

The Crises of Family in Korean Literature

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I. Introduction

Family is the first social setting for its members and smallest social unit. We live in the family together with family members, finding peace and comfort and learning customs and proper attitudes there. Although family is a unit based on mutual affection, its harmony requires a stability in its material and social circumstances.

Throughout history, human beings have been making great efforts to find peaceful and stable families. Especially, we Korean people, who have strong orientation towards lineage and practical realities, have wished for a harmonious and stable family as the condition of ideal life. Nevertheless, in our history, we have almost never been able to have such an ideal life. For frequent foreign invasions have taken away chances for having a harmonious and stable family. Furthermore, the modern industrialization, while bringing about material prosperity, precipitated a rapid breakdown of family, and family problem has emerged as a serious social issue.

Such a weakening and dissolution of family appears also in the modern literature. Since literature closely reflects and reproduces concrete lives and customs of the age, family is an essential theme of literary works. In general, however, families associated with the main literary characters are characterized more often in terms of conflicts and suffering rather than by stability and happiness. These problems may originate from the social situation of the age or from the discords of family members themselves. The conflicts take on a variety of forms according to ages. Sometimes they are marvelously

overcome, and sometimes they lead to a ruin. In this essay, I would like to examine causes of family crises that appear in literary pieces, thereby bringing a deeper understanding to the issue of family.

I. Family and Literature

The word "home" originates from the Greek word "kome", which signifies place or location and also from the Latin word "civis", which refers to citizen or person. *The Webster's Dictionary* defines family as the basic social unit where family members, centering on the husband and wife, live together. In the Book of Changes, family plays an important role in the formation of the universe. The Great Ultimate produces *Yang* and *Yin*, and *Yang* and *Yin* produces the heaven and earth and all things. Human beings are the encapsulation of Yang and Yin, which is the basis of the universal order, and the center of the human order. From the family, created by a man and woman, other human relationships are formed such as king and minister, parents and children, and elder and younger. As this develops, society is established.

This means, then, that only when a family is rightly established, can social order be correctly upheld. As we can see from the saying, "First cultivate yourself, then rule the family, govern the country, and bring peace to the world", family serves as a channel between individuals and society. The reason society and world are in insuperable chaos is that family ethics as the basis of social and national ethics is in decay. Family is the corner stone of social formation and basis of universal order. Furthermore, family is a channel through which an individual as a social being can approach the society.

Family receives a great significance in Christianity as well. Adam and Eve, who were born through Yahweh's blessing, ate the Fruit of Knowledge of Good and Evil and were expelled from the paradise, thereby destroying family and bringing into being the original sin of humankind. In the Buddhist terms, we humans are born already with karma.

Hence, family is considered important from a social and religious and standpoints, and this holds true also in the world of literature. Authors describes concrete lifestyles of people living in the age. As literary characters go through struggles with their surroundings, family serves as an important space for it. Family serves as an important medium between a literary character and his social

environment. Our nation, who have an exceptionally strong pragmatic orientation, place a high importance to family harmony and consider a stable family a prerequisite for happiness, and this is directly reflected in literary pieces. Especially in the classics, struggles of literary characters are directly linked to family crises and its resolution again leads to restoration of family harmony.

In general, attitudes of literary characters towards the outside world is endless desire and struggle rather than order and harmony, and this is carried through to families in writings. Historically, an ideal family is a hope of literary characters, and yet what actually happens in stories is mostly disorderly and shattered families. In all, family is an indispensable theme in literary pieces, and through this we can perceive the world view of the writers that happy family constitutes our ultimate ideal world.

III. Family Crises that Appear in Korean Literature

1. Classic Literature

The nature of family crises appearing in classic writings is clearly distinguishable from that in the modern literature. It is because the classic works are based on the soil of feudal society, characterized by male domination and class system, whereas the modern pieces are produced in the context of Capitalism, dominated by industrialization and materialistic lifestyles. In the classic works, characters share the ordeals of family with their family members. Typical causes of family crises in the classic writings are external factors such as war, natural disasters, cracks in the social system, and abuse of power by authorities, which pose a great contrast with those in the modern writings, which are mostly internal factors such as crisis of self-identity and self-contradiction.

1) War and Disasters

From the past, human beings have been most afraid of war and bad harvest. For it inflicts an unbearable pain on families by thoroughly depriving them of the most basic necessities of life. Hence, people of the past dreamed of a world that is filled with happiness, away from war and poverty, and yet no age could be free from war and poverty. They not only brought suffering to family members but also drove families into the brink of destruction. These processes are preserved and reproduced in classic writings. There are many surviving works that deal with war. In most of them, however,

the main character's heroic activities at the time of national crisis are highlighted, and suffering of family members is down played. This seems to be a way of trying to gain a mental compensation for the humiliation and resentment we experienced as a nation. So many heroic novels came out, and *Im Jin Rok* describes a heroic activity of monk Sa Myung in bringing the Japanese king to surrender.

This does not mean, however, that there is no piece that connects war with family tragedies. There is testimonial literature, which carries stories of people directly involved in atrocities of war. Some who experienced Im Jin Japanese War and Byung Ja Chinese War left their testimonies to tell the world about the tribulations of war, and many of them wrote about family misfortunes. For instance, *Gan Yang Rok of Kang Hang* (1567-1618), a Confucian scholar captured by Japanese army, vividly portrays sufferings families had to undergo during the war. Bound up by the Japanese, he personally witnessed his family being murdered by them, and especially the part Bo Ran Sa Juk (?) records in detail the sufferings his mother and daughter had after they were taken hostage to Japan. On the other hand, *Dong Cha Rok*, written by Hwang Shin (1560-1617), who went to Japan as an emissary during the war, describes a woman who was taken to Japan, was forced to serve Japanese by drawing water, and attempted suicide twice.

On the other hand, poetry also deals with family crises associated with war. Throughout the history, Japan has continuously pirated our country, and the Koryo Dynasty saw no exception. Taking advantage of the chaotic political situation of the North East Asia, Japan frequently invaded and pillaged Korea.

A Woman's Cry

Japanese pirates stormed upon a lonely island,
And the desolate village is trembling with rage.
The husband was murdered,
And the widow is screaming in tears.
Her sleeves are soaked with blood,
And her pathetic cry is rising up to the sky.
The deeper the night, the bitter the cry,
Keeping the wonder wide awake.

This is a piece by Kwon Kun (1352-1409), a writer and contributor to the founding of Lee dynasty. He wrote this when he happened to stay in one fishing village and heard a neighbor woman crying over her husband killed by Japanese pirates. On the other hand, bad

harvest and famine dismantled families. Since agriculture was the main means of living in Korean traditional society, bad harvest and rain storm were the main atrocities.

I stopped at a ruined village,
Where the people ran away from suffering.
The living never return,
And the dead cannot be buried.
The souls must have gone their ways,
Although their names may remain.
Underneath the wall, through a pile of ashes,
A neighbor is planting a barley seed.

This is a poem called "Ruined Village" written by Nak Suh Kim. Born in a humble family, he worked as a member of poetry group called "Song Suk Won Shi Sa", along with Chun Soo Kyung, Cha Jua Il, and Cho Su Sam, all of whom were from the same class. In this poem, we can see the doleful reality of the people wondering aimlessly, trying to run away from famine and extortion. As we see here, war and bad harvest uprooted families by bringing destitution and driving people out to be wondering beggars.

2) Social Systems

The feudal society, based on class system, had many problems. Whereas the ruling class had many privileges including exemptions from tax and military service, the under-class were subjected to oppression and humiliation. Whereas women were required to keep chastity and marital fidelity, men were allowed to have many concubines. Moreover, there was a sharp discrimination between children of the wife and of concubines with regard to the position within the family and opportunities for advancing into the society. Such a family structure necessarily distorted human relationships and caused conflicts among family members. Family problems arising in the feudal environment include conflicts based on discrimination, strife among the wife and concubines, and persecution by step mother.

First, a piece that expresses struggles due to discrimination of children is *Story of Hong Gil Dong*. Hong Gil-Dong is as a very capable man. As a son of a concubine, however, he suffers in isolation, not even allowed to address his father as father and brother as brother. He finally runs away from family and forms a group of bandits called "Hwal Bin Dang", through which he fulfills his will.

Among the pieces that deal with conflicts between a step mother

and children of the previous mother are *Story of Jang Hwa and Hong Ryun*, *Story of Kong Jui and Pat Jui*, *Story of Jung Ji Eul*, *Story of Fish and Dragon*, *Story of Yang Pung Un*, *Story of Wang Kyung*, and *Story of Lady Wol Yung* (?). In these novels, children of previous mothers suffer or die under the persecution and conspiracy of step mothers. These stories are called "Step mother style family novel", the prototype of which is *Story of Jang Hwa and Hong Ryun*. This novel is based on a real story. With the death of their mother and appearance of a step mother, the two sisters go through ordeals, and finally, through a conspiracy of the step mother Huh, Jang Hwa is killed and Hong Ryun commits suicide.

There is a novel in which the wife is accused by a concubine and finally becomes expelled from the family. This is called "Struggle type family novel (?)", and the most representative piece of this kind is *Story of Ms. Sa's Southern Trip* (?). Written by Kim Man Jung, this novel tells that Ms. Sa, the wife of Yu Han Rim, becomes accused by a concubine Ms. Kyo, and expelled from the family, after which she goes through many tribulations. As we can see, the concubine system, based on the philosophy of male domination, created many conflicts within families.

The contradictions in the feudal system led to distorted human relationships and strife within the family. Especially, no matter how noble the father was, children of concubines were not treated in accordance with the father's status but with the mother's status, who most of the time had very humble origins. Thus, children of the wife and children of concubines did not have the same privilege, although they descended from the same father. Such a social system eroded harmony and mutual affection within families and brought about family crises. Then, what is the origin of the male-centered patriarchal feudalism and contradictions in the family system giving rise to fierce family strife?

Divine Principle declares that such contradictions and confrontations originate from the fall of the human ancestors. The Principle of Human Fall explains that Adam and Eve disobeyed God's commandment and ate the fruit, which resulted in the families and societies without equality and peace. Especially, it holds, and with a strong plausibility, that this fruit means female chastity. We must note that the tragedies conveyed in the novels such as *Story of Hong Gil Dong* and *Story of Jang Hwa and Hong Ryun*, as well as contents of such modern novels as *Potato* by Kim Dong-In and *Windmill* by Na Do-Hyang are expressions of the fallen nature that has been deeply entrenched in the human consciousness due to the sexual fall of the

human ancestors.

The fall of Eve, prompted by the temptation of Lucifer, who are symbolized as a great dragon or serpent, led to the fall of Adam and then to the murder of Abel by Cain, after which the original sin has been passed down the entire human lineage and created the world of tragedy. It is a challenging task to offer literary interpretations based on this understanding.

3) Abuse of Power by Government Authorities

Exploitative government policies in the feudal society sometimes forced people to leave their hometowns and separated family members away from one another. The most painful cause of family tragedies appearing in the classic writings is the abuse of government authorities rather than war or contradictory social system. The corruption in the central government reverberated through local governments, and corrupt officials satisfied their personal interests and greed through their power at the expense of the people.

Especially after the *Im-Jin and Byung-Ja* Wars, and towards the end of the Lee Dynasty, corruption reached the peak, with authorities exacting taxes that were not even legally stipulated and imprisoning innocent subjects in order to confiscate their possessions. Family destructions caused by government misconducts are well reflected in poems of conscientious writers.

The grandfather is carrying woods
 Into the forest.
 The grandmother is turning breathless,
 Following him with a little child.
 They see an acquaintance on the way,
 To tell why they are moving away.
 "Our son is in the army,
 Never to be heard from for six years,
 And now we must be separated
 Even without a promise."

This poem is written by Lee Dal (?~?) with the title "Story of leaving home". He was a teacher of Huh Kyun. Born in the high-class family through a slave mother, he lived a gloomy life without being able to realize his brilliant talents. The military duty in the Lee Dynasty brought worries and pains to people's lives, and this is mentioned in this poem: Having lost their son to the army for six years, without any communication with him, the grandparents must

support the family with the grand child. On the other hand, women's weaving serves as an important literary motive to express family suffering caused by government abuse.

Hemp clothes
 Woven with sighs.
 Somewhere under the loom,
 Cries a grasshopper.
 Even infants must pay
 Military fees,
 When my old husband
 is still in the army.
 Not even a warm clothes
 To carry us through the bitter winter,
 But only a lonely lamp,
 Flickering through the long night.
 Hemp clothes
 Woven with tears.
 Who would know
 This pain of my heart?

This is a piece by Choi Yon-Dok(?~?), who worked in the 18C, with the title, "Lamentation of a weaving woman". Towards the end of the Lee Dynasty, when the corruption and exploitation reached the peak, much effort was made, but all in vain. In this poem, the husband is away in a military service, while the wife is making a hemp clothes with which to pay the military fee for the baby. As we see, the family crises caused by the abuse of public officials were very common in the feudal society.

2. Modern Literature

We cannot talk about modern Korean literature without considering the Japanese colonialism. The Japanese oppression and exploitation of our people brought great destitution and psychological harm. On the other hand, the industrialization that occurred in the sixties and seventies rapidly weakened the bond and sense of common living among family members. Furthermore, the materialistic attitude and alienation in the modern society add fuel to the family crises. Thus, family crises in the modern literature arise from a co-working of external social pressures and internal self-contradiction of the modern consciousness.

1) Poverty and Sexual Misconducts

At the end of the Nineteenth Century, the Korean peninsula suffered as a battleground of global superpowers. The thirty five years of Japanese rule undermined the national spirit and left deep scars in the and minds of Korean people. Furthermore, through a ruthless confiscation, Japan suppressed an accumulation of the national capital and ruined economic lives of the people. The writers of this age expressed this bleak reality through literature. They concretely depicted poverty and destitution, and dealt with family problems as an extension thereof. Among such authors are Kim Dong In, Na Do Hyang, and Yom Sang Sup. The poverty that was captured in their works is of the low-class people.

Their works describe distorted values of modernists who commercialize sex in order to escape from poverty. Commercialization of sex means using human sexuality directly or indirectly to gain profits. In a desperate urge to flee from poverty, characters abandon like used shoes their chastity, which is traditionally cherished as much as life. Eventually, this disheartening reality of poverty and commercialized sex is connected to the Japanese colonial oppression.

Through his short story, *Potato*, carried in the January 1925 issue of *Cho Sun Mun Dan*, Kim Dong In describes that the circumstances of poverty corrupts inner morality of a person. The main character Bok Nyo, as daughter of a noble family, knows a proper norms of behavior. Because of the poverty, however, she is forced to go around begging for food and catching worms. Through this, her mind becomes devastated, and she starts selling her body. So her poverty leads her to prostitution and eventually to death through a fatal relationship with Mr. Wang. Hence, a general flow of novels of this age is that poverty leads to sexual degeneration, and this results in a family breakdown.

In Na Do-Hyang, we can find trends of Romanticism and Realism. His piece *Windmill*, published in 1925, conveys the tragedy of a tenant farmer who loses his wife to his landlord and goes to prison for protesting. After coming out of the prison, he goes back to his wife and begs her to join him. Immersed in the comforts of rich life, however, she turns the cold shoulder to him. Enraged, he kills his wife and also himself. This piece shows elements of Romanticism, but also manifests anger against the distorted social system of the age.

Through his work *Two Minds*, carried in *Mae Il Shin Bo* from October 1928 to April 1929, Yom Sang Sup diagnoses his time by depicting scenes that arise from greed for money and sex. When the

husband comes out of prison he becomes aware of his wife's sexual betrayal: in an effort to escape from poverty, she came to know a Japanese hotel manager and became his concubine. As the husband's friend threatens her to expose her wrongdoing, she sleeps with him also. She makes a suicide attempt but is rescued by a pimp. These three people conspire together to seduce an innocent American youth and steal from him a huge sum of money. Finally, the husband gives her up in cold blood and sells her off as a prostitute. The story ends tragically as the wife commits suicide.

As we see, the modern social scenes resulting from greed for money and sex maximizes distrust and hatred among people and destroys families, which are sacred and precious. The extreme poverty in the context of Japanese rule is closely connected with sexual issues; in other words, the characters try to use their sexuality to escape from poverty, and end up with a miserable fate. We should note that these elements are prominent especially in the Realist novels of the Twenties. This way, commercialization of sex is the main cause for loss of human dignity and identity and sickening of the modern society, and this is closely reflected in literary works. Especially, early writers made cold judgment upon the society by exposing the poverty our nation experienced under the Japanese rule and shockingly showing family breakdowns precipitated by sexual misconducts.

So far, we have discussed a degeneration of human nature caused by the tragedy and commercialized sex that arose in the structural contradiction of Japanese colonialism. Turning to the Divine Principle, we can understand this from the standpoint of the restoration through indemnity. Owing to the human fall, God's Will has not been realized, but Satan's evil history has been maintained in this world. In this situation, we cannot be saved without the medium (Messiah), no matter how much we try ourselves. Bok Nyo, a character in Kim Dong In's "*Potato*", is such a figure. Also, Na Do Hyang's *Windmill* vividly describes the situation of the evil sovereignty.

2) Weakening of the Family as a Place of Common Living

As time progressed from agricultural to industrial society, many changes have occurred. The enlarged family system, which cherish common living, family tradition, and harmony and balance among family members, has been rapidly replaced by the small family system, which emphasizes efficiency and functionality. In this process, common bond among family members and sense of common living have become undermined. Furthermore, distrust and alienation

among family members has brought dissolution of families.

Park Wan-Suh's "Dusk", published in the magazine *Purigipun Namu* in 1979, very well exposes distrust and alienation among family members and hypocritical ethics of middle class life. The mother, living with her son and daughter in law, complains a chest pain and asks them to rub her solar plexus area. The couple declines, and hospital inspection does not show a clear disease. One day, in a phone conversation, a friend of the daughter in law says that the mother in law made such a request because of her sexual dissatisfaction. The mother hears this by accident and feels extremely humiliated. She requested it because she wanted to have someone to share her joy and sorrow with, and she comes to hate her son's couple for misunderstanding her. She feels that she has no value. In this novel, the author treats the crises and conflicts of the modern family through a struggle of mother and daughter in law and through a pathetic portrait of an alienated old mother.

Again, in Park Kyung-Lee's *Daughters of Kim Pharmacy*, we can find a family being dismantled by greed and ethical degeneration in the modern society. This piece can be characterized as a family history novel, realistically describing a tragedy of a declining family on the seaside of Tong Yong in the province of Kyung Nam. Kim Bong-Je is the owner of Kim pharmacy, with a noble character. His brother, Kim Bong Ryong has a hot and impulsive personality, however, and when Song-Ok, a former lover of his wife, visits her, he kills him. Unable to handle the shame, his wife commits suicide, and he runs away and hides himself. In consequence, his son, Sung Su, is raised by the uncle, Kim Bong Je. Sung Su becomes the owner of the pharmacy, and gives birth to five daughters. The first daughter Yong Sook commits adultery with her son's doctor and becomes socially ostracized. The third daughter Yong Ran is sexy, and yet she also becomes socially ostracized by making affairs with a servant. The fourth daughter Yong Ok marries without affection, separates from her husband, and eventually dies on a sea journey. Yong Ran, while staying with the servant, gets caught by her husband, and husband kills the servant and his mother. After this, Yong Ran turns mentally insane.

In the modern society, human bond is weakened and alienation deepens among family members. Choi In Ho's "Other Man's Room", published in *Literature and Intellect* in 1971, tells of modern man's alienation. When the protagonist comes back from a business trip, he finds his home empty, with his wife's false memo. Here, we can perceive a consciousness of a modern man in general who feels

isolated from his environment. This piece describes the sorrow of a father who fails to be the master of the family and becomes ignored in his environment. In all, although the modernization and industrialization has brought material comfort, it also precipitated an invasion of materialistic value and thereby a rapid dissolution of family as a place of common living. Furthermore, the frequent distrust and alienation among family members in the Capitalist society serve as the key factor of family crises.

3) Structural Contradiction of the Industrialized Society

Korean industrialization, although it has enabled the people to escape from absolute poverty, has nevertheless brought about a sharp disparity between the rich minority and the city poor. As a result, city laborers, alienated from the rewards of industrialization, have come to suffer from below-subsistence-level wages, miserable work environments, unfair work load, and extreme sense of deprivation, which they can only resist through violence. Families, alienated in the process of industrialization, have been subjected to enormous pressure amid the structural contradiction of the Capitalist society.

First, Kim Seung Ok's *To Understand My Sister*, published in 1963, deals with frustration and loneliness family members experience in the process of transition from the traditional society to industrialized society. In the sixties, when population began to be concentrated in cities, modern people had to taste individualism and loneliness of city life. The main theme of Kim's novel is individualization of human consciousness through industrialization and urbanization. The sister, who went to the city, fails and becomes silent. Then the protagonist goes to the city to find out the reason for it, only to learn the individualism of the city.

If *To Understand My Sister* portrays family's frustration and loneliness due to industrialization and urbanization, Cho Se Hee's *A Ball Shot By a Dwarf* tells about a poor family of the city who cannot but lose hope amid the structural contradiction of the industrialized society. This family, which can be called "dwarf family", lives through all kinds of hardships each day in the industrialized society. The daughter Young Hee loses her chastity to a gambling investor. The father holds on to a flickering light of hope, and yet finally he gives up and throws himself off from a factory chimney. In short, through the shocking family tragedy evolving around the death of the father, the author describes the lives of the alienated people, which was the core of social problem in the seventies. The core of the problem here is the tension between the haves and have-nots. Although the dwarfs

work hard, they live poor, without receiving a fair reward for their labor. Young Soo finds in an old document that their ancestors also lived like dwarfs, and he sees that this life will be handed down to the three children as well. Young Soo and Young Ho lose their jobs after protesting over unfair treatment and deteriorated work environment. The sorrow of the have-nots, however, is that the more they protest, the more persecution they receive from the society. This novel shows an inevitable destruction of an alienated city family in the contradiction of the industrial society.

Such phenomena of family can be understood through providential history. Here, we should first focus, through a mythical critical approach, on the element of human fall, which have been passed down through the human lineage and exist within the inner consciousness of family members, and second on the reality of the society where the evil sovereignty has triumphed. This area is yet to be explored with a continuous research to shed light to the two aspects through the Principle.

IV. Conclusion

Our nation, with an exceptionally strong sense of blood relation, have cherished family and sought to gain happiness through family. Family has been regarded as both the beginning and end of life. This sub-conscious attitude towards family has been necessarily echoed in literary works, for in the Korean literature stability and happiness of family is perceived as the ultimate ideal. A happy family, however, remains as an idea, and in the reality families go through tribulations because of conflicts within the family and with its surroundings.

In the classic works, family crises originate from war and natural disasters, feudal system that gives rise to wife-concubine conflicts and discrimination of children, and exploitative government policies. In other words, external social factors contribute to family crises more significantly than factors within families. On the other hand, the modern writings introduce problems of colonial society, commercialization of sex, alienation and weakening of family as a common living, and concentration of wealth and a collapse of the city poor. In other words, modern writings present composite factors of family crises some families disintegrate because of contradictory social structure, and others go down because of internal factors such as alienation and weakening of human bond.

So the classic writings exhibit stronger bond and sense of common living than modern works. Hence, in the former, no sooner the external factors are eliminated than family is restored. In the latter, however, families are driven into pits because their crises arise from inherent contradictions of Capitalist society and from modern man's loss of meaning. The problems of family appearing in modern literary pieces is very serious, as they arise from a rapid dissolution of families in the tumult of industrialization and from modern man's alienation and self-contradiction. This is at the same time the present whereabouts of living families of today.