

THE ARTISTIC FEATURES OF KON DJON'S WORK "OUR HAPPY MOMENTS"

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Abstract

The work "Our Happy Moments" by Kon Djon, a representative of Korean literature, is written in a distinctive manner that focuses on the depiction of the human inner world. In the work, the motif of crime and punishment serves as a fundamental means of revealing the psychological states of the characters. Through the destinies of the main protagonists, Yunsu and Mun Yuchjon, the social life of the period is portrayed.

Keywords

artistic world, artistic expression, inner world, authorial style, creative method, social context, family relations.

Modern Korean prose differed from the literature of the preceding period in a number of distinctive features. In particular, when writers were confronted with the question of which artistic method should serve as the foundation for the development of contemporary prose, objective factors determined the choice of realism as the dominant method. In their search for material, writers increasingly turned to the environment surrounding them—namely, to everyday life, which had previously been regarded as unworthy of serious artistic attention. At the same time, they gained greater freedom in the selection of means of artistic expression. The narrative mode from the author's perspective gradually gave way to narration from the viewpoint of the character.

However, while realism became established as the main tendency in the development of modern Korean literature during the 1920s, both the content of this concept and attitudes toward it underwent significant changes. Realism began to position itself, to a certain extent, in opposition to traditional approaches to representing reality. Supporters of realism showed particular interest not in ordinary facts of everyday life, but rather in revealing and often disturbing facts. Alongside the term "realism," the notion of the "shocking" or "striking" increasingly came into use.

At the same time, following naturalism, which sought to ensure the objectivity of the intelligentsia, and critical realism, a form of prose distinguished by strong ideological orientation emerged—namely, proletarian literature promoting socialist ideas, or what may be termed 'tendentious literature.' Advocates of socialist realism were not satisfied merely with objective representation of facts or with criticism; instead, they pursued clear ideological goals. These very characteristics play a leading role in the works of the writer Kon Djon."

"Kon Ji-young (공지영) developed an interest in literature from an early age and engaged in creative writing from her youth. Already during her adolescence, she presented her short stories and poems to a broad readership. In the 1980s, while studying at college, she became involved in the student movement, a process through which she clearly defined her ideological and creative goals. In 1985, she earned a bachelor's degree in literature from Yonsei University. Her first novel, **Dawn**, was a product of her student years.

The author's subsequent works were written during a period marked by student life in South Korea, violence, protest, and political turmoil. Kon Ji-young began her full-fledged literary career in 1988. Her works stand out from those of other writers for their focus on the lives of

workers, the economically disadvantaged, and socially marginalized individuals. She also integrated into her narratives the tragic fate of women who failed to find their place within the family structure.

Kon Ji-young was regarded as a feminist writer of her time, particularly as themes of women's struggle and the labor movement occupy a central position in many of her works. The pursuit of a dignified and prosperous life through women's labor became a core narrative motif in her fiction. It is well known that the social tension of the 1980s gradually gave way to relative stability in the 1990s, a shift that was likewise reflected in Kon Ji-young's literary works."

"In her literary works, the author raised the issue of equality between women and men, that is, the question of gender equality. Her 1993 novel **Walk Alone Like a Rhinoceros**, which was directly devoted to women's issues, was adapted into a film; in 1995, **Walk Alone Like a Rhinoceros** became the first of Kon Ji-young's novels to be transformed into a feature film.

In the late 1990s, Kon Ji-young continued to focus on issues concerning women and workers, while also expanding the scope of her creative activity to encompass the lives of economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized members of Korean society. In her 1998 novel **My Sister Bongsun**, Kon Ji-young depicted the lives of women in the 1960s. In her bestselling novel **Our Happy Moments**, she examined the issue of the death penalty, while in her autobiographical novel **House of Happiness** she portrayed the realities of a divorced woman's family life. In her most recent work, **Crucified**, she exposed sexual repression within Korean society as well as the increasingly severe discrimination and violence directed toward people with disabilities."¹

"The novel **Our Happy Moments** was adapted into the film **Maundy Thursday**. Upon its release in September 2006, the film attracted considerable public attention and became the highest-grossing film of the preceding four years, maintaining the top position at the box office for eight consecutive weeks."

"Together with South Korean writers Lee Ki-ho and Ham Min-bok, Kon Ji-young was among the first authors to publish her literary works on the internet. She initially released **The Crucible** on November 7, 2008, through the South Korean internet portal Daum. In South Korea, such serialized works had traditionally been published in newspapers. The novel **The Crucible**, published in 2009, exerted a significant influence on Korean society as well as on legislation concerning the rights of people with disabilities. Following the highly successful premiere of the film adaptation in 2011, members of South Korea's Grand National Party demanded an investigation into Kon Ji-young's involvement in what they described as "political activity." They alleged that the author had employed excessively frightening and disturbing language, thereby unduly alarming the public."²

"Subsequently, Kon Ji-young responded to these remarks with ironic gratitude, writing on her Twitter account, 'Thank you, the Grand National Party, for making me internationally famous.'³

¹ "공지" biographical PDF available at: http://klti.or.kr/ke_04_03_011.do# Archived 2013-09-21 at the [Wayback Machine](#)

² Bae, Myeong-jae (27 October 2011). [도가니 과도한 표현, 공지영 조사하라](#). *Kyunghyang Shinmun* (in Korean). Retrieved 2011. - P. 11-19.

³ 공지영 "한나라당이 날 세계적인 작가로 만들려 꿈 기획...감사" [꼬집어](#). 2011. P.-11-19.

“Our Happy Moments depicts the lives of two individuals whose fates are intertwined. They are people forced to endure the cruelty and indifference of those closest to them. The novel’s protagonist, Mun Yuchjon, was raised in a prestigious, wealthy family and became a famous singer; on the surface, his life appeared perfect. From an early age, his mother showed no concern for him, constantly reminding him that she resented giving birth to him and was disappointed in him at every opportunity.

The second main character, Yunsu, grew up in a hostile environment marked by poverty. He and his younger brother were regularly beaten by their frequently drunk father, while their mother abandoned them in search of a better life. Yunsu’s entire existence unfolded on the streets or in prison, associating with the wrong people and losing faith in humanity. Both Yuchjon and Yunsu struggle with past trauma and emotional wounds. They are cynical, resentful, afraid to trust others, and unable to believe that life can be good. Although their backgrounds are very different, they share profound similarities. Together, the moments they spent sharing personal thoughts and engaging in sincere conversations—without fear of judgment—represent their happiest times.

Our Happy Moments as a film adaptation presents a narrower and simplified version of the story, while the book offers a broader, more complex portrayal, allowing the characters’ lives to be vividly realized in the reader’s imagination. The central theme of the novel concerns faith, trust in God, and seeking refuge in the divine. The author avoids preaching or moralizing, instead raising profound existential questions. For example: “If God exists, why is there so much injustice in the world? Why do so many good people suffer, while the wicked live in eternal comfort?” The characters search for answers to these and other questions, ultimately discovering the most important truths—inner peace and serenity of the heart.

Another central issue the author explores is the necessity of the death penalty. Can a person who has committed a horrific crime be reborn, truly repent, and be forgiven? Or are such individuals born as predatory creatures, living and dying without hope of redemption? Initially, Yuchjon holds these beliefs about Yunsu, but after meeting him, he realizes he was mistaken. He comes to understand that newspapers report crimes incessantly, yet no one truly wants to hear the truth or inquire about the circumstances that led to these events.

In preparing the novel, the author conducted extensive research, spending significant time in detention centers for female prisoners and meeting women sentenced to death. In the novel, Yuchjon’s mother often acts in ways that leave the reader astonished at her failure to truly understand her son’s hatred and his desire for suicide. Unlike the film adaptation, the tragic event Yuchjon experiences in adolescence is immediately clear, leaving little mystery. Overall, the work cannot be described as a love story; rather, it resembles a narrative of friendship and human connection.”

“The novel centers on its two main protagonists, Mun Yuchjon and Yunsu, and the ways in which their lives have shaped their characters. At the beginning of the work, the author uses the epigraph: ‘사랑받아본 사람만이 사랑할 수 있고, 용서받아본 사람만이 용서할 수 있다는 걸..... 알았습니다’⁴ – which can be translated as, ‘I understood that only those who have been loved can love, and only those who have been forgiven can forgive.’ This epigraph serves as the leitmotif of the novel.

Indeed, a person who has experienced love, attention, and appreciation is capable of giving genuine love to others. It is difficult for a heart that has never known affection to understand or

⁴ 공지용 «우리들의 행복한 시간» 2005.

express love. Similarly, when a person feels forgiven for their own mistakes, they begin to view the mistakes of others with compassion. The experience of being forgiven softens the heart and enables empathy and understanding.”

“Our Happy Moments begins with a depiction reminiscent of journalistic investigation: ‘사형수인 그들을 방문했던 것은 그들을 취재하고 싶어서였다. 소설 재료로써 그들이 내게는 필요했고 취재가 끝나면 나는 떠날 사람이었다’⁵ – which can be translated as, ‘The reason I visited those sentenced to death was that I wanted to interview them. I needed them as material for my novel, and once the interviews were over, I would leave.’ This introduction establishes the investigative, almost reportage-like framework of the narrative, grounding the novel in real-life social realities and emphasizing the author’s methodical approach to research”.

“This poignant, profound, and unforgettable drama depicts the meeting of two lonely individuals who gradually reveal their emotional wounds to one another and seek solace for their inner scars. The novel’s conclusion features Yunsu’s final letter, which is particularly moving and evokes tears. As the novel states: ‘If you divide all the people in the world into two groups, you will probably encounter: one that suffers occasionally, and one that lives amidst suffering.’ The two main protagonists belong to the latter group. They have endured numerous hardships, which have hardened their hearts. Had someone paid attention to them in a timely manner, listened to them, and offered them shelter, their lives might have unfolded differently. Yunsu might have grown into a better person, and Yuchjon may not have been driven to contemplate suicide so urgently.

Overall, **Our Happy Moments** is an intimate, melancholic novel about crime and punishment, love, and forgiveness. It is imbued with words and expressions that resonate deeply with the human heart, leaving a lasting emotional impact on the reader.”

“Published in 2005, this novel became a bestseller that same year and remained on the bestseller list until 2009. It tells the story of a man who has killed three women and a woman who has attempted suicide three times. The novel explores fundamental human concerns of life and death through the meeting of two very different, yet ultimately similar, individuals. The narrative is both moving and beautifully rendered, as the characters share their ‘true stories,’ confronting long-neglected emotional wounds and seeking healing together.”

“The protagonist of the novel is an adolescent in a transitional stage of life, whose inner world is fraught with conflict: on one hand, a desire for independence, and on the other, a reliance on adults and their support. These two opposing forces drive the adolescent’s personal development, yet the process is painful and challenging. He feels unnecessary within society, encountering misunderstanding and indifference from those around him.

The depiction of adolescence in Kon Ji-young’s **Our Happy Moments** represents not only the personal growth of an individual but also reflects the broader search of an entire generation to find its place within society. The author portrays the psychological complexity of adolescence, the challenges of social adaptation, and the internal conflicts that arise within the human psyche in a profound and compelling manner.”

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⁵ 공지용 «우리들의 행복한 시간» 2005.

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