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The Mundaneness of Oppression: Translation, Silence, and Reception in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*

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Abstract

With the enduring difficulty in translating narratives of suffering, it is rare for a novel focusing on gendered trauma to achieve the same level of success as Nam Joo Cho's *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, the second book from South Korea, which became a million-seller in 2016. The novel employs a sparse narrative style, almost clinical in its delivery and often perceived as 'bland' by many non-Korean readers, which resists western understandings of fiction. This article examines how the novel's English translation negotiates structural irony, narrative ambiguity, and cultural idiom in its representation of gendered trauma. It questions how silence is constructed as a narrative strategy, and how it is mediated and interpreted in translation. Methodologically, this article combines close textual analysis with a reception study and content analysis of a selected sample of Goodreads' reviews to evaluate readers' responses to the novel's sparse, bureaucratic narrative style and documentary footnotes. Drawing on feminist translation theory and reception theory, this article demonstrates how silence serves as a deliberate strategy to counter epistemological violence in the Korean text. While the translation mostly preserves structural irony, reader reception reveals the complex terrain of translational ethics. The article ultimately presents translation as a site where cultural legibility, feminist politics, and reader expectation intersect, unveiling its possibilities and limitations.

Keywords: Hallyu, translation, gender studies, digital reception, epistemic violence, neoliberalism

Introduction

The global circulation of contemporary Korean literature has risen rapidly in parallel with the *Hallyu* wave, the popularity of South Korean popular culture through its drama, music and other cultural exports.[1] The slim 2016 novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982,* written by former television scriptwriter Cho Nam-Joo, has become an unlikely cultural anchor in South Korean (hereafter, Korean) feminism and a linchpin in global gender discourse.[2] It was unexpected

[1] Sarah Shaffi, 'Why fiction from Korea and Japan has become so popular with English-language readers,' *The Booker Prizes*, 10 May 2024. https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/why-fiction-from-korea-and-japan-has-become-so-popular-with-english#:~:text=While%20Japanese%20literature%20in%20translation,books%20in%20English%2Dlanguage%20countries.

[2] Elise Hu, 'South Korean Bestseller 'Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982' Gives Public Voice to Private Pain,' *NPR Weekend Edition,* 19 April 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/04/19/835486224/south-korean-bestseller-kim-jiyoung-born-1982-gives-public-voice-to-private-pain.

for such a simple novel about a mundane Korean female experience, narrating the life of the titular character from her childhood to adulthood, would become the second Korean book to sell more than one million copies and ignite national-level protests, debates, and boycotts, while also being translated into more than eighteen languages. Then-President Moon Jae-in famously received the novel from a party leader.[3] This public endorsement, along with the support from several K-pop idols, including the popular bibliophile Namjoon of BTS, significantly boosted the book's popularity. Ironically, a lot of female celebrities like Irene of Red Velvet were famously cancelled for endorsing this book and 'coming out' as feminists.

Through its translations into various languages, Kim Jiyoung enters the arena of World Literature, circulating beyond its culture of origin and existing in an elliptical space shaped by both its origin and receiving cultures.[4] The work of literature in this realm is not static, but transforms as it is reinterpreted into different contexts, and the critical standards gleaned from one literary tradition might not apply to another.[5] Literary studies in the era of globalisation have become divided between worldwide openness and communitarian closure, negatively affecting the commonality of features that define literary knowledges.[6] Within this discourse, it is interesting to examine responses to translation as ideological reactions arising from the dynamic interaction between distinct cultures. The theory of Comparative Literary Variation was developed by Cao Shunqing as a response to the theoretical and literary flaws of Eurocentric reading and shifts its focus to heterogeneity by analysing how literary works change in form and meaning when adapted into different languages and cultures.[7] The balance between staying true to the source language and being marketable to the target language is a major point of contention in translation.[8] Moving away from the idea of the ideal literary reader towards a 'real reader' would allow for a more complex and perhaps complete understanding of what succeeds and fails in the process of translation.[9]

The book's global reach through Jamie Chang's 2020 English translation led to divisive reviews.[10] While the book gained major global popularity and appeal, the prose is occasionally reviewed as 'clinical,' 'bland,' and 'flat', pointing out the titular character's passivity as a

[3] Kwon Mee-Yoo, 'How feminist book 'Kim Jiyoung' became million-seller,' *Korea Times*, 2 December 2018, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/books/20181202/how-feminist-book-kim-Jiyoung-became-million-seller.

[4] David Damrosch, 'World Literature, National Contexts', *Modern Philology* 100, no. 4 (May 2003), 514. https://doi.org/10.1086/379981.

[5] Revathi Krishnaswamy, 'Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization,' *Comparative Literature* 62, no. 4 (2010), 415. https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-2010-024.

[6] Didier Coste, 'Introduction: Cosmopolitan Reading, How and Why?' *A Cosmopolitan Approach to Literature: Against Origins and Destinations*, ed. Didier Coste (Routledge, 2023), 1.

[7] Cao Shunqing, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* (Springer, 2013).

[8] Cao Shunqing and Lu Zhai, 'The Variation of Chinese Literature and the Formation of World Literature,' in *Cultura. International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology* 19, no. 2(2022), 18.

[9] Elke Brems and Sara Ramos Pinto, 'Reception and Translation,' in *Handbook for Translation Studies,* vol. 4, ed. Luc Van Doorslaer and Yves Gambier (John Benjamins, 2013), 146. https://doi.org/10.1075/hts.4.rec1.

[10] Nam Joo Cho, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982,* tr. Jamie Chang (Scribner, 2021).

narrative lack.[11] Intentional creative choices to keep the novel academic and serious have often been read by audiences as emotional detachment and poor writing. Translation is not merely a cross-cultural transfer but also an ideological one, in which ideology involves the beliefs, ideas, and values of a community, with parameters such as historical considerations, societal changes, connotations of gender, sex-biased stereotypical ideas, and the socioeconomic status of the referent.'[12] The divergence of the text's reception in its target language invites deeper inquiry into how gendered trauma travels through translation, especially when it is expressed through cultural forms of silence and restraint.

This paper explores how *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* resists western understandings of fiction by deploying a sparse and clinical narrative style. The novel employs style as a form of resistance against hegemonic discourses by mimicking bureaucratic coldness and formality, and utilising calculated precision to overcome notions of female 'hysteria.' The novel's global reception reveals the aesthetic and ethical challenges of discussing and representing gendered traumas across national and cultural borders. Drawing on work in feminist translation theory and reception theory, in this article I examine the complex terrain of translational ethics by analysing how this translation negotiates cultural contexts and narrative ambiguity while employing silence as a textual strategy. I also examine how the translation succeeds or fails in conveying epistemological violence and its defiance. I also interrogate online reader reviews and comments as sites of reception, revealing the horizon of expectations that shape interpretation. Ultimately, the paper argues that this translation enables and distorts the novel's politics by circulating a feminist Korean text globally while distorting epistemic nuance.

Feminism and gendered trauma in South Korea

South Korea ranks one hundred and first out of 152 countries in terms of gender equality.[13] As a strictly patriarchal Confucian society, Korea discriminates against women based on the fact that men inherit the legacy of the family and its name.[14] To maintain harmony and be accepted by society, women were historically relegated to the background as objects, seen as a responsibility and, through their duty towards the family, the basic unit of Confucian Korean society.[15] This led to the reinforcement of patriarchal systems such as the now-discontinued *Hoju* system, a registration system which positioned only male heads of family at the centre of the family registry. This system was outlawed in 2008, a comparatively recent development. Democratisation led to an increase in feminist movements and legislation, raising questions about the principles of human dignity and international gender rights

[11] Mukherjee, Anusua. 'Everywoman's narrative: Review of Cho Nam-Joo's 'Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982',' in *The Hindu*, 11 April 2020, https://www.thehindu.com/books/everywomans-narrative-review-of-cho-nam-joos-kim-jiyoung-born-1982/article31307644.ece.

[12] Uwe Kjær Nissen, 'Aspects of translating gender,' in *Linguistik Online* 11, no. 2 (June 2002), 31. https://doi.org/10.13092/lo.11.914.

[13] Global Gender Gap Report, *World Economic Forum*, 11 June 2025, https://www.weforum.org/publications/gender-gap-report-2025/.

[14] Tomasz Śleziak, 'The Role of Confucianism in Contemporary South Korean Society,' *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 66, no. 1 (2013), 39.

[15] Marian Lief Palley, 'Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change,' *Asian Survey* 30, no. 12 (December 1190), 1140, https://doi.org/10.2307/2644990; Kyung Ae Park, 'Women and Development: The Case of South Korea,' *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (1993), 134, https://doi.org/10.2307/422348.

discourse, prompting administrative reforms such as the abolition of *hoju*.[16] There has been progress in governance and policymaking, but the inherently patriarchal ideology, developed over centuries of exploitation and division, has yet to change.

Prevalent anti-feminist sentiments in Korea were challenged through 'an epic battle between feminism and deep-seated misogyny,'[17] involving online activism. *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* was published at a time of mounting tensions within the South Korean gender discourse. A key moment was the rise of the hashtag #iamafeminist in February 2015, which countered prevalent anti-feminist sentiments in Korea.[18] With the rise of feminist websites like Megalia and its radical offshoots, WOMAD and the 4B movement, a resurgence of feminist activism, dubbed a 'feminism reboot,' came to the forefront around this time.[19] The internet was turned into a public forum for the discussion of gender-based violence, especially that perpetuated through technology like the brutal 'nth room case', where underage girls were sexually enslaved and exploited through the encrypted social media platform Telegram.[20] The book sparked controversy because it came out just a few months after the Gangnam Station murder on 17 May 2016, when a thirty-four-year-old perpetrator, Kim Seong-min, stabbed a twenty-three-year-old woman who was a stranger to him because he felt ignored by women.[21] Irene, a member of the popular girl group Red Velvet, experienced heavy backlash from male fans who burned her merchandise for aligning with feminism. This further led to an increase in gender-based discourse within South Korea. The rise of feminism has also led to a rise in misogynistic social discourse, turning digital media into a battleground for a range of gender issues. If privilege and power fail at protecting celebrities, where do regular women lie?

Apart from gender-based violence, women in the modern age are also subjected to precarity and hardship caused by the neoliberal capitalist order. After the 1997 Asian Financial crisis, the frustrations of all young Koreans have been highlighted through neologisms such as '800,000 won generation' (reflecting the low monthly salary of around $750) and 'Hell

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[16] Eon-ha Park, 'The Abolition of the *Hoju* System and Intergenerational Conflict in South Korea,' *Intergenerational Relations and Future Generations - Theory, Empirics, and Policy*, ed. Andrzej Klimczuk (IntechOpen, 2026), 3.

[17] Isabella Steger, 'An Epic Battle Between Feminism and Deep-Seated Misogyny Is Under Way In South Korea,' *Quartz,* 21 July 2022, https://qz.com/801067/an-epic-battle-between-feminism-and-deep-seated-misogyny-is-under-way-in-south-korea.

[18] Jinsook Kim, '#iamafeminist as the "Mother Tag": Feminist Identification and Activism against Misogyny on Twitter in South Korea,' *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 5 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1283343.

[19] *Megalia*, Megalian.com (now defunct); WOMAD, www.womad.life.; Jieun Lee and Euisol Jeong, 'The 4B movement: envisioning a feminist future with/in a non-reproductive future in Korea,' *Journal of Gender Studies* 30, no. 5 (2021), 634, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1929097; Hee Jeong Sohn, 'Feminism Reboot: Korean Cinema under Neoliberalism in the 21st Century,' *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 12, no. 2 (2020), 99, https://doi.org/10.1080/17564905.2020.1840031.

[20] Yoonjung Seo, 'Dozens of Young Women in South Korea Were Allegedly Forced Into Sexual Slavery On An Encrypted Messaging App,' *CNN,* 28 March 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/27/asia/south-korea-telegram-sex-rooms-intlhnk/index.html.

[21] '강남역 한복판서 '여자들이 나를 무시했다' 묻지마 살인' ('Women ignored me' motiveless crime in the middle of Gangnam Station), *Sports Kyunghyang,* 18 May 2016, http://sports.khan.co.kr/bizlife/sk_index.html?art_id=201605181037003&sec_id=560901.

Joseon' (reflecting the death of the Korean neoliberal dream and the decline of progress)[22]. However, such narratives often leave out the doubly marginalised women who suffer by gender and economy. On top of this, misogynistic discourse since the 2010s targets young women and blames them for the recession and the challenges to masculinity.[23] In an era where women face continuous marginalisation and oppression, feminism has become a tool to survive and succeed in a precarious neoliberal capitalist society and to provide a collective affiliation that empowers women and helps them navigate everyday discrimination.[24] This paper looks at how *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* explores these themes of feminism in South Korea and how this exploration is perceived in translation.

Methodology and theoretical framework

The ethical problem in translation lies not just in linguistic transfers but in the mediation of affect and experience. I employ qualitative reception analysis, close reading, and textual analysis to examine the English translation of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, by the Korean American award-winning translator Jamie Chang, as a literary text that serves as a meaningful regional book with global impact. My reading draws on feminist translation theory, positioning translation as a site devoid of neutrality and innocence, rather it is situated within relations of power, culture and ideology.[25] The study situates the novel within its original context and analyses its narrative features, including tone, structure, narrative restraint, idioms, and style. The analysis aims to identify translational shifts and gaps that impact the expression of epistemological violence, gendered trauma, and feminist critique.

To examine the impact of transnational shifts on global receptions, I incorporate publicly accessible Goodreads reviews as qualitative data from which to understand readerly patterns. The sample comprises 150 Anglophone one- and two-star reviews from the book-cataloguing website Goodreads, collected between October and November 2025, where interpretive breakdown is most visible. A site of participatory culture, Goodreads acts as an arena of collective interpretation. In line with ethical codes for internet research,[26] only publicly available data without login requirements has been collected, excluding the account details of the reviewers. The study exclusively and intentionally focuses on low-rated reviews as negative evaluations tend to articulate dissatisfaction with translation choices, narrative tone, and perceived ideology more comprehensively than do positive reviews. The rejection

[22] Youngmi Kim, 'Hell Joseon: Polarisation and Social Contention in a Neo-liberal Age,' in *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratisation*, ed. Youngmi Kim (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57066-2_1.

[23] Eun-Kyung Bae, 'Cheongnyeon sedae damnon-ui jendeohwa-reul wihan siron namseongseong gaenyeom-eul jungsim-euro' (Gendering 'Young Generation' Discourses: Focusing on the Concept of Masculinity), in *Jendeo-wa munhwa* (Gender and Culture) 8, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.20992/gc.2015.06.8.1.7.

[24] Jinsook Kim, 'The Resurgence and Popularisation of Feminism in South Korea: Key Issues and Challenges for Contemporary Feminist Activism,' *Korea Journal* 61, no. 4 (Winter 2021), 90, https://doi.org/10.25024/kj.2021.61.4.75.

[25] Enise Kocakaya, 'Equivalence, Translator Subjectivity, and Rewriting in the Context of Feminist Translation Theory,' *Abant Journal of Translation and Interpreting Studies* 3, no. 2 (2025), 122, https://izlik.org/JA45CC85DH.

[26] Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, 'Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0),' *AOIR*, 2012, https://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf.

or dismissal of a translation makes moments of friction more analytically legible and reveals epistemological conflict. The sampling strategy does not claim to represent the whole spectrum of Anglophone reception but rather isolates moments of reader resistance to examine how certain narrative strategies are perceived as failures or excesses within a western reading framework.

An inductive coding strategy was employed. The reviews were tabulated and coded using differentiating terms based on comments on writing (e.g. 'dull', 'flat', 'boring'), comparisons to other genres or forms (e.g. 'essay,' 'thesis,' 'pamphlet'), comments on the translation (e.g. 'Maybe it was the translation'), evaluative fatigue or misjudgement (e.g. 'too obvious') and affective misalignment (e.g. 'absolutely boring and pissed me off'). While the reviews selected for the purpose of this paper are one and two-star reviews, it is important to note that several positive reviews also point out the stylistic choices of the novel and question the translation, eventually excusing the perceived gaps in translation in favour of the book's sociocultural impact in South Korea and abroad. The study is limited by its deliberate reliance on negative reviews. Future research may compare cross-rating responses or incorporate interviews to broaden the reception landscape.

According to Hans Jauss, the aesthetic merit of a literary text is defined by how it engages with the 'horizon of expectations' of a reader rather than the author or the text.[27] The significance and reception of a literary text evolve in response to the reader's shifting expectations, shaped by prior sociocultural and aesthetic experiences. However, in a global, transnational literary sphere, texts often travel beyond their original contexts into unfamiliar spaces where they may be misinterpreted. When the translated *Kim Jiyoung* enters Anglophone markets, it encounters new markets where western readers may read narrative restraint as a deficiency. In this paper, the theme of untranslatability is discussed through a Jaussian perspective.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak sees ethical translation as requiring a deep understanding of cultural peculiarities rather than just fluency, as language is a tool for producing and making sense of one's identity.[28] Epistemic violence, a term created by Spivak, is slow and gradual violence, with delayed destruction that is often imperceptible to both victim and perpetrator.[29] This concept is discussed herein in the context of analysing silence as a narrative strategy. The unintentional or intentional refusal of an audience to reciprocate in a linguistic exchange, as well as the refusal of the dominant to listen to the oppressed, oppresses the vulnerable through a 'reliable ignorance' that uses power dynamics to create harm.[30]

I use contextual analysis as a methodological tool to aid in understanding the culture that created the book and how the gendered experience is presented within it. The paper examines the novel's translation and its utilisation of silence as a strategy against the patriarchal system. Situating the discussed models of comment and textual analysis, this article approaches two questions: Is it possible to translate the ethos of a culture through the

[27] Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,' tr. Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History* 2, no.1 (1970), 15, https://doi.org/10.2307/468585.

[28] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation,' in her *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 1993), 179.

[29] Rob Nixon, *Slow violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

[30] Kristie Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,' *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x.

translation of significant literature? To what extent is it possible to convey the sociocultural context and convey a local feminism within global feminisms?

Silence as a narrative tool and strategy

The *soseol*, the Korean novel, developed differently from the western novel, and expecting the two to be the same because they are both technically the same genre of literature is a fallacy. During the Enlightenment period, the modern Korean novel developed from editorial narratives that shared allegorical or didactic stories, with a greater emphasis on political affairs rather than plot, and an evaluation of the outer world.[31] While modern Korean literature is heavily influenced by Japanese and western literature, it is undeniable that it has continued the characteristics of pre-modern Korean writing.

Cho, the author of the book under discussion, intentionally writes the novel to read like a 'true-to-life biography of someone out there' rather than a work of fiction.[32] She highlights the common yet often undeserved experiences of the average Korean woman by adopting a clinical, bureaucratic tone that lends the narrative academic vigour. This is observed by several commenters, who highlight this choice through adjectives such as 'flat,' 'boring,' 'dull,' 'preachy,' and 'scaffolded with statistics,' among others. Out of the 150 comments studied, only seven comments do not actively mention the writing style or choice of structure. The other 143 actively comment on the literary merit of the novel and state that it would work better as a non-fiction medium, like an 'essay,' a 'thesis,' a 'pamphlet,' or a 'dissertation.' This sentiment derives from the footnotes added to the narrative as a stylistic choice that factualises Jiyoung's experiences. When read within the frame narrative as a psychologist's notes, they give the story an added distance from the main character. A common complaint is that the text fails to evoke emotion through its plot and character interplay. Nineteen reviews specifically mention that the novel contains flat or one-dimensional characters. The matter-of-fact nature of the work is also criticised for its inability to hold readers' attention and provide them with the literary catharsis of fictional reading.

While these criticisms are subjective, collecting them into a dataset reveals common patterns and themes. Many contemporary Anglophone readers are accustomed to conventions of psychological realism, with the expectation of fully individuated and well-rounded characters and narrative principles such as 'show, not tell.' Within such reading traditions, narrative restraint and documentary exposition of the type utilised in this novel may be perceived as a stylistic deficiency rather than an intentional strategy. The novel's preference for declarative, blunt narration over dramatised interiority disrupts expectations shaped by the dominant character-centred storytelling of the Anglophone literary marketplace. The different preferences in storytelling create a pervasive ignorance, an outcome of the Anglophone audience failing to meet or reciprocate the stylistic dependencies and understandings of an Asian author, whether intentionally or unintentionally.[33]

Korean literature has evolved over time to highlight the individual as a character; however, it conventionally prioritises the community over the individual and positions the

[31] Kim Young Min, 'The Development of Early Modern Korean Narratives,' *The Review of Korean Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006), 165.

[32] Alexandra Alter, 'The Heroine of This Korean Best Seller Is Extremely Ordinary. That's the Point,' *New York Times,* 8 April 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/books/cho-nam-joo-kim-jiyoung-born-1982.html.

[33] Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence,' 241.

group above its individual members. Here, Cho's choice to utilise an everywoman character with a common name, who stands not only for herself but for the average Korean female experience, intentionally erases her individuality to show that the Korean patriarchy reduces what she could have been by making her and others like her suffer. Looking at the book through the lens of Korean experiences of shame and the desire to fit in rather than stand out, Jiyoung's lack of action and protest is not meant to promote passivity, but to highlight how necessary it is to fight for their rights as women. The novel, which can be interpreted as passive in Anglophone readings, is seen by feminists as a 'howl of anger,' a phrase used to market the book's English edition.[34]

In discussing silence as a narrative strategy, it is crucial to specify what it means. Silence concerns withholding and restraint, an absence of overt emotional expression, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps with her own imagination and understanding. The novel deploys a bureaucratic narrative register to produce structural silence, which strategically conveys resistance within the text. However, readers accustomed to more action-driven, fast-paced storytelling may interpret this as passivity. For instance, this type of misreading is evident in how Jiyoung's dissociation is framed as personal madness rather than structural violence. Certain reviewers point out the pointlessness of Jiyoung's madness, which, unlike the madwoman in the attic, is not a manifestation of an angel or monster, and does not drive the narrative towards a satisfying conclusion.

The text uses narrative silence as a formal strategy—a sociopolitical silence which structurally conditions the characters—and a failure of reception through misrecognition and misinterpretation. When narrative restraint is interpreted as absence rather than strategy, the interpretive framework risks reinscribing what Spivak terms epistemic violence, which is the foreclosure of subaltern articulation through dominant regimes of intelligibility.[35] Spivak's concept of epistemic violence illuminates the stakes of this reception. Epistemic violence silences and structures the conditions of speaking within dominant regimes of knowledge. The frame narrative utilised in this novel is a male psychologist's case notes. These notes show how women's experiences are bureaucratically recorded but affectively nullified. The psychologist sympathises with the character Jiyoung while failing to see how his own actions are creating similar patterns. When his wife quits her job to care for their son with ADHD, the doctor fails to understand the connection and resents her for giving up her passion for maths to do housework.[36] The novel covertly challenges the idea of supportive partners by challenging the support they provide with their limited understanding of women's issues. Silence is not the absence of story or context, but a deliberate site for the contestation of intelligibility. The demand for psychological transparency reflects epistemic violence, where understanding is granted only when the subject conforms to dominant narrative expectations.

The bureaucratic tone generated through the frame of the psychologist interviewing Jiyoung is selected to repress the covert hysteria associated with the feminine experience,

[34] Peter Kemp, '*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Nam-Joo review—a howl of anger disguised as a novel,' *The Times*, 16 February 2020, https://www.thetimes.com/culture/books/article/kim-jiyoung-born-1982-by-cho-nam-joo-review-a-howl-of-anger-disguised-as-a-novel-w9rl3z3n8.

[35] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (Columbia University Press, 2010), 34–35.

[36] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 158–61.

hysteria being patriarchy's disease enacted in women's bodies.[37] The subaltern appears to speak, but her experiences are filtered through institutional discourse. Jiyoung is possessed by the women in her life, namely her mother, her dead college friend Cha Seungyeon, and her grandmother. In the novel, she is robbed of her social identity and value as an educated professional. The possession, manifested as insanity, symbolises female imprisonment within patriarchy and the misogynist South Korean landscape, which is characterised by voyeurism, glass ceilings and sexual assaults.[38] Madness is often viewed as an impasse for those whose cultural conditioning deprives them of any means for self-affirmation or protest.[39] Madness is interpreted as a female malady.[40] Constantly being subjected to epistemic violence within both private and personal spaces creates the tension between agency and femininity, which produces the double manifestation of anxiety and rage, which generates psychological release and can be turned to power. Hysteria is a manifestation of silence, of rage that quietly bubbles when there is no other way to release it.

The silence in the novel, apart from its stylistic refusal to indulge in Jiyoung's emotions as an individual and using her as a seemingly passive spectator to her own life within a patriarchy, is the silence of repression, of 'silencing.' It is not merely a narrative silence but a sociopolitical one wherein women's suffering is normalised and bureaucratically absorbed. Jiyoung's time in school comes with the acceptance of the perversion of strangers and older boys at school, where 'all they could do was remove themselves from the scene,'[41] and be grateful that they had it better than girls working part-time jobs who would internalise and repress daily sexual assault.[42] During the meeting with her husband's parents, her mother-in-law comments that Jiyoung will get better at housework. While Jiyoung thinks to herself that she and her partner Daehyun will handle it together, neither says anything in front of the older adults.[43] Any semblance of resistance is internal, and she finds it difficult to articulate her thoughts in a culture which values respect over individuality. South Korean culture deeply values *Chemyeon* (체면), or 'saving face,' a concept rooted in Confucianism, which prioritises community over the individual.[44] In such a culture, which highlights shame, women often avoid speaking up for themselves to avoid conflict and protect social harmony, even if they are directly harmed as a result.

The few glimmers of hope in the novel come from Jiyoung witnessing collective actions that spark discourse and action. On a bus, a strange young man falsely claims she had flirted with him, gets off at her stop and begins to corner her. An older woman intervenes by pretending she has Jiyoung's scarf, creating a distraction that allows her to escape and

[37] Cecily Devereux, 'Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisited: The Case of the Second Wave,' *ESC* 40, no.1 (2014), 42.

[38] Fan Yang, 'Possession by Devil: Women's Alternative Language; A Feminist Reading of Kim Ji-young, Born 1982,' *Feminist Media Studies* 22, no. 6 (2022), 1558.

[39] Shoshana Felman, 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy,' *Diacritics* 5, no. 4 (1975), 2.

[40] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (Pantheon Books, 1985), 4.

[41] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 51.

[42] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,*52.

[43] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 114.

[44] Roy Han, 'Buying Chemyeon: The Commodification of Face in Korea,' *Harvard International Review*, 14 February 2024, https://hir.harvard.edu/buying-chemyeon-the-commodification-of-face-in-korea/.

prevents a potential assault.[45] When a flasher starts showing up at their campus, the school authorities do nothing to solve the issue and suspend the five girls who beat up the assaulter for disgracing the school.[46] Through scenes like these, the writer presents the society as exacerbating the issues these young women face. As some of these girls and women come together to support each other, such as the older woman who helps Jiyoung evade a likely molester, the girls who beat up the flasher, and her mother, who encourages her to pursue education, the community led by women becomes a safety net that can provide emotional and spiritual support and help share individual struggles. While Jiyoung is shown as a relatively passive character, she is surrounded by women trying to fight patriarchal conditioning.

The translatability of experience as a typical Korean woman is inherently impossible due to differences in cultural context, and the silent traumas of everyday life are further relegated to a deeper abyss. Clinical writing makes it more logical and medical, compelling readers to take it seriously and counteracting the notion that the female experience is irrational and emotional. While it is unfair to assume a homogenous western literary tradition and to think of the western reader as uniform, certain geographically determined narrative norms do create a stable western canonical logic. A western reader might consider Jiyoung a passive and flat character who refuses to stand up for herself; however, this imposed passivity, stemming from generations of silence, is fundamentally untranslatable. Such differences are epistemic and composed of varying degrees of socioeconomic, ethnic, and sexual advantages and limitations, and they create ignorance that can be reliable even if it is non-culpable and unconscious.[47] When read through Anglophone literary frameworks that privilege interiority and dramatic showing, this novel's bureaucratic tone may appear to lack character development. This perception does not reveal narrative failure but highlights a clash between aesthetic regimes. The emphasis on the main character's passivity can also be attributed to the stereotypical colonialist relegation of Koreans to a passive, submissive status, an image that essentialises rather than presents the divergent discourses of a nation's public.[48] The psychological beating that the everywoman experiences by seeing hope fail her repeatedly is inherently difficult to 'speak.' To ask why she doesn't resist is to foil the entire scope of resistance generated through the text.

Another criticism among Goodreads' reviewers is that western feminism has evolved comparatively well over decades of philosophical analysis, and Kim Jiyoung, as a representative Korean feminist text, tackles relatively rudimentary issues. This is an extremely white-supremacist manner of looking at non-western literature, where, upon reading one translated text, audiences feel comfortable discrediting an entire nation's literary history without attempting to understand its nuances. It pits western gender discourse against other regional discourses, arguing that feminist progress must look the same globally, or it is not considered progress. This is a dogmatic colonialist approach which believes in the superiority of one over the other. Considering the impact of this novel in South Korea, it is fair to assume

[45] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung*, 55.

[46] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 46.

[47] Dotson, 'Tracking Epistemic Violence,' 248.

[48] Ester Torres-Simón, 'Hidden Struggles: Presentations of Korea in Translated Korean Literature,' *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 10, no. 3 (2015), 377.

that the literary metaphor and the intentions of the work of fiction were better understood and accepted by the culture of its writing.

Untranslatability within Kim Jiyoung

Untranslatability, be it linguistic or cultural, arises from the gap between source and target. While linguistic untranslatability stems from differences in languages, according to John Catford, cultural untranslatability arises when situational features relevant to the source language texts are absent from the culture of the target language.[49] Whether translation is seen as a theoretically impossible problem to solve,[50] or as an 'intermediary of the possibles,'[51] the ethics of translation are highly debated, and so is the extent to which creative liberties are permissible. Certain tonal subtleties, cultural idioms, and embedded tones in Korean discourse resist equivalence in English and complicate the reception of the intended narrative restraint. Literature is dynamic and dialogical, and its historicity relies on its reception by readers, creators, and critics.[52] In its translation from Korean to English, the text enters a new horizon of expectations shaped by different ideological, aesthetic, and market conditions. The translator operates within institutional and market constraints that define what is possible and what is superfluous. Translation choices are not simply about individual agency but stem from negotiations within institutional expectations. Through translation, the text does not fail narratively but generates the productive fiction of cross-cultural circulation.

While translating from Korean to English, the rich and complex linguistic distinction between *banmal* (casual) and *jondaemal* (polite) is lost.[53] The Korean honorific system has six levels, ranging from the most deferential to the most informal. Translation from Korean to English is a relatively new phenomenon, and several concepts and ideas remain fundamentally untranslatable because of differences between the two languages at the structural and pragmatic levels.[54] The Asian concept of face, encompassing notions of self-image and how others perceive you, fosters a propensity to maintain harmony in interpersonal relationships.[55] The complex hierarchical system, face, and concern for duty, responsibility, and vigilance are core components of a Korean's life that are not necessarily conveyed accurately in literary translation for Anglophonic audiences.[56] The translator's

[49] John Cunnison Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation* (Oxford University Press, 1965).

[50] Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation,* trans. E. Brennan (Routledge, 2006).

[51] Lisa Foran, 'Untranslatability and the Ethics of Pause,' *Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2023), 47, https://doi.org/10.1080/0907676X.2022.2146516.

[52] Hans Robert Jauss, 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory, *New Directions in Literary History*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Routledge, 2020), 11.

[53] Geoffrey Leech, 'Politeness: Is There an East-West Divide?' *Journal of Politeness Research* 3, no. 2 (2005), 24, https://doi.org/10.1515/PR.2007.009.

[54] Jieun Kiaer, 'Translating Invisibility: The case of Korean-English Literary Translation,' *Translation and Literature in East Asia,* ed. Jieun Kiaer, Jennifer Guest and Xiaofan Amy Li (Routledge, 2019), 81.

[55] June Ock Yum, 'Communication Competence: A Korean Perspective,' *China Media Research* 8, no. 2 (2012), 12.

[56] Jin K. Han, Yong Seok Sohn and Kun Woo Yoo, 'The Korean Language and the Effects of its Honorifics System in Advertising: Deferential vs. Informal Speech as Regulatory Prime on Persuasive Impact,' *Marketing Letters* 26 (2015), 324, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-015-9353-2.

position must be understood within publishing infrastructures which regulate readability, paratextual framing, and market circulation.

At Jiyoung's first job, she makes coffee for her entire team as 'the youngest.'[57] In Korea, the *maknae* is the youngest member of any social group and, according to social dynamics, is generally expected to show respect to others and perform errands. As a powerless employee at the bottom of the social ladder, she must attend events after work where young female workers drink with older male clients, fearing reproach if she refuses to attend.[58] Work obligations beyond formal labour are a crucial component of the traditional South Korean workforce. Korean society sees drinking as an essential component of socialising and has elaborate workplace drinking norms where non-drinking can be stigmatised.[59] While resistance is brave and ideal, resisting a system that sees you as an afterthought is psychologically and spiritually taxing. Nuances like these are conveyed without any cultural context, which might be interpreted by Anglophone readers as a weakness of her character, rather than a system of which she is unwittingly a part. Even when translations are semantically accurate, cultural opacity can persist due to a lack of familiarity with the text's social and political background.

Of the 150 reviews analysed, 24 commented on the translation or translator explicitly, with statements like 'Maybe it's a matter of translation that the whole thing reads too didactically.' Here, the audience attempts to make sense of their dislike of the book by generously assuming it is a translation error, rather than assigning blame to the original, which they view as culturally important due to its status as an essential Korean feminist text. Jamie Chang, the English translator of the novel, was born in Seoul, and her experiences as a homosexual woman raised in different countries are significantly different from those of an average Korean woman. According to her,

> My upbringing was very different from Kim Jiyoung's upbringing. And I think that was maybe good and bad as a translator because part of me was able to see Kim Jiyoung's life through fresh eyes because her experience was so different from mine. And then there was another small part of me that had to really work to understand some aspects of Kim Jiyoung's thinking. For instance, her need to conform or her need to be, I guess, a 'nice girl' or a model student, a good daughter and so forth.[60]

Chang's initial resistance to Korean conformity is reflected by the reviewers who see *Kim Jiyoung* as lagging in feminist politics and seemingly lacking the intensity of contemporary western feminism. As an homogenous country with a 97 per cent Korean population, the sociopolitical polarisation in South Korea mainly comes from its gender divide. One Goodreads reviewer states, 'to try and sell this book in Western Europe/Scandinavia as thought-provoking and important, I do not agree with,' and this review aligns with a common tendency to compare feminism globally, positioning one nation's gender discourse against others. The negative reception displayed in the one-star reviews shows the dialogical movement when the novel traverses cultural and linguistic borders and its narrative strategies

[57] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 98.

[58] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 103.

[59] Sonia Ghumman, Jin Suk Park and Sooyeol Kim, 'Failure to Drink, Failure to Launch? A Model of the Perceived Stigma of Nondrinkers in the Workplace,' *Applied Psychology* 71, no. 4 (2021).

[60] Jamie Chang, Amy McPhie Allebest, 'Episode 28: Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982 – with translator Jamie Chang,' in *Breaking Down Patriarchy,* season 3, episode 28, 11 July 2023, https://breakingdownpatriarchy.com/episode-28-kim-jiyoung-born-1982-with-translator-jamie-chang/.

are put to the test by a new interpretive framework. Literary meaning is not simply transported as it is but reconstituted within new horizons. Given the relative newness of Korean gender discourse and activism, there is still scope for more intersectional and inclusive approaches, which have received increasing attention over the past decade.

Untranslatable words

While cultural contextualization influences reader reception, linguistic untranslatability also affects how a text is interpreted outside its source culture. Choosing what to translate and what to leave out is a translation decision that affects the text's readability. Chang's translation contains twelve Korean words, Romanised for Anglophone readers. Some of these are fundamentally untranslatable, such as food and drinks like *soju* and *tteokbeokki*, and festivals like *Chuseok.* Chang translates the Korean derogatory term *mamchung* as 'mum-roach,'[61] but romanises another term *doenjangnyeo.*[62] Both are derogatory and sexist terms used to criticise women. *Doenjangnyeo* is a neologism which mocks women who overspend on luxuries by denying themselves necessities.

Mamchung originated in 2015, referring to distorted maternal love and inconsiderate parenting.[63] The translation to mum-roach might evoke the image of Kafkaesque vermin, who, like Gregor Samsa, are overwhelmed by social expectations to simply exist.[64] However, the original term lacks the artistic nuance introduced by the English translation and instead simply highlights a prevalent insult that demeans mothers. Originally intended to point out specific behaviours, these derogatory terms are now part of a violent and provocative language mobilised to exacerbate individual hatred to a group level.[65] With the decline of the Korean familial unit because of several sociocultural reasons, such as precarity, inequality, and rising costs of living, women and other marginalised groups are often victimised through physical and epistemic violence.[66]

One of the triggers of Jiyoung's madness is the *Chuseok* celebration, a mid-autumn harvest festival during which Koreans return to their ancestral hometowns to perform ancestral rites (*jesa*). It is an important Korean festival in which women are relegated to gendered labour preparing food and other materials for their in-laws. The book highlights Jiyoung's sarcasm as her grandmother 'possesses' her, and she comments on the labour of the festival and on her inability to visit her own family because, as a married woman, her own

[61] Cho, Kim Jiyoung, 153.

[62] Cho, Kim Jiyoung, 102.

[63] '맘충' (mamchung) originated as a neologism referring to neglectful mothers. While it started as slang, it has been generalised to demean and stigmatise mothers and is seen as a term of hate speech. See '맘충,' *Namuwiki*, 8 March 2026, https://namu.wiki/w/%EB%A7%98%EC%B6%A9.

[64] Euny Hong, 'In This Korean Best Seller, a Young Mother Is Driven to Psychosis,' *New York Times,* 14 April 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/books/review/kim-jiyoung-born-1982-cho-nam-joo.html.

[65] Hong Sanj-ji and Lee Hyeon, '"맘충""급식충" … 더 독한 막말로 관심 끌려는 사회 ("Mamchung" and "geupsikchung" ... A society that tries to attract attention with harsher words),' *The JoongAng,* 20 June 2017, https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/21680917.

[66] John Finch and Seung-kyung Kim, 'The Korean Family in Transition,' *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society*, ed. Youna Kim (Routledge, 2016), 134.

family comes below her husband's in the hierarchy.[67] While Chang does a good job of conveying the tension of this conversation, certain contextual information, such as the significant rise in domestic crimes during the festival season,[68] may be well known to the average Korean but will likely be missed by the average western reader.

At the meeting between her and her future husband's parents, when his mother says that she will get better at housework, she thinks to herself that her *oppa*, her beloved, will do it as he has promised her privately.[69] Seen within the context of expectations of gendered role-playing through *aegyo* (acting cute), the choice to leave this one word untranslated becomes laden with meaning.[70] While her husband is a comparatively supportive and kind man, he fails to see the enormity of her sacrifices, such as giving up her career after having a child, and indirectly upholds the patriarchy by 'helping' with childcare. He does not belittle Jiyoung, but he also upholds the status quo and indirectly aggravates her exhaustion and mental decline. Here, *oppa* is not merely a term of endearment for her lover, but an infantilising addition to the sentence which showcases her enduring belief in the promises of 'her' man, when she has consistently experienced otherwise. This belief represents hope despite the cyclical and systemic subjugation that Jiyoung experiences through patriarchy. It is an affective linguistic choice that highlights her desire for co-existence instead of radical feminism. She believes in the hopeful promise of the patriarchal system; instead of fighting and resisting, she wishes to coexist, hoping that her experience of marriage will be different and more fulfilling with a supportive male partner who upholds her dignity and desires. While her husband is not a villainous patriarchal figure, he fails to fully comprehend Jiyoung's previous gendered trauma and what she is experiencing in the form of microaggressions that he is unable to perceive or understand.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982,* as a translational feminist text whose reception and circulation reveal the paradox of contemporary literary globalisation. By closely reading the English translation of the novel and analysing Anglophone reader responses qualitatively, I show that the novel's understated, clinical tone is not merely a narrative style but a deliberate strategy to highlight the banality and mundaneness of everyday gender-based epistemic violence. The translation, while well-received and accessible, cannot convey the full phenomenological force of this minimalism and the culturally embedded affects which are often perceived as emotional flatness or narrative inadequacy among Anglophone readers.

My analysis of Goodreads reviews reveals reading as a culturally situated act, in which expectations are shaped by interpretive habits developed within a distinct literary and epistemological context. Online reviews have become valuable cultural artefacts that track the circulation, mutation and resistance of meaning. Western literary imagination is often

[67] Cho, Kim Jiyoung, 11.

[68] Jeong-yoon Choi, 'Police ramp up preventive measures, targeted monitoring to tackle holiday crimes,' *Korea Herald,* 5 October 2025, https://www.koreaherald.com/article/10588869.

[69] Cho, *Kim Jiyoung,* 115.

[70] Aljosa Puzar and Yewon Hong, 'Korean Cuties: Understanding Performed Winsomeness (Aegyo) in South Korea,' *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 4 (2018), 334, https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2018.1477826.

unconsciously shaped by the privileging of psychological interiority, emotional expressiveness, catharsis, and narrative escalation. Jiyoung has a clinically restrained, bureaucratic voice, making political and ethical intentionality seem like a stylistic deficiency. Theoretically, I have differentiated between silence as a narrative technique, silence as a sociopolitical condition, and silence as a failure of reception and posit that translation becomes a battleground for conflicting aesthetic regimes. Rather than seeing negative reception as an anomaly, it is investigated as a manifestation of disruption where embedded cultural expectations influence evaluative judgments. What is expressed as feminist minimalism in one literary horizon may be interpreted as emotional flatness within another. This disparity does not invalidate either but exposes the historicity of interpretive norms.

By positioning translation studies alongside digital reception analysis, I have argued that untranslatability persists at both linguistic and experiential levels. There is nothing obvious when it comes to literary analysis. What is obvious to one audience might be deeply repressed for another. Instead of looking for the ultimate feminist text, gender-based discourse should open itself up to unknowing, to discomfort and unfamiliarity. Through unfamiliar experiences in literature, a reader can transcend their own realities to enter that of the 'other.' Ultimately, accessibility does not guarantee universality. Feminist narratives cannot be disengaged from the conditions of their production. I advocate an approach to world literature that acknowledges not only what is translated but also what remains untranslatable and views what is left out as valuable sites of epistemic tension. Accessibility does not equate to universality; instead, the circulation process reveals the uneven terrain through which feminist narratives are disseminated.

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