



Research Paper

The Psycho-social ‘Everywoman’: Deconstructing the Concept of Selfhood in Cho Nam-joo’s *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*

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ABSTRACT: *Kim Jiyoung is a woman; she is ‘everywoman’ within whom other women emerge to voice her un verbalized thoughts. Her identity being at stake, the question thus arises: Who is Kim Jiyoung? By implementing Erik Erikson’s theory of ‘Psychosocial Development’ assisted by George Herbert Mead’s theory of ‘Self’, my argument regarding the dissociation of identity during Jiyoung’s sudden outbursts being the result of years of systemic sexism, locates its roots. The objective of this paper is to assess society’s consequential impact on the psychological development of a young girl, continuing to play its role in contributing to shape her psyche as a grown woman, resulting in a slow, steady yet sharp decline which ultimately leads to question the authenticity of the process behind the formation of one’s identity.*

KEYWORDS: *Everywoman, Identity, Psychosocial Development, Psyche, Systemic Sexism, Self*

Received 14 Sep., 2024; Revised 27 Sep., 2024; Accepted 30 Sep., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cho Nam-joo, an eminent South Korean author and an ardent advocate of women’s rights in the patriarchal South Korean society, proves her merit through her path-breaking novel in the genre of Feminist literature, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016). Drawing partly from her own life experiences after having to resign from her job after childbirth, Cho Nam-joo, in this psycho-social document, decides to not only tell the story of an ‘everywoman’ but the story of every woman as she deftly sows her protagonist, Kim Jiyoung’s journey with the thread of oppression faced by innumerable women in the patriarchal society. The term ‘everywoman’, as defined by Cambridge Dictionary, means “a woman who is very typical and ordinary” and Kim Jiyoung is an average everywoman leading a run-of-the-mill life. The term ‘Systemic Sexism’ can be defined as that which, unlike individual acts of sexism, operates at a broader level within social, economic, political, and cultural structures, and Jiyoung’s seemingly ordinary life is underscored by systemic sexism; Kim Jiyoung is a woman whose father blames her for being stalked by a male classmate on her way home, she is denied a better position at job because the head of hiring does not consider women as long-term employees and she is called ‘*똥충*’, which loosely translates to “mum-roach” (Cho 153) by strangers for enjoying a cup of coffee while taking a leisurely stroll at the park with her baby. Unable to cope with the impact left by years of misogyny Jiyoung breaks down mentally, dissociating from herself, adopting the identities of other women, voicing the rage she forever suppressed.

II. METHODOLOGY

Kim Jiyoung’s crisis in personality development could be effectively studied by implementing Erik Erikson’s theory of ‘Psychosocial Development’ along with George Herbert Mead’s ‘Theory of Self’ which is essential to assess society’s impact on her identity formation. The identity confusion that Jiyoung faces is not an overnight phenomenon but the result of years of repressed rage. Hence, when she finally hits rock bottom, she adopts the identities of every woman she witnessed suffering yet retaliating; for them to voice the injustices she has quietly endured. With the assistance of the aforementioned theories by Erikson and Mead, this paper aims to dissect and decode the stages in which Jiyoung faced difficulties during the process of her personality development and to track down the roots of the crisis in the social interactions as experienced by her against the backdrop of South Korea’s patriarchal society.

III. ERIK ERIKSON'S THEORY OF 'PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT'

Erik H. Erikson, a Neo-Freudian Psychoanalyst who coined the term 'Identity Crisis', in his book *Childhood and Society* (1950), expounded that to become a complete human being with a healthy personality, a person must go through eight stages of development, beginning from infancy to old age. This theory is known as 'Psychosocial Development' which modified Freud's 'Psychosexual Theory of Development' by proposing that personality develops throughout the lifespan as one grows and associates with the society instead of focusing only on the childhood stages like Freud's theory. According to Saul Mcleod, "For Erikson (1958, 1963), these crises are psychosocial because they involve the psychological needs of the individual (i.e., psycho) conflicting with the needs of society (i.e., social)" (Mcleod). As mentioned in chapter 7 of *Childhood and Society*, the "Eight Stages of Man" (Erikson 119-234) are:

- i. Trust vs. Basic Mistrust (Infancy)
- ii. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (Early childhood/Toddler)
- iii. Initiative vs. Guilt (Play age/Preschool age)
- iv. Industry vs. Inferiority (School age)
- v. Identity vs. Role Diffusion (Adolescence)
- vi. Intimacy vs. Isolation (Young adulthood)
- vii. Generativity vs. Stagnation (Middle adulthood)
- viii. Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Old age/Late adulthood)

To develop a well-rounded personality, one must successfully resolve the psychological conflict present in each of the stages before moving onto the next; otherwise, crisis can occur which might hinder the ability to complete the succeeding stage, resulting in an underdeveloped personality and poor sense of self.

IV. KIM JIYOUNG: DEVELOPMENT AND CRISIS

In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, Cho Nam-joo presents Kim Jiyoung's story as a psychiatrist's case record being narrated by the psychiatrist himself who has been conducting Jiyoung's counseling sessions. The chapters are divided according to the different phases of her life, from birth till the present, focusing on the environment in which Jiyoung was brought up and describes in detail her feelings and thoughts during the different phases of her life to analyze the reasons which led to her breakdown. The chapters are sorted as:

- Autumn, 2015
- Childhood, 1982-1994
- Adolescence, 1995-2000
- Early Adulthood, 2001-2011
- Marriage, 2012-2015
- 2016

The arrangement of the chapters allows us to delve into an in-depth examination of Jiyoung's personality development from a psychological perspective and we will do so by implementing Erikson's theory to her case in an attempt to locate the unresolved crisis in each of the developmental stages which might have led to her psychological breakdown.

- i. Infancy (Birth-1 year), Trust vs. Basic Mistrust:

During this stage, the child relies on the affections of the caregiver. If the caregiver responds to the needs sincerely, the child develops a sense of trust and hope, whereas neglect and inconsistency in care leads to a sense of mistrust. Kim Jiyoung, being the second girl child in a family which was hoping for a boy, foreshadows the treatment which she might have received during this stage. Jiyoung's grandmother's desperation to have a grandson landed as a weight on Jiyoung's mother, Oh Misook's shoulders as she says, "I'm sorry, little girl" (Cho 17) to the newly born Jiyoung. Becoming pregnant less than a year after the birth of Jiyoung with a three-year-old daughter and an unsupportive mother-in-law, it would be safe to deduce that Jiyoung might not have received the best care during this stage.

- ii. Early childhood/Toddler (1-3 years), Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt:

In this stage, the child gains a sense of independence and explores skills like putting on clothes, playing with toys, etc. Encouraging the child to do small tasks independently renders a sense of autonomy and self-confidence. However, overly criticizing the child leads to a sense of shame and self-doubt which later develops into a sense of inadequacy. Jiyoung in this stage is like any other child; curious about her environment. "Jiyoung's earliest childhood memory is of sneaking her brother's formula" (Cho 13), however, she is smacked by her grandmother whenever she is caught having some because she dared to take what belonged to her "precious grandson" (15). The favoritism towards the younger brother is evident as he gets all things new while "the girls shared" "whatever was available" (15). The frequent criticisms transformed her innocent excitement into shame, obstructing the development of a healthy self-esteem, while the clear favoritism towards her younger brother made her doubt her worth in the family creating "an increasing sense of being small" (Erikson 223).

- iii. Play age/Preschool age (3-6 years), Initiative vs. Guilt:

During this stage there is rapid development in the child. An encouraging environment gives the child freedom to take control, accomplish challenges unassisted, inducing a sense of purpose in them. If a child is discouraged from performing activities independently and is led to believe that one has no control over one's environment, the child develops a sense of guilt. Watching her mother take up odd jobs, to bring in some extra income to add to her father's meagre salary while taking care of the household and the family of six, developed a sense of helplessness in little Jiyoung as she could only sit near her mother and watch her work and at times, trying to help as much as she could. However, the feeling of guilt weighs down upon Jiyoung when she discovers her mother's unfulfilled dream of becoming a teacher because she has "to work to send you kids to school" (Cho 27), making her feel like "a rock, small but heavy...holding down her mother's long skirt train" (27). The lack of control over the situation made her blame herself for being the obstacle holding her mother back.

iv. School age (7-11 years), Industry vs. Inferiority:

This stage takes place during elementary school and is crucial for a child to develop a sense of competence as the school environment becomes a microcosm, for the child "now learns to win recognition by producing things" (Erikson 226) by communicating effectively and becomes industrious. Appreciative feedback from teachers and parents instills a sense of confidence and motivation to achieve goals. Negative feedback, on the other hand, gives rise to "a sense of inadequacy and inferiority" (227). Erikson opines, "Many a child's development is disrupted when family life may not have prepared him for school life, or when school life may fail to sustain the promises of earlier stages" (227). Kim Jiyoung's initial school experience was marked by the pranks of a male classmate including hitting her and hiding her belongings which "felt more like harassment or violence" (Cho 28). In an incident when he gets Jiyoung in trouble, the teacher, without properly evaluating the situation, rebukes her in front of the whole class which initiates a sense of inferiority as "Jiyoung couldn't speak up" "a word in her defense" (29) since she began to consider her side of the story insignificant. In the third grade, the lunch system scared a "slow eater" (33) Jiyoung as she got chided by the teacher which turned the morsel of food "into a lump in her throat" (33). Hence, Jiyoung's school experience was far from encouraging as she begins to face "a hard time voicing her complaints" (34).

v. Adolescence (12-18 years), Identity vs. Role Diffusion:

This stage marks the entrance into the age of puberty during which adolescents search for a sense of self-identity and the failure to do so results in a lack of aim in life. With rapid physiological changes, they "are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are" (Erikson 228). Jiyoung's first experience of gender discrimination happens at her school which was formerly all girls, becomes co-ed, and, turns severely strict towards the dress-code to be followed by female students while staying lenient towards the male students. If protested, it was the female students who were punished for misbehavior. The incident of being stalked by a classmate who "deluded himself into thinking she was flirting with him" (Cho 55), shocks her as her father accuses her saying, "It's your fault" (56). The only sympathy during this distress comes from the woman who helps her, "It's not your fault" (56). Jiyoung's identity confusion occurs as she attempts to deduce the role of women as a whole while examining what she is supposed to be in a society that is evidently patriarchal.

vi. Young adulthood (19-29 years), Intimacy vs. Isolation:

This stage is important for an individual to form meaningful relationships for emotional fulfillment with an intention of long-term commitment. Finding someone "with whom one is able and willing to share a mutual trust" (Erikson 231) is the goal. The failure to create such a bond, due to earlier unresolved trust issues, results in isolation and a sense of alienation. Hitherto, in all the previous stages, Jiyoung has faced crisis in solving the conflicts. Hence, in this stage too, she falters to do the necessary i.e., effectively communicate her feelings. Jiyoung develops a trait of withdrawing herself whenever there seems to be unrest in the relationship. The first relationship with her college boyfriend sinks as she fails to understand the behavioral changes in him caused by stress and anxiety, common in army returned individuals. Similarly, the second relationship crumbles due to a misunderstanding that Jiyoung had no intention to resolve. Several attempts in dating failed thereafter because "she didn't feel close to any of them past a certain point" (Cho 108).

vii. Middle adulthood (30-64 years), Generativity vs. Stagnation:

In this stage, individuals try to contribute to society through establishing careers or marriage and procreation; the goal is to leave one's mark in the society. Individuals who can do something personally or, socially productive achieve a sense of generativity whereas those who fail to produce something meaningful, suffer from what Erikson calls "interpersonal impoverishment" (231) or, stagnation i.e., a sense of being stuck. During this stage, Kim Jiyoung steps into conjugal life and has a daughter. From a social perspective, Jiyoung seemed to have attained generativity. However, personally she felt like "bargaining something away" (Cho 124) and that 'something' was her career. Being coerced into becoming a stay-at-home mother, abandoning her ambitious future is the final nudge that pushes her off the cliff, mentally, leading to identity dissociation.

viii. Late adulthood (65 onwards), Ego Integrity vs. Despair:

In the last stage, individuals reflect on the lives they lived. The “acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be” (Erikson 232) leads to a sense of fulfillment and not doing so leads to dissatisfaction towards life. Witnessing Jiyoung’s psychological deterioration occurring in the previous stage at the age of 33, the point where the author concludes the text, leaves no hope for this stage to be resolved successfully.

V. MEAD’S THEORY OF ‘SELF’

George Herbert Mead, an American philosopher and sociologist, in his book *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) theorized that an individual’s identity i.e., the ‘self’ emerges from interacting with the society; “it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience” (Mead 135). In chapter 22, Mead distinguishes the two phases of the ‘Self’; the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’. The ‘I’ is self as subject which is spontaneous and is necessary to express oneself, whereas the ‘Me’ is self as object which is the “organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes” (175), necessary to get recognized as a member of the community. As social creatures who grow and function as a part of a society, human beings are bound to create a public identity by accepting and adhering to the already established social rules. However, human beings also require to have personal perspectives which assist to differentiate themselves from the herd and assert their thoughts. One without the concept of ‘Me’ would struggle to establish one’s identity publicly while one without the concept of ‘I’ would struggle to establish one’s individual identity. An individual has to balance the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ without letting one overpower the other since one’s individuality or, the ‘I’ is crucial to assert one’s personal thoughts whereas the ‘Me’ is necessary to act accordingly in a social situation and an imbalance between the both could either distort one’s self-image or, affect social behaviour. Hence, both components engage in an intra-psycho level to form responses for maintaining the correlation between society and the individual.

VI. ‘I’, ‘ME’ AND KIM JIYOUNG

In Kim Jiyoung, the social ‘Me’ seems to overpower the individual ‘I’. Throughout the text she often finds it difficult to voice her opinions; when she feels the favouritism towards her brother is unfair, she does not complain as “she was accustomed to rationalising things” (Cho 15); when protesting against the school lunch system, she “had a hard time voicing her complaints” (34); when she overheard her collegemates trash-talking about her character “she held her tongue” (80); when asked an offensive question during an interview she gives a safe answer only to contemplate later, “I should have spoken up” (90); and when relatives openly suspected health problems while investigating her difficulty in conceiving “she held in” (121) her feelings. During these numerous social interactions through the various stages of life, the social self gradually takes over her individualism as she fails to “evolve out of the consideration of a problem” (Mead 197) and assert herself. Jiyoung’s indecisiveness reflects through her tendency to be irresponsive and her indecisiveness is the result of never getting a chance to develop a sense of self-confidence in the way of self-expression. It is evident through her experiences that Jiyoung possesses the capability to measure the gravity of the situations and she does, in fact, logically ponders over the responses suitable for the given situation. However, what she lacks is faith in herself i.e., the ‘I’. Hence, covertly, she examines the situations rationally but overtly, reacts how the society would expect her to and thus, dilutes her sense of selfhood in the process.

VII. AN ‘EVERYWOMAN’ SYMBOLIZING EVERY WOMAN

In *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, the protagonist Kim Jiyoung becomes a mouthpiece for all the woman who face discrimination in the everyday walk of life highlighting instances ranging from the private sphere such as home and conjugal life to the public sphere such as educational institution and workplace. The everyday discrimination she faced at school, at workplace or in daily life are not situations unfamiliar to an ‘everywoman’ but experienced by every woman. In a survey done by *The Diplomat*, over 60% of Korean women agreed to have been a victim of everyday gender discrimination, whereas a survey done by *The Korea Times* showed a shocking gender wage gap of 31.2% in 2022 which was twice the OECD¹ average of 12.1% in 2023. Another survey done on 1481 women by Kim Seongju et al., 39.91% suffered from PPD² with one of the major factors being the society-imposed expectations to become good mothers. Throughout Jiyoung’s life, she manages to hold herself together, regardless of the sexism and discrimination, because of her ambitions that are snatched away from her after childbirth which leaves her sanity with nothing else to clutch onto. When Jiyoung suffers from a mental breakdown, she impersonates the identities of the women she has witnessed suffering yet retaliating in their own ways; something which Jiyoung could not do for herself i.e., speak up. It is important to note that Jiyoung adopts the identities of women to express herself instead of the identities of men who asserted their dominance over her. This highlights the sense of security she feels in her own gender and an intense urge to defend and protect this very sense of security. Jiyoung dissociating as her mother signifies her longing to be seen and to be treated as

¹ Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

² Postpartum Depression

someone's daughter by her in-laws besides being a wife to their son and a mother to their grandchild. Dissociating as her deceased college senior, Cha Seungyeon, whose straightforward attitude she immensely admired, she expresses her desire to be appreciated for taking upon the role of a new mother and doing her utmost best by the person she loves, her husband. Hence, dissociating as her mother, she reminds her mother-in-law to "let our daughter come home when your daughter comes to visit you" (Cho 11), and as Cha Seungyeon she reminds her husband, "You should tell her every chance you get: You're doing great! You're working so hard! I appreciate you!" (4). Thus, Cho Nam-joo encapsulated the varied experiences of discrimination endured by every ordinary woman in the character of Kim Jiyoung.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In an attempt to dissect Kim Jiyoung's development of personality, we happened to dissect the patriarchy that flows in the roots of the society and that is where Cho Nam-joo's brilliance lies. Instead of narrating Jiyoung's story from her own voice, she opts for a third person narration and that too from the point of view of a male psychiatrist who can only convey the facts from a clinical perspective but cannot understand the feelings from a social perspective. It is only when we thoroughly examine the sexism that occurs daily, that we often disregard as commonplace, that we can gauge the impact that it leaves on the unconscious. It is only with time that those repressed feelings either break out of the confinement in the form of retaliation or, in the process, break us from within, which is what happens to Jiyoung. Cho Nam-joo thus, through this novel, simply and soberly attempts to convey "what it means to live as a woman" (Cho 157).

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