

Traces of Guilt and a Hint of Reparation in Kyung-Sook Shin's *Please Look After Mother*

Shruti Das
&
Suman Adak

Abstract

Guilt arises with the realization of wrongdoing. *Please Look After Mother* by noted South Korean writer Kyung-Sook Shin is replete with repentance which finds perfect expression in the characters' memories. Like in most oriental societies family and emotional and physical relationships between family members are very important and the basis of stability. Failing to care for members of one's family is considered sacrilege and looked down upon. Therefore, neglect of family results in guilt. In the novel, the mother goes missing from the Railway station and the other family members blame each other and themselves in high drama. The characters, not only exhibit guilt but also are aware of their own guilt. The narrative exposes the human psyche projecting how unconscious guilt often manifests itself if the stakes are as high as losing suddenly one's mother and wife. The guilt emerges and the 'feeling bad' turns eventually into a creative expression of prayer. This paper is a psychoanalytic study of *Please Look After Mother* whereby the emotional bond in a family is explored. This paper aims to fill the need for a comprehensive psychoanalytic study when it comes to the guilt the characters feel while putting forth the idea of family as a bounded structure and its reparation from the novel itself.

Keywords: South Korean fiction, ego, guilt, learned helplessness, remorse, reparation, projection.

Kyung-Sook Shin is one of the most-read authors in South Korea and the first woman to receive the Man Asian Literary Award. She is best known in the literary world for her novel, *Please Look After Mother*, which was released in more than 20 countries. Maureen Corrigan, a Western critic, has weighed the book on Western scales and has expressed concern that *Please Look After Mother* is too emotionally packed and presents East Asians as extremely melodramatic. The book, according to Corrigan, the book critic for NPR's *Fresh Air*, is unquestionably the "manipulative sob sister melodrama" in Korean. She is surprised that this guilt-ridden morality story has generated such a stir in Korea and scoffs that a reputed literary house like Knopf has published it. Corrigan who considers Western literature as "therapeutic" misunderstands the cultural depth in this novel and comments that the novel wallows "in cross-cultural self-pity?" (Corrigan n.p.). Conversely, it is regarded as a milestone work and a watershed moment in Korean literary history since Korean writing is normally heavily laden with political topics, and Shin's novel probes the depths of humanity. Shin's 2022 novel *Violets* too explores the

psychological impact of a missing relative on the family members. This paper is a comprehensive psychoanalytic study of *Please Look After Mother* whereby the emotional bond in a family is explored.

Guilt, Remorse, Reparation

Sigmund Freud mentions the sense of guilt for the first time in “The Neuro-Psychosis of Defence” (6). However, he describes it in *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, *Totem and Taboo*, *The Ego and The Id*, and *The Economic Problem of Masochism as self-pity*. Guilt or self-pity has to do with the part of the ego that is trained and civilized according to the parameters of normative society. According to Freud, “The considerations that led us to assume the existence of a grade in the ego, a differentiation within the ego, which may be called the 'ego ideal' or 'super-ego’” (*Ego and the Id* 22). Freud's concept of guilt underwent development throughout his therapeutic practice. Initially, he associated the feeling of guilt with phylogenetic memory in the context of the Oedipus complex and castration complex. This concept was further expanded upon in his works such as *Totem and Taboo* and in the exploration of the development of the super-ego. He then connects guilt to masochism or the inclination to draw pleasure from pain and to the death drive. Thus, guilt is induced mostly by sexual desire, parricidal urges, and death drive, according to Freud's theory. Additionally, the conflict between the expectations of conscience and the actual performance ego gives rise to a feeling of guilt, which is predominantly unconscious. The super-ego dominates the ego “in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt” (*Ego and the Id* 30). In his paper titled “Shame vs Guilt vs Remorse. What Is the Difference?” Laurie Hollman says that guilt arises when one's “conscience is on full alert” because one “has put others in danger,” he further argues that remorse originates from guilt as a deep regret: “Remorse is defined generally as deep regret for a wrong committed. It follows from guilt if you are an emotionally healthy person” (Hollman n.p.). Guilt and remorse are recognized to yield both advantageous and detrimental effects on an individual's life. The constructive outcome of remorse lies in its potential to motivate one to seek reconciliation and mend relationships. This facet of guilt and remorse is denoted as the “capacity for concern” (Winnicott 72) and “the healing...of our cultural malaise” (Carveth 176). However, it may also result in self-punishment, which impedes growth. Guilt is an unpleasant emotion experienced after breaking family, religious, or national laws or even just when the idea of violation crosses one's mind (Akhtar 126). The *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* defines guilt as “a sensation of intrapsychic tension, sometimes linked to apprehension of a catastrophic threat to oneself” (716). In psychoanalysis, a distinction is made between remorse and guilt. Remorse is identified as the ego's response when a sense of guilt is present, while guilt is characterized as the heightened reaction of the super-ego. Melanie Klein, following Freud, associates guilt with aggression, highlighting a “connection between sadism and epistemophilic impulse” (Bagliacca 25). Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca in *Guilt: Revenge, Remorse and Responsibility After Freud* opines, “[Guilt] is not merely a particular form of anxiety known to us all...nor is it simply an objective event caused by people (breaking a rule): guilt is a way of living and thinking” (xii). He expands upon the Freudian concept that “guilt can break out even when...we are completely

innocent; otherwise, Freud preferred to speak of remorse” (12). The difference between unconscious and conscious guilt is made more apparent by Speziale-Bagliacca's formulation of guilt.

A recent psychoanalytic study focuses on the negative features of guilt and relates it to the concept of shame. Following World War II, postmodernism diminished the significance of superego expectations due to the failure of ideologues motivated by the superego. This perspective led to the emergence of a narcissistic culture that called for the elimination of the superego. However, fostering the id's rash urges had a negative impact on society by weakening the integrity within families. Shin through her fiction not only advocates for the superego's demands of eliciting slavish adherence by placing guilt on the surface, as consciousness of guilt of the characters but also on a humane side of their emotions. She is undoubtedly focusing on the depressed state of the characters who are dictated by emotion. Through Chi-hon and Hyongchol, Shin also tries to expose the positive side of guilt which dissolves in the characters taking remedial actions, acceptance, and ultimately reparation.

Memory and Guilt in *Please Look After Mother*

Please Look After Mother draws in the emotion for the taken-for-granted role of a mother, Park So-nyo. The narrative is written from the perspective of the older daughter of the family, Chi-hon, in the section “Nobody Knows” in the second person; the son in the section “I’m Sorry, Hyongchol” in the third person; So-nyo’s husband or Father in the section “I’m Home” in second person, and their mother herself in the section “Another Woman” in first person and again in Chi-hon’s second person in the Epilogue “Rosewood Rosary”. This unconventional shift in the perspective of a narrative is rare and helps in attaining emotional clarity and directness that “speak” directly “to the heart” (Iyer n.p.). To an extent, it seems autobiographical as Chi-hon often resembles the young villager, Shin. Memory and its resonance are spread throughout the novel. Guilt cannot be without remembrance or self-consciousness of a hateful or ignorant act however insignificant. Mother is shown missing for a week in the first chapter. Here Chi-hon gives a vivid description of Mother’s treatment of her children. From her narration, it is evident that Mother loved Hyongchol most because he was her firstborn male child, and was a bit partial towards him in her treatment of her children. While Hyongchol was given ramen, the other children, including Chi-hon, would get jealous. Chi-hon, who was left-handed was strictly reprimanded by Mother. Mother held the belief that numerous challenges in life would arise if she utilized her left hand. Mother would habitually take the scoop from her left hand and transfer it to her right. Any attempt to revert to using her left hand would prompt Mother to forcefully take the scoop back and administer a stern spanking, perplexed by the disobedience. She narrated the pride Mother took in her achievements, recounting that her mother’s face was glowing like a ‘mint flower’ when she learned to write her and her mother's names and read books before starting school. Chi-hon believes that this could be the reason for the bitter-sweet mother-daughter relationship that existed between her and Mother. Her mother loved her but there is a subtle duality in Chi-hon’s feelings regarding her mother and hence a sense of guilt arises when they are separated. Ambivalence takes its origin from mixed feelings

for someone. Freud puts forth the idea that “[G]uilt is the expression of the conflict of ambivalence” (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 121).

The family members, desperate to find Mother, discuss and print “100,000 WON PER MONTH, WITH A DEPOSIT OF 10 MILLION WON. 150,000 WON PER MONTH POSSIBLE WITH A DEPOSIT OF 5 MILLION WON” (Shin 67) on flyers distribute them locally so that someone might take this incentive and find their missing mother for them. Hyong-chol gives out missing person flyers in Seoul Station and other places. Meanwhile, one of Hyong-chol's fliers convinces a passing woman that she has seen someone who looked like Mother in front of the Yongsan 2-dong office, that the woman in the picture and the woman she had seen shared the same eyes, and that the woman was wearing blue plastic sandals and had an injured foot. Despite knowing that Mother was wearing a shoe of unusual color when she went missing, Hyong-chol goes to the Yongsan office. Socio-psychologist VeronikaDzukaeva, conducting a qualitative analysis on 196 people, concludes that although fathers are important in the development of identity “separation from father occurs easier than from mother” (350). Surprisingly, Father himself was the reason for the initial separation from their mother which had already taken place by way of his extramarital affair. When Hyong-chol was young Father had brought home an attractive woman considerably younger than Mother, Mother had reacted and left home by the back door. Despite the woman's attempts to make friends with him and his brothers, Hyong-chol rejected her repeatedly, begging their Mother to return home. The repeated rejections and disruptive behavior are a consequence of a foreshadowing depression. A recent study on the disintegration of the parent-children relationship concludes, “Parental divorce/separation is associated with an increased risk for child and adolescent adjustment problems, including ... disruptive behaviors ... depressed mood” (D’Onofrio and Emery 100). Mother, whose bond with her children is stronger than that of the father, responds to her children’s pleas and returns home and chases Father and the woman out of their home. The next year, Father returned, and Mother with her large heart cared for him as always, “as if Father had left that morning and had come back at night, instead of having left in the summer and returned sheepishly in the bitter cold of winter” (Shin 75). Upon Father's return, Mother ensures that Hyong-chol receives the best and most food, as well as has enough time to study. Hyong-chol remembers all these incidents and feels guilty for not treating his mother the way she could have been treated while he became a successful person in the country's capital because of her life-long sacrifices.

In the chapter “I’m Home,” Father, So-nyo's husband starts narrating his part of the story in the second person. After he leaves Hyong-chol's home and returns to Chongup, he encounters Tae-Hee Hong, a young woman seeking "Auntie Park So-nyo". Despite his confusion, Father invites the woman in. Tae-he happens to be from the Hope Home orphanage. She says that So-nyo used to visit the orphanage to clean; she also donated 450,000 won, about 400 American dollars, to Hope House per month. And because So-nyo has not visited recently, the kids and the employees of the orphanage are worried. Father is shocked to know all this and desperately misses his wife. He remembers how Mother spent a lot of money on magnificent funeral

garments and wanted him to die first. He remembers his dependence on his wife as he struggles to cook rice in a rice cooker which becomes challenging for him. His thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of two little girls who were looked after and fed by Mother when their own mother used the services of Mother. Her thoughts move to the day Mother got lost at Seoul Station and he weeps uncontrollably when the girls leave. He has not sobbed in this manner ever in his life. His remorse is because he regrets and realizes what he has lost. In many examples of “remorse” that are considered normal, guilt becomes readily visible. Father’s mental condition can be referred to as a “consciousness of guilt” rather than a “sense of guilt” (*Civilization and Its Discontents*123).

In the chapter “Another Woman,” the narrator gradually reveals herself to be a Mother and that the focus of her attention is her daughter. Mother appears in the shape of a bird, perched outside her daughter's house, and watches the happenings there. She speaks about her daughter's love for birds and how she buried a dead bird which was discovered by her eldest son. The mother also describes a telephone argument between her daughter and Chi-hon, who is about to embark on a promotional tour for one of her books. She pays a visit to an ‘old man’ entering a hospital who retaliates fiercely every time a doctor asks for his name and, at one point, mentions Mother's name. This prompts Mother to recall how she had met the man one day when he rode by on his bicycle and he offered to assist her carry a huge bag of flour and leave it for her up ahead, but instead, he had gone to his own house. When the anxious Mother located both the bag and the man, she realized that the man's wife was pregnant and assisted her in giving birth, after which she prepared food for the famished family. Mother recalls how she returned to the family later only to realize that the wife had died. Sorry for the family, she breastfed the baby, and thus she and the baby’s father became good friends. Indeed, Mother was an empathetic, soft-hearted humane person. Empathy is the recognition of projection through internal objects as qualities of the other (*Envy and Gratitude and Other Works* 252).

Even towards the end of the novel the lost mother is not found and the family is desperately searching for her. She was an illiterate person, indifferent to city life. Working in the rice paddy fields, she had paid for the food and education of her children. Subsequently, the children moved to live independent luxurious lives in Seoul city. All her life she had taken care of her children but her children had never taken care of her. In this context, Freud again is important, through his studies he posits the “sense of guilt” as the “most important problem in the evolution of culture,” he seeks to convey that the price of “progress in civilization” is paid back withdrawing happiness through the “heightening of the sense of guilt” (*Civilization and Its Discontents*99). Almost all the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of guilt as they realize that they had taken their mother for granted and had neglected her while she was there. There is no disputable solution to the question of how someone develops a sense of guilt: a person feels terrible after doing something that he or she understands to be wrong or “bad” (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 85). Westerink argues the same addressing the Freudian theory of guilt. Freud in the 1890s was not just discussing the “sense of guilt” or the “awareness of guilt,” but was analyzing guilt itself. Freud, according to Westerink, appears to have felt that the cause of guilt

was one's own internal awareness of wrongdoing, which he refers to as "wrong" here. He also mentions an "excess" that might aggravate problems. Awareness of guilt appears to have everything to do with what is considered ethically "acceptable, with that which is judged to be wrong and excessive" (2). Chi-hon is found to have gone to Rome, Italy where she visits Michelangelo's Pietà. There she is with her significant other. Freud says, "[A]t this stage the sense of guilt is only a fear of loss of love, "social" anxiety. In small children, it can never be anything else, but in many adults, too, it has only changed to the extent that the place of the father or the two parents is taken by the larger human community" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 107). Although Chi-hon has a community of her own and her significant other, she remembers her Mother because of the deep filial bond between the two, and as previously mentioned in this paper "separation from father is easier than" that of "mother" (Dzukaeva 350). Chi-hon feels guilty and is depressed as Mother is nowhere to be found even after all her efforts. This state is interpreted as a known, conscious, or learned helplessness. Learned helplessness occurs when an individual facing recurring challenges begins to perceive their circumstances as being beyond their control. As a result, they cease their efforts to bring about changes and "accept their fate" (Cherry n.p.). The failure in and of itself does not appear to be sufficient to cause helplessness deficits in humans, but a failure that leads to "decreased belief in personal competence is sufficient" (D. Klein et al. 508). The essence of object relations theory revolves around our internal interactions with others. This notion suggests that our early connections with our parents, especially our mothers, profoundly shape the development of our interpersonal abilities throughout our lives. An external object refers to an actual person or object toward whom or which an individual invests emotional energy. A complete object is an individual in their authentic form, encompassing both positive and negative attributes (Fritscher n.p.). Hanna Segal had something very seminal to convey building upon the object relation theory as Chi-hon is somewhat depressed that Mother is not found anywhere:

When the depressive position has been reached, the main characteristic of object relation is that the object is felt as a whole object. In connection with this, there is a greater degree of awareness and differentiation of the separateness between the ego and the object. At the same time, since the object is recognized as a whole, ambivalence is more fully experienced. The ego in this phase is struggling with its ambivalence and its relation to the object is characterized by guilt, fear of loss or actual experience of loss and mourning, and a striving to re-create the object. At the same time, processes of introjection become more pronounced than those of projection, in keeping with the striving to retain the object inside as well as to repair, restore, and re-create it. (Segal 394)

Conclusion

Separation alone could show how directly or indirectly the family leaned on their mother for everything. Segal's point justifies the feelings of fear of loss, mourning, depression, and guilt suffered by the characters in the novel. In psychoanalytic theory, projection is identified as a defense mechanism wherein undesirable feelings and personal attributes within an individual are disclaimed and instead "attributed to someone else" (Rohleder n.p.). Introjection is a

psychoanalytic term that refers to the psychological process through which items from the outside world, often parental objects, are incorporated “into the ego, internalized” (Truscott 1). For Chi-hon the psychological process of introjection becomes so ‘pronounced’ that she tries to repair the guilt by recreating the mental paradigms of the object, in this case, the lost Mother.

The striving for reparation or recreation to feel at peace comes from the consciousness of guilt. Melanie Klein opines that the “feelings of guilt,” which, as she has attempted to demonstrate, are “fundamental incentives towards creativeness” (*Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945* 335-36) and effort in general, even the most basic ones. The need to make amends, so inextricably linked with care for the loved one and fear for his/her death, may be expressed in innovative and productive ways. These processes and modifications can also be recognized in adult psychoanalysis. Otherwise, the reparation takes the form of recreation as an alternative the subject seeks a “new mother” in his imagination to replace the actual one from whom he feels alienated or is “unconsciously afraid to lose” (*Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945* 338). While praying for Mother, Chi-hon remembers her Mother praying for her own mother. The final connection with Mary, the Holy Mother, and the title of the novel, "Please Look After Mother," appears to be a creative reparation. Through projections of guilt, remorse, and reparation Shin melodramatically brings to the fore the socio-psychological impact of loss and break in filial bonds which are immensely powerful in South East Asian social structures.

Works Cited

- Akhtar, Salman. *Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Karmac, 2009.
- BookBrowse. “Kyung-Sook Shin Author Biography.” *BookBrowse.com*, www.bookbrowse.com/biographies/index.cfm/author_number/2025/kyungsook-shin. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.
- Carveth, Donald, L. "Self-Punishment as Guilt Evasion: Theoretical Issues." *Canadian Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2006, pp. 176-98.
- Cherry, Kendra. “What Causes Learned Helplessness?” *Verywell Mind*, 11 Nov. 2022, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-learned-helplessness-2795326#citation-1. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.
- Corrigan, Maureen. “‘Please Look after Mom’: A Guilt Trip to the Big City.” *NPR*, 5 Apr. 2011, www.npr.org/2011/04/05/135120998/please-look-after-mom-a-guilt-trip-to-the-big-city. Accessed 9 Feb. 2023.
- D’Onofrio, Brian, and Robert Emery. “Parental Divorce or Separation and Children’s Mental Health.” *World Psychiatry*, vol. 18, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 100–1, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20590>. Accessed 23 January 2023.
- Dzukaeva, Veronika. “Family Characteristics of Psychological Separation from Parents during Late Adolescence.” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 146, no. 1, Aug. 2014, pp. 346–52, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.110>. Accessed 15 Feb. 2023.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated and edited by James Strachey. Liveright, 1950.
- . *Civilization and Its Discontents*. W. W. Norton, 1961, cloudflare-ipfs.com/ipfs/bafykbzaced22yms2kmeskqxdmullmvv7adhj3di7hijufxb4azz4t7fvqqlzm?filename

- =%28Complete%20Psychological%20Works%20of%20Sigmund%20Freud%29%20Sigmund%20Freud%2C%20James%20Strachey%2C%20Christopher%20Hitchens%20%20Civilization%20and%20Its%20Discontents%20%28The%20Standard%20Edition%29W.%20W.%20Norton%20%26%20Company%20%281989%29.pdf. Accessed 21 Feb. 2023.
- . "The Ego and the Super-Ego (Ego Ideal)." *The Ego and the Id/Sigmund Freud*, translated by Joan Riviere, revised and edited by James Strachey. W.W. Norton, 1960, pp.22-36.
- . *The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence*. Read Books Ltd., 2014.
- . *Totem and Taboo*. Translated by James Strachey, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950.
- Fritscher, Lisa. "Object Relations Theory and the Mom Factor." *Verywell Mind*, 30 Jan. 2013, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-object-relations-theory-2671995. Accessed 24 Mar. 2023.
- Hollman, Laurie. "Shame vs Guilt vs Remorse. What Is the Difference?" *Upjourney.com*, 29 Sept. 2020, www.upjourney.com/what-is-the-difference-between-shame-guilt-and-remorse. Accessed 19 Mar. 2023.
- Hughes, Judith M. "Omnipotence Holding Sway." *Guilt and Its Vicissitudes*. Routledge, 2007, pp. 87-104.
- Iyer, Pico. "Book Review: Please Look after Mom." *WSJ*, 11 May 2011, online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703730804576319130980329832.html. Accessed 22 Feb. 2023.
- Klein, David C., et al. "Learned Helplessness, Depression, and the Attribution of Failure." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 5, 1976, pp. 508–16, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.33.5.508>. Accessed 14 Feb. 2023
- Klein, Melanie. "Love, Guilt and Reparation (1937)," *Love, Guilt and Reparation: And Other Works 1921-1945*. The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan, Inc., 1984, pp. 335–38.
- . "Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy (1959)." *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963*. Random House, 1997, pp. 247–63, *The International Psycho-Analytical Library*, [doi:10.1017/9781017000003](http://doi.org/10.1017/9781017000003). Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.
- Kovshenin, Konstantin. "Shin Kyoung-Sook." *Korean Literature in Translation*, www.ktlit.com/authors/shin-kyoung-sook/. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.
- Kyong-Suk Sin, and Chi-Young Kim. *Please Look after Mother*. A W&N PAPERBACK, 2012.
- Leonard, Jayne. "Learned Helplessness: Examples, Symptoms, and Treatment." *www.medicalnewstoday.com*, 24 Jan. 2022, www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/325355#what-it-is. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.
- Maier, Steven F, and Martin E P Seligman. "Learned Helplessness at Fifty: Insights from Neuroscience." *Psychological Review*, vol. 123, no. 4 2016, pp. 349-67, doi:10.1037/rev0000033. Accessed 15 Jan. 2023.
- Mijolla, Alain De. *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 1, Thomson/Gale, 2005.
- Rohleder, Poul. "Projection, Overview." *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 2014, pp. 1520–22, *Springer*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_415.
- Segal, H. "Notes on Symbol Formation." *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 1957, pp. 394.
- Speziale-Bagliacca, Roberto. *Guilt*. Routledge, 2013.
- Truscott, Ross. "Introjection." *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, 2012, pp. 1-3, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313167434_Introjection. Accessed 3 Mar. 2023.
- Westerink, Herman. "Carmen and Other Representation." *A Dark Trace: Sigmund Freud on the Sense of Guilt*. Leuven UP, 2009.

Winnicott, Donald Woods. *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. Edited by M. Masud R. Khan, Hogarth P, 1965.