

# TRAPPED WITHIN: A STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF KIM JIYOUNG, BORN 1982 BY CHO NAMJOO

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## Abstract

All social institutions are structured, and gender, being one of them, is subject to heavy systematization. While there have been periodic changes in conformity to the structure of gender, it remains largely perpetual. Oppression and discrimination are two facets of this gender structure that lead to inequalities. Women— called 'the second sex' by de Beauvoir— are at the receiving end of overt discriminatory activities. Taking a structuralist point of view of the internationally acclaimed novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* by Cho Namjoo, this paper aims to understand how various social institutions are structured and how genders are expected to function in them. It also intends to observe cultural signs, and the cyclical structural pattern which repeats itself across generations. Kim Jiyoung's familial structure is the main focus of the study, and other structures would be studied in relation to the same.

**Keywords:** Structuralism, Feminism, Kim Jiyoung, South Korea, binary oppositions, family, women

## INTRODUCTION

Structuralism perceives the world in terms of underlying structures which are found in all areas of thought and study. Rejecting Plato's ideal form, it states that all structures are man-made, and all individuals belong to structures- nobody is unique. Structuralism works on the belief that "things cannot be understood in isolation- they have to be seen in context of the larger structures they are part of." (Literary Theory and Criticism, 2016). According to Guerin et. al, structuralism "... identifies structures, systems of relationships, which endow signs (e.g., words) or items (e.g., clothes, cars, table manners, rituals) with identities and meanings, and shows us the ways in which we think." (pp. 368-369).

A fundamental idea in structuralism is that there are underlying structures everywhere and human activities are constructed around them. Structures organize things into rules and systems which, over a prolonged period of functioning, become naturalized; the human mind itself develops an underlying structure, thereby influencing collective behaviour. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), says that, "every means of expression used in society is based, in principle, on collective behaviour or- what amounts to the same thing- on convention." (p. 68). He goes on to add that, "...language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent." (p. 71).

The society itself is a colossal structure composed of numerous smaller component structures. At any given point in time, an individual belongs to various structures and is compelled to function according to the demands of those structures in the given context. These rules are not always overtly stated, but get relayed through signs in one way or the other.

"As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature ... which is described as feminine." (qtd. in Abrams and Harpham, 2015, p. 125). A 'constructed woman' is an amalgamation of various structures she is a part of. From the constructivist perspective, gender and the feminine are constructed in history, and are not eternal norms (Guerin et al, 2005, p. 226). Perceiving women from the structures they belong to and operate within is essential to understand why some structures do not change. Conformity sustains gender roles.

Kim Jiyoung, 33, the titular protagonist of *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* is a part of numerous structures. The novel covers various stages of her life and portrays how all structures that she belongs to at a particular time in her life, affect her as a person. The story is also about all the women around Jiyoung and how they are influenced by structures.

## ANALYSIS

Kim Jiyoung can be seen as a product of structuralism. She is a part of a structure right from the start. Not only is she shaped by the structures, she contributes to the maintenance of those structures through conformity. By complying, she participates in her own oppression. Only when she begins suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), does she break out of the structure of sanity. She then transitions into the structure of insanity.

Structuralism's emphasis on binary opposition gets echoed in the novel. "... relations among units within the structure occur in binary pairs, which are either similar to each other or different from each other ..." (Klages, *Claude Levi-Strauss*). The most prominent binary opposition is that of man and woman (or, in wider terms, gender relations). Klages, while talking about Levi-Strauss' *The Structural Study of Myth*, mentions how binary opposites are an intrinsic element of human cultures, thought and signifying systems. The reliance on binary opposites essentially structures thought. Binary pairs (or opposites) are always imbalanced i.e. one element is always considered more important than the other. The usual notion of gender relations claims that men are primary and superior, while women are secondary and inferior. This binary is an underlying element of a majority of social structures in the world. It has played a vital role in shaping both thought and structure; their intermingling and co-dependency becoming so pervasive that they are practiced unquestioningly.

Jiyoung belongs to a family that holds patriarchal ideas about gender roles. Her family includes her father (unnamed in the novel)- a civil servant, her mother Oh Misook- a housewife, her grandmother- Koh Boonsoon, her older sister - Kim Eunyong, and her younger brother (unnamed in the novel).

Right from Jiyoung's childhood, there are instances that reflect the preference of and towards males. This aspect of social structures is not difficult to understand as what is considered primary or fundamental is always the priority.

Jiyoung observes that her brother gets preferential treatment as he is the male child. His luxuries come at the cost of his sisters' deprivation. The child Jiyoung cannot make sense of the overt discrimination and hence rationalizes her and everyone else's behaviour. Girls are taught to be understanding and sacrificing for the good of others.

"It didn't occur to the child Jiyoung that her brother was receiving special treatment ... There were times when she had an inkling of a situation not being fair, but she was accustomed to rationalising things by telling herself that she was being a generous older sibling and that she shared with her sister because they were both girls." (Cho, 2018, p. 15).

Even after moving into a bigger house, her father and grandmother want the girls to share a room with their grandmother so that their brother— who does not even sleep alone— can have his own room. It clearly shows how it is deemed unnecessary to give women their own space. Women's spaces are dispensable. Here, Misook is firm about letting the girls have their own room. "Father and grandmother suggested that the girls share with the grandmother as before and give the boy his own room, but Mother was firm." (p. 39).

Oh Misook and numerous women of her generation lived to support their male siblings and put them through higher education, never getting to study themselves. They wasted their lives only to be belittled by those around them. All families used their daughters as stepping stones for their sons' success. The success of the family was only dependent on that of its sons because the daughters were never given an opportunity to succeed.

This was a time when people believed it was up to the sons to bring honour and prosperity to the family, and that the family's wealth and happiness hinged upon male success. The daughters gladly supported the male siblings. (p. 25)

An entire generation of women wasted their opportunities as they became sacrificial lambs. Misook, in retrospect realizes that it was "... a sacrifice made without truly understanding the consequences, or even having the choice to refuse, created regret and resentment ..." (p. 61)

An order gets created while assigning and accepting gender roles which goes on to become the only way of seeing the world. The order is accepted as it is because there are no alternatives to see the world in any other way. It becomes naturalized in human responses.

When Eunyong says, "I do a lot of washing and cleaning around here. I put away laundry when it's dry, and Jiyoung helps out, too. There's only one person under this roof who never lifts a finger. ... You mean he's the son!", she very clearly refers to her brother. It is not just about taking responsibility in helping out, but even observational learning. Children pick up from what they see around and do not question. They see events and behaviours as set patterns, which they then reproduce.

This situation can be extended to the time when Jiyoung visits her in-laws. While Daehyun (Jiyoung's husband) takes a nap after lunch, Jiyoung has to work. Be it Jiyoung's brother in the earlier case, or Daehyun here, the men are never asked to work.

Jiyoung has to prepare Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving Day) food with her mother-in-law to the point of exhaustion. Due to social conventions, she cannot refuse to work. This shows another pattern whereby in collectivistic cultural settings, daughters-in-law are treated as outsiders, as well as servants.

When Suhyun, Jiyoung's sister-in-law visits her parents for Chuseok, one realizes that her life is no different. Her father-in-law being the oldest male sibling puts a lot of burden on Suhyun's shoulders during Chuseok. It is again a family structure whereby the oldest son is important in name and for performing the rituals, but the burden of everything else- most importantly preparing food for Chuseok- falls on the women of the family. Suhyun understands the position Jiyoung is in, yet does not help Jiyoung with her chores. All she does is tell her mother to order food so that Jiyoung is not burdened, to which she gets the reply, "It isn't work when you're feeding your own family." (p 9). It brings to notice how work of homemakers is often considered to be no work. Homemakers' work is judged and valued in terms of their love. They have no monetary reparations.

This is also seen in the relation of Boonsoon and Misook. Boonsoon gives credit to her son when she says, “I get to eat warm food my son made for me, and sleep under warm covers my son arranged for me ...” (pp 16-17), when it is Misook who makes all arrangements for her. Misook does all the household chores while Boonsoon exclusively looks after her grandson.

These individual experiences go on to show no matter what the situation it, the women in it adhere to a set pattern as daughters-in-law. In the structure of the family, the individual components i.e. the members follow certain roles which leads to a universalization of experience.

Another impactful incident in the novel is when the father meets up with his ex-colleagues and returns home to say, “I’ve made it!” (p. 75). It is because of his wife that he turned out successful after losing his job, yet he takes all the credit by himself. Men are raised to be self-elevating creatures. His colleagues are jealous of him because, “... his eldest a teacher, his second attending university in Seoul, and his youngest, a son.” (p 75). Again, this goes on to show that Eunyong and Jiyoung doing something provides them with validation while their brother’s mere existence is validated by the society. This again shows the binary opposition preference.

At one point, Jiyoung’s father tells her, “You just stay out of trouble and get married.” (p 93). The idea that marriage is the end goal of a woman’s life, and it is the only way she can stay out of trouble, gets reflected here. In response to this, Misook tells Jiyoung, “Jiyoung, *don’t* stay out of trouble. Run wild!” (p. 93). Misook is telling Jiyoung to break out of the structure of patriarchal ideas and find her own path. She has to be her own woman. Jiyoung’s father’s orthodox ideas are further brought to light when Jiyoung is stalked by a guy from her cram school. Father blames her clothes, and also her for smiling at the guy because her smile could have given him the wrong idea. Jiyoung’s— and in general, women’s— smiles are culturally codified as signs about ‘asking for it’. Even if the blame lies with the men who make women uncomfortable, women need to leave the scene or correct their behaviour.

Misook understands the world in a very unique perspective. She understands the pain that structures entail, yet sees the world through the lens of those very structures. She once tells Jiyoung that she wanted to be a teacher but could not make it. When the family is going through a financial crisis, Misook advises Eunyong to go to a teacher training college since she sees teaching as a stable occupation for working mothers. Misook perceives marriage and motherhood as something very natural for a woman. Finally, Eunyong gives up on her dream of becoming a television producer and goes on to become a schoolteacher. Misook wanted to be a teacher too, but in providing for her brothers, she could never accomplish her own dreams.

When Misook meets her to-be in-laws for the first time, she and Daehyun’s mother talk about “how their daughters only studied and worked without ever helping around the house” (p. 115) while that is not the case. Conventions compel women to appear less capable than they actually are and they are even portrayed that way. Moving on to Jiyoung’s married life, Jiyoung realizes that Daehyun had saved much more before their marriage. An aspect of corporate economic inequality is seen here.

“... his income was higher, he worked for a bigger company, ... but when she realised just how much more he’d been able to save, she felt little demoralised.” (p. 116)

Even while selecting members to the planning team at Jiyoung’s workplace, the two men who started with Jiyoung were assigned to the team as women were not considered long-term employees post marriage and children. Corporate structures do not make it viable for women to work post childbirth. In most cases, women do not have enough family support either, which compels them to leave work to look after their children.

Even when new elements are added to a system, they get governed by previously existing rules (Klages, *Ferdinand de Saussure*). The glass ceiling is a prominent issue in Korea’s corporate life, and even though there are developments, they are slow. The primary preference is still given to men. Kim Eunsil, a team leader at Jiyoung’s workplace receives a lot of flak. Her daughter is in elementary school and she lives with her mother. Her success is accredited to her husband. “Living with the spouse’s parents is harder for the husbands than the wives.” (Cho, 2018, p. 98). In no case should men be inconvenienced while living with their in-laws while women have adjust to all whims and fancies without complaining.

It goes on to show how men are prioritized. A natural order has thus been established whereby men have become the first priority without questioning. It is assumed to be the natural order of things while it is man-made.

The institution of marriage is not just social and legal, but also has an emotional aspect to it. Daehyun wants to get their marriage registered because, “It changes how we [Jiyoung and Daehyun] feel.” (p. 117). The legal aspect of marriage is shown to have something to do with how one feels about their spouse. Registering a marriage provides validation to the relationship.

Laws exist on paper for most part. People would not follow new rules just because they have come in effect. They cling to their old ideas because it is easier to understand the world in that perspective. Legal procedures do not hold as much weight as social customs and understanding do. Saussure (1916) says that, “... language furnishes the best proof that a law accepted by a community is a thing that is tolerated and not a rule to which all freely consent.” (p. 71). The same applies to the abolition of “hoju system” (Cho, 2018, pp. 118- 120).

Falling back into the structure, Daehyun and Jiyoung both agree that having a child after marriage is natural. Daehyun supposedly understands all the sacrifices that Jiyoung would have to make after they have a child, which also includes leaving her job to look after the child. He mentions the changes he would go through as well, but they are negligible as compared to those of Jiyoung. As per traditional childcare roles, most work falls under the

mother's domain. Daehyun thinks that changing nappies and helping around a bit would be enough, failing to realize that a lot more goes into raising a child. That 'much more' is always a result of the mother's sacrifice. Jiyoung's sacrifices encompass a wider area- her body, her social standing, her economic independence, her own relations, and her freedom. Daehyun sees his sacrifices as being largely associated with guilt and an added financial responsibility as the head of the family. As the head of the family, he recreates the hierarchy, whereby he has to be the provider, and his wife the caretaker of his child. He easily suggests Jiyoung to give up her job, while saying that he would feel guilty about attending company dinners once his child is born.

When Jiyoung's first child, a girl, is born, both she and Daehyun know they have somehow disappointed the elders who wanted a boy. Over three decades after Jiyoung was born, the desire to have a male child remained the same. Upon becoming a full time housewife, Jiyoung notices that housework is not given as much importance as work outside is. Women's work at home is overlooked.

... there was a polarised attitude regarding domestic labour. Some demeaned it as 'bumming around at home', while others glorified it as 'work that sustains life', but none tried to calculate its monetary value. Probably because the moment you put a price on something, someone has to pay. (p. 137)

Even Jiyoung's mother tells her to adjust because she herself raised three kids and did all housework by herself without having anyone around to help her. Women ask women to stay in the structure rather than trying to break it. Women make the structures oppressing them last.

Jiyoung as labelled a "mum-roach" (p. 153) by some male office workers for drinking a cup of Americano on a hot day. They perceive housewives as women who mooch off their husbands. This also brings to notice the Kafka-ness of the term 'mum-roach'. The tag 'roach' equates homemakers with creatures who are considered parasitic, insignificant, and freeloaders. The first (and a natural) instinct upon seeing a cockroach is killing it. Associating homemakers with cockroaches degrades their position and presence. The hypermasculine ideological hegemony equates women who live off their husbands' earnings as dispensable and non-contributing members of the society. It also reinstates the binary opposition of man-woman, and also that of man-other creatures, in both of which, the 'man' is superior. The men are able to hold this view because there is little to no resistance on the part of women to refuse these labels, and also because men are in a position of authority which enables them to assign labels.

Metamorphosing is also important- Jiyoung metamorphoses into other women through Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Jiyoung's identities are those of women around her. Through these women, Jiyoung speaks up for herself. Throughout the novel, Jiyoung is shown to be a character who avoids conflict and never speaks up even when she finds something wrong. It builds up to a point where nothing but an illness can help her out. She does not defend herself directly, but through her identities- identities of women who are structured. She has to metamorphose into someone else to speak up for herself.

When Jiyoung's DID is discovered, it becomes a point for her to break out of the structures. The constant negotiations with all the structures that she belongs to reach the boiling point, after which, she has to take on another identity. She is thrust out of the structure of normalcy, and is now a part of the structure for abnormal people. Once she undergoes this change, it affects her relationships too. It shows how elements of a structure are interdependent and change in one inevitably affects another (Levi Strauss, 1963, p. 279).

Once out of the structure to which everyone around her belongs, she is free to criticize it, which she could not have done under normal circumstances in a restrictive social setting. She separates herself, and looks at the people and world around her in a different light. Her breaking out is vital for her to create her own narrative and refuse any totalizing attempts on her behaviour.

Structures are restrictive, and only when one steps out of them can there be another perspective.

## CONCLUSION

*Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, upon its release, created a wave in South Korea. Feminism is a sensitive topic in the country and most men do not see the need for it. Celebrities supporting the novel were boycotted too, such was the rage.

This novel is not just about Kim Jiyoung. She is merely a metaphor for all those women who are victims of rigid social structures that make them who they are, and are unable to break out of them. Since breaking out is not even an option, they just further the oppressive practices. They accept subjugation.

This paper made an attempt to assess the structures which Jiyoung and women around her belonged to and how they function in it. The relation between these women and the systems is interdependent. Womanhood is a construct which women abide by. Gauging the female construct through Foucault's 'normalization' (*Britannica*), the ideal female adheres to norms that are considered acceptable, and the one who does not is irrational. Everyone is, eventually, a product of eternally perpetuating cyclical patterns of institutionalized structures.

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