

## Book Review

### ***Please Look After Mom* by Kyung-sook Shin**

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All humankind, despite countless differences and diversities, has one thing in common: we come from a woman's body we call "mother." This may no longer be true someday in the future, but for now it is still a universal human truth. Since this is part of the human experience, it begs the fundamental question, "What is a 'mother'?" This question is as necessary, and even obligatory, as one that has opened up a new generation of feminist discourses in the latter half of the twentieth century: "What is a woman?" As we were so carefully taught by our feminist mothers, "to state the question" is already a preliminary answer because the performance of asking itself is momentous. So we have been insatiably trying to imagine and define what a mother is what mother is, how she creates, destroys, has an eternally-impossible-to-know relationship with her child or children, naming her Abject for the sake of the economy of words. The notion of Mother as Other—the impossibility of knowing her—renders the very ground for still vigorous feminist's inquiries: what is a mother? Are there mothers, really? If so, where?

Kyung-sook Shin's internationally acknowledged novel *Please Look After Mom* asks the above questions upfront and answers immediately: "Nobody Knows." A mother is missing; the given information from the very basic fact, like the date of birth, is no less inaccurate and unknown than a splitting headache, breast cancer, or her secret male friend. The whole book is a saddened, heavily guilt-ridden eulogy which gradually discloses the multi-layered life of the missing mother. Nevertheless, it is only when she is missing, perhaps dead, that she is seen, read, and known. Literally, no sooner had she emerged above the screen (or in between the sliding subway door) than she was gone. Her life is only remembered, recaptured, retold, and reconstructed by her guilty family members (selfish children and an unfaithful husband) whom she has

looked after, “mothered” all her life. The eldest daughter, the first “You” character in this mother novel, orchestrates the first chapter (“Nobody Knows”) of this tragic symphony of searching and longing in vain: her first and foremost, and perhaps most guilty child Hyong-chol does not even voice out his memoir but rather is hidden behind the third person narration in the second chapter which is ironically titled “I am sorry, Hyong-chol”: in the third chapter, “I’m Home,” the unforgivably blamed husband is also whispered out as “You” with a touch of pity and mercy. Finally, last but not the least appears the first person “I” when the third “You” character (the youngest of all now with her own three children) repeats and re-presents her missing mother’s life in the fifth chapter “Another Woman.” In the end they ask in turn: “Please look after Mom.” This belated asking, as is easily predicted, turns out to be impossible since it is “after” the event. The mother is vigorously and penitently followed, traced, and “looked up” only after her life, at her absence.

For this reason, this story has often been an easy prey for far-advanced feminist critics as well as well-read modern readers of our time. This book, in many ways, seems to default on the promissory note that has guaranteed the unalienable Rights of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” insofar as mothers are concerned. One may as well say, now is the time to burst out the remaining discontent and seek righteous redemption for the unearned suffering of mother. How unfathomably unfashionable in the twenty-first century to behold the mystery and myth of the Mother! Thus one reviewer must have felt that she had a right to dispute this melodramatic fiction by calling it “cross-cultural self-pity,” and “the cheap consolations of kimchee-scented fiction.” (Surely if we focus upon the cover design of the first published international version of the story, it looks somehow apt to associate with the cheap Orientalist paintings with which many contemporary readers seem to be disappointed and even irritated. But, alas, the kimchee related comment makes us imagine an effect that the confident critique could not have expected: if a novel is scented with kimchee, how wonderfully well written it must have been. The author should be fluttered by that.)

Apparently, *Please Look After Mom* may not be the best among many recent Korean novels or even among the author’s. However this is a

text that not just sold more than a million copies but sells a new way to look at women, in particular, Korean women who have been through the cinematic kaleidoscope of violent historical events: the World Wars, their country's civil war (known simply as "The Korean War" the division of the Korean peninsula, the reconstruction of a nation, the fearful and painful march for democracy, etc. History has been foreign to her; its deviation was only real in the name of poverty, lack of education, endless toil, and sacrifice. Let us remember that mother Park So-nyo (literally meaning Little Girl) is from nowhere else than a small rural area called "Jeongeup" and speaks, although not overtly enough, the never-to-be-translated dialect of the Jeolla Province of South Korea.

If anyone is informed of what happened to the citizens at Kwangju, Jeolla, in 1980; of the brutal treatment of the people dreaming of freedom and democracy; and of the anger, resentment, and blame for the loss of the innocent young souls (many of them were not even aware of what they fought and died for as much as the ignorant mother was), it is not difficult to picture this mother's isolation as a mere woman multiplied by the specific historical/geopolitical background of South Korea in the twentieth century. Although this novel is not directly connected with the Kwangju Massacre we have a glimpse of the aftermath of the historical turbulence through the mother's life. How proud and happy she was when she followed her daughter to participate in "a funeral" (presumably a groundbreaking event in the 80s), without knowing "who was that young man who caused so many people to gather?" Nevertheless she wished at least for her youngest daughter "to be free from everything" since she was the only child who was "free from poverty."

And with that freedom, you often showed me another world, so I wanted you to be even freer. I wanted you to be so free that you would live your life for other people.

Then says she "I think I'll go now."

But then where does she go? Precisely speaking, where is she? Is there really a she who is called 'Mother'? As stated earlier, "Another

Woman” is the only chapter where the first person “I” (the Mother) appears, but “I” is posthuman, a bird, a ghost, a voice. “Maybe it’s related to the bird that was dead in front of the gate yesterday,” speaks softly the youngest daughter’s young daughter. The fourth, the most educated, the freest child and her children hold the bird’s funeral, and the granddaughter prays “Amen!” promising (etymologically speaking) to *be firm* and *faithful*, and to *believe*. In fact, the freest child is yet far from free, still bound to responsibilities (as a mother) and disadvantages (as a woman, a Korean woman, a woman from Jeolla etc.). When we trace the voice from heaven knows where, we are not so much searching for the eternal Mother myth as trying to look for/after the exact person, a woman named Park So-nyo. Her appearance may not be by far distinguished among the short, salt-and-pepper haired grandmas with typical Asian cheekbones; but failing to identify her with a person, singular and unique, is due to the lack of first-hand knowledge and experience as to how women in Korea have suffered and survived in the midst of “important” historical events and movements. If anyone reads this text looking for irony and a comic twist, *Please Look After Mom* is a complete failure: but it is the reader’s failure to see what she/he has been missing. Even in this modern world where the majority of readers (who are still in fact minor in number) are adequately instructed in resolute ideas about the individuality and autonomy of life, there still exist women who live up to what we call a “Han”-ful life and leave without regrets. “Han,” a peculiar Korean literary sensitivity, comprises both sadness and hope, and never loses joy, or what is called “Heung.” Under the most wretched condition is always heard a humming melody and indefinable rhythm to which they would dance. Mostly “they” are far from the nobility, merely poor and weak, and having no power to fight against oppression. However, while dancing as if lying prostrate before a harsher wind that blows, they leave their voice, as a bird’s singing (or rather crying when translated in Korean), a cow’s mooing, in a daughter’s writing, or a granddaughter’s whispering. *Please Look After Mom* is the voice of the Other, who endlessly speaks to You as if “her story were piled inside you, in endless stalks.”

*Biographical Note:* **Jung Min Woo** received a Ph. D. in English at the University of Warwick (UK) in 2006. She currently teaches at Duksung Women's University in South Korea. Major research works include modernism, contemporary British fiction, cross-cultural literature, and contemporary literary theories. E-mail: littlewooga@duksung.ac.kr