

Book Review – *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2020); Cho Nam-Joo

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Despite the many strides and acts of transcendence within the last 100 years, discrimination based on gender remains a persistent phenomenon, often covertly, in many societies today. Observed based on biological, cultural, philosophical, or socio-political factors, gender inequality refers to the process by which men and women are not viewed or treated as equals, resulting in socio-economic divergences between both genders. Studies have shown that elevated gender inequality is often attributed to ultra-conservative societies or linked to meagre socio-economic conditions.¹ Nonetheless, it is not strictly confined to such environments. Novelist and former television scriptwriter Cho Nam-Joo demonstrates such realities in *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. This relatively short tale, first published in 2016 and adapted for film in 2019, chronicles some of the main challenges experienced by the protagonist, Kim Jiyoung, and her life as a woman and mother in South Korea – a country widely recognized today for its socio-economic prosperity and modernism.

The novel is primarily divided into slim accounts of Jiyoung’s childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, and marriage. Narrated in chronological order by her male therapist, Jiyoung’s story as an ordinary woman driven to the point of mental derangement provides a compelling account of South Korean women’s experiences in a country still plagued by severe structural discrimination based on gender. While the novel serves a crucial purpose by contextualizing gender relations in a developed country such as South Korea, it also acts as a wake-up call, especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the current health crisis has exposed women to increasingly adverse circumstances such as grappling with widening pay gaps, taking

¹ Pamela Waldron-Moore & Leslie R. Jacobs, “Gendered Inequity in Society and the Academy: Policy Initiatives, Economic Realities and Legal Constraints,” *Forum on Public Policy* (2010): 1, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ903473.pdf>.

on most of the labour at home and on the frontlines, and, in many cases, losing employment altogether.²

From an early age, Jiyoung and her older sister struggled with gender discrimination in its many forms as they traversed through different chapters of life – school, employment, and marriage. Jiyoung’s first encounter with gender discrimination was not out in the world, but at home; she recollects being occasionally reprimanded by her grandmother for digging into her younger brother’s milk formula. To her grandmother, boys and their affairs were virtually sacred and off-limits, leaving Jiyoung confused and uncertain about the roots of such unfounded bias. But such biases were not unfounded, at least to most South Koreans. The novel paints South Korean culture as one based on patriarchy and male dominance, allocating significant preference to boys over girls and men over women in most socio-economic and bureaucratic affairs. In school, Jiyoung experienced discrimination in class, during lunch breaks, and over dress codes. Despite the lucidity of such biases, “Jiyoung had a hard time voicing her complaints because she wasn’t used to expressing her thoughts.”³ According to the novel, this lack of the ability of girls and women to cast doubt on those biases had been the norm, exemplified over other areas such as “why men’s national registry numbers begin with a ‘1’ and women’s begin with a ‘2’ ” in South Korea.⁴

Nevertheless, such realities were not exclusive to Jiyoung’s generation alone. Before her, Jiyoung’s mother and grandmother also experienced, and at times, indirectly abetted, gender inequalities within social interactions, work, as well as in child-rearing and home-making responsibilities. In a highly unequal society driven by males’ superiority over females, boys’ birth was widely preferred over girls. Indeed, “it was a time when people believed it was up to the sons

² Troy Stangarone, “COVID-19 Has Widened South Korea’s Gender Gap,” *The Diplomat*, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/covid-19-has-widened-south-koreas-gender-gap/>.

³ Nam-joo Cho, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2020), 31, Kindle.

⁴ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 33.

to bring honour and prosperity to the family, and that the family's wealth and success hinged upon male success."⁵ Such dispositions capitalized on abortion – legalized based on medical complications since the 1970s – eventually leading to a significant increase in female abortions as “common practice, as if ‘daughter’ was a medical problem.”⁶ As a result, these activities led to a highly imbalanced male-to-female ratio as abortion of females soared in the 1980s and early 1990s. By the year 1990, there were approximately “116.5 boys born to 100 girls.”⁷ Under such circumstances, Jiyoung and her sister were considered lucky to be allowed to live, since it was not long before Jiyoung's mother succumbed to societal pressures and “erased Jiyoung's younger sister” from existence out of deep frustration with not conceiving sons.⁸

During her adolescent years, Jiyoung was exposed to more implicit forms of discrimination. As most girls reached puberty around seventh or eighth grade, Jiyoung observed that some of her friends' families celebrated the milestone by hosting parties with cakes and flowers for their daughters. But to Jiyoung's family, like most South Korean families, a female's menstruation “was a secret shared only among mothers and daughters – an irritating, painful, somehow shameful secret,” forcing family members to avoid naming it or directly referring to it during conversations.⁹ As Jiyoung grew older, she began to get exposed to the many facets of gender discrimination through her friends' experiences and eventually her own during school and later, employment. The novel highlights an instance when Jiyoung thought she was being pursued by a suspected ‘predator’ on her way home late at night. Upon reaching safety, she was scolded by her father, who, instead of taking his daughter's side, proceeded to instruct her on ‘lady-like’

⁵ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 25.

⁶ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 20-21.

⁷ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 36.

⁸ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 21.

⁹ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 40.

dressing etiquette, before holding her responsible for not doing more to avoid potentially dangerous places and people. In this instance, Jiyoung experienced her first instance of ‘victim-blaming,’ a distinctive aspect of gender inequality that many women and girls continue to experience worldwide to this day.¹⁰

Upon Jiyoung’s graduation from college in 2005, a poll determined that “only 26.9 percent of new employees at 100 companies were women.”¹¹ As the novel points out, the drivers behind such patterns followed a two-fold logic: preferential hiring practices towards males were grounded in the fact that men deserved compensation for years lost during military service and their assumed prospects of leading future households. But it was also because, as experienced by one female character in the novel, companies found smart, determined women “taxing,” in contrast to the type of female employee preferred by most CEOs – submissive and undemanding.¹² It is no doubt then that, as the author demonstrates through footnotes, South Korea ranked quite poorly amongst the OECD countries concerning gender wage gaps. In 2014, South Korea was titled “the worst country in which to be a working woman” as per the Economist’s glass-ceiling index.¹³ As of 2020, East Asian women faced “a ceiling that appears to be made of bulletproof glass,”¹⁴ with South Korea taking the last place on the index. According to the latest data, South Korean women earn, on average, 35% less than their male counterparts and fill only one in seven and one in 30 leadership and board positions, respectively.¹⁵ Such statistics confirm the argument that rapid development and modernization are not always considered antidotal to social diseases such as gender inequality.

¹⁰ Alexa Karczmar et al., “Changing the Culture of Victim Blaming,” *Women’s Health Research Institute*, accessed December 2nd, 2020, <https://womenshealth.obgyn.msu.edu/blog/changing-culture-victim-blaming>.

¹¹ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 64.

¹² Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 65.

¹³ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 84.

¹⁴ The Economist, “Go North, Young Woman,” 2020, <https://www.economist.com/business/2020/03/07/go-north-young-woman>.

¹⁵ The Economist, “Go North, Young Woman.”

Certainly, Jiyoung's marriage and her daughter's birth pitted Jiyoung against a myriad of unfavourable challenges. Even after years of struggle to break the glass ceiling, Jiyoung's child-rearing responsibilities trumped all else, forcing her to quit her job to dedicate herself as a full-time mother. Furthermore, Jiyoung's husband was not of much help, especially as he casually offered to "help out" with parenting responsibilities during times of need.¹⁶ Naturally, Jiyoung pondered why he kept offering to 'help out' as if he was "volunteering to pitch in on someone else's work."¹⁷ Unfortunately, for women who chose their families over their jobs, the prospect of returning to the workforce immediately becomes immensely more complicated since "more than half of the women who quit their jobs are unable to find new work for more than five years."¹⁸ However, it was not until one day while out on a stroll with her infant daughter that Jiyoung reached her breaking point. According to the narrator, that took place after she was called a "mum-roach" – slang for married, unemployed mothers or wives who allegedly live on and squander their husbands' hard-earned money. This moment was one of deep hurt for Jiyoung as she suddenly felt awfully discredited, and her career and family sacrifices unfairly overlooked. Following that incident, Jiyoung was never the same. Her frequent brushes with family and society over the years, combined with the culmination of her suffering after strangers made the insensitive mum-roach reference, were likely suspects behind Jiyoung's descent into madness as she struggled to cater to the countless demands of the many different parties in her life, eventually breaking her sanity. In the words of her psychiatrist:

¹⁶ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 97.

¹⁷ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 97.

¹⁸ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 107.

*“Jiyoung became different people from time to time. Some of them were living, others were dead, all of them women she knew. No matter how you looked at it, it wasn’t a joke or a prank. Truly, flawlessly, completely, she became that person.”*¹⁹

One issue that stands out in the fact-based novel is its lack of a stronger emphasis on the prevalence of sexual harassment in South Korea. While the novel identified a few instances in Jiyoung’s experiences as sexual harassment, the author fell short of augmenting such a crucial part of the picture through facts and data as she had done with other facets of gender inequality. Particularly, the novel fails to highlight the fact that “sexual assault and harassment are persistent forms of gender-based violence that are rooted in gender inequality.”²⁰ In South Korea, the latest figures indicate that “the percentage of sexual harassment crimes were an alarming rate of 98% of the assaulters being men and of the victims, 86% were shown to be women.”²¹ More worrying still, the “sexual harassment crimes rate for reported sexual crimes stand at an astonishing rate of 3.4 reported cases every hour,” with the majority of reported incidents taking place in the workplace.²² Indeed, the inclusion of such a vital component would have strengthened an already unusually valuable novel, one that received quite the attention in the conservative Asian country.²³

Still, albeit sounding monotone and particularly undramatic throughout, Cho’s novel’s perhaps most striking advantage had been its timing. 2016, the year the novel was first published in Korean, was a tense year of reckoning for South Korea. It coincided with the murder of a South

¹⁹ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 113.

²⁰ Canadian Women’s Foundation, “Sexual Assault and Harassment in Canada | The Facts,” accessed December 2nd, 2020, <https://canadianwomen.org//the-facts/sexual-assault-harassment/>.

²¹ Hanyang Dis University, “Sexual Harassment in South Korea,” accessed December 2nd, 2020, <http://dis.hanyang.ac.kr/lyceum-vol-1/sexual-harassment-in-south-korea/>.

²² Hanyang Dis University, “Sexual Harassment in South Korea.”

²³ Shin Joon-Bong, “Bringing to light the subtle sexism in modern Korea: Cho Nam-joo’s book reflects the discrimination many women face daily,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, September 5th, 2017, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3038016>.

Korean woman in a suspected hate crime, paving the way for major gender equity reforms, which were further augmented by the arrival of the ‘MeToo’ movement in South Korea two years later.²⁴ Moreover, Nam-Joo’s novel also sheds light on the link between gender inequality and mental illness, often understudied and overlooked in most scholarships and policy-making procedures, yet highly contributive to the plight of women worldwide.²⁵ It is in this respect that Cho’s novel does not merely emphasize the troubles of everyday Asian women. Rather, it serves as a wake-up call for Western societies, presumed leaders on women’s rights and equality, who often ally themselves economically and politically with many Asian, African, and Middle-Eastern governments who subject their female citizens to severe gender discrimination in almost all dimensions of life without preconditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exposed the world, and especially women, to several new challenges and threats. However, it has mostly pronounced existing social disorders much more than it has created new ones. With that reality in mind, the novel provides a timely perspective into the unique world of women and the countless difficulties they have endured for many centuries. As gender issues ebb and flow worldwide, the onus is on Western leaders to demand and secure more gender reforms from their non-Western partners. Realistically, however, such demands can only do so much if people and institutions remain unwilling to see change. At one point, Jiyoung wonders, “do laws and institutions change values, or do values drive laws and institutions?”²⁶ Like Jiyoung, the novel is guaranteed to strike its readers with not only the urge

²⁴ Rukhsana Shama, “Korea urged to improve sexual harassment law after Seoul mayor’s death,” *The Korea Times*, July 28th, 2020, https://koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2020/07/176_293226.html.

²⁵ Shoukai Yu, “Uncovering the hidden impacts of inequality on mental health: a global study,” *Translational Psychiatry* 8, 98 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41398-018-0148-0>.

²⁶ Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 89.

to ask such questions but also, hopefully, instill them with the impulse to find answers in the face of persistent social dilemmas and outdated gender stigmas and sentiments.

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