

Seeing Suicide through a Different Lens

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Abstract

South Korea has endured a difficult history. From its involvement in wars that culminated into its separation from North Korea in 1953 to the various expressions of dissent and protests from activists challenging the government in the late 1980s. South Korea's literature outlines these tumultuous years of political and socioeconomic changes that are characterized by the state's great exercise of control and regulation across different institutions. This paper discusses suicide in Kim Young-Ha's *I Have The Right To Destroy Myself* by viewing it as a way of rejecting the consistent control and regulation of bodies. This paper aims to analyze self-inflicted violence in the story in two ways: (1) as a personal undertaking to regain control of the body and (2) as a form of aggression towards the society. This paper applies Foucault's theory of the docile body, which puts forward that bodies are made to be inscribed upon by tightly organized institutions that maintain order; therefore, effectively stripping off the capacity of individuals to resist control. The paper uses this theory to show that the characters in Kim Young-Ha's novel use suicide as a means to reclaim control of their bodies.

According to Michel Foucault (1980), tightly organized institutions maintain order by producing docile bodies, in which individuals are made to be passive members of the state. The power of the state is dispersed through its many institutions - schools, workspaces, and the family. These institutions work to discipline individuals, subjugating them, to produce the types of bodies the society needs.

Institutionalized regulation has been the driving force behind South Korea's economic development. The economic success of South Korea is highly driven by its capitalistic system, in which the state accumulates profit by optimizing the productivity of its working class. This has resulted in South Korea's "economic miracle" but has also compromised the economic and social rights of its citizens. Case in point is Korea's financial crisis in 1997-1998 that prompted the entry of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the country. *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* was one of the first social commentaries on the post-IMF malaise in South Korean society, which is manifested by high divorce and suicide rates and low birth rates (Fulton, 2011). The South Korean government alienated its people by enacting repressive policies that fueled their desire to "exit" the neoliberal capitalist system. The exit from the system was exhibited in various ways - from massive youth withdrawals from job search, disconcerting rates of divorce and separation from the family to the remarkable number of people committing suicide. In 2006, South Korea's suicide rate even topped all OECD countries, managing to put suicide-prone areas like Japan, the Nordic countries, and "transition societies" in Eastern Europe behind (Chang, 2012). On this view, suicide can be seen as a

way of reclaiming the body that has been subjected to severe structural regulation that threatened its very identity.

Taking place in the highly urbanized Seoul, *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself* revolves around the suicide assistance business of the narrator, called C. He approaches people who “unconsciously want to reveal their inner urges” (Kim, 1996, p. 6). Interestingly, despite his fascination with death, he only administers suicide. He does not encourage murder because he only wants to draw out people’s “morbid desires” (Kim, 1996, p. 7). The novel opens with a reference to Jacques-Louis David’s 1793 oil painting, *Death of Marat*. The narrator notes the absence of dejection and relief on Marat’s dead face. His face was “peaceful but pained, filled with hatred but also with understanding” (Kim, 1996, p. 5). This sets the general tone of the story. The characters approach death with curiosity and acceptance. They view it as a way to escape their current situation and as an attempt to take control of their lives for one last time.

The first suicide assisted by C is by Se-Yeon. They first met through his brother, K, when he found them having sex in their house. Se-Yeon had a rough childhood. She quit school because her professor hit her after claiming that she lied about her father ripping up her books whenever he drinks. She eventually ran away because her mother “beat the hell out” of her when she refused to return to school (Kim, 1996, p. 20). She worked in a bar as a prostitute when K first met her. Ever since she was young, Se-Yeon had already been subjected to society’s expectations, making her feel like she had no control of her life. A woman “selling a good time,” like her, is expected to put her customers’ whims on top of her needs (Kim, 1996, p.

21). She suffers not only from physical violence but also from emotional manipulation from her customers. The men who consoled her and offered her comfort during her trying times are the same men who beat her during their sexual activities and try to extort money from her. This kind of environment has elicited a sense of hopelessness in her, encapsulated by a question she asked C: “Don't you ever walk down a street and stop suddenly, looking around, and wonder where you are?” (Kim, 1996, p. 10) She has come to a point that she no longer recognizes her agency. She is just aimlessly going through life with no purpose in mind.

When C introduced the idea of ending her life to her, she felt vivacious: “This is exciting. My life has always been an uncontrollable mess. I'm always somewhere I don't want to be. But it feels different now” (Kim, 1996, p. 35). Suicide is commonly seen as a tool to end one's suffering. The one who commits suicide sees it not as a mechanism to regain control of his life but as a way to stop feeling pain - the former is an active exercise of one's agency while the latter is more of the person surrendering himself to his circumstances. There is always a sense of unwillingness and regret in suicide victims because at the end of the day, they do not want to die. They simply want to end their misery and it just happens that suicide is the only remedy they think will work. But in the case of Se-Yeon, suicide is not seen as a quick exit route but as a new way of embracing her existence. She does not feel regret or hesitation commonly present in suicide victims. On the contrary, she feels reborn. In her situation, however, it is noteworthy how suicide can also be seen as a form of aggression towards society, towards the institutions that had

the purpose of keeping her alive. It shows how her school has failed in producing a bright student with a promising future, how her family has failed in raising an obedient daughter and more importantly, how the state has failed in doing its job of keeping its people alive and well.

The second and final assisted suicide by C in the story is by Mimi. Mimi was a performance artist who worked with C for a video art. Mimi initially did not allow people to take videos of her performances because she thinks that preserving the beauty of art invalidates its realness. The art becomes a manufactured product, filtered through the lens of the person recording it. However, she decided to collaborate with C because a man she was seeing before suggested that she should see her own work with her own two eyes. The man suggested it after Mimi attempted suicide because she does not believe that she was creating true art and that all her life, she felt that she has been running away from all sorts of things. In the middle of her performance in C's video art, she starts backing out because she becomes unsure whether she can retain the power she holds over her art, and consequently over herself: "Performance art is different. I meet things directly. I see death and lust in the audience's eyes. Depending on what I see in their eyes, my work changes immediately" (Kim, 1996, p. 52). By allowing C to film her, she is relinquishing all control to him. She is now the one operated on. Will she be copied over and over again? Will she be reduced to a simple video footage?

According to Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, the body is "the most immediate, the proximate terrain where social truths and social contradictions are played out, as well as a locus of personal and social resistance, creativity, and

struggle” (as cited in Linos, 2010). The body can be read as a stage where a person’s agency is consistently contested. In the case of Mimi, she makes her art truly hers, free from anyone’s control, by using her body as a medium: “I sometimes think my work wouldn’t be mine anymore if I put it in another medium. Actually, if that ever happened, I feel like the life that I’ve been maintaining against all the odds would crumble at the foundation” (Kim, 1996, p. 52). Her resistance to video recording is her way of rejecting regulation. Once recorded, the viewer can do whatever he wants to the footage. He can edit its content, manipulating it any way he wants to without needing the consent of the artist. Thereby completely removing the artist’s control over her work. This is why Mimi felt strongly about preserving art, that after she watched C’s video art of her, she decided to commit suicide. In her case, suicide is not only her way of accepting her incapability to attain true beauty in her art but also her form of rejecting any kind of control that society might subject her art into. Suicide is her ultimate form of resistance against society’s desire to preserve her art as she has now completely destroyed its medium – her body. It is also interesting to look at her chosen method of dying. She played Leonard Cohen’s “Everybody Knows,” which talks about the pessimistic state of the world in the 1980s, highlighting the alienation of people and the sense of no control, while laying down in a bath tub full of water after slitting her wrists. Until the very end, she saw her body as a medium, treating her exit from the world, from anyone’s control, as a performance art.

The final suicide committed in the novel, though not assisted by C, is by his brother, K. K embodies the feeling of helplessness the most among the characters: “My hand is

already determined from the beginning. My hand in life is probably something worthless . . .” (Kim, 1996, p. 14). He works as a cab driver. His feeling of helplessness is rooted in his relationship with his brother. All his memories of C are about having things stolen from him. From when they were children to now that they are adults, as C also slept with Se-Yeon, whom K was previously drawn to. In comparison to C, K is passive about his life. He never asked himself where he is going. He'd always sat behind the wheel, stepped on the gas, and only then chosen a destination. When he told C that he is going to kill himself by crashing his car, C replied: "I can't stop you if you really want to do that (Kim, 1996, p. 60). K telling C about his plan communicates that he now chooses to assert himself, not allowing anyone or anything to control his life anymore. It is also a form of aggression towards his brother as C failed to look after him, which is what is expected from a family.

In the three instances of suicide in the book, the characters have attained the ultimate reclamation of control because they had overcome their body's nature of self-preservation, which has been nurtured by society. People are conditioned by different institutions and forms of knowledge to preserve their body, to keep it at its optimum form, as the body is the ultimate resource of the state. In choosing to end their lives, Se-Yeon, Mimi and K have successfully removed themselves from the dictates of the society. Moreover, their deaths are in a way, a critique of the state's failure to keep its people alive, which is its primary purpose.

While the three characters discussed above manifested their agency through suicide, C embodied power and control by

working on being a god: “. . . I write about the client and our time together. Through this act of creation, I strive to become more like a god” (Kim, 1996, p. 8). Yet he also values the freedom of his clients, as he does not participate per se in the act of suicide itself because for him it ruins the significance of his work. But since he has implanted the idea of suicide in his clients, he is able to exercise his control over them despite his non-participation in the act itself. It is similar to how our idea of God works. He has conferred in us the capacity to make our own decisions and so He gives us the space to exercise it. The narrator’s ability to convince people to go against the natural order of things by prematurely facing death empowers him, fueling his obsession to be a god and thus, becomes the means through which he finds his sole meaning for existence.

I Have the Right to Destroy Myself challenges its readers to view death in a different way. To perceive it not as one’s inevitable end, but as life in itself, and that suicide does not have to be an act of despair from a hollow or “weak” individual but can be an assertion of the individual’s power over his body, rejecting every form of society’s regulation. It can be an embracing of life, a meeting of that ultimate moment of life on one’s own terms.

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