Chapter 1

Introduction: Dilemma of being a New Woman

Any women who tells the truth about herself is a feminist.

(Alice Munro)

Many different men and learned men among men have been and are inclined to express both in speaking and in their treaties and writings many wicked insults about women and their behavior. It seems that they all speak from one mouth and the same mouth. And the simple, noble ladies, following the examples of suffering God commands, have cheerfully suffered the great attacks which have been wrongfully and sinfully perpetrated against women. Now it is the time for their just cause to be taken from the Pharaoh’s hands.

(Christine de Pisan 1365-1430 quoted in Richards 1994)

The aim of my study is to examine the emergence of the 'New Woman' both as concept and reality with reference to the poetical and fictional world of Sylvia Plath in America and Wanseo Park in Korea. Therefore this study is essentially a comparative assessment of the perceptions of these two writers about the role and status of woman in their countries. Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park inherit two different socio-cultural and religious traditions, and we can discern marked similarities as well as divergences, in their approach to the complex and continuing problem of being a woman as a survivor in this contemporary world.

The scope of this chapter is initially to analyze briefly the position of women in the Western as well as in Oriental traditions. In the second chapter, I will study religions more precisely; how they have affected and been engraved in the lives of women irrespective of their cultural
backgrounds as a deterrent and fetters for their life. The social morals, customs and attitudes being prevalent today are largely a direct legacy of these heritage; the Christian canon profoundly affecting women in the West and the Buddhist tradition and Confucianism pervasively influencing women in Korea. This chapter indicates the nature of the contribution made by Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park to women’s questioning of their identity and emancipation from claustrophobic surroundings for women in the West and Korea respectively, as evident in their poetry and fiction.

In each country, a common contemporary issue they are facing is the question of a woman. Whether in Western or Korean literacy tradition, the women are seen as launching themselves into the quest for their identity. The overwhelming evidence considered in the historical perspective shows that women’s status and rights were assigned within a patriarchal set up. Even great thinkers such as Aristotle, St.Thomas Aquinas, Neitzsche, Schopenheur, and Rousseau take woman’s inferiority as innate gene. Aristotle said in his Politicia that;

The element of a man is active, mobile and living in the union of sperm and menstrual blood, and a woman furnishes passive material only..... and the first and fewer possible parts of family are master and servant, husband and wife, father and children. And slaves have no deliberative faculty, and women have deliberate faculty but it is without authority. Courage of a man is shown in commanding; that of a woman in obeying.( Lerner, Max. The politics of Aristotle, New York: A Modern Library Book.1943 p.56)
Aristotle’s theory of fertilization and human creation has had great impact on the modern western society since the middle ages. St. Thomas Aquinas viewed “women as misbegotten and incomplete males.”

Mary Wollenstonecroft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1972), refuted Rousseau’s idea:

Rousseau declares that woman should never for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man. (Wollenstonecroft, Mary. *A vindication of the Rights Of Women: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects.* Tahchert, Ashley ed. London: Everyman. 1929 p.29)

She continues:

Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam’s ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it is strength to subjugate his companion and his invention to show that ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure. (Ibid p.30)

Whereas, a psycho-analyst like Sigmund Freud and his followers clearly assigns a subordinate position of a woman to a man. Friedan criticizes the narrowness of Freud’s followers:

Because Freud’s followers could only see women in the image defined by Freud... with no possibility of happiness unless she adjusted to being man’s passive object they wanted to help women get rid of their suppressed envy, their neurotic desire to be equal. They wanted to help women find sexual fulfillment as women by affirming their natural inferiority. (Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique.* New York: Dell. 1974 p.69)
Freud strongly believed that anatomy is destiny. To him, a woman who doesn’t have any phallus is anomaly and inferior. A Woman is thus the direct product of the basic assumptions of male-generated-oriented and dominated social values and has remained so for centuries. She is moulded, reshaped and reoriented by man and for the man. Kate Millet also criticized that;

In our culture, the temperament of men were expressed as aggressive, active, intellectual, dominant etc..., while those of women were described as passive, non-intellectual, soft, virtuous, etc. (Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. New York: Garden City. 1970 p.26)

However, the point that woman herself had been passive is debatable. Because the struggle for an independent, dignified life is not a new phenomenon at all but one with a long history. History itself is the oppression to the woman. The perspective of a number of disciplines: anthropology, theology, physiology, psychology and sociology are all against women’s liberation. With in these contexts, women have been struggling to escape from these fettered claustrophobic surroundings. But the women who have been struggling to get back their speaking voices and their identities as subjects were regarded as abnormal. According to Wittig, the institution of marriage is the principal culprit in the enslavement and objectification of women in patriarchal societies:

Men appropriate for themselves the reproduction and production of women, and also their physical persons by means of a contract, which assigns the woman certain obligations. (Wittig, Monique *The category of sex*, Feminist Issues, vol 2, no 2, 1992. P27)
Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) refuted the idea of woman being weak. According to her a woman's weakness is the direct result of nurture rather than nature, to the social and familial conditioning rather than the qualities which are innate to the female sex. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was the first woman who stressed for the economic independence of women. Similarly, Simon de Beauvior raised her voice against the sexual oppression of the patriarchal Society.

She is a simply what man decrees; thus such is called the sex, by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex, absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differential with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other. (Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second sex* in Miriam Schneider ed. *Feminism in our time; the Essential writings, world war II to the Present*, Vintage Original, 1944. p. 8)

If woman is Other, then she is always available as the vehicle for the self-conception and activities of man, the subject, the center of universe. Many more crusaders voiced their resentment against the sexist attitudes of the male-dominated society with little result of improvement in women's condition.

In this chapter, I will analyze the forces leading to the emergence of the 'New Woman' as neurotic. To be a new woman, she is reduced to an insane and mad creature. To understand and to know the new woman, it becomes important to realize what the traditional woman was. All the definitions about women's conduct, behavior and existence were given by men. The traditional woman was thus the product of man's needs. The questions which we face are: Is the new woman a part of the old set up or...
has she broken away from the traditional 'old' woman concept? Or is she an extension of the traditional woman, with only marginal changes to suit her newly acquired dignity and equality? Where is the new woman getting to? What are her aims and objectives? These are some of the questions which need to be answered. But it is important to know the traditional conceptions of both Western and Korean women in order to know and understand the ultimate advent of the image of the new woman.

The image of the traditional woman has been in clear black and white, devoid of any variation. She has been seen, whether in the Western tradition or Korean, either as an angel in the house or a witch or monster, "If you be not an angel, you are worse than human — you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive, powerful scary monster." (Atwood, Margaret *The Curse of Eve-or What I Learned in School*, Women and Women. York University Press. 1978. p.25)

In understanding the implications, it would be convenient to divide the discussion into three aspects: the traditional Western concept of woman, the Korean counterpart of this and the contribution of these two writers to the emergence of the image of the 'new woman'.

1. Traditional Western concepts of woman

In the Western culture, going back to the pre-Biblical mythology, one notes that woman's totality was fragmented in such parts as divine or temptress, as an Angel or a Medusa. But as George Lakoff mentioned, women much more seem to belong to negative category, volatile dangerous one;
Women, fire and dangerous things have something in common—say, that women are fiery and dangerous. Most feminists I've mentioned it to have loved the title for that reason, though some have hated it for that same reason. But the chain of inference is based on the common idea of what it means to be in the same category: things are categorized together on the basis of what they have in common. The idea that categorized are defined by common properties is not only our everyday folk theory of what category is, it is also the principal technical theory—one that has been with us for more than two thousand years. (Lakoff, Goerge, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. University of Chicago Press. 1990 p.5)

In the Christian tradition, Eve is portrayed as the first temptress seducing man towards evil and the conceiver of original sin. It is this original sin committed by women and the resultant image of being a seductress determined the position of woman in the Western culture. The great philosophers who have vastly contributed to the existing values of life have paradoxically treated woman as an object to be used by man: she is “God’s second mistake,” said Nietzsche. To Aristotle, “she is an inferior man.” Machiavelli choose to identify woman with a fortune: “fortune is a woman, and if you wish to master her, you must strike and beat her.” These aphorisms of a few of the great philosophers indicate the status of women in a male-dominated society. And these views are still relevant in some parts of the Western social structure. It is from this kind of pinning and labeling that the new woman is trying to liberate herself.

In the Christian culture, the few respectable choices left to women were: indissoluble marriage, or the dedicated life of a nun with severe abnegation and the much scorned choice of an old maid or a spinster. Marriage was important from the point of view of the fulfillment of the
husband’s need, both physical and genealogical. It is also significant to see what oaths the life partners take in marriage. The husband promises to love and cherish his wife, whereas the wife on her part takes the oath to love and obey. Men want women to remain their supporters while they occupy the position of supremacy. Virginia Woolf criticizes this situation:

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses position the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power the earth would still swamp and jungle...For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking_glass shrinks, his fitness for life diminished. How is he to go on giving judgments, civilizing natives, making laws, writing laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets, unless he can see himself at breakfast at twice the size he really is? (Woolf, Virginia in Harold Bloom ed, Modern Critical Views: Virginia Woolf. New York, Philadelpia: Chealsea House Publishers, 1995)

While men are looking for succor, women are always victims. Women never get chance to grow out of men’s shadows. They are unable to sustain creative minds and get their identity as women under these conditions. A wife in the Christian tradition was an Angel in the house. A perfect role model, adored by men. This concept of ‘Angel in the house’ was immensely encouraged by men and severely practiced by women. Virginia Woolf defines her role as:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult art of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that the never had a mind or a wish of her own, put preferred to sympathize always with the mind and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty... in those days...

A traditional woman then was self-effacing, unselfish, sympathetic, attentive, unseeking and chaste. She was all this not merely as a wife but as a daughter as well. Her well earned price was that she was promptly put on a pedestal and called an Angel. The credit, of course, goes to the men for giving birth to such an agreeable woman.

In marked contrast to this image of angel in the house is the image of sexually voracious woman. She is seen as nothing but sex, spoiling the morality of men and society at large: "Woman is sex. Sex selects her, isolates her, exalts her, humiliates her, makes her taboo. She must be sought, avoided, wooed, conquered, held." (Weiser, Alexsander Golden. *Sex and Primitive Society, Sex in Civilization*. ed. V.F Calceton & S.D. Schmalhosten UnwinLtd. London, 1929. p.24)

In effect, she is seen as sexually dangerous and has to be therefore trained and moulded into a meek and servile creature. And men have been successful in training this rather weak and susceptible creature, who can doom the fate of a whole nation by her sexual overtures.

Religious taboos, parental authority and economic standing contributed to the maiming of the spirit of Western woman until a few decades back. She was trapped by society in being strictly divided into two roles, and it took her persistent efforts for a long time to break out of the shackles of the traditional image. She demanded equality in all spheres of life: social, economic, cultural, judicial and sexual. It turned into a major
problem for men to cope with this evolving, questioning woman. Freud saw her as a living, growing phenomenon without any solutions:

What does a woman want?... Throughout history people have knocked their heads against the riddle of the nature of femininity .... . Nor will you have escaped worrying over this problem – those of you who are men, to those of you who are women this will no apply – you are yourself the problem. (Freud, Sigmund. *Feminity: The complete introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Ed. James Strached. W.W. Norton Press, New York. 1966 . p.577)

This problem of woman, probably arises from the query – ‘What does a woman want?’ Perhaps, the lack of understanding of woman’s emotions, sentiments, needs and wants contribute to the factor that if men could not comprehend the needs of a woman, how could they understand her? Have they ever been trying to understand her and helping her predicament without any conditions? Have they ever tried to figure out what makes her suffocating, neurotic and hysterical? Have ever they tried to take her away from this morbid conditions? Never. That’s why they have been unable to find out her requirements, needs. That’s why they cannot be her real better half. On the contrary they are her master and torturer. Therefore the problem continues to remain and rather to become grower.

Increasing consciousness of their oppressed situation has given rise to the women’s struggle against male-dominance, against the strictures passed by renowned men. They have been struggling to rectify Simone de Beauvoir’s insight that “One is not born, one rather becomes a woman.” Gender, cross-culturally, was found to be a learned quality that very independent of biology and an ideology that attribute them to nature. The women have to seek and affirm their identity in the changing context; where do they stand in a patriarchal set up? Their emotions, sentiments and
economic freedom which were so long curbed by the religious and moral constraints perhaps, would now find expression in various fields. Women in different counties have begun a crusade against despotism demanding an equal position with men and for human consideration and dignity due to them. The new woman is not only aware of her unequal status but is also in search of her roots – the real image, whose concept was lost amidst the constrictions of the male-dominated society. They detested the idea of being reduced to an appendage to their more dominating spouses. The woman today, seems to challenge the traditional notions of ‘angel in the house’ and sexually voracious image. We recognize the emerging new and independent women that Simon de Beauvoir envisaged:

Once she cease to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator. (Beauvoir, Simone de. (The Second Sex .Tr.and ed.H.M.Parshley, four squire edition,1960, first published, 1949. p.412)

In America itself the modern feminist movement started burgeoning in the early 20th century. The Women’s liberation movement of America had peaked in late sixties. Betty Friedan was one of the feminists to feel the absurdity of society against women. The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each woman struggled with it alone.

American women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Friedan lamented this situation in her book, The Feminine Mystique “Experts told
them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents.”(Friedan, Betty. The Feminine Mystique, penguin, 1963 p.96)

American women were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to have their professional careers. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights, financial independence and the opportunities that a few pioneering feminists fought for. Some women, in their forties and fifties, still remembered painfully giving up those realms. but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, and their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a good husband and bearing children.

Home sewing became a million-dollar industry. Many women no longer left their homes, except to shop, chauffeur their children, or attend a social engagement with their husbands. Girls were growing up in America without ever having jobs outside the home. Sylvia Plath also must have been questioning and agonized between her career as writer and marriage when she had faces her path in college.

I am afraid getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day- spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free to know people and their backgrounds- free to move the different parts of the world so that I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. (Plath, Aurelia. ed. Letters Home. London: Faber & Faber. 1975. p.40)
The suburban housewife - she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy of women all over the world. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. Only as a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world.

This mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands goodbye in front of door. Their only dream was to be perfect wives and mothers. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions.

Words like emancipation and career sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years. When Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book called *The Second Sex*, an American critic commented that she obviously "didn't know what life was all about," and besides, she was talking about only French women. The woman problem in America no longer existed. They are forcibly blinded and illusioned by male-dominated society. Betty Friedan asserts this situation like this “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform.”( Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*, penguin, 1963. p.9)

Within this deplorable contexts, the women’s liberation movement in America evinced women as the severely oppressed group to show the oppressiveness of the role of housewife-heroine which deny them a life of their own. And they demanded equality for women in all social, economic, cultural, judicial and sexual matters. The newly aroused and enlightened woman launched a systematic campaign against economic discrimination, inequality against women and sexual ignominy – which
they encountered in their quotidian existence. Mary Daly says, “The process of liberation involves the creation of the new space, in which women are free to become who we are, in which there are real and significant alternative to the prefabricated identities provided within the enclosed spaces of patriarchal institutions” (Daly, Mary. Beyond God, the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation, Boston: Beacon Press 1973 p.40)

Contemporary American or Korean or most other societies are identical in one aspect—in being severely patriarchal. It is this patriarchal set up which reinforced discriminatory treatment of women in their daily life. Expanding a particular principle of “the personal is political”, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, observe:

The essence of feminism for us, is its idea about the personal, its insistence on the validity of women’s experience, and its argument that an understanding of women’s expression can be gained only through understanding and analyzing everyday life, where oppression as well as everything else is grounded. (Stanley, Liz and Sue, Wise. Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research. Routledge and Kegan Paul. London, 1983. p.135)

Also Betty Friedan says “When a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often merely describes the daily life she leads.”

But such oppression affecting a woman can no longer be termed private or personal, when recurrence of suppression on women has become almost a fact of public life.

Today, Women are expected to be happy and want to be happy. Of course they have a right to be happy, yet are only experiencing lingering
despair and neurosis. Many are still made to feel at fault, neurotic, since no credibility was given to their problems. They are still looking for the outlet beaming the hope.

Fundamentally the goal of the feminist movement is committed to understanding and improving the situation of women. The women's group is still in state of identifying the sexist elements prevalent in the society. Margrit Eichler argues that:

The feminist work leads eventually towards groping for a new epistemology which allows for the adequate understanding of both female and male life. (Eichler, Margarit. *And the Work never ends: Contribution of Feminist Approaches to Canadian Anglphone Sociology*, Canadian Review of Sociology and Antropology, May, 1985. p.12)

The male is still seen as the norm by certain social groups and the female as the deviation. Women's contribution to public life has, for a long time in Western thought, been dismissed as unimportant. The social system has actively contributed to justifying the inferior position of women by largely equalizing them with the private realm and this was done, say Nancy Henley and Jo Freeman quite easily to women –

By being continually reminded of their inferior status in their interactions with others, and continually compelled to acknowledge that status in their own pattern of behavior, women learn to internalize society's definition of them as inferior so thoroughly that they are often unaware of what their status is. Inferiority becomes habitual, and the inferior place assumes the familiarity – and even desirability – of home. (Henry, Nancy and Freeman, Jo. *The Sexual Politics of International Behavior*)
And men were identified with the more domineering public realms. A double standard was thus created with two different measuring tapes.

It is against these social factors that the ‘New Woman’ rebelled. In America, she is struggling to break away from the stranglehold of tradition. Today she is busy reshaping herself in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for a thorough re-examination in depth of marriage and man-woman relationship, for a better understanding and sharing of mutual love and respect.

But this is not to say that this social disease is cured. Going to the root of the ailment is a step towards preventing the malady. The same is the case with resolution of women’s problems. Women today have been successful in identifying their problems, but have not yet been able to find solutions to all of them. Still there is a long way to go.

2. Traditional Korean concepts of women

Women in any position or state of mind should be obedient to men, because a man is the heavens(haneul) and a woman is the earth(thang). This dysfunctional hierarchy is the relationship between men and women imposed by the Korean society. It is this outlook which dominates the traditional Korean male attitude, even to this day. such an orthodox attitude has passed on to contemporary men who still regard them as center of universe in their life

Therefore understanding of Korean culture and society is not possible without
comprehending the nature and role of Confucian thought—it would like to grasp the
nature of American development without sensing the significance of liberalism, the
Protestant ethic. While Americans are concerned foremost with freedom and
individualism, Koreans, steeped as they are in a Confucian moral code, are more
deeper concerned with relationship. Therefore, to understand women’s role and
their position in Korean society is as same as the understanding the influence of
Confucianism in society where frequently women’s unequal roles and rights are
justified within contexts of Confucianism.

In Korea, there are the three ways for woman to be subordinated; “she must
follow her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son after the
death of her husband.” (Kim Yung-Chung ed. The Women of Korea: A History from

A woman must never govern herself as she likes. The traditional Korean
woman complied and abided by the rules laid down by Confucius law and upheld
by the society. The Confucianism prevailed in the Yi Dynasty, in general, curbed
the growth of woman. The Confucianism was criticized as hindrance to
modernization. Confucianism emphasizes the vertical structure of society and the
obedience of inferiors to the authority of superiors; this position is opposed to that
of the horizontal democratic society, which emphasizes individual freedom

Korea has been a patriarchal society since the beginning of its history. The
woman’s role in Korean society has traditionally been very limited and very
specific. It is of extreme importance for Koreans to preserve the family line and
keep it honorable. Koreans valued the devotion women gave to their families. After
a woman married, she belonged to her husband’s family. She has been regarded as
‘other’ to her own biological parents. Her identity as a daughter of her own parents
has been transformed and forced into the given role by her in-laws. As children,
females are prepared for their subservient role. In earlier times a girl was given less education than a boy. There was an interesting saying: "If a woman has lots of letters in her stomach, she has no more space to bear a child."(Ibid p.58)

Because Koreans value men more than they value women, women are negligible in Korean history. A woman’s most important role in life is to bear a son and raise him to contribute to his family name. If a Korean woman did not bear a son, another woman was to be brought in. Above all, a husband had a right to divorce his wife based on the ground that she committed the ‘seven sins’: it included a lack of filial piety, barrenness of son, immorality, stealing, talking too much, disease, jealousy. If a Korean woman became a widow, she was not expected to remarry. These ideas may have been influenced by Confucianism. During the Chosun Dynasty, Confucianism was the predominant belief. It supported and promoted the patriarchal ruling system. In the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) women were not looked upon as equal to men. Male children were more highly regarded than female children. Korean women were expected to give birth and raise male children. Males would be the family heirs and would continue the family line. During this time, women had few opportunities to participate in social, economic, or political activities.

It was the role of the woman to devote herself to her family, especially the men, so they would succeed in their careers. Women were admired for raising successful sons and for helping their husbands. Women were subservient to the men in their lives; however, they were very influential in their role in their family. It was the woman’s role to be in charge of the home, all family matters, and managing ancestors’ affairs and rituals. Thus women were confined to the home.

It was towards the end of the nineteenth century that Korean women were finally allowed to begin formal education. Christianity was introduced in Korea. Before, under Confucian rule, boys and girls could not even sit next to each other
after the age of seven. Christianity began to influence the way Koreans valued women. The tight restrictions that were placed on Korean women were beginning to be lifted. Christian missionaries were opened and girl schools were established. This was the beginning of change for the Korean woman.

In 1945 brought tremendous change to the Korean woman. The Sex Equality Law was passed in Korea in 1946. Progress was slow, but it was a beginning. In 1948, the Republic of Korea was established and women received the rights to pursue public education, work, and public life. In 1972, the Korean constitution stated women had equal rights and equal social status as men. Women in Korea were making headway but they had not fully won equality. Male children are still preferred over female children. Most women work in light industry and do not receive equal pay.

Education may be partly responsible for reinforcing the male as the dominant role. Males and females were educated separately. There was a far greater emphasis on education for boys than for girls. Girls received more lukewarm support than boys from their parents. Sometimes girls had to give up school unwillingly for the sake of their brothers who were the center of the family. Seo Chae-pil criticized the government's narrow-minded educational policy as follows:

There should be no distinction between the sexes when teaching the children of our people. It is proper to establish one school for girls when one school for boys is built. However, the government does not educate girls, which means that the half of our national populations are abandoned in the state of being uneducated. How regretful it is! We are friends of humble, poor, and ignorant people. We grow sad that Korean women are treated so scornfully. We are determined to fight men for women at any time. (Article in Tongnip Sinmun Independence
Newspaper) written by Seo chae-phil. September 5th. 1896)

After a marriage a woman must dedicate herself the family she marries into through housework and house chores. In this family situation, the woman possessed such a lower position that obedient slave was often applied to the situation of them.

Even though the woman dedicated herself married-in-family, the relationship between husband and wife was that of superior and subordinate. According to Confucius rules, the duties of a wife towards her husband are natural and strict irrespective of the treatment meted out to her by her husband. Her husband is the judge examining the her moral behavior and misconduct. He must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. The wife was supposed to be faithful, docile, obedient and worshipful towards her husband even if the husband was not like her. And if she neglects her duties, deviates from the norms laid down for her, the punishment is severe. This phenomenon was indicted by Seo Chae-pil who wrote his first editorials in first Korean Newspaper, Tongnip Sinmun

Despite that women are by no means lower beings than men, men despises women. This is caused by the reality that men are not duly enlightened, with the results that they rely only on their physical strength and suppress women without thinking over reason and humaneness. This is nothing but barbarism. (Tongnip Sinmun April 7th.. 1896)

No such punishment, however, is given to man, no matter how great his sins are against woman. Simply by obeying her husband, a woman is exalted to heaven. In the process of compliance she might suffer
indignities - but it is a price she has to pay if she desires to go to heaven. To submit is to remain essentially feminine, something which befits her. She should be grateful that "our social and religious culture has permitted her to be and remain essentially feminine." (Kim Yung-Chung ed. The Women of Korea: A History from Ancient Times to 1945. Ewha woman's University Press. Seoul, Korea, 1976 p.167) Femininity is synonymous with unquestioned obedience and compliance.

The Korean tradition has imposed the a self abnegation and the unselfish trait as virtue on women. Analyzing the roots of this image of woman, given to her essentially by man. And it is on these deep rooted conventions that a woman's lame existence is based. As only a mother, the woman in Korea is respected for her selfless love. She even dominates in certain areas of the family life. Her world is law in such family affairs as the upbringing of the children, marriage and assigning duties to the new daughter-in-law. Apparently she is given the title called 'the inner master' which she doesn't feel happy about. She should stay in 'Anbang': a room located in the inner side of the house. It's her cocoon and her shell which never can be broken and come out of. It's her fortress where she is forever a recluse and confiner physically and mentally. Therefore that condition makes her neurotic and stifling. Man is often dismissed as ignorant in the household activities and is often not allowed to interfere with the decisions made for the benefit of the house. Even if one were to assume that woman dominates over man in certain aspects of family life - it should be noted that a woman comes to this stage late in her life - as probably a middle aged, mother when the husband condescends to agree to his wife's wishes only when he's sure that she has acquired some knowledge and experience in her
long sojourn as a wife under his mother's supervision. It is this sojourn of
tolerance and self-effacement that entitles her to the brief interlude of
domination as a mother and knowledgeable wife. In the Korean traditional
system, one's destiny is determined by one's place in life. So it is of a
woman. The destiny of a woman depends on her relation to man- as a
daughter, wife and mother. In a sense, it is this idea of destiny which gives
the Korean woman tremendous stamina and patience to undergo suffering
and subjugation in the course of her life. Such tremendous qualities of
strength and endurance could perhaps be more affirmatively used toward
her own emancipation from her life of bondage and suffocation which is to
be exploded in the end.

It is, however, the overriding concept of destiny which has contributed
to woman's tolerance and self-effacement. Even when they are completely
 crushed by the injustices done to them, they take it as the dispensation of
their previous karma. The principle taught by Buddha. The more they suffer,
the sooner will it wash away their sins. To find meaning in suffering is in
some sense, accept it, enabling the legitimation of suffering that may be
unjust and unnecessary. Ultimate suffering would seem not only devoid of
value but also actually destructive value which never would be revealed and
remained as "lump in the spirit" (Chung, Hyun Kyung. Struggle to be Sun
1990. p. 43) to be manifested itself as gap or silence for women. Therefore
to revolt against it will be to display further moral depravity, for revolt
itself will multiply their suffering in this life. This given them a great
capacity to endure any amount of evil and suffering. This extreme
commitment to traditional values and the passive courage which has marked
the life of Korean womanhood is today slowly crumbling down. Woman today no longer feel morally depraved to protest against man-made injustices.

Woman has realized that her prime duty is not merely to please and obey man but also to lead a life of dignity and equality. The new woman is essentially woman of awareness and consciousness of her stifle position in family and society. It is this awareness and enlightenment which has made her brood over her life for almost the first time in the tradition-bound Korean society. She is not necessarily the one who has attained equality and freedom—for they are only the tip of the total population of woman in Korea.

Today, Korean women's goal are clearly defined, first, their resentment against the suppression and humanity by men in a patriarchal society. And second, exploration of their true potential and the consequent discovery of their identity. Most women go against the socially approved image of the passive woman. The Korean woman today is also consciously fighting with herself to get rid of the elements of passivity and meekness ingrained in her since centuries.

The emergence of the new woman in Korea is perhaps a direct outcome of the education given to her, education which was primarily given to make her a better informed wife and mother. This little freedom has brought her out of the cloistered, claustrophobic environment, to become useful individual serving the larger interests of society. The exposure to diverse fields of knowledge and constructive activity has instilled in women an awareness of their skills and talents. Coupled with this consciousness is the women's liberation movement of the West, which
has given courage to the Korean women to question her circumscribed, 'master in anbang' image.

3. Being a New Woman

It is against this background that the poetical and fictional world of Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park needs to be studied. The questions which I am concerned with are: How have these two writers chosen to portray their women protagonists in the context of the particular life situation depicted in their works? And what is their concept of the new women? Why do they have to be a neurotic?

Although there are men writers whose protagonists have been women, their understanding and grasp of the feminine psyche is certainly different from that of the woman writers themselves, whose instinctive knowledge and sensibility makes them analyze woman in her encounter with the quotidian problems of her day to day existence from within.

One can discern a difference in the range and quality of perception between a man and woman writer when both write on women's problems. Evincing this dichotomy in the point of view, Virginia Woolf writes:

... both in life and in art the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to man, trivial what is to him important. (Woolf, Virginia. *Women and Fiction* The Granite and rainbow. New York, 1975. p.81).
This difference in stress effectively shows the need to study: the problem or what is significant and trivial to woman writers and what determines the significance and trivialness of things.

My study seeks to explain the place of woman in contemporary society as visualized by Sylvia Plath and Wanseo Park belonging to two different countries and cultural traditions. The study will also take into account the different interpretations and versions of the woman's identity. The two women writers, chosen here, develop their own perceptions concerning the new woman, her urges and needs on the basis of quest of self, keeping in view their actual social conditions. Although the common denominator in each of writers is the deplorable condition of woman, each of the writers attacks the problem from her own cultural perspective. Women' urges, needs and aspirations are largely conditioned by the social milieu where they live. The American civilization stemmed from the European lexicon culture and is taking a very different shape. It is a country which achieved independence with reason and liberty. With this particular background, the women in America are seeking emancipation from social, legal, artistic, sexual and psychological constraints.

In Korea, women are trying to seek equality in domestic and intellectual spheres. But the sense of being an individual is a difficult task to achieve. They know that their value lies in their own personal fulfillment and development. In their own literature and life they find an individual submerged in their family and community. The family is the primary unit of an individual's life in Korea. Hence there is a vital difference between the urges and aspiration of women in America and
Korea. But the similarity lies in their drive to attain dignity and respect in a male-dominated society.

What two writers are concerned with, therefore, is the imaginative depiction of socio-realistic themes with woman as the central character. In our society what is the place of woman? Where exactly would men place her? Finally, which place would women give to themselves? Sylvia Plath’s primary concern has been with the weak as against the strong, victim versus the victimizer. To Sylvia Plath survival is the most important factor even though she was known as suicidal poet. By survival she does not mean continuity of mere physical existence, but a striving for dignity in the battle with society and circumstances. Her notion of women are victims either of man, or of authority, or of a particular social set-up. The themes which has engaged Sylvia Plath’s imagination is the place of woman in modern society and an exploration of her identity in the highly ignored and isolated age.

There is still a lot of social pressure on women demanding them to be morally perfect. Elaborating on this argument, Atwood says:

Women are still expected to be better than men, morally that is, even by women, even by some branches of the women’s movement, and if you are not an angel, if you happen to have human failings, as most of us do, especially if you display any kind of strength or power, creative or otherwise, then you are not human. You are worse than human, you are a witch, a Medusa, a destructive power scary monster. (Atwood Margaret. The Curse of Eve-or What I Learned In School, The Second Words. P.226)
What Sylvia Plath is concerned with is the treatment of woman as normal human beings and therefore she must be allowed to be imperfect. She criticizes the social system that assigns role to the sexes and then categorically labels them as either inferior or superior, sinful or chaste. She is intensely preoccupied with women fighting against the female norms of life—sexuality, dichotomy between career and the claims of the family which makes her outraged especially in her novel, The Bell Jar. She is still questioning to herself.

Would marriage sap up my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression... or would I if I married achieve a fuller expression in an art as well as in the creation of children? Am I strong enough to do both well?... That is the crux of the matter, and I hope to steel myself for the test...as frightened as I am. (Martin, Linda Wagner. Sylvia plath: A biography Simon and Schuster: New York, London. 1987. p.70)

And instantly she tries to compromises herself, “I’ll get used to the idea of marriage and children. If only it doesn’t shallow up my desires to express myself in a smug, sensuous haze. Sure, marriage is self expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn’t just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married.”(Kukil,Karen V.ed. The Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath(1950-1962) Anchor Books: New York.2000 p.21)

She wants not to be solitary weepers, but to make decisions, perform actions, be ready to face the consequences, whatever they be, and to be ambitious. But a woman aspiring to selfhood is by definition selfish, deviating from norms of subservience to the dominant gender. Sylvia Plath
herself, as a writer, was found to be deviating from the social norms and had to face dilemma such as

Writing is the religious act: it is ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. (Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath p.436)

The tone suggests incredibility coupled with the notion that she was capable of this intellectual exercise, despite being a woman and doing such things as washing dishes. For her, writing is emergent commitment for her survival “I want to write because I have the urge to excel in one medium of translation and expression of life. I can’t be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living.”(Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath p.184)

But Sylvia Plath had the fear of writing as a woman:

What to do with the fear of writing: why fear? Fear of not being a success? Fear of world casually saying we’re wrong in rejections. Ideas of maleness: conservation of creative power (sex and writing). Why do I freeze in fear my mind & writing: say, look, no head, what can you expect of a girl with no head?’. Why don’t I write a novel? Images of society; The writer and poet is excusable only if he is successful. (Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath p.76)

Criticizing such chauvinistic attitudes of society, Sylvis Plath refuses to see women as belonging to different species assigned with different roles. She defends them and entreats to accept them as human beings first. She also asserts herself as a human being like this:
I love people. Everybody. I love them, I think, as a stamp collector loves his collection. Every story, every incident, every bit of conversation is raw material for me. My love’s, not impersonal, yet not wholly subjective either. I would like to be everyone, a cripple, a dying man, a whore, and then come back to write about my thoughts, my emotions as that person. (Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath p.9)

In Wanseo Park’s fiction, the setting is middle class Korean family life. It is in this atmosphere that she unravels the unhappy situation of the Korean women. She depicts the strong reactions of quiet, sensitive and repressed Korean women married mostly to complacent, insensitive, uncaring and selfish though dutiful men. Their lives turn into a bog of dull and drab matrimonial relationship with mostly no emotion and love on the part of the husband.

Wanseo Park’s women protagonists are much too individualistic and temperamental to compromise with the harsh mechanical existence. They find it difficult to come to terms with the loveless living conditions. Wanseo Park is thus primarily concerned with the fate of the married woman in Korean society today. Her women become victims of the traditional modes of existence which makes them intensely conscious of their lack of identity. Their protest mostly turns into frustration, for as an Korean girl, a woman is brought up to be passive, meek and obedient. With this kind of orthodox background, she fails to breakaway from such an oppressive and unfeeling conjugal bond. The only alternative left to them is repression and hysteria.

But the awareness and the attitude of constant questioning and rejecting the present state of life is in itself a kind of protest. It shows the
mettle and courage in them to defy and reject the traditional norms of society. Wanseo Park values highly this spirit of interrogation and objection which leads to the development of one's self, the discovery of its identity:

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a strand against the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort. But to those who cannot follow it, whose heart continuously cries out 'No' and those who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

The traditional Korean woman was resigned to take her lot as her karma and was content with shedding a few self-pitying tears in a dark room. They made no demands on men. They did not make an effort to change their lives, for change meant confronting not merely the man, be it husband or father, but the whole of society. In contrast, the 'new woman' that Wanseo Park visualizes is both contemplative about her plight and has the capacity to question the indifference of men. She continues to struggle, fight against the strong currents, even if it results in failure, to get back her lost identity. That notion is coincided with Cixious:

It is time to liberate the New Woman from the Old by coming to know to her -by loving for her getting by, for getting beyond the Old without delay, by going out ahead of what the New Woman will be, as an arrow quits the bow with a movement that gathers and separates the vibration musically, in order to be more than her self. (Marks,Elain and Courtivron,Isabelle de,eds. New French feminism: An Anthology. Sussex: The harvest Press. 1986. p.248)
Wanseo Park’s protagonists are constantly, persistently grappling with their situation and one can admire their spirit of resilience. But at one stage they also turn into objects of pity, because their obsessions most of the time take the shape of failure. Her protagonists are not merely ignored, but thought to be ignorant and childish as well, by their husbands. They are used mostly as showpieces in social gatherings and treated as one would treat one’s pet animal. The protagonists’ extreme sensitiveness is taken for childishness and lack of culture. The men themselves are busy with their work outside and come back home to rest and sleep, ignoring in the process the women in the house completely—they are certainly not as important as the work outside. It is that drab and dry vegetable existence that Wanseo Park’s women rebel against. Their fight is not for equality as such but for the right to be acknowledged as individuals – capable of intelligence, insight and feeling. There is a great desire in them to be heard and taken seriously. There is a compelling urge in them for a particular way of living – a life full of love, respect and dignity. But it is sad that all these three things are denied to them. Because they are ignored despite that repeated efforts at being acknowledged, because they are unloved and are taken for granted, that the extreme sensitiveness of the protagonists turns into frustration. The Korean situation and their upbringing leaves little scope for either total break up or freedom. Wanseo park’s protagonists do not seek for freedom outside the household but they desire for it within the family struggle without camouflaging or having to mask their behavior and attitude. They want to be taken for what they are.

Margaret Atwood asserts as follows;
Women both as characters and as people must be allowed their imperfections. If I create a female character, I would like her to be able to show her having the emotions all human beings have – hate, envy, spite, lust, anger and fear, as well as love, compassion, tolerance and joy without having her pronounced as a monster, a lour or a bad example. (Atwood Margaret, *The curse of Eve or What I learned in school* The second Words. York university Press. 1978 P226)

This applies as well to Wanseo Park's women characters. Despite the newly acquired liberation of the late twentieth century, Wanseo Park, through her novels, seems to say that women have not gone far in achieving anything significant, least of all their recognition as human beings. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. But women in Korea are still burdened with the household drudgery, indignities and humiliations – and no one ever seems to think about them. Moreover, the respect of the whole household depends on the woman, and if she herself goes to eke out her livelihood or assert her individuality, it is the household which has to face shame and humiliation. Thus the women have got used to sitting at home brooding about their inconsequential life. Wanseo Park's women come from such a background. The question of their being occupied outside the house doesn't arise at all, their confinement imposed by society is their destiny. Women are busy with either bringing up their children or serving their men as handmaids.

The women in the cloistered shell of the house – have they widely spoken about liberated movement touched them? Wanseo Park's fiction seems to say an emphatic 'No'. But these women are slowly but definitely trying to crack the hard shell. These are the 'new women' who have not abandoned the traditional image but are evolving it, changing it, improving upon it. They are neither passive, nor
indifferent to their plight. They are slowly but surely acquiring the capability to face their lives, to break the customs that so far crippled them.