If femininity thus emerges as a historically and socially situated cultural construct, which is open to multiple contestations, it is useful to consider how women writers, both as women and producers of new cultural meanings, have responded to patriarchal representations of femininity. Although women writers have been active throughout modern Korean history, the fact that they have sometimes been writing about (and as) women has not meant that they have automatically succeeded in creating effective counter-discourses to existing ideas about femininity. In some cases they have arguably not even aspired to do so. In fact, the way femininity is represented in twentieth century Korean women's fiction is very descriptive of how difficult it is to imagine alternatives to existing phallocentric ideas about femininity.

This difficulty stems in part from the position that Korean women writers, as opposed to male writers, have occupied within the field of cultural production. The fact that the writers are women has typically prompted critics to search for some specifically feminine qualities in their texts, whatever those might have been defined as at a particular time in history. Among critics both inside and outside Korea, there has thus been a tendency to segregate women's literary works from those of men on the assumption that the specificity of women's writing arises from some innate biological reason that somehow predisposes women to write in 'feminine' ways. In the context of Western symbolic imaginary, feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, have explored and evaluated how women are affected because of the way they are positioned in relation to language that itself is essentially phallocentric. Their ideas build, to an extent, on Jacques Lacan's idea that human subjectivity can be
conceptualized in terms of the symbolic (the unconscious, deep structure of language and meaning), the imaginary (the realm of fantasies and images), and the real (that which lies outside all signification).\(^1\) But because patriarchal symbolic order only recognizes the existence of one dimension of human subjectivity, its language too is underpinned by a morphology of patriarchy.\(^2\) Consequently, women are always disadvantaged in one way or another in relation to language. Hélène Cixous, an author herself, has argued that this is both an opportunity and drawback for literary women. On one hand, women seem more versatile because of their ability to tap into creative powers that seem transgressive because women already are in some ways writing language that is essentially phallic (or phallogocentric, as she terms it). On the other hand, the downside of this might be that this kind of writing may also be so different that it will not be understood by the general reading public, not to mention publishers who of course control what gets published in the first place.\(^3\)

In the field of cultural production this dictates who possesses the power to decide on what constitutes ‘good’ literature. Take the Korean literary establishment for example. Since Korean male writers and literary critics have typically been, until very recently, at the forefront of defining the parameters of what constitutes ‘good’ literature in terms of literary expression and subject topic, women writers have been disadvantaged on two fronts. Firstly, they have had to write in the language of patriarchy, and one that inherently might even be considered as a tool of their very oppression. Lastly, because of the embedded phallocentricism in culture that presents gender relations as a fixed structure, women’s own texts about women and femininity have also been evaluated within a discourse that assumes that humanity is conceptualized as male. It is no wonder then that throughout the twentieth century Korean literary history women writings have been received with no little ambivalence: there has been a tendency to either praise women’s works for the extent to which they describe ‘human experience’ (itself understood as male) or more recently, for women’s ability to write about that strange, yet fascinating quality called ‘femininity’ that still seems to somehow escape that which is considered normative human experience.

In fact, the following discussion on how Korean women writers in the twentieth century sought to engage with discourses of femininity shows how difficult it was for women writers to create counter-discourses to existing representations of femininity, given their own position in relation to both the male-centred language and literary establishment. For women writers, the task at hand