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EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT, FAMILY PROBLEMS, SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE NOVEL BY KIM JI-YOUNG "OUR HAPPY TIMES"

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ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the analysis of the novel *Our Happy Times* by South Korean author Kim Ji-Young, which explores the traumatic consequences of adolescent experiences in the formation of personality. The author examines the figure of the adolescent as the central character in the work, serving as a metaphor not only for vulnerability but also for the potential for transformation. The article emphasizes the role of the family environment, particularly the figure of the mother, in shaping the psycho-emotional framework of the protagonist, Yoon Su, whose childhood is marked by emotional abuse and a lack of support. The image of adolescence in the novel symbolizes not only the tragedy of an unhappy childhood but also the possibility of healing through the recognition and reinterpretation of adolescent traumas. Through a literary analysis of the novel and the application of modern developmental psychology theories, the article asserts that adolescent trauma is a key factor in personality development, supported by scientific research in psychology, neuropsychology, and sociology. The absence of emotional support, social isolation, and violence during adolescence lead to consequences such as depression, deviant behavior, and social maladaptation, as evidenced by various theoretical sources (Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher et al., 2003).

Special attention is given to the novel's humanistic tone, where even the most damaged individuals retain the potential for internal transformation. The process of revisiting adolescent memories is considered a therapeutic and spiritual journey that can lead to genuine redemption and reevaluation of life values, despite a tragic past. The article highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing adolescent trauma to prevent further tragedies and asserts that understanding, compassion, and responsibility can contribute to real healing.

Keywords

Adolescent trauma, emotional abuse, social isolation, deviant behavior, neuropsychology, harsh parental control, guilt and redemption, religious fanaticism, existential guilt, reflection and self-reflection, adolescent memory.

INTRODUCTION

Kim Ji-young's novel *Our Happy Time* is a profound psychological drama that explores themes of pain, remorse, redemption, and forgiveness. Through the dialogue between the protagonist Yoon Soo and Yoon Suk, a death row inmate, the novel reveals complex internal conflicts rooted in traumatic past experiences. One of the central aspects of the narrative is the depiction of adolescence—not only through the main character's own youth but also through the lives of other characters who endured cruelty and alienation during their teenage years. **Adolescent Trauma as a Source of Pain.** Kim Ji-young emphasizes that many of the characters' personal and behavioral traits are shaped during adolescence. As a teenager, Yoon Soo experiences emotional abuse from her mother, societal pressure, and a lack of support, all

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of which contribute to her emotional detachment and tendency toward self-destruction. This early traumatic experience serves as the foundation for her subsequent psychological suffering. In *Our Happy Time*, Kim Ji-young profoundly addresses adolescent trauma as a key determinant in personality development. Adolescence represents a critical stage in an individual's psycho-emotional formation, during which a person is particularly vulnerable to external stressors such as familial violence, social pressure, and the absence of emotional support. Within the context of the novel, the character of Yoon Soo embodies the consequences of neglecting a child's and adolescent's fundamental emotional needs, leading to maladjustment and internal disintegration. One of the most detrimental factors influencing Yoon Soo's personality is the systematic emotional abuse inflicted by her mother. In the scientific literature, emotional abuse is defined as parental or caregiver behavior that includes humiliation, neglect, constant criticism, threats, and emotional coldness (Garbarino et al., 1986; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995). Such experiences during childhood and adolescence significantly increase the risk of developing anxiety disorders, depression, low self-esteem, and self-destructive behavior. From an early age, Yoon Soo is subjected to rejection: her mother displays neither empathy nor warmth, disregards her emotional and physical needs, and perceives her existence as a burden. This persistent neglect instills in Yoon Soo a deep-seated belief in her own worthlessness and "inherent defectiveness," which becomes the foundation of her guilt and self-denial in adulthood. In addition to the family environment, Yoon Soo's social surroundings play a significant role in the formation of her adolescent trauma. South Korean society is characterized by high levels of competitiveness, academic pressure, and behavioral expectations, which make adolescents particularly vulnerable to social isolation and stigmatization (Lee & Larson, 2000; Kim et al., 2005). Yoon Soo lives in poverty, faces discrimination, and lacks access to education and healthcare. From the outset, her position in society is marginalized, further intensifying her internal sense of helplessness.

MAIN PART

Sociological studies (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) indicate that adolescents growing up in conditions of social isolation and poverty are more likely to become victims of deviant behavior, crime, and mental disorders. Thus, the societal structure, unable to protect vulnerable adolescents, becomes an accomplice to their future tragedies. It is particularly important to note that Yoon Soo receives no support from educational institutions, social services, or psychologists. She is, in effect, invisible to the system. In developed countries, adolescents exhibiting signs of traumatic experiences are often included in programs for support, correction, and rehabilitation. In Yoon Soo's case, this does not happen—she faces her traumas alone.

From a neuropsychological perspective, trauma during adolescence affects the development of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for emotion regulation and decision-making (Teicher et al., 2003). This explains the impulsivity, difficulties with empathy, and disruption of moral orientation that can be observed in Yoon Soo later in life.

Isolation and Misunderstanding of Adolescents. The theme of adolescent alienation from the adult world is repeatedly addressed in the novel. Despite her outward success, Yoon Soo feels a profound sense of loneliness and an inability to connect with those around her. Her isolation becomes a symbol of the estrangement experienced by an entire generation of adolescents who suffer from neglect and indifference.

The Influence of the Family on Adolescent Development

The figure of the mother plays a crucial role in shaping the adolescent's identity. Yoon Soo's mother is a strict, religious woman who is incapable of showing affection. A teenager deprived

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of love and approval grows up with a sense of inadequacy. This conflict between parental control and the need for acceptance becomes one of the tragic themes of the novel. The family, as the fundamental institution of socialization, exerts a decisive influence on personality development, particularly during early and adolescent years.

In Kim Ji-young's *Our Happy Time*, special attention is given to the figure of the mother as the main factor in the psycho-emotional development of the protagonist, Yoon Soo. Through the portrayal of an emotionally cold, religious, and oppressive mother, the author shows how the lack of basic parental love and support leads to deep personality and behavioral distortions in the adolescent. Contemporary attachment theories, particularly those developed by John Bowlby (Bowlby, 1969), assert that stable, warm relationships with a primary caregiver (most often the mother) form a child's sense of basic safety, trust in the world, and self-confidence. Disruption of these relationships, especially in the form of emotional rejection or excessive control, can lead to anxious or avoidant attachment styles, which subsequently increase the risk of developing depression, self-destructive behavior, and social maladaptation (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Yoon Soo's mother in the novel is depicted as an emotionally unavailable and critical figure. She is immersed in religious dogma and views parenting not as care but as a mission of disciplinary control. Her inability to empathize, lack of physical and emotional warmth, and frequent humiliation of her daughter instill in the adolescent a sense of inadequacy and a profound "guilt for her existence."

In psychological literature, the phenomenon of rigid parental control is identified, characterized by the imposition of norms, authoritarianism, lack of emotional support, and constant criticism (Baumrind, 1991). This model is evident in the relationship between Yoon Soo and her mother. The mother does not perceive her as an individual, nor does she acknowledge her feelings or needs, which leads to alienation, the formation of chronic low self-esteem, and an inability to establish healthy interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, the mother's religious fanaticism plays a crucial role in intensifying the psychological pressure. Faith, which under different circumstances could serve as a source of support, is used here as a tool of moral suppression. The mother views her daughter's suffering as a "divine test" rather than a signal for the need of help, which deepens Yoon Soo's sense of loneliness and the meaninglessness of life.

Yoon Soo grows up in conditions of emotional deprivation, meaning the complete absence of positive reinforcement, care, acknowledgment, and love. Research shows that children raised without emotional support tend to develop an internal "deficit of self-worth" — they cannot perceive themselves as deserving of love and acceptance (Schore, 2001; Fonagy et al., 2002). This leads to self-destructive tendencies, difficulties in adaptation, and social alienation. Yoon Soo does not simply suffer — she does not know what it means to be loved. Her inner world is shaped by chronic emotional insufficiency, which makes her vulnerable to radical forms of expressing pain, such as crime, self-harm, and indifference toward her own fate.

Thus, the conflict between the need for love and the rejection she experiences becomes not just a personal trauma but a structural part of her identity. The family model depicted in the novel is not a unique case, but a reflection of a broader social issue. Research in criminology and adolescent psychiatry (Widom, 1989; Farrington, 2003) shows a direct correlation between familial abuse and adolescents' propensity for criminal behavior. The lack of emotional contact with parents, particularly with the mother, is one of the key risk factors. Yoon Soo, raised in an atmosphere of fear and rejection, does not develop basic moral orientation — not because she is "immoral," but because her emotional experience is depleted. She does not know how to

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express feelings constructively because she was never the recipient of love. This makes her vulnerable to forming antisocial behavior patterns, which later manifest in serious criminal acts.

Adolescents as Victims and Witnesses of Violence. The novel is rich with scenes of physical and psychological violence to which adolescents are subjected. Not only Yoon Soo, but also Yoon Suk, experienced violence and poverty during their adolescence. Their youth is filled with traumas that shaped their attitudes toward life, justice, and death. Kim Ji-young illustrates how adolescent trauma can determine the trajectory of a person's life. Adolescence is portrayed as a time of heightened sensitivity and a yearning for meaning. The characters in the novel, during their youth, seek answers to questions about good and evil, love and hate. These searches often remain unresolved, but it is precisely these quests that shape the characters' inner world and guide their life choices.

The Theme of Guilt and Redemption from the Adolescent Perspective

Yoon Soo returns to memories of her adolescence, trying to understand when she lost her belief in life. In her memory, adolescence is associated with the first feelings of guilt, the first despair, and the first attempts to understand herself. Yoon Suk, on the other hand, reflects on his youth as a time when he still had the possibility of changing his destiny. Thus, adolescence is understood as a turning point. One of the central motifs in Kim Ji-young's *Our Happy Time* is guilt and the quest for redemption, explored through the lens of traumatic adolescent experience.

Through the internal monologues of Yoon Soo and Yoo Jung, the author shows that it is during adolescence that one first confronts moral responsibility, the understanding of good and evil, and attempts to find meaning in personal experiences. The adolescent memory for both characters becomes a source of both pain and later self-understanding, against which the need for redemption is formed.

From the perspective of developmental psychology, adolescence (approximately 12–18 years old) is a stage of forming personal and moral identity (Erikson, 1968). It is during this period that key ethical orientations are formed, and reflection on one’s actions begins. Yoon Soo, during her adolescence, first experiences guilt—not necessarily related to criminal behavior, but rather to her inability to protect herself, her passive acceptance of violence, and her internal destruction. This sense of guilt has an existential quality: she blames herself for not being “different”—strong, needed, loved. Such guilt is not situational but deep and personalized, often characteristic of adolescents with traumatic experiences (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This internal state can transform into a persistent feeling of "damaged identity," in which the individual perceives themselves as inherently "bad" or "irreparable.

Kim Ji-young structures the novel in such a way that the key memories of the characters return them specifically to their adolescent years. Yoo Jung recalls her first suicide attempt related to a youth trauma (rape), and Yoon Soo remembers the moment when she lost faith in her own worth. This symbolizes the psychological concept of the "decisive moment"—a period when the individual could have gone down a different path had there been support, love, or at least recognition (Frankl, 1959). Yoon Soo reflects: "If only someone had just said that I wasn't to blame..."—this is not simply regret; it is a clearly expressed idea that adolescence was the last "window of opportunity" for change.

Thus, the author elevates the adolescent stage to the status of a fateful, existentially important moment. Paradoxically, Yoon Soo's redemption begins not with remorse for the murder she committed, but with a return to her vulnerable adolescent self. Only by recognizing the abandoned, beaten adolescent within her can she begin to feel compassion for herself, and through this, for others. Contemporary psychological theories (such as the theory of self-compassion by C. Neff, 2003) emphasize that true redemption is only possible when an

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individual is able to see in themselves not a "monster," but a wounded person. Yoon Soo, by recognizing her childhood as trauma rather than as "proof of her worthlessness," is given the chance for inner transformation. This process is true redemption: not merely regret for wrongdoings, but an attempt to understand the roots of her pain and reconstruct her attitude toward herself and the world. Although guilt and shame are traditionally considered negative emotions, they can also serve as motivation for moral maturation (Baumeister et al., 1994). In Kim Ji-young's novel, Yoon Soo's guilt does not lead to the ultimate destruction of her personality, as happens with other broken characters, but becomes the starting point for reflection, reassessment, and self-dialogue. Thus, adolescence in the novel is portrayed as a moment of moral awakening, albeit delayed. Reflecting on her past, Yoon Soo concludes that it was precisely then that she needed words of support and love—and it was then that society turned away from her. This realization makes her redemption both genuine and tragic: it is delayed, but sincere.

The novel raises an important question: are traumas passed down from generation to generation? The image of the adolescent becomes a connecting link between the past and the future. Yoon Soo recalls her youth in order to understand the present, thereby posing the question of whether trauma can be overcome. Adolescent memory becomes a tool for self-discovery. Despite the tragic fates depicted, Kim Ji-young finds hope in the adolescents. At the novel's conclusion, Yoon Soo begins her journey to healing by remembering the bright moments of her youth. Thus, adolescence is given a dual interpretation — as a time of pain and as a potential beginning of renewal. The author uses flashbacks, internal monologues, symbolism, and metaphors to reveal the inner world of the adolescents. Often, images of the past emerge through associations, smells, and sounds, enhancing the effect of presence. This technique helps the reader feel the depth of the characters' emotional experiences. The significance of the adolescent image for the overall message of the novel. In the novel, the image of the adolescent serves as a key to understanding the tragedy of the adult. Kim Ji-young suggests that to heal the soul, one must return to the past, to the moment of first pain, and recognize it. Thus, the adolescent is not simply a character in the novel but a metaphor for vulnerability, strength, and the possibility of starting anew.

CONCLUSION.

Kim Ji-young's novel *Our Happy Times* is not just a narrative about forgiveness, guilt, and the death penalty, but a profound philosophical and psychological exploration of the formation of human personality, the roots of which can be traced back to adolescence. Through the character of Yoon Soo, as well as through the memories of Yoo Jung, the author raises key questions concerning the impact of traumatic experiences on an individual's life path. The influence of the family, and especially the mother, on Yoon Soo's personality development in *Our Happy Times* is presented by Kim Ji-young not only as an individual factor but also as a socio-psychological issue. The mother is not merely a negative character but a symbol of the broken parental function, devoid of empathy and supportive strength. Through this character, the author demonstrates how the lack of love, emotional deprivation, and psychological abuse during adolescence lead to the formation of a personality marked by deep internal conflict, loss of moral stability, and a subsequent tragic choice.

One of the most significant conclusions that Kim Ji-young leads the reader to is the portrayal of adolescence as a formative space where not only personality traits but also fundamental existential attitudes are established — self-worth, trust in the world, perception of justice, and the ability to empathize. Disruptions during this period of life, particularly in the

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form of violence, neglect, or social isolation, can lead to severe consequences in adulthood — depression, deviant behavior, alienation, and self-aggression (Felitti et al., 1998; Teicher et al., 2003).

However, it is important to note that the author does not limit herself to grim fatalism. Despite Yoon Soo's tragic fate, the novel contains a clearly expressed humanistic message: even the most broken individual retains the potential for understanding, growth, and reevaluation. The return to adolescent memories is not merely an act of nostalgia, but a psychotherapeutic and spiritual process through which late, but authentic transformation is possible. This idea aligns with contemporary theories of developmental psychology, which suggest that personality reconstruction can occur even after serious crises, provided there is internal readiness for change and external support (Neimeyer, 2001; Herman, 1992)

Thus, the image of the adolescent in Kim Ji-young's work is not only a reflection of vulnerability but also a symbol of potential. It embodies the tragedy of an unprotected childhood and the hope for inner healing. The author emphasizes that as long as society continues to ignore the suffering of its children and adolescents, tragedies will repeat. However, if these memories are approached with understanding, compassion, and responsibility, it is possible that the "happy times" will become not just a memory, but a reality.

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