

**Kim Ji-Young, born in 1982: “Gender as a social category within the classroom”**

**Kim Ji-Young, nacida en 1982: “El género como categoría social dentro del aula”**

**Kim Ji-Young, nascida em 1982: “O gênero como categoria social na sala de aula”**

**Marta de la Torre Cano**

Universidad de Málaga

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9671-3642>

[martita\\_774@hotmail.com](mailto:martita_774@hotmail.com)

**Abstract**

*Kim Ji-young, born in 1982*, is a novel by Cho Nam-Joo that has become a resounding success both in her native South Korea and abroad (it has been translated into more than 10 languages). Compared to other bestsellers, its synopsis seems "simple" and will disappoint those looking for action, mystery, or fantasy. Within its pages, we find an "ordinary" life, seemingly without any major ups and downs or anything noteworthy. The protagonist has no superpowers, doesn't experience a passionate love story, and doesn't make an astonishing discovery that changes the fate of the world. It is an intimate and realistic tale. Why, then, has the story of a South Korean woman's everyday life resonated around the world? Because it is not the story of one woman: it is the story of many.

**Keywords:** Anthropology, South Korea, education, gender, feminism, women, women and development, pedagogical guidance, psychology, critical sociology.

**Resumen**

*Kim Ji-young, nacida en 1982*, es una novela escrita por Cho Nam-Joo que se ha convertido en un éxito rotundo tanto en su país de origen, Corea del Sur, como en el extranjero (ha sido traducida a más de 10 idiomas). En comparación con otros bestsellers, su sinopsis parece "simple" y decepcionará a quién busque en sus páginas acción, misterio o fantasía. En sus páginas encontraremos una vida "común", sin aparentemente altibajos ni nada reseñable. La protagonista no tiene poderes, no vive una historia de amor apasionada ni hace un descubrimiento asombroso que cambie el destino del mundo. Es un relato intimista y realista. ¿Por qué, entonces, la historia de la vida cotidiana de una mujer surcoreana ha dado la vuelta al mundo? Porque no se trata de la historia de una mujer: es la historia de muchas.

**Palabras clave:** Antropología, Corea del Sur, educación, género, feminismo, mujer, mujer y desarrollo, orientación pedagógica, psicología, sociología crítica.

## Resumo

*Kim Ji-young, nascida em 1982*, é um romance de Cho Nam-Joo que se tornou um sucesso estrondoso tanto na Coreia do Sul como no estrangeiro (foi traduzido para mais de 10 línguas). Comparativamente a outros best-sellers, a sua sinopse parece "simples" e pode desiludir quem procura ação, mistério ou fantasia. Nas suas páginas, encontramos uma vida "comum", aparentemente sem grandes altos e baixos ou qualquer coisa de notável. A protagonista não tem superpoderes, não vive uma história de amor apaixonada e não faz uma descoberta surpreendente que mude o destino do mundo. É um conto íntimo e realista. Por que razão, então, a história do quotidiano de uma mulher sul-coreana ressoou pelo mundo? Porque não é a história de uma mulher só: é a história de muitas.

**Palavras-chave:** Antropologia, Coreia do Sul, educação, género, feminismo, mulheres, mulheres e desenvolvimento, orientação pedagógica, psicologia, sociologia crítica.

## Introduction

Kim Ji-Young is 33 years old, married, a homemaker, and the mother of a daughter. One day, Kim begins to behave and speak in a strange way, as if she were "possessed" by other people. This alarms her husband and family members: Is she truly possessed? Is she experiencing a psychotic episode? Why does she speak and behave as if she were her mother or her sister...? The author offers no clear explanation, instead inviting readers to draw their own conclusions through the protagonist's biography.

We follow Kim's life from birth, through family life, school, friendships, university, work, marriage, and motherhood, showing how in each and every one of these spheres -without exception- her experiences have been shaped by sexism and misogyny.

Throughout the book, we repeatedly observe, sometimes more directly and at other times in subtler ways, how in her education, her family, and the society in which Kim moves, her condition as a woman subjects her to unpleasant and unjust situations. Notably, many of the situations she experiences are not acts of extreme violence: they are behaviors that appear innocuous, some of which can even be disguised as kind gestures, yet they are grounded in the same misogyny that underpins more extreme acts.

These behaviors are what we know as micro-aggressions. The prefix micro is misleading, as it unconsciously leads us to think they are of minor importance, but it would be a mistake to be guided

by that initial association. Although there is evidence that micro-aggressions form part of the spectrum of aggressiveness (Williams, 2021), their frequency and pervasiveness in everyday life are such that we tend to take them for granted, without recognizing them as aggressive or even noticing them. And it does not end there: micro-aggressions function as a stressor that affects the psychological well-being of those who experience them and fosters the internalization of misogyny (Cherry & Wilcox, 2020). From the micro to the macro, they operate as cogs in the mechanisms that normalize oppression and violence against women.

### **Brief Contextualization of South Korean Society**

“I often think that Kim Ji-young could be someone around me, someone who lives somewhere nearby. The fact is that all of us—my friends, my colleagues, and even myself—resemble Kim Ji-young. I confess that while writing this novel I was distressed by the character’s situation and felt compassion for her. But I know very well that the way she was raised and the environment in which she grew up did not allow her to live in any other way. My life is not very different from hers”.

— Epilogue of *Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982* (novel), by Cho Nam-Joo (2016).

Cho Nam-Joo’s intention to turn her work into a mirror of South Korean society is evident: her protagonist bears the most common female given name and the most common surname in South Korea. Despite the country’s remarkable economic and technological development, South Korean women continue to face discrimination and sexist violence. In 2018, 8% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 reported having experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months (Country Fact Sheet | UN Women Data Hub, n.d.). Women and girls over the age of 10 devote 12.4% more of their time to unpaid domestic and care work, compared to 3.6% for men. South Korea is also one of the developed countries with the largest gender wage gap (Gender Equality and Work, 2024), and few women reach positions of power within companies (OECD, 2017). Women’s participation in the labor market declines significantly after marriage and childbirth. If, after their children become independent, they wish to re-enter the labor market, they face considerable difficulties and, when they do succeed, it is usually through low-paid, precarious, and/or part-time jobs (Kang et al., 2024).

However, the glass ceiling is not the only obstacle South Korean women face in the workplace. Those who remain employed -either because they choose not to marry and/or not to have children, or because they have somehow managed to overcome the incompatibility between work and motherhood- encounter other forms of violence that must be taken into account, particularly the normalization of sexual harassment at work, which has increased in recent years. A recent survey

conducted by the South Korean labor rights organization Workplace Gapjil 119 reveals that 15.1% of workers have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, a figure that rises to 19.7% when focusing exclusively on women (Hyun-Bin, 2024).

In the year the book was published, the infamous Gangnam Station crime took place, in which a man murdered a woman he did not know and later stated that he had done so out of hatred toward women (Korea JoongAng Daily, 2016). This event forced both the media and politicians to acknowledge the existence of a serious problem of misogyny in South Korean society. How had it come to this point? Without downplaying the number of factors that contribute to the intensification of misogyny in South Korea, the book reflects several key factors that have also been analyzed in social and gender studies:

- **Patriarchy:** The patriarchal structure in South Korea has its roots in Confucian doctrine, which has traditionally been the country's predominant religious and philosophical current and which assigns women a subordinate role in relation to men. This is reflected at various points in the novel through Kim's family. Social expectations for South Korean women center on marriage (heterosexual, of course, as same-sex marriage is not legally recognized in South Korea), having children, and assuming responsibility for domestic care work and childrearing. Other significant factors include the intense aesthetic pressure imposed on South Korean women and issues related to eating behaviors (Ya-Ke, 2020). Although the book does not explicitly mention these two factors, it does suggest them when one of the reasons Kim is excited about starting university life is that, according to her sister, "she will lose weight."
- **Population imbalance** between the number of men and women. Kim is born in the early 1980s. During that decade and the following one, sex-selective abortions were so common (as mentioned in the novel itself) that they disrupted the population ratio between men and women (Chun & das Gupta, 2009).
- **Neoliberal policies** and a hypercompetitive education and labor access system (Jung, 2024). Precarious employment, lack of social support networks, difficulties in accessing housing, declining marriage rates, and falling birth rates are among the consequences. These social conditions negatively affect both men and women, but distress is expressed and experienced differently. In the case of men, dissatisfaction stemming from their inability to meet masculine social expectations has created fertile ground for channeling frustration into blaming women (Kim, 2025). After the data presented on gender inequality faced by South Korean women, what follows may seem like a cruel joke: a non-negligible number of South Korean men between the ages of 20 and 40 believe that they are the true victims of the system and find it justifiable for a hierarchy that favors men to exist (Lee, 2025). The use of derogatory neologisms targeting women, common on social media, appears several times in the book: "parasite mother" to refer to homemakers who care for the household without paid employment, or "doenjang girl," used to describe women who are financially dependent on

their parents or husbands. Even women who are ostensibly complying with “traditions” are harshly punished.

Unlike Western feminisms, which tend to seek international sorority, South Korean feminist currents are characterized by their close relationship with nationalism (Hee-Kang, 2009). Among the feminist movements that have gained international visibility through social media and reached other countries and groups (such as women of color), the 4B Movement has stood out in recent years. It is situated within radical feminism and has a strong isolationist orientation. 4B translates as “four no’s”: no dating men, no marrying men, no sex with men, and no having children with men. Despite its controversies, it is indicative of the growing discontent among South Korean women, who express profound exhaustion with male hostility and the violence of the patriarchal system (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Faced with the social expectations imposed on them, the response of South Korean women is clear: no.

### **The Family: Tradition, Customs, and Hierarchy**

“[...], Kim Ji-young came to understand how irrational the patriarchal family system was. Of course, there were also people who argued that, if this system were abolished, individuals would become like animals who neither recognize their parents nor their siblings, and that immorality would prevail in the country.”

Kim is the middle child of three siblings. Her household consists of her father, her paternal grandmother (who dies when Kim is still a child), her mother, her older sister, and her younger brother. The family structure is nuclear, following the U.S.-style model of parents and children, yet it retains traces of the traditional family patterns characteristic of East Asian countries, which include the extended family (in this case, the grandmother).

The novel opens with one of Kim’s earliest memories: her fondness, as a very young child, for drinking her baby brother’s powdered milk... an infantile pleasure that would be little more than anecdotal were it not for the “important” lesson it teaches her at a very young age, delivered by her own grandmother. The grandmother disapproves of this behavior, not because she believes it might be harmful to Kim or because she condemns her greed. Kim’s transgression, according to her grandmother, is that she “dared to covet what belonged to her male grandson.”

Within just a few pages, the hierarchy within the household is clearly portrayed through this and other everyday incidents narrated by Kim. The order in which meals are served (father, sons, grandparents, mother, and daughters) signals a fundamentally patriarchal family, in which the father is the center of the family, sons are the desired heirs, grandparents (if still alive) are valued for their experience, and mothers and daughters are valued insofar as they bring honor to the family —whether by displaying decorum (dressing “properly”), “helpfulness” (Kim’s mother and daughters take care of all household

tasks), or by securing a good marriage and bearing sons. Kim's grandmother is particularly proud that all four of her children were male. Kim's mother cannot say the same: she tearfully apologized to her family when she gave birth to her two older daughters. When she becomes pregnant for the third time and doctors reveal that the baby will be a girl, the disappointment of her husband and mother-in-law pushes Kim's mother to have an abortion.

Kim's mother's decision cannot be considered a free one. Through a perverse use of women's reproductive rights, these rights are turned against her to perpetuate the idea that having multiple daughters is undesirable. The novel itself sheds light on this by providing contextual information: surgical abortions for medical reasons had been legalized ten years earlier, and as if carrying a female fetus were a medical justification, sex determination tests and sex-selective abortions of female fetuses became widespread practices. This trend prevailed throughout the 1980s and the early years of the following decade, when gender imbalance among newborns reached record levels: in third pregnancies, the proportion of male babies doubled that of female babies (Nam-Joo, 2016). As the author notes, abortion for medical reasons was permitted in South Korea during the 1980s. It is chilling to consider that the sex of an embryo could come to be regarded as a genetic defect.

Another issue addressed in the book is that of the family surname. Since 2008, children in South Korea are not required to carry their father's surname and may instead take either the paternal or maternal surname (the decision is made once). According to the novel, since that year, only about 200 families have registered children under the mother's surname. As an adult, Kim reflects on this reality... she herself ultimately accepts giving her husband's surname to her children: "The world had changed enormously, but the small rules, the agreements, and the customs had failed to keep up. In short, the world had not changed that much." A similar situation exists in Spain, with the difference that children inherit two surnames, and the issue concerns the order of surnames, which traditionally prioritizes the father's. Since 2017, parents have been allowed to choose the order without additional documentation (removing the barrier of extra bureaucratic effort), yet in 2022 only 0.5% of newborns carried their mother's surname as the first surname (RTVE, 2022). Some of the explanations offered in that same article echo Kim's words: "everyone I know follows inertia," "we followed tradition." Tradition, customs, and what is socially accepted once again tip the balance in favor of male supremacy, even when we are not entirely sure why. It simply seems like the right thing to do, doesn't it?

Following traditional Korean values, Kim's father is considered the primary economic provider. Women's contributions are viewed as support or assistance, despite the fact that Kim's mother contributes a significant amount of her own money so that her husband can start a business. The book repeatedly mentions somewhat lazy and irresponsible fathers who, charming in their own way, manage to get by thanks to the implicit support of their wives. Why not openly acknowledge that women also fulfill the role of "head of household"? What meaning does the very concept of "head of household" even have? Shouldn't the family function as a team? Even when family power resides, in one way or another, with the woman, male hierarchy prevails and resists being questioned.

At that stage, Kim, still a child, naturalizes all of this. She does not initially resist it. She accepts it as something natural, just as from an early age we accept other injustices in the world because we consider them inevitable and inherent to life itself. From the moment we are born, we are shaped to fit our place within the family and within society. These social circumstances permeate everyday life and are reinforced through channels of socialization. We have seen that the family is one of these agents of socialization, but not the only one. Education also has something to contribute, as will be discussed next.

### Education: Gender as a Category in the Classroom

“—I want you to change my seatmate. I never want to sit next to him again.

The teacher stroked her shoulders in a gesture of comfort.

—Well, it seems you don't know something that I do. That boy likes you.

At those absurd words, she stopped crying.

—He hates me. You just said you know how he has been bothering me.

The teacher laughed.

—Boys are like that. They tease the girls they like.”

The term “gender” is one of those concepts that intuitively seems easy to explain, yet conceals a complexity that quickly emerges when one attempts to articulate it in words. There is a common tendency to use “gender” to refer to sociocultural characteristics and “sex” to refer to biological ones; however, this distinction is much easier to sustain in theory than in practice. For the purposes of this section, I will operate with the concept of gender as a social construct. Thus, gender is understood as a category, a social representation, rather than merely the “visible” expression of an underlying biological base (Butler, 1988).

Why have I chosen this conceptualization of gender? Because, as Judith Harris notes in her book *El mito de la educación* (2002), social categories exert a powerful influence within the classroom. Paraphrasing that work, the most effective way to generate performance differences between Black and White students (in favor of White students) is to place a question at the beginning of a test asking: “race.” The same occurs when the categories are men and women. If a woman or a Black person is made aware of their social category as “woman” or “Black,” they tend to perform worse on mathematics tests. This is what Claude Steele refers to as “stereotype threat” (TED, 2023). What is striking about this phenomenon is that the stereotype is self-assigned. That is, there were no external expectations significantly influencing test performance. Individuals belonging to minorities (symbolic minorities) had internalized the stereotype and attributed it to themselves; no external reminder of the stereotype's content was necessary, only the category itself.

Of course, stereotypes do not emerge out of nowhere. These social determinants operate at multiple



levels and shape the most influential channels of socialization, such as the family and education. They permeate everyday life; they constitute “the way things are done.” When that “doing” becomes “being,” internalization takes place.

We are very accustomed to thinking of oppression as a power that exerts pressure, violence, or threat from the outside. However, following Foucauldian thinking on mechanisms of power, this external oppressive force ultimately becomes internalized by the subject, who not only accepts it but assimilates it as part of their identity (Butler, 2001). In the case of gender as a social category, this internalization may not be merely symbolic: there appears to be scientific evidence that this social phenomenon affects cortical and inhibitory systems, modulating behavior in order to avoid the negative consequences of violating the norm and, in turn, perpetuating the legitimation of these stereotypes (Rippon, 2023). Stereotypes thus combine mechanisms of oppression with a sense of group belonging, creating a distorted equilibrium between punishment and reward mechanisms (no one wants to be excluded from their reference group, even when belonging to that group entails disadvantages).

Kim and her friends internalize this stereotype from a very young age. They notice injustices and attempt to correct them (with varying degrees of success and with considerable merit), but they do not question what lies beneath them. This can be seen in the following scene: school cafeteria shifts, much like what happens within the family, give priority to boys over girls. That is, boys always eat before girls. As a result, girls must rush through their meals because lunchtime is nearly over (a further layer of complexity is added by the fact that, within these groups, students are subdivided alphabetically by surname). The girls complain and propose that the alphabetical order be rotated each month, so that those whose surnames fall later in the alphabet get to eat first. The teachers reluctantly agree, and the girls enjoy this small victory. However, they only perceive the injustice in the fact that those with surnames at the end of the alphabet always eat last. They do not propose alternating between boys and girls, or simply mixing both groups and abandoning that absurd segregation altogether. How could they propose it, if things work the same way at home?

The school Kim attends constantly reinforces this distinction between men and women. There are frequent references to girls being more “responsible” and boys being “unable to sit still,” yet no one questions the fact that the class representative is always a boy (despite boys supposedly being less responsible), while cleaning duties are assigned to girls. The issue of class representatives must have been particularly conspicuous, as the narrative includes a news item that seems to surprise everyone who reads it: the number of female student representatives in secondary schools has increased. Of course, girls are expected to dress and behave with decorum, while boys are allowed to play ball and are expected to be loud and restless during play. In girls, the same behavior is viewed as disrespectful.

Although the book does not address this issue explicitly, another way stereotypes are reinforced in the classroom is through textbooks. I cannot speak to South Korean textbooks, but I can comment on



male bias in those used in Spain. In a 2025 study by Virginia Guichot-Reina and Ana María de la Torre-Sierra, it is shown that in current Spanish textbooks, 66.41% of the individuals mentioned in language textbooks and 88.30% in social science textbooks are men. The percentages are similar with regard to visual representation. Nor do the adjectives used to describe male and female figures help much: women are usually associated with support or care roles and a passive attitude, while men are portrayed in far more proactive roles (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2022).

And where does this education lead? To answer that question, we must revisit some of the data and experiences described earlier regarding society and the family. Kim's mother advises her eldest daughter (Kim's sister) to study Education in order to become a teacher, because it is a stable job and compatible with motherhood. The older sister (not without reason) becomes upset by this advice and turns the question back on her mother: would she give the same advice to her son? Why should she structure her entire future around an option having children- that may never come to pass? Moreover, the older sister wants to study something related to television. The mother regrets having suggested that option and ultimately tells her daughter to study whatever she believes will make her professionally fulfilled. But the crack has already opened. The gender category has once again become salient. When she goes to gather information about university degrees, she ends up choosing Education. At first glance, she has changed her mind of her own accord. Yet we have already seen the labor conditions faced by South Korean women, their limited presence in positions of power, their low levels of political and cultural representation, and the subtle promise that their destiny is, someday, to be a "good mother" and wife. Education, family, and society have fulfilled their function. They have not directly forced Kim's sister into her place—that would be crude, something that happened in the time of her mother and grandmother; now no one forces you. But then, why say they have fulfilled their function? Because they have created the necessary conditions for her to "choose" that place herself—a place that conveniently benefits the system and legitimizes women's inferior position within the social hierarchy. The internalization of the social category has taken place

### **And now what?**

Please forgive me for not answering the question that gives this section its title, but it would be naive and somewhat arrogant on my part to assume that I have the answer. Instead, I am left with more questions to explore, more issues to reflect upon, and more than enough reasons to try to rise to the occasion. Women's rights have Schrödinger-like properties: they exist and do not exist at the same time. Legally, women may have the same rights as men, but the gears of the system operate in a very particular and suspicious way, and that legal equality is not clearly reflected in reality. Continuing with the physics metaphors, if the ideology underlying the system does not change, mechanisms of oppression do not disappear, they merely transform. Critical thinking helps us to identify those mechanisms but, and I am not saying anything new here, as you know, it is not enough. One must

know how to translate critical thinking into action, to leave the realm of ideas in order to have an impact on reality. To build change through action, rather than waiting for instructions.

As I do not wish to end on such a pessimistic note, and because I believe that no matter how arduous the struggle may be, it is worth the effort, I would like to offer an example of “doing” that responds to the question “And now what?” far better than I could, and that shows us that another way of doing things is possible, even if at times difficult. I am referring to *El Club de Malasmadres* (literally, The Bad Mothers’ Club), which defines itself on its website as “a community of mothers and women who fight to break the myth of the perfect mother and achieve real work–life balance” (Club de Malasmadres – Comunidad Emocional 3.0 Para Malasmadres, 2025). They organize workshops, talks, and podcasts, responding -like South Korean women- with a “no” to social expectations. And since the system is not going to change overnight, but it would also be unfair for women to have to choose between being a mother or a worker (a dilemma rarely imposed on men), they add to that “no” a “I will do it my way.” They take action and carve out their own path.

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