

Bitterness of the Inner Quarters

By Na Hye-seok

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Literature Translation Institute of Korea

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About Na Hye-seok

Na Hye-seok (1896 – 1948) was a poet, feminist writer, painter, educator, and journalist. Born in Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, as the fourth child of a wealthy family, she demonstrated an artistic talent from an early age and graduated at the top of her class from Jin Myeong Girl's High School in 1913. She went on to study western painting at Tokyo Women's Art College in Japan, which was an unheard of accomplishment for a Korean woman at the time. She became the first female professional painter and the first feminist writer in Korea, and later made waves for a rumored extramarital affair and her subsequent divorce. Her major written work, “Gyeong-hui” (1918), explores the theme of *sinyeoseong*, or “new woman,” and is regarded as the first feminist short story in Korean literature. She is also well known for her essay, “A Divorce Confession,” which was published in a magazine in 1934.

Na’s works challenged patriarchal mores and social conventions. In *Gyuwon*, or “Bitterness of the Inner Quarters,” Na takes on the tragedy of being a young widow in a society that enforced both female chastity and absolute dependence on male family members. The story is framed as a cautionary tale: an older woman speaks to a group of women gathered at the home of a young mother and warns them of the tragedy that could befall any of them at any time. She tells of how she was widowed and left at the mercy of her in-laws, framed for adultery due to the meddling of a neighbor, and victimized by a mysterious stranger who was able to pursue her with impunity due to his gender and wealth. Despite her own wealthy background and unfailing adherence to the moral standards required of her by the patriarchal social structure, she finds herself stripped of both social status and personal rights due to the selfish motives of others, and utterly without recourse or protection from any quarter. The story reveals the contradictions inherent to a patriarchal society and the precarious situation of all women, regardless of class status, who live within such gendered power structures.

Bitterness of the Inner Quarters

It was mid-May, and the dark clouds that had not yet cleared after the rains stopped were covering the peak of Mt. Samgak; the wind was so flat that the poplar trees that normally stood tall and shook with vigor were motionless. Not a leaf stirred. Sparrows formed a flock and darted this way and that in bewilderment, while a heron flew over the roof, crying out lustily for rain.

In a certain house, a group of women who'd come to see the newborn baby sat together on the cool wooden floor of the three-*kan* hall: one was fanning herself; another, fatigued from the heat, had loosened the breast-tie on her blouse for a moment and was resting on the woven straw mat, her neck supported by a wooden pillow, her eyes lightly shut; another sat quietly and kept looking all around as it was her first visit to that home; another was discussing household matters; and the last was listening intently. A couple of diapers were scattered on the floor, and a kettle sat beside several bowls with a few drops of water still left in them. Cherry pits lay where they'd fallen, and inside a large, painted glass bowl, freshly washed cherries gave off a translucent red glow that glimmered like oil.

Through the wide-open back door came the sound of a baby crying in the master's quarters. The baby's mother, who'd been suffering from postpartum fever, had risen earlier, tucked her wildly disheveled hair any which way into a bun and pinned it in place with a hairpin made from the horn of a water buffalo, and had been sitting listlessly since then against the raised sill of the door. But when she heard the baby's cry, she sprang up, startled, to fetch it at once. A few small tears were spilling from the baby's eyes, and there were several red marks from mosquito bites. It may have been the joy of being in his mother's arms, but the baby took one look around at the women assembled there, bright eyes glistening, and smiled as if in recognition. All eyes were fixed on the baby as they cooed, "*Aigo*, he smiled!" and played with him and stroked his head and touched his small hands to see if they could make him smile a second time. But the baby showed no interest. He turned and nuzzled at his mother's breast.

In the far corner, smoking a pipe and staring listlessly up at the sky, sat a woman who from some angles looked to be well into her forties and from others to be barely thirty. Her face, which bore a certain nobility, was lined with wrinkles—vestiges of the hardships she'd suffered. She had lightly powdered her wrinkled cheeks: the color clashed with the sun-darkened roughness of her skin. Above her high forehead, her hair was parted evenly down the middle, neatly combed in place with a mixture of beeswax and sesame oil, and then loosely braided and twisted into a thick chignon held firmly in place with a long silver pin. It was apparent from how she dressed—from the long sleeves of her unlined ramie blouse that covered the backs of her hands and the coarse weave of her ramie skirt that came up high on her waist and billowed long and loose—that she was no mere lady from Seoul. The air of

refinement that could not be pinned to any one particular feature revealed the pedigree of a proper *yangban* family. Even as the other wives crowded around the baby to stroke and coo, she stared off into the distance, saying nothing, then let out a strange snort and laughed to herself. She lowered her eyes and tapped the bowl of her pipe, which she'd barely touched, against the terrace stone below to empty the ashes. A sad look crossed her face. Then she sat back in the same position as before and watched the baby suckling at his mother's breast. "Look at that," she said. "So many women all in one spot, and yet the only one to hear the baby's cries was his own mother. The love between mother and child can never be severed, and yet I..." Her throat tightened, and she was unable to finish the sentence. Her eyes brimmed with tears. The other women thought this strange and couldn't help but ask why she looked so sad. She didn't answer for a moment. Her friend, Lady Kim, who had accompanied her, sat down beside her and gazed at her a moment before saying, "You're thinking about your sons, aren't you? The baby reminds you of your sorrow." This only made the crowd more curious.

"What about your children?" they asked. Just as before, she said nothing. Lady Kim said, "It's like that old novel, *The Tale of Suk-hyang*." Of course, this remark only stirred up the curiosity of the women all the more. "What happened? Do tell us!" they entreated. Lady Kim gave her a long look and said, "Tell them." Finally, after another bout of silence, she said, "Look," and held out her hands. "There is no telling what fate holds in store for you. Who would have known that my hands, once as soft and fine as powder, would now look as if nails have been driven through each knuckle, and that I would be wearing the same bloomers from May all the way up to the hottest months of the year?" (Here, she lifted her overskirt to reveal cotton bloomers blackened with dirt.) "I grew up in the lap of luxury with no need to envy others, and even after I married, I never so much as sullied my foot by stepping down into the courtyard. As you can see, I am every bit the daughter of a *yangban* family. So when I tell you my story, you might die of shock." And with that, she began her tale.

"My father was the governor of Pyeongyang, county governor of Bongsan, and county governor of Anseong. His eldest brother is Minister Yi. This tells you that my family wields considerable political influence in my hometown of Cheolweon. As the only daughter among four sons, I was adored. Of course, my face is as ruined as can be from the miseries I've endured, but when I was a girl of twelve and of thirteen and of fourteen, I was beautiful, with fair skin and fine features and silky black hair. After I turned ten, offers of marriage began flowing in from the families of chief ministers located in Seoul and in the countryside alike. Whenever my father spoke of those marriage petitions, my mother would ask whether it wasn't too bitter a thing to marry off one's one and only daughter. And that would silence him. But in the end, what else is one to do with a daughter? In the third month of my sixteenth year, I had no choice but to join a new family."

One of the ladies asked, "How old was your groom?"

"They said he was thirteen. Minister Kim, who became my father-in-law, was a close friend of my father's. They must have settled on our marriage over drinks one

night. I was so loathe to leave my mother's side that I wept during the entire eighty *li* journey to my new home. Like my own parents, my in-laws not only lacked for nothing but also had only sons, and as my betrothed was the last to be married, they showered us with a shocking amount of silks and other wedding gifts. Who else in the world has been as adored by their in-laws as I? People speak of the difficulties a new daughter-in-law faces, and yet I knew nothing of hardship or suffering. Three years passed with no hint of pregnancy, and everyone began to fuss and worry. But after eight years of marriage, the signs appeared, and I gave birth to a son. I cannot describe how delighted they all were. They treated me as carefully as one would a silver tray. That same year, my husband was put in charge of the county office of Chuncheon. While we were living there, our first son turned three, and I became pregnant again and gave birth to another boy. At night, the four of us would sit together and play, and though we were living apart from our families, we were happy. But I suppose my luck ran out, or perhaps the family's fortune was ill fated. In the eleventh month of the year that our second child was born, my husband went to a banquet to celebrate the Japanese New Year and came home very late and very drunk. He got under the blankets straightaway without bothering to undress and complained that his head was aching. Then he vomited suddenly. Twice, coughing up bright red blood. My own blood ran cold when I saw that."

Several of the ladies who'd been listening must have felt their stomachs knot. Some urged her to keep going, saying, "And then what?" Others grimaced and exclaimed, "Oh no!" as if unable to bear another word. Others said simply, "*Aigo*, what a shame!" Lady Yi felt her throat tighten. She paused to swallow hard before continuing with her story. "After he lay down that night, he didn't get back up again, even when the time came and went for him to be at the county office. He barely sipped at a bowl of thin rice gruel, and he became so ill that he filled the chamber pot with bloody phlegm. His illness worsened rapidly with each day. I sent word to the head family. I sent it by telegram, and my eldest brother-in-law said they would all come fetch us. I rushed to pack our belongings, and they arrived at once. Who would have believed such a thing? When we arrived at the head family's house, I felt as if I'd committed a terrible sin. I couldn't look any of the elders in the face. And sure enough, my mother-in-law took one look at me and asked spitefully what I'd done to make him so sick. My parents-in-law lay in bed and refused to eat or drink, sending the whole household into turmoil. They bought all the best medicines, from ginseng to sliced deer antler, and brought the most skilled of skilled physicians from near and far and housed them in the men's quarters so they could check my husband's pulse and administer medicine everyday, but nothing worked. You can just imagine how much money that cost them, as well as how worried we all were. Then, on the twenty-first day of the eighth lunar month, he breathed his last." She dabbed at her eyes with the end of her breast-tie. Everyone murmured and clucked their tongues in sympathy. Lady Yi's spirit flagged, and she was barely able to get the last words out.

"And so at the tender age of twenty-five, when I should have been in the flower of my youth, I had to abandon all joy. It is indeed a pity to die so young. Likewise, what sort of fate is that for a woman to be alone before she's thirty? I must

have looked miserable. I was so ashamed that everyone might see me as ill-fated that after he was gone I couldn't bring myself to look anyone in the eyes. My older brother came to visit, and I was so embarrassed for him to see me in my white mourning clothes that I burned with shame. I could not lift my face to greet him."

One of the women said, "Ah, you follow the old ways. That's not all. You feel guilty for the rest of your life. You can't go around with your head held high or speak too loudly or laugh too much. I suppose that's why they say your life is over or that the sky collapses when you become a widow. Ah, it is a terrible thing. But nowadays, widows are different. They treat themselves to a purple ribbon for their hair or brush on a little face powder. No wonder the world is falling apart." When she sat up from her reclining position and bent over to tap the ash from her pipe, the mourning ribbon in her hair showed that she too was a widow and spoke from experience.

Lady Yi continued. "When I look back now, I realize how naïve I was. But if there was one ray of hope amidst the tragedy, it was that my husband fathered two sons before he died. His parents took a great deal of comfort from that, and it bolstered me as well. My father-in-law took pity on the three of us and told me to seek joy in managing my household. He took the fields and paddies that had been set aside for his second son, land that produced three hundred *seok* in rent each harvest, and placed them in my name. Then he purchased the house right next to their own, decorated it as beautifully as a makeup box, and graciously invited us to move in, providing us with all of the necessary household goods that winter. He even dropped by frequently to check on us. Of course, buying domestic items is only enjoyable when you're doing it with a spouse. Each time I had to buy something for the house, I thought, 'Where is my husband? What am I striving to survive all by myself for?' A rush of sadness would come over me, and my eyes would be blinded with tears.

My parents, on the other hand, sent fresh fruit each season and clothing for the children. They even sent me money to add toward covering our daily expenses, as they thought I must have felt terribly impoverished having to rely on my father-in-law for cash with my husband deceased. Ah, how time does fly! It gave me great comfort to prepare food for his memorial table every morning and evening, and whenever I happened to enter the hall in the middle of the night, the sight of the white hemp cloth hanging from the altar made me feel secure, as if he were watching over us. And soon enough, the three-year mourning period was over. That only renewed my sorrow and left me with indescribable regret and emptiness, which came from the bitterness of not being able to die with him. While I lived on, unable to join him in death, a year passed, and then another, and soon it had been four years. In the eighth month of that year, I was sitting alone in the hall making a new set of clothes to give to my oldest son at Chuseok, when the old lady from Cheomdong, who used to come by the head family's house to do some mending for us, visited with her grandson on her back. She said something about how sad and pitiful it must be for me to be all alone, and then started going on and on about how she knew a certain fine gentleman in Seoul who had just lost his wife and was looking to acquire a young widow, how he didn't care about my family background, how he had a considerable fortune of his own, and so on and so on. I was probably listening to her with only one ear, figuring that there was

no point to the story. But then, a few days later, the old lady came back and started talking about him again. It was so strange the way she never came to the point and instead tiptoed around the subject with me. I too felt the topic was distasteful and pretended not to get the hint. But wait until you hear what happened next! Would you believe she came back a few days later and shamelessly asked if I was interested in him? I yelled at her for asking such a question, and she turned tail and fled. I was so angry that I couldn't sleep for several nights. I felt that everyone was looking down on me, which left me feeling even worse than when I was first widowed. But there's more. The shame didn't end there. I will never forget the date. It was the twelfth day of the ninth month that same year. We had just finished supper, and I was lying down breastfeeding my baby in the main room with the door closed to keep out the cold air. Suddenly I heard a man's voice in the courtyard calling my oldest son's name: 'Sunyeong! Sunyeong!' I thought it was my father-in-law, so I put the baby down and got up. But then I heard the voice call again. My father-in-law's voice is clear and high-pitched, but that voice was deep and sonorous. Something felt very wrong, so I peeked through the door. It was after dark, so I couldn't see him clearly, but I caught a glimpse of a very tall man facing the house with his hands clasped behind his back and a walking stick swaying back and forth between them. He was no one I knew. I became frightened, and in a trembling voice that could barely be heard, I said, 'Somebody, ask him who he is!' When he heard my voice, his face brightened, and he stepped right up to the door. Without a trace of awkwardness, he said, 'Yes, hello! I've come from Seoul!' My voice still shaking, I said, 'Somebody, ask him what he means by he is from Seoul!' Then he stepped inside and said, 'The old lady from Cheomdong should have told you about me. I'm Junior Officer Jang... of Seoul.' He smiled and spoke to me as if we were already acquainted. I was afraid and angry, and said, 'I don't know any Junior Officer Jang of Seoul. How dare you enter someone's home without permission?' Just then, I heard the front gate open, and my mother-in-law entered." At this, the women fidgeted and murmured, "Oh no!" and "Such bad timing!"

"I was like a fish caught in a net. I couldn't jump out or swim away. I didn't know whether this Junior Officer Jang should run out of the house, or run into it instead. Without a clue what to do, he stepped into my room. Of course I wound up falsely accused. My mother-in-law must have noticed right away that something was amiss, because she rushed into my room, eyes wide, and demanded to know, 'What is this man doing here?' She studied my reaction like a hawk. What could I have said? I was so dumbfounded that no words would come out, and I just stood there, not saying anything. Always quick to anger, she rushed at me, grabbed me by the hair, and slapped me on both cheeks. 'You wench! You're bent on ruining this family! You killed your husband when he was in the prime of his life, and since that wasn't enough, now you make a cuckold of him night and day with hordes of men? You slut! You must have had all sorts of men at your beckoning, so you poisoned your husband to make him sick! I could kill you myself. Get out of this house this instant! Leave with him! Go! Go!' She kept demanding that I leave that instant. Who would've dared defy her? Since we were out in the country, the loud shouting drew onlookers—

old, young, men, women, everyone—from all the neighboring houses. They crowded into the courtyard until it was nearly bursting. Even if I'd protested that I was innocent, who would have believed me? I couldn't prove what happened. They were all from the same clan—the Hong of Namyeong—so they'd come together in a flash. Demands that I be kicked out began raining down in all directions. You can only imagine my bitterness! All I could do was turn my eyes to the heavens and beg, 'Please, God, not this!' I'd grown up never having once heard a harsh word from my parents, and yet there I was, being beaten until every inch of me was covered in bruises and my hair was pulled out by the handful. Look at this," she said, pulling back her upper lip to reveal several gold teeth. "I was beaten so severely that my gums were swollen and aching for weeks after. Within six months all my front teeth had fallen out." (She pointed to six of her false teeth.) "That's why I had to have these put in. That day, that very hour, I was thrown out of my home. Of course I lost my children as well. But where was I to go? First of all, I was ashamed that the entire town knew about it. I had no choice but to seek out the home of a distant relative on my parents' side. There I spent the night sitting on the ice-cold floor of the servants' quarters. My hands and feet were so cold that they turned numb, and my breasts became so swollen with milk I could barely stand the pain. I was too upset to cry and too distraught to observe the usual formalities. I no longer cared about what I was supposed to do and, at the first opportunity, I sent a man to fetch my younger child, as if I were kidnapping someone else's baby. The next day, sometime late in the morning, a palanquin entered the courtyard, followed by a smartly dressed man with a foreign hairstyle. I stole a peek and saw that he looked like the man who had barged into my home the night before. As soon as I saw him, I became furious and began trembling like an aspen in the breeze. I wish I could have marched over to him, grabbed him by the collar, and given him the beating of his life. But he gestured pompously at me and told me to get into the palanquin, as if he had come to escort another's wife somewhere. What kind of gutless woman would get in that palanquin? Naturally we exchanged angry words with each other. I called him a swindler for framing me, and he said I had to watch my mouth now that I was his woman. Everything he said made me angrier. When I looked around, onlookers had crowded in on all sides again. What was I to do? I had to leave at once. When I saw how the head family's servants had flocked to watch the commotion, I couldn't bear the shame. My throat locked up, and without even thinking about it, I grabbed my child and fled into the privacy of the palanquin. We traveled for what felt like an endless stretch of time until finally the palanquin was set down before a rundown thatch-roofed cottage in some village deep in the mountains. He told me to get out. Then that horrible man looked at me as if we were friends and asked if I was hungry. Even in my dreams, I could never have imagined such a thing. I was so furious that I wanted to slap him, but I couldn't bring myself to raise a hand to a strange man. And anyway, I didn't dare show my face anywhere else... So we wound up spending ten days or so in that cottage."

The baby's mother, who'd been listening intently the whole time, grinned and said, "When was the wedding? You must have consummated the marriage then and there." Lady Yi hemmed and hawed, her cheeks flushing.

"What would you have done? I don't think I could've done any differently. When I think how I gave him my body then, my teeth chatter with rage. If it were to happen now, I wouldn't care. But at the time, I'd been driven out, having known nothing of the world beyond the inner quarters, and I found myself in a place where nothing, neither water nor mountains, was familiar. If I didn't follow him, how could I have survived otherwise? He caught me and feasted on me. Looking back now, I don't know why I didn't hang myself. I suppose suicide is also fate... Afterward, Junior Officer Jang left, saying he would purchase a house in Seoul and send for me. I stayed there a few more days and then went to my parents' house, despite my shame. As luck would have it, one villager said he was also headed to Pyeongyang. I put my baby on my back and walked fifty *li* for the first time in my life. When I reached my parents' house that evening, my heart was pounding and I was quivering with fear. I was too terrified to set foot beyond the front gate. But I gritted my teeth and stepped inside. Surely they wouldn't know of any scandals that had taken place over eighty *li* from our home! My mother ran out in stockinged feet and said, 'What are you doing here?' My brothers also came running and made a great fuss of taking the baby and ushering us inside. That night, when my father was served his evening meal, he ate only half of his meat and told my brother's wife, 'Give this to your sister-in-law. She no longer knows the pleasures of married life, the poor thing.' He checked on me every night, asking me if the room was too cold. I spent that winter in the lap of luxury, eating well and wearing nice clothes.

Then, before midday on the sixth day of the third lunar month, I was in my room opposite the main room embroidering my father's overcoat. Suddenly my younger brother burst in, nearly breaking down the sliding door, his face blue with anger. He flung a telegram in front of me. Of course I did not know what it said, since I was never taught how to read. I asked his wife, who was sitting next to me, to look at it. She looked over it for a long time and then gave me a strange look and said, '*Aigo*, Sister-in-law! Your child's father passed away, so who could this be from? It was sent to your father. It says that his son-in-law Jang Pilsop is arriving today.' My tormentor had found me again! Just then, we heard an automobile pull up outside the gate. In he strutted, the hem of his Chinese-silk overcoat fluttering around his long legs and his gold-framed glasses shining, right through the inner gate and into the main room like a deaf-mute and sat down at one end of the hall. My mother promptly pulled out a blanket and curled up on the warm part of the floor. My older brothers took flight to the neighbor's house, and I stood trembling in the kitchen, unable to budge. My brother's wife said, 'He's your guest, so you have to go serve him.' I could not argue with that. And what was I to do if someone else came? I had no choice but to go out and lead him to my room. He stood at one end and I at the other, neither of us with anything to say. It seemed the further I went, the steeper the climb; and when it rained, it poured. Of all the moments for my father to return home from three days of memorial services at the head family's house! I heard him go into the

main room and ask my mother why she was lying down. She said she wasn't feeling well. He went back into the hall and was walking around when he noticed the pair of snub-nosed leather shoes sitting on a terrace stone. He called my brother's wife and asked her what that pair of men's shoes was doing there. After a moment's hesitation, she reluctantly said, 'My sister-in-law from Pyeonggang has a visitor.' He said, 'What is she doing with a male visitor, and why isn't he in the master's quarters where male guests belong? Who on earth is that sitting in her room?' Then he yelled, 'Get out here!' Naturally I fled out the back door in fear. When I came to a stop, I felt someone grab me by the hair and hit me on the back of the head as if to break my neck. Shocked, I turned to look. It was my father. He started hitting me wildly up and down, but I was beyond pain. I yelled for my mother to please save me, but no one so much as looked outside. Junior Officer Jang says he still feels pity for me when he thinks of the beating I took that day. Given all that had occurred, he should have stuck up for me. But instead he ran out, jumped into his car, and drove off. I was so ashamed I couldn't even face the servants, and my father badgered my mother and sister-in-law about why they'd let him into the house in the first place. Then he kicked me out. I had no choice. That evening, I was kicked out of my birth home as well. I left with the baby on my back and no destination in mind. My mother followed me for twenty *li*, weeping the whole way. Mother and daughter bade their final farewell in the street. I had nowhere left to turn but to my new husband. But even if I'd known which way Seoul was or how to get there, I had no idea where he lived. I decided that if I had to beg, I'd rather beg with my children, so I made the forty-*li* journey to Cheolweon and snatched little Sunyeong as he was playing outside the house. After that, I came to stay with the family who owns the tavern. When I left my parents' home, my mother gave me three *won* that they'd earned from selling rice. I'd been using that to pay for food, but that trifling amount wasn't enough for us to get by on for very long. Before ten days had passed, it was all gone. What else could I do? From then on, I did mending work and looked after children in exchange for room and board for my sons and me. But listen. Who ever heard of hired help being treated to so much as a bite of warm rice? Instead you're lucky to get table scraps from sundry meal trays after the sun is high in the sky. Some country home! I know I am a mere woman, but I must work so hard that I never have a moment to relax. Five family members sleeping in a one-room house, plus the three of us, means that I might never again be able to loosen my breast-tie and sleep comfortably with my legs stretched out. I've suffered terribly. And yet if they tell me to leave, what can I do?"