



Genderism, Sexism, Otherness: A Study of the novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

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Abstract— Women make up almost half of the world's population, nearly 49.73 per cent. However, they endure discrimination in multiple ways. They face sex and gender discrimination worldwide. Even with advancements in education, employment, and political representation, women remain victims of systemic inequalities stemming from both gender and sex discrimination. This research paper discusses the marginalisation of women in their homes, schools, and workplaces. It studies the discrimination of women in society through Cho Nam-Joo's novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which reflects the lived experiences of numerous women confronting patriarchal systems in modern society. This study employs a qualitative research methodology. It aligns with critical theoretical frameworks, such as genderism, sexism, otherness, and feminism.



Keywords— Gender Discrimination, Sex Discrimination, Otherness, Ostracisation of Women, Women's Plight

I. INTRODUCTION

It is unfortunate that in the 21st century, women are still fighting for their fundamental rights. They face discrimination in the spaces where they are meant to feel safe and supported. They remain undervalued in their homes. They are treated as second-class students at their schools. They are being ostracised in their workplaces. This discrimination seems unending. Globally, we hear stories of the various struggles and suffering of women. This paper discusses the plight of every girl and woman in their life.

This paper studies Cho Nam-Joo's novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. The novel focuses on the oppression that women have to endure even before taking birth till the end of their lives. Cho Nam-Joo uses her own experiences in the novel. She focuses on the gender stereotypes that hold a woman accountable for the well-being of the family. A woman has to give up on her dreams for the welfare of the family. Jamie Chang translated the novel into English.

The novel is set in South Korea. However, it tells the story of every woman in the world because, globally, women

face the same conditions and discrimination, as shown in the novel. Nam-Joo depicts the lives of South Korean women, representing all women. Because worldwide, the sufferings of women remain the same. All female characters in the novel represent every woman in the world who has had to give up on her dreams and life choices, either because of sex discrimination or gender discrimination.

There is a slight difference between sex discrimination and gender discrimination. Sex discrimination is based on biological factors. It is the unequal treatment of persons based on their sex (male or female). This biological bias continues throughout the life of every individual. Gender discrimination is rooted in the history of culture and traditions. It emerges from the societal construction of feminine and masculine attributes and the socially constructed gender roles. According to conservative ideology on gender and social roles, gender is based on the sex of a person. In contrast, thinkers and social reformers assert that gender is a societal construct. Despite the trivial difference, these concepts mingle to contribute to the

plight of women. This cooperation leads women towards the state of Otherness.

A feminist theorist, Judith Lorber, asserts about the initiation and enforcement of genderism in her book, *Paradoxes of Gender*,

‘As a social institution, gender is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives. Human society depends on a predictable division of labor, a designated allocation of scarce goods, assigned responsibility for children and others who cannot care for themselves, common values and their systematic transmission ... One way of choosing people for the different tasks of society is on the basis of their talents, ... The other way is on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity—assigned membership in a category of people. Although societies vary in the extent to which they use one or the other of these ways of allocating people to work and to carry out other responsibilities, every society uses gender and age grades. Every society classifies people as "girl and boy children," "girls and boys ready to be married," and "fully adult women and men," constructs similarities among them and differences between them, and assigns them to different roles and responsibilities. Personality characteristics, feelings, motivations, and ambitions flow from these different life experiences so that the members of these different groups become different kinds of people. The process of gendering and its outcome are legitimated by religion, law, science, and the society's entire set of values. (Lorber, 1949, p. 15)

This assertion points out that the roles of males and females are socially assigned by society. While assigning these roles and duties, the skills and potential of individuals are ignored. This discriminatory structure of society benefits men and often ignores the significance of women. Ironically, women justify and protect this structure more than men do. This patriarchy propagandises women. In the household, elderly women pass it on to the younger generation.

They teach the lesson of morality differently to the girls and the boys. They teach girls that they must learn to do all the household chores, and boys are expected to go outside the house to earn a living. They instruct them to perform their duties respectively towards the welfare of society without questioning. They instil the notion that each gender is meant to fulfil different roles. Additionally, it has become a societal standard that every gender is expected to cultivate distinct traits. According to them, boys are supposed to be more rational, assertive, ambitious,

dominant, protectors and providers of the family. In contrast, they expect girls to be more nurturing, passive, domestic, and obedient so that they can stick to their duties of childcare and homemaking without questioning.

These teachings have a significant impact on the minds of individuals. Women are always treated as less than men everywhere. At home, at school and in workplaces, they face worse discrimination. In Kim Jiyoung's family, her grandmother embodies conservatism. Kim Jiyoung shares that when her mother was pregnant with her, her in-laws stressed her, and over-pressurised her with their desire to have a boy child. The same thing happened when her elder sister was born. Instead of congratulating her, her mother-in-law said,

“It’s okay. The second will be a boy.”

When Kim Jiyoung was born, Oh Misook held the infant in her arms and wept. “I’m sorry, little girl,” she’d said, hanging her head.

Kon Boonsoon repeated warmly to her daughter-in-law, “It’s okay. The third will be a boy” (Cho, 2021, p. 17).

The birth of a girl is never seen as a celebration in their eyes. Oh Misook, the mother of Kim Jiyoung, felt terrified and anxious about the prospect of having a third child, especially if it were not a boy. The thought of having yet another girl in succession was unthinkable for her. Her husband was equally unprepared to consider such a possibility. He prohibited her from even contemplating this idea. Oh Misook grew increasingly tense and decided to abort her third pregnancy if it was not a boy.

Oh Misook went to the clinic by herself and ‘erased’ Jiyoung’s younger sister. None of it was her fault, but all the responsibility fell on her, and no family was around to comfort her through her harrowing physical and emotional pain. The doctor held Oh Misook’s hand as she howled like an animal that had lost its young to a beast and said, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Thanks to the old lady doctor’s words, Oh Misook was able to avoid losing her mind. (Cho, 2021, p. 19)

Although she was not prepared to terminate her pregnancy, societal pressures surrounding the preference for male children led her to end the life of her baby girl. Mothers of boys gain societal respect, while those who have daughters often face sympathy and ridicule from their in-laws for not bearing a son. People frequently voice their worries about how parents will manage in old age and their need for someone to care for them. They believe that only a son can adequately look after ageing parents and bring stability to the household, viewing daughters as incapable of fulfilling

these roles. This mindset is the fundamental cause of gender discrimination that occurs within the family.

This bias extended beyond the household; it was more severe in public spaces. They faced numerous challenges in educational settings and even in the workplace. The management at Jiyoung's school played its part in making the female students' lives difficult by keeping a stricter dress code for girls than for boys.

The skirt had to be long enough to cover the knees and roomy enough to hide the contours of the hips and thighs. As the thin, white fabric of the summer blouse was rather sheer, a round-neck undershirt was mandatory. No spaghetti straps, no T-shirts, no colors, no lace, and wearing just a bra underneath was absolutely not allowed. In the summer, girls had to wear tights with white socks, and just black tights in the winter. No sheer black tights, and no socks allowed. No sneakers, only dress shoes. Walking around in just tights and dress shoes in the middle of winter, Jiyoung's feet got so cold that she wanted to cry. For boys, the trouser legs could not be too tight or too loose, but everything else was generally overlooked. (Cho, 2021, p. 42)

It was more restrictive for girls. They were unable to play, run, or feel comfortable in that dress. In the effort to protect girls from the male gaze and maintain discipline on the school campus, their comfort and happiness were neglected. The school administration focused solely on reassuring the guardians of female students about the safety of the school environment. They showed little concern for the physical and mental development of the girl students. This situation illustrates how authority and culture can disregard the needs and wants of women. During the school years, every child needs to engage in play, run around, and learn from their mistakes to promote the healthy development of both body and mind. Imposing such rigid rules stifles their growth. Even their guardians were not concerned about it. One day, a girl has to raise her voice for her rights,

"You think girls don't play sports because they don't want to? We can't play because it's uncomfortable to play wearing skirts, tights, and dress shoes! When I was in elementary school, I went outside every break to play red rover, hopscotch, and skip rope" (Cho, 2021, p. 43)

After that, teachers began to give girls a little liberty to play dress up comfortably. Usually, people impose their stricter rules on females without considering their needs. These beliefs stem from a mindset that expects women to sacrifice their peace and happiness for the sake of dignity.

These points lead towards the concept of sex discrimination. As Catherine MacKinnon talked about Sex discrimination in her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination* (1979). "This approach to inequality is marked by the understanding that sex discrimination is a system that defines women as inferior from men, that cumulatively disadvantages women for their differences from men, as well as ignores their similarities" (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 116). This statement of MacKinnon is proved when we study that the female students were able physically and mentally to play and take part in sports. However, their abilities were underestimated and overlooked by the school management. In the same way, women are capable of contributing more to the welfare of society than to childcare and housekeeping. It is the result of both sex and gender discrimination that, despite being more talented in their work, women get fewer opportunities than men. Even if they are more likely to succeed in their careers, they may have to quit and sacrifice their jobs to provide a better upbringing for their children or to ensure the welfare of their families. Because of these patriarchal limitations, the abilities of women have been shrunk to the house.

Oh Misook have been working and supporting her family since she was an adolescent. First, she and her sister financed her brothers' studies. Later in life, she supported her whole family with her husband. When her husband lost his job, she supported the family on her own. She was the fourth of the five children in the family. Their parents were more concerned about the studies and careers of the boys in the family. Instead of giving every child the same opportunities, they sent Oh Misook and her sister to work in a factory so that their elder brothers could study. Her parents thought that the future and reputation of their family depended on the career and success of their sons. Oh, Misook and her sister earned money for the family at a time when they should have been studying, and no one even appreciated them. They supported their elder brothers financially and received no credit.

When her older brothers, the ones she was so proud of she would often brag about them to her friends at the factory, began to earn a living, they put the youngest boy through school. He attended a teacher training college in Seoul thanks to their support, and the eldest was praised for being the responsible first-born son who brought honor to the family through his own success and provided for his family (Cho, 2021, p. 25-26).

In the midst, Oh Misook and her sister, who sacrificed themselves, did not receive any praise. No one even thought about their study; in the end, they were both

admitted to the school on their own. Even after working harder than their brother, they were not considered the harbinger of respect and prosperity to the family. The only cause behind this was that they were the daughters, not the sons, of the house.

This constant discrimination gives birth to the feeling of otherness in the minds of girls. They start questioning their self-worth and place in society. At every point in their lives, they are put second to boys. Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, stated, “History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchy they have thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other” (De Beauvoir, 1953, p. 159). This quote highlights the subordination of women by the institutionalised patriarchal system. Beauvoir emphasised the notion of otherness that is the result of ingrained patriarchy. Women are not perceived as individuals; instead, they are seen and treated as secondary and derivative beings. That keeps them in the state of otherness.

When Jiyoung was young, her mother used to make a special formula for her little brother. Jiyoung was also fond of the formula, but she and her elder sister, Eunyong, were forbidden to have it, as it was only for the son of the house. Even if they tried to have it, their grandmother used to scold them. They were not allowed to have anything that was for their brother,

Their grandmother wasn't scolding them just because they were too old for formula or because she was worried there wouldn't be enough formula for the baby. The combination of her tone, expression, angle of head tilt, position of shoulders, and her breathing sent them a message that was hard to summarize in one sentence, but, if Jiyoung tried anyway, it went something like this: *How dare you try to take something that belongs to my precious grandson!* (Cho, 2021, p. 14-15)

Jiyoung endured all these situations with a smile and happiness. She became a master of dealing with these situations. Despite all the discrimination, she and her sister studied well because of their mother, who made sure not to compromise with their studies and careers. Kim Jiyoung got a job at a firm after graduating, after many failed tests and interviews. In a very short period, she became one of the hardworking, promising and nascent employees. She wins the appreciation of her head as well as her colleagues in the office. She was the deserving employee to be part of a bigger project, but instead, the management team

prioritised male employees, who joined with her, and have not proven their abilities yet.

. . . the men were picked because the planning team was a long-term project. The head of the company knew that the nature and intensity of the marketing agency job made it difficult to maintain a decent work-life balance, especially if childcare came into play, and therefore he did not think of female employees as prospective long-term colleagues. (Cho, 2021, p. 111)

At the office, she and her female colleague were typically assigned more complex tasks than their male colleagues. She initially thought that it was because she is more capable of handling things and doing more work, which makes her a better employee. However, she later discovered the reason behind it. “That was the reasoning behind giving the more high maintenance clients to Jiyoung and Kang Hyesu. It wasn't their competence; management didn't want to tire out the prospective long-term male colleagues from the start” (Cho, 2021, p. 111-112).

The authority of the office treats female employees as temporary workers because they were all sure that after a certain point in time, the female employees would have to leave the job for childbirth or childcare. They used to give them less money and more work than the male employees. “She also learned that the guys were paid better from the very start, but that information stirred very little in Jiyoung, who'd filled the day's quota of shock and disappointment” (Cho, 2021, p. 112). Over the years, it has become a norm in the employment industry that women are paid less than men. “. . . studies have found a remaining difference between men's and women's salaries of between 20 and 43 percent, a difference which can be explained only as discrimination” (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 14). It is the same till today. The employers consider that women are not the breadwinners of the family; they work to pass the time. Many thinkers strongly oppose this point. Catherine MacKinnon challenges the notion, “Nor can working women be ignored as economically unimportant because they are supported by a man. Women work because they need the money” (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 15).

By paying women low salaries, companies save a significant amount of money and make a big profit. “It has been argued that women are a reserve labor force for capitalism, that women's generally lower wages provide extra surplus to a capitalist employer” (Rubin, 1975, p. 160). At the same time, it has a more significant negative point in women's lives. Even after working outside, they remain dependent on the males of the family, as their salaries are not enough for them to run the house on their

own, compared to their male colleagues. “The conclusion is unquestionable: women, as a definable social group, are disadvantaged in employment” (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 14). A smaller salary is a crucial point behind women quitting their jobs. They become more vulnerable to quitting their jobs and giving up on their careers. Moreover, the family members begin to expect them to work more at home.

They are expected to perform duties at home and think about the upbringing of the children. They are expected to manage all household chores and caregiving responsibilities, even if she has a heavier workload at the office. This is why many women are compelled to give up their careers after having children. Nam-Joo also shares the statistical data of women quitting their jobs because of household and childcare duties,

In 2014, around the time Kim Jiyoung left the company, one in five married women in Korea quit their job because of marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and childcare, or the education of their young children. The workforce participation rate of Korean women decreases significantly before and after childbirth. (Statistics Korea, 2015, as cited in Cho, 2021, p. 133)

Jiyoung’s life reflects the argument. She also had to give up on her “youth, health, job, colleagues, social networks, career plans and future” (Cho, 2021, p. 124) after having a child. “Her career potential and areas of interest were being limited just because she had a baby” (Cho, 2021, p. 152). It highlights that in a patriarchal society, women’s careers and abilities often shrink after childbirth because of the preconceived gender-based notion that compels women to give up their choices and follow the patriarchal norm of society. On the other hand, man has all the privileges at the office as well as at home. They are treated respectfully, and everyone considers their valuable contributions. They received immense respect and were taken care of. This ingrained discrimination has become a part of the culture and the structure of society. Whether it is because of their sex or gender perceptions of society, in both cases, it’s only women who suffer, sacrifice, and conform. For women, these kinds of discrimination go hand in hand.

In every period of their life, they are taught to perform accordingly. In childhood, they are forbidden from asking for the same treatment as their brothers. In adolescence, they are forbidden to wear clothes that they like, as they can attract the male gaze. At a young age, they are forbidden to choose their desired careers. When they are mother, they are instructed to give less to their daughters

than their sons. Until they intentionally become a part of the patriarchy.

This paper talks about the plight of women and the tragedy of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, it sheds light on workplace discrimination, the neglect of unpaid labour, challenges stemming from patriarchal standards, and the inadequacies of education in promoting gender equality through an analysis of Kim Jiyoung’s life experiences.

This paper employs a Qualitative text analysis research methodology. Through the study of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, this paper sheds light on the ingrained sex and gender discrimination in society through theoretical lenses such as Gender Studies, Feminism, and Sexism. It proves the argument by citing scholars and theorists like Simone De Beauvoir, Judith Lorber, Gayle Rubin, and Catherine MacKinnon.

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