THE PRINCIPLE OF TRANSFORMING THE ARCHETYPAL FEMININE IN KOREAN MYTH AND FOLKLORES

CHANG, YOUNG RAN
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES, SOUTH KOREA
MINERVA COLLEGE.
The Principle of Transforming the Archetypal Feminine in Korean Myth and Folklores

Synopsis:

This paper aims to achieve (1) to introduce that different versions of Mago Halmi story has something of a family resemblance via philological studies, (2) to analyze the archetype of the ‘Feminine’ and to establish the mythological significance of the story of Mago Halmi, finally (3) to explain the ambivalence of Mago Halmi by the method of analytic psychology.
The Principle of Transforming the Archetypal Feminine  
in Korean Myth and Folklores

Young-Ran Chang

1. Foreword

In the analysis of Korean myths and folklores, it is difficult to find stories that depict the individual characteristics of mothers. This is because the mothers are socially forced into silence, or die. However, in modern-day feminist Korean discussions, maternal myths featuring the motif of the mother’s sacrifice are at their peak. The principal narrator of the maternal myth is not the mother herself, but the other persona disguised as a mother, or a mother who has been conscientized as the mother. This study analyzes the archetypal image of the mother in Korean myths and folklores and seeks to critically accept and theorize a positive system of values for the modern-day women. However, the recorded lore and literary narratives are massive in volume, making it difficult to deal with the archetypal image of the mother in all sources. Therefore, the works that were selected are well-known in general and have significant numbers of literary studies devoted to them. First, the mythical image of the Korean mother will be explained through comparative analysis between Western myths and the creation myths appearing in the shamanic myths, comparing the major characteristics of the maternal goddess and the human mother. Moreover, this study ultimately focuses on analyzing the discussions of the mother from a perspective of cultural philosophy, instead of literary analysis of Korean myths and folklores, in order to study the archetype and changes in feminine consciousness and the awareness of women.

2. The role of the goddess and the problem of fertility in Korean creation myths

Who is the mother found in the Korean myths? Western myths can largely be divided into procreation myths and creation myths. Foremost, in the Greek myths written by Hesiod, the procreation myths in the West, the virgin birth of the mother god, Gaia, gives birth everything that exists in this world.¹ The thought that this world was born as a mother would give birth to her child signifies that the first god was a goddess, or a mother goddess. The procreation myths can be further classified into two types. In the first type there is only one god, normally depicted as feminine. This is because femininity symbolizes the principle agent of fertility. Thus, these myths tell that everything in this world came to be through the mother goddess giving virgin birth. For example, in Hesiod’s myths, there are no male gods in the beginning, only Gaia, and then she gives birth to offspring. The world is generated by the unions of her offspring. In the second type, more than one god exists in the beginning, and the mother goddess and the father god normally exist together. The first parents engage in union to give birth to countless offspring and form everything in the world. In the Babylonian procreation myths, the father god, Apsu, and the mother goddess, Tiamat, exist at the beginning. They engage in union to give birth many gods. Western procreation mythology, do not depict the process of giving birth to universe worldly formation as a simple natural phenomenon, but compare it to humanity and explain the formation as if parents had given birth to children.

Next, the world creation myths claim that the first god “created” the world, of which the Christian myths are the leading examples. Unlike procreation myths, it is not the “giver of birth”, but the “creator” in the beginning, and, as such, the metaphorical gender of divinity is masculinity. In the Christian myths, it is not the Great Mother but the Great Father who exists in the beginning.² In another case, the Babylonian myths, the new hero god, Marduk, creates the world by slaying the first father

goddess, Tiamat, and by dividing her body to create the world. However, there is no need to think that the characteristics or values of maternity or paternity are described just because gods in the myths of creation or procreation are depicted as mothers or fathers. While explaining how everything in this world came into existence, only comparisons are made to the father or mother; therefore.

Korean cosmogonic myths take a kind of both procreation and creation. First, One myth that can be classified as the classic cosmogonic myths is the Invocation Rituals, passed down on Jeju Island. It explains the origin of the world through the method of division, occurring in a state in which the sky and the earth are not divided but mixed.2

In cosmogonic myths, the division of the sky and earth is a mytheme also commonly seen in the myths of the West. In the Greek myths, Ouranos, the sky god, makes his way down to the earth goddess, Gaia, and is castrated by their son Cronos, resulting in the divide of the sky and the earth.3 In the Egyptian myths, as the sky goddess and the earth god do not wish to separate, the air god, Shu, pushes the sky upward to drive it from the earth. The story of the divide between the sky and the earth is a common mytheme in procreation myths. However, the Korean creation myth, the Invocation Rituals, depicts the world being created naturally, instead of by gods with independent personas who give birth to it. In reality, this myth could be seen as a form of cosmogony, instead of a myth of formation.

Next, in the Korean myths of origin, those that take the form of creation myths have also been passed down. However, the persona of god that is the principal agent of world creation varies. Generally, in the Western cosmogonic myths, this god is depicted as “female,” and “male” in the myths of creation. However, in the Korean myths, female and male gods appear regardless of whether the myths pertain to formation or creation. In particular, the myths of world creation sometimes feature male gods, and sometimes female gods. For example, in the Kim SsangDolee version of the Creation Epic, passed down in the Hamgyong province, Maitreya(彌勒) is featured as the typical god of creation.4 This Creation Epic is unclear in its expression of the separation of the sky and the earth, but it seems that Maitreya plays the role of the god of creation. “Maitreya was born when the sky and the earth were attached; Maitreya pushed the sky up as if it had been the handle of a lid, placed copper pillars on the four corners to prevent them from coming together again, and fixed the number of suns and the moons at one, as the god of creation.”5 In this myth, the first god of the world is a male god called Maitreya.

In the Korean creation myths, there are goddesses and gods. Let us look at the MagoHalmi, the representative goddess of Korean creation mythology. The myth of MagoHalmi had many branches of transmission.6 The MagoHalmi that remains in the form of a myth of creation belongs to a type of tale in which a female giant is responsible for creation. There are remained so many stories, such as one in which MagoHalmi, the giant, creates the mountains and rivers with her hands,7 the mountain peaks by gathering soil from her skirts,8 or mountains and rivers with her feces and urine.9 In the tales of MagoHalmi, when it is said that she created the world herself, she appears as more of a “creator” than a “mother.” This is because she has created the world not through the act of “giving birth,” but instead through the act of “creating.”

In the history of Western myths, those that explain the formation of the world through the act of “giving birth” precede those that explain it through the act of “creation.” The act of “giving birth” to the world by the Great Mother that appears in the beginning of human history occurs when humans and nature are placed in an analogous relationship and is explained in a symbolic manner. However, humans have come to focus on the act of “creating” the world after civilization began developing, which seems to be a method of explanation for later generations. The Great Mother Goddess in the Western myths is not only the being that gives birth to the world, but oversees the balance and order of nature, and exerts total

---

4 Hun Sun Kim, Creation Myths of Korea, Gilbut, 1994. 393-4.
5 Hesiodos, Theogonia, 154-181.
7 Dae-Suk Suh, “Identity of Korean mythology from the perspective of mythology of Northeast Asia”, Asian Comparative Folklore Society Call for Papers, 2007.
10 ibid., 4-2, 813.
11 ibid., 8-8, 125.
power over the lives and deaths of not only plants and animals, but also humans.

However, in the Korean myths of the origin of the world, the goddess has lost her fertility. Why is there no reference to the world’s mother goddess? In reality, this problem may actually have arisen because Korean myths have not been appropriately recorded and documented, and because of cultural differences between the East and West. The image of the “mother” is not reflected in cosmogony. Regarding the cosmogonic myths, the loss of the goddess’ fertility leads us to forget an important characteristic of the expression “mother goddess.” Indeed, this term is not necessarily derived from the process of giving birth to offspring. However, the question of whether or not the mother goddess’ function of “giving birth” is regarded as a fundamental characteristic of women, begs itself in the patriarchal myths of Korea. It is entirely possible for the mythical role of the mother goddess to have been forgotten due to the patriarchal mindset. It leads to thinking that the mother is passive, but the father is active in giving birth to offspring. So the father is the real cause for reproduction.

3. The discovery of female functions and sovereignty in Korean literature narratives and shamanic myths

Who is this being, the mother? The mother forms blood ties through her biological ability to give birth to a child, and forms social ties through her sociological ability to care for the child. This characteristic of the mother that does not appear in the Korean creation myths can be found in Korean heroic myths. However, the problem is that the mother does not have any active character or any quality apart from being the “birth giver.” The mother cannot simply be evaluated based on her ability to give birth. In a patriarchal society, women have the primary goal of giving birth to, and raising, the son who will be the male heir. As such, the values that fit the goals of patriarchal society are idealized and internalized by women. For example, unmarried women are forced to embrace virginity, and married women to be virtuous. In particular, in the case of Korea, if a married woman was unable to give birth, she could be expelled from her marriage, for the reason that she had committed one of the Seven Valid Causes for Divorce.

In extreme patriarchal societies, there are many cases in which women are thought to be tools for childbirth. In Greek myths and tragedy, the idea that the goal of woman’s existence is childbirth is outright prevalent. Iason betrays Medea, but still blames her, saying, “There should be some other way for men to produce children, and there should be no female sex, The mankind would have no trouble.” This reconfirms the reason why men marry women: childbirth. Hippolytos, son of Theseus, hears from a nurse that Phaedra is in love with him, and asks Zeus, “If you wished to propagate the human race, it was not from women that you should have given us this. Rather, men should have put down in the temples either bronze or iron or a mass of gold and have bought offspring, each man for a price corresponding to his means, and then dwelt in houses free from the female sex.” In Korean mythology, women are not regarded as evil, but its perspective sees them only as tools for continuing family heritage.

In Korean myths, there are many cases in which women are featured only in relation to the limited functions of childbirth. Who is “Woongnyeo”, Bear-Woman in the Myth of Dangun? She is a bear, but stays in a cave, away from sunlight eating only garlic and mugwort to become human. The bear wishes to become a human and endures hardship for a certain period of time by her own choice. However, the bear becomes a “female.” What can the bear do, after becoming a woman? Give birth to a child. However, unlike the bear’s wish to become a human, it is not something that the woman can select by herself. “Woongnyeo had no-one to marry, and prayed for a child every day under the Sindan tree. After Hwanwoong became a man, they were married and had a child; the child was called King Dangun.” Woongnyeo completes her role by giving birth to Dangun, son of Hwanwoong. There is nothing else that she achieves as a human, or as a woman. Furthermore, she obtains no unique qualities as a mother.

As for the myth of Jumong, there is room for interpretation regarding the role of the mother.

---

12 Won-Oh Choi, Preceding paper, 1-16.
13 Euripides, Medea, 573-575.
14 Euripides, Hippolytos, 616-624.
Yuhwa (柳花), a daughter of Habaek, is caught by Haemosu while playing with her sisters in a pond. However, Haemosu does not take Yuhwa to the heavens when he ascends. Habaek banishes Yuhwa for disgracing the family, and she is found by King Geumwa and stays in a royal villa. Yuhwa becomes pregnant from being under the sunlight and lays an egg, from which Junong is born. Junong is exceptional from birth, and regarded as dangerous by the sons of King Geumwa. When Junong wants to head south to establish a nation, the mother Yuhwa selects a swift horse and the seeds of five grains, taking an active role—in other words, the role of the holy mother.16

Normally, the mother who gives birth to a hero in Korean mythology is an unmarried virgin. Usually, in the heroic myths, the father is a holy figure, while the mother is a human girl. In the majority of them, the mother’s story usually focuses on giving birth to the hero. In reality, how Woongnyeo gives birth to Dangun, or how Yuhwa gives birth to Junong, takes up the major part of the tale of the mother. After being born from their mothers, the heroes grow up with the exceptional abilities that they inherit from their holy fathers, but the mothers are unable to play important roles. The mother of the hero only plays a biological role in giving birth to the hero, and is unable to actively accomplish the social role of the mother.

Moreover, the mother undergoes a rite of passage called “marriage” as they go through the process of pregnancy and childbirth. However, in the heroic myths, official tales of marriage are often absent. Usually, the virgin mother gives birth through “unofficial” methods of a holy figure or cause. Therefore, heroes often lack an actual or realistic fathers. In reality, the paternal authority often disrupts the potential desires of the son. However, many of the heroes either do not have fathers or are free from their fathers. The hero of Korean myths is an explorer of his own life, building on his sense of sovereignty and free will. He autonomously solves and overcomes all hardships and obstacles he faces in the real world. The hero does not require any being but himself. The hero is himself both father and son. He sometimes appears as the father of a nation, or as its founding monarch.

However, in the majority of heroic myths, the absence of the father does not emphasize the presence of the mother, nor does it converge or merge with the roles of the father. The mother, even in the absence of the father, still plays a passive role. These situations are similarly revealed in Western mythology as well. In the heroic myths of the West, the hero himself often becomes the father of his nation and people, regardless of the presence of his mother or father. In the father’s absence from a family, the mother does not take on his role. Even if the mother exists, the status of the father is inherited by his son. In these myths, the son with a holy father or with no father at all is simultaneously father and son. Therefore, as the mother is subordinated to the father, she is also subordinated to her son.

Unless the role of the mother, as we speak of it in our society, is properly fulfilled, it is difficult to establish the origins of motherhood in the ability to bare children, or the mere fact thereof. Giving birth to a child is insufficient in itself to become a mother, as she must also nurture and raise the child. In a patriarchal society, the mother’s core role is not to give birth, but to nurture and care for the child. Why is raising children prioritized in the mother over giving birth? In a patriarchal society, giving birth is an external phenomenon, but it is the father who “gives birth” to the child. In Korean society, the saying that the “father gives birth to children and the mother raises them” has been practiced unconsciously. Therefore, it would have been thought that the core role of the mother is to raise the child, rather than give birth to the child. In reality, the heroic myths do not bestow an important role on the mother, apart from the biological ability to give birth and to raise children. Mostly, the hero has the wisdom to overcome all hardship by himself. He, by himself, becomes a father and king. In these cases, the mother of the hero plays very few roles or often disappears from the myth altogether.

In Korean mythology, the archetypal image of the mother is expressed in the woman-bear myth appearing in the shamanic myths. We are able to observe the feminine values and principles that have led to the active development of a sense of sovereignty and the attainment of transcendental characteristics, through her role and function as the mother, despite her passive life in patriarchal society. Myths of women contain stories of the role of the “mother” pertaining to her sociological roles, however passive, apart from the mother’s biological functions. We are able to study how the mother independently establishes her life within the limits forced on her by patriarchal society.

---

One defining characteristic of Korean mythology is that humans are able to become gods through hardship. In the Near East, Western, and Greek myths, humans can rarely become gods. Gilgamesh of Babylonia reflects on death and obtains an elixir plant to become immortal, but such efforts are eventually in vain. In the Greek myths, there are cases such as those of Heracles or Asclepios, who are born as humans but become gods, but these are extremely limited and have been glorified by later generations. However, in the tales from the Korean shamanic myths, there are often cases of human-born gods. In “Jeseok Bonpuri,” Maiden Danggeum is banished from her family due to an unwanted pregnancy, gives birth to children in a cave, and is glorified as a goddess. Maiden Danggeum becomes a heavenly angel for her sacrificial life of giving birth to fatherless children, who become the Sambul Jeseok (帝釋三佛), who grant the wishes of all peoples. In “Princess Bari,” Bari leaves for Seocheon (西天, the world of the dead) to save her father who had abandoned her because she was born a girl and, through her hardships and overcoming of them, becomes a goddess who oversees the life and death of the world, as a woman who has sacrificed everything. Surely, when explaining the ontological rise from heroine to goddess, it is said that the woman was originally holy in nature, descended to the human worlds, and has returned. In other words, the goddess is originally a deity, becomes human to overcome obstacles and hardship, and then becomes a goddess again.

4. Conclusion
This paper has examined the characteristics of goddesses and the roles of mothers in Korean myths and folklores, in order to analyze their archetypal image of the mother. The uniqueness of Korean myths of the origin of the world is that the goddess is not exactly a mother goddess. Her appearance comes in the presence of a female god who has lost her fertility, and creates the world in procreation myths. In Western origin myths, the mother goddess is the source of life and the creator of all things; however, in those of Korea, the mother is not the source of “life,” but of “creations.” As such, it does not matter whether the origin of the world is a male or female god. Moreover, the role of the mother in Korean heroic myths and folklores is limited to her ability to bare children, and she does not display any active character or defining characteristics. In a patriarchal society, the purpose of women is to give birth and raise the male family heir. Moreover, most of the mothers in Korean heroic myths are unmarried virgins, become pregnant involuntarily, and are abandoned. The virgin mother undergoes enormous social criticism and pains to give birth to and raise her child and, owing to her heroic son, becomes a holy mother or receives godly blessings. Actually, these folklores are common features of maternal myths and ideologies. In the mothers in Korean myths and folklores, the archetypal image of the mother goddess is modified into a source of life. However, while these women passively accept lives as mothers, in a patriarchal society that oppresses women, they exhibit heroic strengths to overcome hardships and obstacles, and confirm their potential to develop a sense of sovereignty, within a limited range, through moral reflection and decision.