immigrants” are often unclear. A study conducted by one Korean studies research team noted the arbitrary use of the term “foreigner.” This arbitrary and incorrect use of titles reveals the society’s sense of incompatibility towards the subject both in legal and public practices. In the legal sense, a foreigner in Korea is a person without Korean citizenship. For this reason, an immigrant woman who is naturalized as a Korean citizen under the law is neither a “foreigner” nor a “marriage immigrant” (Kim et al. 43). A marriage immigrant is defined as a foreigner residing in Korea who is now, or was previously, in a marriage with a Korean citizen.³ As Korea does not allow dual nationality, defining these people as foreigners deprives them of their legitimate national identity. The study further notes that even the Korean Multicultural Families Support Act defines the naturalized members as “marriage immigrants” and their families as “multicultural”.⁴ The public concept is even more arbitrary; the category of “foreigners” is often decided by an individual’s appearance, not by their actual nationality. Thus the problem of “international marriage immigrants” actually begins with the very name used in Korean society, indicating the implicit differentiation in the community. The married women are still called immigrants even after the naturalization, which means that they are categorized as different citizens.

² Recently, more wives began to locate themselves in business and transnational exchange of material & cultural resources. Many studies recognize this; some are included in Lee, Ed., 2012
³ 「재한외국인처우기본법」제 2 조⑨
⁴ The essay’s use of the term “international marriage immigration women” also follows the direct translation of the common Korean usage. It is probably necessary to acknowledge and apologize for the term’s ultimate inappropriateness.
Their social position is marginalized and unstable — they remain as an outsider, “homeless” in their own home. Numerous news articles, studies and personal interviews and anecdotes deliver the stories of the wives suffering from husbands who regard their wives as purchased property and abuse them as a result, of their conflicts with the in-laws and the family financial problems. These stereotypical images are imposed on all of the “immigrant wives” regardless of differences, blurring their individual identities. In this case the naming of the women actually works against them, deprives them of the possibilities of individual identity and leaves them with only an undesirable or inaccurate one. By naming them, Korean society marks them as “homeless”.

KOREA AS A NEW HOME:
THE PROBLEM OF THE “HOMELESS AT HOME”

With its own particular historical background, Korea has the distinct characteristics of a closed, ethnocentric nationalist society. Dong Chun Kim makes reference to certain characteristics of early nationalism that have persisted in post-war, modern Korean nationalism. Although the time puts it in the category of post-nationalism, Korean nationalism in the late twentieth century possesses an authoritarian and racist character which can be traced back to the Northeast Asian history of colonization and coercion from foreign power (Kim 1996: 164). Kim points out the guarded and exclusive mindset of the nation due to the aftermath of foreign invasion as well as the ethnic nationalistic tendency which focuses on blood ties and shows “extremely exclusive and indifferent attitude toward other ethnic, national group besides their own ones” (171). Although its national or ethnic identity is becoming less strong, Korean society still emphasizes a collective identity more than an individualistic one (Kim et al. 107). The Korean sense of “one nation” has been emphasized and used for a number of reasons: territorial nationalism (to overcome the geographical weak point of neighboring bigger countries); ethnic nationalism (especially due to Japanese colonialism and South/North division); and developmental nationalism (to encourage the support of overseas Koreans) (115). First to protect, and then to revive, the nation, Korean

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5 For more examples, see Kim(2008), Kim(2012), Kim et al, Chung. 문화콘텐츠기술연구원 다문화콘텐츠연구사업단.
society adopted a strong, exclusive nationalism, and despite the changing social conditions, ethnocentrism has persisted, which impacts on the contemporary attempts to accommodate its immigrants. Korean’s nationalistic perception of the nation as a big home and its members as one extended family collides with its emphasis on blood-ties as important familial elements. As marginalized others, international marriage immigrants often fail to fit into their symbolic home.

As opposed to “homeliness,” “homelessness” not only indicates a lack of settlement but also implies the lack of homely virtues, such as the welcoming warmth of one’s home and comfortableness, the tacitly feminine virtues of wives and mothers. Association with homelessness works unfavorably against immigrant wives even more so in this sense that it questions the ability as a homemaker in the society where they chose to come for the purpose of making a home; an inability to assimilate to the society (“to make oneself at home”) is associated with an inability as a married woman. Traditionally, both in the West and the East, the place of dwelling has been associated with femininity. Jyungwha Jin explains that “house,” the material dwelling, becomes “home” through the work of femininity; the home is where many women build their worlds, their identities and gain their sense of fulfillment and satisfaction (Jin 47). A study on the relationship of the sense of feeling “at home” and spatial environments suggests the importance of a social-spatial environment in defining one’s identity:

Like other forms of identity, place identity answers the question--Who am I?--by countering--Where am I? or Where do I belong? From a social psychological perspective, place identities are thought to arise because places, as bounded locales imbued with personal, social, and cultural meanings, provide a significant framework in which identity is constructed, maintained, and trans-formed. (...) they become important mechanisms through which identity is defined and situated (Cuba et al. 114).

The study lists the importance of place experience for place identification; integration into the local are; long-term residence to build “sentimental attachment and a sense of home”; and placement in the broader society (115). Needless to say, the level of integration into the new society affects the self-positioning and identification of the immigrant wives within the society.

Acknowledging the necessity of the integration, Korean immigrant policies were made to
help international marriage immigrants settle down in their new homes. However, until recently the principal social and political approach has been focused on assimilation. Assimilation is a process which different individual groups socially fuse together as they gradually come to share a common culture (Kim et al. 138). In this case the gap between the two becomes narrower but in many cases of assimilation process a minority group is forced to melt into the majority, as some critics negatively speak of the example of the United States (138-9). A similar problem is also raised by the Korean assimilation policy. In a collection of interviews with a number of international marriage immigrant women, the interviewer notes the prevailing sense of assimilationism in Korea; they feel that they are forced to abandon their own identities and origins in order to be able to adapt to Korean society. In the search for a “place to call home” as the “important mechanisms through which identity is defined and situated” (ibid 114), emphasizing assimilation puts place before identity. It pressures the individual woman to agree to the seemingly necessary step of creating a desirable identity in order to fit into society.

BEYOND ASSIMILATION:
DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO “HOMELESSNESS”

In his discussion of the Heidegger-Levinas debates on the politics of dwelling and homelessness, David J. Gauthier notes Heidegger’s visionary concern “about the homelessness that is concomitant with the rise of globalization” in the contemporary “age of tribalism and globalization, disintegration and integration” (Gauthier 155). He then introduces Levinas’s critique of Heidegger’s emphasis on rootedness and the centrality of place that seeks to draw a line between natives and foreigners. For Levinas, “the home achieves its full dignity when the Other is welcomed into it, thereby transforming it from a pagan site to one that illuminates the existence of the transcendent” (131). Gauthier goes on to suggest that the Levinasian imperative to alterity is too radical in that it overlooks necessary boundaries and distinctions and demands an idealistic and ultimately inhuman hospitality to the homeless (ibid 165). To Gauthier, Levinas’s politics of hospitality also overlooks “the human desire for

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rootedness,” which Heidegger emphasizes (151). Yet despite his preference for Heidegger he admits the necessity of a middle ground that is hospital to the Other in the age where “homelessness” prevails. The idea of relating “homelessness”, the common condition of humanity, to the embracing of the Other opens a different way to approach the “homeless” state of the marriage immigrant women. Homelessness is a natural human condition: the approach to it can be from acceptance by society, not always from the forced change by the individual. Gauthier eventually turns to “an ancient ideal of hospitality in which the welcoming of alterity is an expression of human rootedness” (ibid 176). His middle ground may seem too convenient, yet it suggests an important point in Korean society’s perception towards immigrant women in international marriages. The growing recognition of the public that we are no longer a racially homogenous nation (Kim et al. 151), suggests that it is Korea’s own uncertain identity that creates the problem of “homelessness”.

Assimilationism has long been in question for its appropriateness as an approach to multicultural issues. The approach does not match the meaning of “multiculturalism”, which implies the acceptance of diversity. As an example, Kim(2012) comments on Korea’s social integration policies by asking whether seeking control over difference and diversity is the correct strategy (Kim 2012: 20-22). The current assimilationist discourse requires the erasure of the immigrant women’s legacy of her former home and former identity. In his study on multicultural education, Zun Sang Han borrows Jacques Attali’s notion of “(l’)homme nomade” to suggest that everyone is basically a nomad in a culturally complex world (Han 286). From this perspective, a sense of “homelessness” can indicate flexibility to ongoing changes; “homelessness” here is not a mere sign of social maladjustment but a request for a new, more complex identity. Recent studies on international marriage immigrant women suggest a brighter picture of the future. Young Hee Shim’s study on the “transnational” marriage immigrants suggests the new aspect of transnational identity that embraces both nationalities of the immigrant women (Lee 2012 32-33). Her study shows that recent international marriages exemplify both the weakening of national boundaries and the making of new identities, which work for both spouses (19). Mobile phones, which became a common necessity long ago in Korea, also enable a continuous transnational connection between the women and their previous world and encourage a positive nomadic self-identification as a result (Lee 2008 81). All these studies indicate that the change in the society is already, and will continuously be, less forceful than before and bring mutual
influence between the newly arrived and the original members. Hyun Mee Kim notes the positive effects of transnational marriage that help society rid itself of its xenophobic tendencies and closed nationalism, enabling the possibility of considering society from the Other’s point of view (Lee 2012: 96).

CONCLUSION

Korean society has long been ethno-culturally homogenous and limited in its approach to its “multicultural” members. International marriage immigrant women in Korea had been marginalized as the “homeless at home”. This was previously due to the prejudices against the socio-economic disadvantages of the women resulting from the history of international arranged marriage and later due to the crisscrossed attempt of Korean society to make the women feel at home by forcefully transforming them. With the double burden of both overcoming demeaning social stereotypes and responding to forceful assimilationist solutions, international marriage immigrant women have been struggling to locate themselves in their new home. Yet, the state of being “homeless at home” is not merely a negative phenomenon. Openness and hospitality to the alterity of the Other can bring the possibility of new cultural richness in a globalized era. Gauthier’s call for the embracing of alterity as a proof of rootedness is significant to contemporary Korean society: its closedness and emphasis on unilateral assimilation paradoxically reveals its instability. Gauthier closes his discussion by asking two questions: “Is it possible for man to find a home on earth in an age in which the possibility of having a home is increasingly called into question? And if it is, can such a home facilitate dwelling and hospitality?” (Gauthier 177) These are questions that are relevant to the emerging multicultural society of contemporary Korea.


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