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The orphaned subject and moral debilitation: accounting for postcolonial pessimism

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Dissertation

**THE ORPHANED SUBJECT AND MORAL DEBILITATION:
ACCOUNTING FOR POSTCOLONIAL PESSIMISM**

by

HYEBIN HONG

B.A., Ewha Womans University, 2006
M.A., Ewha Womans University, 2009
M.T.S., Boston University, 2013

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Approved by

First Reader

Walter Earl Fluker, Ph.D.
Martin Luther King Jr. Professor Emeritus of Ethical Leadership

Second Reader

Shelly Rambo, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Theology

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Major Professor: Dr. Walter Earl Fluker, Martin Luther King Jr. Professor Emeritus
of Ethical Leadership

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the concept of “moral debilitation” as it pertains to the “orphaned subject” in Korean society, a notion that denotes the diminished moral agency consequential to colonial and neocolonial legacies. The term “orphaned subject” describes certain characteristics prevalent among a group of contemporary Koreans characterized by moral debilitation due to the enduring sense of dislocation and psychological distress. The author traces these characteristics through literary representations, notably the motif of the “orphan consciousness” and the recurring depiction of the absent Father figure in modern Korean literature. This dissertation maintains that acknowledging and addressing the compromised moral agency of the colonized is essential for postcolonial theological analysis. This approach reveals how colonial harms extends beyond the material, political, economic, and psychological realms to affect the moral constitution of the colonized subject. The author posits this pessimistic account of moral debilitation not as an indictment of the colonized but as a means to a deeper, more integrated comprehension of the postcolonial condition.

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List of Abbreviations

IMF	International Monetary Fund
KCIA	Korean Central Intelligence Agency
MI	Moral Injury
MIE	Moral Injury Event
PTSS	Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome
POW	Prisoner of War
STS	Secondary Traumatic Stress
USAMG	United States Army Military Government

Chapter I:

Introduction

I.1. Statement of Thesis

This dissertation examines the “moral debilitation” that plagues the “orphaned subject” of Korean society.¹ This dissertation contends that acknowledging the compromised moral agency of the colonized, resulting from colonial and neocolonial legacies, is essential and should be considered within the discourse of postcolonial theology.

I coined the term “orphaned subject” to encapsulate some identifiable traits across generations of Koreans shaped by a painful, anxious, and lonely consciousness. This concept is built upon the idea of the “orphan consciousness,” one of the significant literary motifs in modern Korean literature.² It is notably evident in individuals who have lost a sense of national identity, tradition, or similar spiritual and cultural anchors. As will be further discussed in the following chapter, the historical experiences of losing paternal

¹ Note: In this dissertation, I intend to format Korean names as last name first, followed by first name (with a dash between the two halves of the first name). I remove the comma between last names and first names in the text itself. For Koreans or Korean Americans who published in English through the US or other countries’ publishers, I maintain their Western formatting. For works published in Korea for which an English translation exists, I reference titles and author names according to the works’ English abstract. When no English translation exists, I translate them into a familiar form. In footnotes referencing works published in Korea, I maintain the Family Name First Name format widely used in Asian countries.

² As a literary trope, “the orphaned consciousness” is not only present in Korean literature but also serves as a common motif in the postcolonial literature of other East Asian countries that experienced Japanese colonialism. See Shin, Min-young, “Identity Struggles of the Colonized in the Taiwanese Novel Orphan of Asia,” *Humanities Journal* 71 (2014): 211–246. The term “orphaned consciousness” is attributed to various scholars, and its exact origin is unclear, but it is a concept that has been extensively explored in academic discussions.

figures to violence have left a significant impact on the Korean mind, resulting in the emergence of a literary archetype portraying the absent Father figure in modern literature. This portrayal depicts a Father who is perceived as incapable, weak, and fragmented, having either disappeared or been defeated during periods of conflict or authoritarian rule.

Discussions on the motif of the absent or symbolically deceased Father and the associated literary theme of the orphan consciousness in literary studies have predominantly centered on the colonial/post-liberation and post-war eras (1910s–1950s).³ However, I argue that its presence has endured and gained even greater prominence in subsequent periods, including times of dictatorship (1960s–1980s) and the Foreign Exchange Crisis of the late 1990s to the 2000s. This prominence is evident in literary works from the late 1950s to the 2000s, where the Father character often experiences a job loss, engages in self-destructive behavior, or perpetrates violence against the Mother and Children, further reinforcing the symbolic notion of his demise as seen through the eyes of the younger generation.

³ Most studies related to the theme focus on works from the postcolonial and post-war era. For instance, Kim, Myong-hoon, “Emotion Education for Orphans: Struggle for Recognition in Lee Tae Joon’s Novels Before and After Liberation,” *Sanghur Hakbo: The Journal of Korean Modern Literature* 41, no. 6 (2014), 59–91; Na, Byung-chul, “Female Bildungsroman and the Absence of the Father,” *Feminism and Korean Literature* 10 (2003): 183–214; Park, Gye-hyun, “A Study of Orphan Consciousness in Lee Tae-jun’s Novels: Focusing on the Conflicts of Thoughts” (MA thesis, Dongguk University, 2001); Kim, Eun-hee, “A Study of Hwang Sun-won’s Novels: Centered on the Orphan Consciousness” (MA thesis, Myongji University, 2002); Oh, Hyun-ju “A Study of Lee Beom-seon’s Short Stories: Centered on the Orphan Consciousness” (MA thesis, Konkuk University, 2007).

More recently, Lee Jung-hwa applied the orphanhood trope to a relatively younger writer, Oh Jeong-hee, in her Master’s thesis titled “A Study of Orphan Consciousness in Oh Jeong-hee’s Novels” from Myongji University, 2020. However, she does not discuss the difference in repetition of the theme.

Considering literature as a mirror of reality, the “orphanhood trope” that consistently appears intergenerationally throughout modern literature needs to be understood as a reflection of individuals’ profound experiences of loss and abandonment.⁴ I contend that the orphanhood trope reflects the traumatic recollections of colonialism that have been overlooked by national history and hegemonic cultural discourse. It captures a profound sense of loss experienced by generations of Koreans, encompassing not only those who are physically bereaved of parents but also individuals who share in the collective experience of detachment and loss resulting from tumultuous historical events. It reflects the psychological, emotional, and moral impact of a society grappling with the aftermath of colonial domination and other significant historical disruptions. It symbolizes a shared feeling of estrangement, a yearning for reconnection with cultural roots, and a struggle for identity and agency amidst the complex tapestry of societal transformation.

In the continuum of the orphan consciousness within Korean society, the new generation of “the orphaned subject” emerges, representing some new phase, a state distinctly marked by a systemic failure, a societal predicament that demands recognition and redress. This subjectivity is rooted in the narratives of previous generations yet distinctly marked by the conditions of contemporary neoliberal society. This subjectivity, characterized by what I term moral debilitation, is not merely a new manifestation but an exacerbated state of psychological and emotional desolation compounded by the

⁴ The term “orphanhood” is adopted by English literary scholar Wendy Gimbel in her work on Edith Wharton. I borrowed this term to refer to a grouping of Korean literary expressions centered around the motif of the absent father and orphan consciousness. Wendy Gimbel, *Edith Wharton: Orphanhood and Survival* (New York: Praeger Special Studies, c1984; 1994).

relentless pressures of a market-driven existence. The orphaned subject thus epitomizes a generation further dislocated by the neoliberal turn, shouldering the inherited trauma of colonial legacy while navigating the isolating demands of self-optimization.

Any research on a group of people, however well-intended, makes it difficult to avoid a charge of essentializing or overgeneralization. Nevertheless, I dare to categorize contemporary Koreans experiencing similar emotional and moral difficulties into a group called “the orphaned subject” with the hope that this research can offer much-needed recognition of their experiences. By validating the negative emotions, frustrations, and difficulties of the orphaned, this study underscores their trauma-induced moral deficiencies and their significance in academic dialogues. Understanding the depth and nuances of moral trouble allows for developing decolonizing interventions that cater directly to this group’s unique experiences. This understanding fosters cross-cultural comprehension and illuminates the broader implications of colonial and neocolonial order continuing to impact contemporary Koreans.

With this hope in mind, I engage the Foucauldian term “subjectivity” to accentuate the shared experiences, perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and desires of the orphaned rather than their cultural, social, ethnic, gender, or professional identities. Michel Foucault introduced a concept of subjectivity distinct from the Kantian notion of a unitary, self-governing subject.⁵ Foucault conceptualized the subject as a construct

⁵ “Kantian subject,” as opposed to the Foucauldian one, can be characterized as an “empirical-transcendental dyad.” Various empirical representations grounded in intuition stem from the transcendental representation (“I think”), forming the basis for *a priori* cognitive principles. The Kantian subject internalizes its external through dual manipulation/action, constructing all cognitive foundations within itself. In this sense, The Kantian subject can be understood as one who internalizes its external through a transcendental perspective. Moreover, in Kant’s *Anthropology*, humans are seen as playing a role in

influenced by “discourse.” Discourse is a system of governance and discipline by which power establishes and maintains social orders. It structures the social norms and shapes individuals into the subject according to the norm.⁶ Understood this way, subjectivity is how individuals perceive, understand, and interpret the world based on their experiences within discourse. It is inherently fluid, as personal perspectives and feelings can change over time or in different contexts.⁷ The Foucauldian concept of discourse and subjectivity

unifying God and the world as “thinking subjects.” From this, the Kantian subject is understood as one who “reproduces the externality of the world as the internality of human reason and negates it within itself,” and one who “represses externality.” In short, through a transcendental perspective, they reduce others to the same. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, c1785; 1998); *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, c1787; 2000).

Foucault seeks to deconstruct the Kantian subject. The problem that prompts Foucault’s deconstruction of the Kantian subject lies in its denial of power relations existing in the empirical-social field. The Kantian subject is one who represses the externality of reason, reduces it to the same, remains within the limits, and denies the power relations of the externality. Against this, Foucault presents a subject who does not repress the externality of reason, does not reduce it to the same, and does not deny the power relations of the externality. Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 2, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205–222; 5 January 1983, opening lecture of *The Government of Self and Others*, translated by Colin Gordon as “Kant on Enlightenment and Revolution,” *Economy and Society* 15 (1986): 88–96; “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books 1984), 32–50.

⁶ Similar to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of “hegemony,” Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse refers to “a system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledges, disciplines and values upon dominated groups. As a social formation it works to constitute reality not only for the objects it appears to represent but also for the subjects who form the community on which it depends.” Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 37; Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language,” in *Critical Theory since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee, FL: University Press of Florida, 1986), 148–62.

Edward Said develops this concept into a “colonial discourse” which means a system of knowledge about the colonized, the colonizing power, and, most importantly, the relationships between these two. Orientalism as a colonial discourse is “a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient.” Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1991).

⁷ Foucault, “What Is an Author.”

allows us to articulate how societal norms and values impact the self-understanding of individuals while avoiding external categorization that entails identity discourse.⁸ The term “orphaned subject” thus describes individuals who navigate their world based on their shared experiences, not bound by broader societal or identity-based categorizations.

By introducing and underscoring the potentially contentious concept of moral debilitation, this dissertation illuminates the profound and often overlooked moral and psychological ramifications faced by the orphaned Koreans of postcolonial condition, which is nuanced and often ambiguous.⁹ This condition is marked not just by a chronological “post” to colonialism but also by the ongoing struggles that permeate the fabric of Korean society—struggles that are both a legacy of its colonial past and a feature of its present efforts to define its subjectivity and ethos in a rapidly changing world. Moral debilitation is critical for understanding the depth and complexity of

⁸ Following the introduction of “strategic essentialism” by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, there has emerged a contentious debate among progressive and liberative theorists. Spivak describes strategic essentialism as “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.” Notable criticisms of Spivak’s conception of strategic essentialism can be found in the works of Judith Butler, particularly in *Bodies that Matter* (1993); Kimberlé Crenshaw, in “Mapping the Margins” (1991); and Patricia Hill Collins, in “Black Feminist Thought” (1990). However, a comprehensive engagement with these critiques exceeds the scope of this study. It suffices to state here that this research has opted for a more flexible terminology to delineate the moral difficulties faced by the “orphaned” subjects, distancing itself from a strategy of essentialization.

⁹ The complex history of military occupations on the Korean peninsula complicates the typical dominant/subordinate binary in analyzing Korea’s postcolonial condition. This multifaceted history and its ongoing implications contribute to the ambiguity inherent in Korea’s postcolonial condition. Kang, Jin-yeon, “Colonialism and Contested Membership: Shifting Sense of Belonging and Postcolonial Division in Korea,” *Asian Perspective* 42 (2017): 263–289; Suk-Bok Lee, *The Impact of US Forces in Korea* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1987); Chae, Ou-Byung, “Homology Unleashed: Colonial, Anticolonial, and Postcolonial State Culture in South Korea, 1930–1950,” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 23, no. 2 (2015): 317–347; Kim, Hak-joon, “The American Military Government in South Korea, 1945–1948: Its Formation, Policies, and Legacies,” *Asian Perspective* 12 (1988): 51–83.

Korean postcolonial conditions, which transcend physical or political subjugation, extending into the realms of moral and ethical integrity.

As its title suggests, this dissertation does not aim to describe something novel to the colonized that dismantles the dehumanizing colonial discourse nor to promulgate a prescriptive moral framework for the colonized. Instead, it seeks to illuminate the moral impairments that the multifaceted legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism have inflicted upon the Korean people. The moral agency, compromised by these systemic forces, thus emerges as a critical concern for postcolonial theological reflection. The dissertation asserts that recognizing the depth of this moral debilitation is not an exercise in attributing blame but a step towards a realistic understanding of the postcolonial condition—a condition that may significantly affect the orphaned subjects' ability to participate in the decolonizing process. Through this recognition, the dissertation aims to contribute to a more authentic engagement with the ethical dimensions of postcoloniality, and in doing so, it endeavors to bridge theoretical postcolonial theology with the lived, often morally compromised experiences of the orphaned subjects.

This rather pessimistic approach to postcolonial subjectivity can be contentious. Nevertheless, this pessimism, I contend, serves as a crucial component in the exploration of decolonizing theologies. It offers a sobering evaluation of colonialism and neocolonialism's psychological and moral aftermaths. Rather than merely negative, this pessimism represents a clear-eyed acknowledgment of the entrenched, multi-generational moral degradation that hampers the colonized subjects' ability to exercise full moral agency. This recognition is vital as it directly addresses the moral and emotional wounds

inflicted by systemic oppression, challenging postcolonial theories to confront the gravity of colonial harm. Such an approach acknowledges that decolonization efforts must be gradual and cultivating, taking into account the profound moral scars left by colonialism.

I.2. Literature Review

Postcolonial Studies

Postcolonialism constitutes an intellectual and political endeavor spanning various disciplines such as critical theory, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, anthropology, political science, feminism, and others. This practice interrogates the repercussions of Western colonization on a global scale, challenging the historical narratives, overarching narratives, and cultural norms imposed by colonizers. Moreover, it critically reassesses stereotypical portrayals of colonized cultures as the “other.” Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha articulates that postcolonialism aims to “intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples.”¹⁰

Influenced significantly by Homi Bhabha, the discourse on postcolonial theory has conceptualized cross-cultural, diasporic, and intersectional identities of the marginalized as a locus of resistance and subversion. Bhabha expanded upon Jacques

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, c1994; 2004), 171.

Derrida's notion of the spectral presence of the "decentered" through his Third Space theory,¹¹ wherein colonial hybrid identities are shaped and emerge:

My insistence on locating the postcolonial subject within the play of the subaltern instance of writing is an attempt to develop Derrida's passing remark that the history of the decentered subject and its dislocation of European metaphysics is concurrent with the emergence of the problematic of cultural difference within ethnology.¹²

Subaltern instances—the articulation of subaltern experiences—create a shadow that exposes “a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations.”¹³ The colonial imagination encompasses cultural, social, and ideological constructs influencing the attitudes, actions, and policies of the colonized society. It is destined to falter because the hybrid subjects expose the inherently imaginary, contingent, and thus ambivalent nature of colonial discourse through colonial mimicry. The repetitive and subversive enactment of colonial mimicry, mirroring elements of dominant colonial discourse, generates unease and fragmentation within.¹⁴

Therefore, mimicry becomes both a form of admiration and a threat to colonial power.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, in his work *Specters of Marx*, introduced the concept of “hauntology” as a response to Francis Fukuyama’s claim that the end of the Cold War signified the triumph of liberal democracy over the lingering specters of communism. Derrida employs the metaphor of specters to designate entities that exist in a state neither entirely present nor fully absent, inhabiting a hauntological realm. These spectral entities, through their ephemeral existence, continually remind the living that the current state of affairs is not solely the product of progressive liberalism, but also emerges from “political or other forms of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or various exterminations.” Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge Classics, c1994, 2007), 4.

¹² Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 84.

¹³ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 34–38.

¹⁴ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 86.

[M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which “appropriates” the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also a sign of the inappropriate. However, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres to the dominant strategic function of colonial power intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers.¹⁵

According to Bhabha, the strategies of hybridity and mimicry dismantle the binary oppositions of colonial discourse, thereby opening a Third Space of possibility for the subjectivity of the colonized, which he refers to as the “interstitial space.”¹⁶

Bill Ashcroft, in his 2009 article “Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope,” explores the postcolonial rejection of national borders and identity, proposing “transnation” as a concept that transcends traditional notions of nation and state.¹⁷ This concept is built on the idea of the hope for a future beyond current constrictions, which he finds prevalent in postcolonial literature. Ashcroft argues for a form of utopianism that is not tied to specific geographies but is instead a dynamic process of cultural transformation and hybridity, challenging and moving beyond the limitations imposed by national identities.¹⁸

The concepts of hybridity and mimicry, together with the idea of the border-erasing power of postcolonial identities, encapsulate the innovative potential of the colonized. The idea of postcolonial identities has consequently become a pivotal

¹⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 122–123.

¹⁶ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 2.

¹⁷ Bill Ashcroft, “Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope,” *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia* 1 (2009): 12–22.

¹⁸ Ashcroft, “Beyond the Nation,” 20–21.

approach in postcolonial studies, revealing the subversive possibilities inherent in hybrid identities. These publications have been pivotal in shaping postcolonial theory, suggesting the creative power of the postcolonial subject, a notion that continues to manifest in contemporary discussions. This view of postcolonial identity posits an affirmative response to Gayatri Spivak's inquiry about the subaltern's ability to speak, thus contributing to a certain optimism within postcolonial discourse.¹⁹

Before engaging with Asian and Korean postcolonial theologies, it is crucial to foreground a critical perspective that tempers the enthusiasm surrounding the Third Space. Despite its potential for engendering subversive identities and practices, the Third Space elicits reservations concerning its capacity to fully address the complexities of decolonization and the reconstruction of postcolonial identities. This study starts from an awareness that although the Third Space offers innovative avenues for resistance and

¹⁹ Gayatri Spivak, a key figure in postcolonial studies, profoundly influences the development of postcolonial theologies. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she critiques essentializing tendencies in postcolonial theory, warning against their exclusionary effects on diverse experiences. Spivak emphasizes the gendered nature of colonial historiography, highlighting how patriarchy further silences female subaltern voices. She contends pessimistically that the subaltern cannot speak, stressing the entanglement of subaltern identity with defining discourses and practices. In "The Rani of Sirmur," Spivak explores the concepts of "worlding" and "Othering," drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis to illustrate the dialectical process through which colonial discourse shapes both colonizers and colonized. Spivak's notion of "Othering" underscores the complex ways in which colonial discourse constructs subjects on both sides. She argues that understanding this complexity is crucial for addressing her provocative question and the concept of "strategic essentialism" effectively. Spivak defines strategic essentialism as a politically motivated use of essentialism, recognizing its risks while advocating for its strategic utility in sparking debates and highlighting urgent issues. However, she cautions against essentializing the subaltern identity, asserting that it must be self-constructed for political action, rather than imposed. Spivak acknowledges the tactical use of essentialized identity while emphasizing its deconstructibility and the importance of self-claimed identity for political agency. Gayatri Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 247–272; "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader*, ed. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, c1985; 1996), 203–237; "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 272–313.

identity formation, it also poses challenges in fostering a decolonizing agency that transcends the limitations imposed by colonial legacies. As the discussion progresses to the contributions of Asian and Korean postcolonial theologians, it is imperative to bear in mind these critical reservations, which underscore the need for a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the Third Space in the context of postcolonial theological discourse.

Asian Postcolonial Theologies

Asian postcolonial theologians who place significant emphasis on the multi-layered aspects of Asian women's experiences and their intersectional identities are particularly enthusiastic about hybridity as a catalyst for transformative change. Prominent feminist postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan views hybridity as a valuable tool that "exposes the myths of cultural purity, the monologic discourse, unitary enunciation, and the collapse of differences that legitimize colonial authority."²⁰ Kwok positions hybridity as an analytical lens through which the monologic discourse—conversations that privilege a singular, dominant voice—and unitary enunciation—the solitary articulation of identity and experience—are critically interrogated.²¹ Consequently, hybridity emerges as a site of resistance, challenging the ostensible "collapse of difference" upon which colonial power depends to sustain its control.²²

²⁰ Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 2004), 171.

²¹ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 171.

²² Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 171.

Kwok's interest in the multilayered, fluid, and situated political identity of Asian women and the solidarity across these differences continues in her later work. In her 2011 article, "What Has Love to Do with It?"²³ Kwok articulates her indebtedness to Spivakian epistemology in postulating solidarity across identities, especially to Spivak's concept of the "planetary." The planetary is a counter-concept to the "global."²⁴ The global is an abstract notion of the entire world, while the planetary is defined as a notion that captures the fully embodied, interlacing multiplicity of bodies living on the planet. Kwok explains that Spivak's move from "postcoloniality" to "planetary" manifests her self-critique on the old epistemological model, which could not address transnational neocolonialism because of its nationally bounded characteristics. Planetary refers to a form of alterity that is not tied to any specific location, representing a system that transcends our understanding yet remains a space we occupy. This notion encourages us to embrace the complexity and diversity of systems without being restricted by narrow identity politics or dichotomous thinking.²⁵

The concept of planetary calls for a radical hospitality towards otherness, advocating for an ethic of "planetary love."²⁶ Kwok highlights Spivak's unease with theological endeavors due to their dualistic, onto-theological, and idealistic characteristics, as well as their historical entanglement with the colonial process of

²³ Kwok Pui-lan, "What Has Love to Do with It?" in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, ed. Stephen Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Kwok, "What Has Love," 32.

²⁵ Kwok, "What Has Love," 33.

²⁶ Kwok, "What Has Love," 33.

world-making.²⁷ Specifically, Spivak is wary of the concept of Christian love, which has been historically leveraged to oppress marginalized groups and exert control over those who are deemed different.²⁸ Kwok introduces a novel approach to reimagining planetary love within the Christian tradition, drawing upon unconventional yet critical theological resources, such as women's experiences of "memory, lament, and the refusal to idealize the Other."²⁹ This perspective on planetary love centers on the subaltern within the Christian narrative, urging a reevaluation of the various forms of love present within the tradition.

Korean/American Postcolonial Theologies

The discourse on Korean postcolonial theology is also profoundly informed by the concept of hybridity, which resonates with profound implications when applied to the analysis of Asian women's lived experiences. Korean American theologian Wonhee Anne Joh also welcomes the concept of hybridity as a potent force of differentiation.³⁰ According to Joh, despite the Korean nation living with deep *han* (a collective feeling of sorrow and resentment), this sentiment has been sublimated into *jeong* (affection or attachment), enabling Koreans to navigate through all the harsh adversities.³¹ The energy

²⁷ Kwok, "What Has Love," 36.

²⁸ Kwok, "What Has Love," 37.

²⁹ Kwok, "What Has Love," 44.

³⁰ Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 63.

³¹ Joh emphasizes that "*jeong*" is a particularly challenging word to translate. It can encompass meanings such as compassion, affection, solidarity, relationality, vulnerability, and forgiveness, yet it is not limited to

of *han*, when positively sublimated into *jeong*, functions as a radical form of love that overcomes dichotomies and contributes to the healing of the community.

Joh's approach to identity reflects the postcolonial theoretical assertion that identity is not unified and singular but instead fragmented, ruptured, and hybrid.³² Joh specifically borrows Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and liminality for theological appropriation. According to Joh, Bhabha's notion of hybrid identity does not dichotomize colonizer and colonized in opposition but instead emphasizes mutuality and negotiation, embodying a resistance that negates colonialism.³³ Such hybridity subverts colonial power through the ambivalent strategy of mimicry, which simultaneously acknowledges and negates the dominating power.³⁴ The colonized, through mimicry, create a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite," undermining the colonizer's intent to colonize.³⁵ These examples concretely demonstrate that identity is not static or stagnant but is instead in motion and unstable. Joh suggests that *jeong*, which is essentially relational, can function within the "interstitial space," overcoming

these interpretations alone. See Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, viii, 25; Wonhee Anne Joh, "The Transgressive Power of *Jeong*: A Postcolonial Hybridization of Christology," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 152.

³² Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 9.

³³ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 54.

³⁴ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 55.

³⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 122.

dichotomies and becoming a site for the creative emergence of new subjectivities. Based on this approach, Joh formulates her Christology of *jeong*.³⁶

A politics of difference encourages a dialectic that neither represses difference nor privileges identity. A politics of difference struggles for the rights of oppressed groups to seize the power of naming the difference, and it explodes the implicit definition of difference as deviance in relation to a norm. Thus, the difference now comes to mean not otherness or exclusive opposition, but specificity, variation, heterogeneity.³⁷

In conjunction with Bhabha's reinterpretation of the subaltern as a hybrid subject capable of disrupting colonial structures, Joh crafts a depiction of marginalized individuals embarking on the journey of decolonization with unwavering dedication and abundant creativity.

Another Korean American postcolonial theologian, Namsoon Kang, also embraces the concept of hybridity. In her Korean article titled "Postcolonial Feminist Theology in Korea: Its Discursive Implications and Tasks," Kang proposes four tasks for Korean decolonizing feminist theology.³⁸ 1) It must grapple with the embedded Orientalist perspectives that have long shaped the representation of Asian identities, particularly the diverse and intricate experiences of women who have been positioned in contrast to their Western counterparts. 2) This theology must also confront and disentangle itself from Occidentalism, the ideological mirror of Orientalism, where the

³⁶ With great caution to translate this complicated affect into English without losing meaning, Joh tries to define it as "a Korean way of conceiving an often-complex constellation of the relationality of the self with the other that is deeply associated with compassion, love, vulnerability, and acceptance of heterogeneity as essential to life." Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, xxi.

³⁷ Joh, *Heart of the Cross*, 15.

³⁸ Namsoon Kang, "Postcolonial Feminist Theology in Korea: Its Discursive Implications and Tasks," *The Korea Theological Study Institute* 132 (2006): 1–21.

East, imbued with a sense of its supremacy, risks perpetuating a discourse as distorting as the one it seeks to resist. 3) Further, it is imperative that this theology crafts a robust discourse that resists the layered colonization of women, who face the compounded oppressions of external (neo)colonial forces and entrenched patriarchal structures, illuminating the nuanced interplay of these dual oppressions. 4) Finally, it should expand to include and transcend the specific Korean or Asian experience, contributing to forming a global feminist theology that acknowledges the interconnectedness and complexity of modern identities.³⁹

In Kang's proposal, hybridity emerges as a crucial instrument in navigating these challenges, offering an analytical lens to critique and deconstruct essentialist narratives that have long dominated Orientalist and Occidentalist thought.⁴⁰ By recognizing the mixed and interwoven nature of identities in the context of an increasingly globalized world, hybridity confronts and challenges reductive cultural and gender binaries, offering a more nuanced and expansive understanding of identity.

In our hyper-connected global society, we experience new forms of undeniable hybridization through various channels like the internet, food, movies, music, and language. Understanding "hybridity" is crucial in contemporary theological reflection and scholarship that aims to comprehensively illuminate modern society . . . decolonial discourse takes an "ambivalent" stance, recognizing the irreversible influence of the West while resisting its colonizing structures and seeking to transcend them. The awareness of Western influence deeply ingrained within us and the desire to overcome its colonizing structures puts us in what Homi Bhabha calls a "conflicted decolonizing situation." Instead of outright denying the two worlds that have already entered our being, we must actively create the "in-between" spaces or "Third Space" as creative arenas for the

³⁹ Kang, "Postcolonial Feminist Theology," 13–19.

⁴⁰ Kang, "Postcolonial Feminist Theology," 19.

negotiation of non-homogenizable differences, thus fostering a new hybrid and transformative identity—the hybridity.⁴¹

The reality of hybridity, as experienced in the daily lives of individuals, underscores the rejection of cultural purism and becomes the wellspring for a creative transformation, encouraging the emergence of new forms of identity and expression within theological discourse. Moreover, hybridity prompts theologians to transcend local and regional confines, thereby contributing to a dynamic, inclusive feminist theology. It enables an understanding that local experiences, while unique, are part of a larger narrative that can enrich planetary discourse.⁴² This intentional engagement with hybridity, a conscious melding of diverse influences into a positive force, is essential for developing a theological discourse that is both transformative and pertinent in the modern context. For Kang, it is within this “intentional hybridization” that a new space is carved out, where power is negotiated rather than imposed and where the subaltern can articulate a distinct voice.⁴³

In one of her later works, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, Kang pursues Kwok’s Spivakian vision of planetary solidarity, extending it into the realms of transnational, trans-identitarian, and trans-religious unity.⁴⁴ Kang explores the possibility of a theologically grounded response to the alterity. She employs the concept of

⁴¹ Kang, “Postcolonial Feminist Theology,” 19. Translation is by me.

⁴² Kang, “Postcolonial Feminist Theology,” 19.

⁴³ Kang, “Postcolonial Feminist Theology,” 18.

⁴⁴ Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013).

“cosmopolitan theology” as a foundational framework that attends grand theological perspectives as well as localized ones.⁴⁵ Kang seeks transnational solidarity where all human beings become neighbors with their particularities. She uses the term “trans-identity,” as opposed to the fixed view of identity, to move beyond the “institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia” in which identity politics are often trapped.⁴⁶

Kang also explores this trans-religious solidarity beyond the shallow multicultural religious interactions she calls “religious tourism.”⁴⁷ She points out the damage that results from the reduction of religion into a simple belief system or set of rituals rather than a formative soil of one’s religious as well as cultural identity. The cosmopolitan religion must “recognize the power disparities between, among, and within religions in the construction of individual and collective religious identities and practice.”⁴⁸ Kang employs Spivak’s concept of planetarity as a corrective epistemological frame for such radical solidarity, interweaving it with the Pauline anthropology of the oneness of humanity. She names it the “planetary hospitality.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 3.

⁴⁶ Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 31.

⁴⁷ Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 102.

⁴⁸ Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 102.

⁴⁹ Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 151.

Summary

The influence of theologians like Joh and Kang, both of whom are based in the United States, has significantly shaped the practice of postcolonial theology in Korea, leading to an incorporation of hybrid creativity at the core of postcolonial theology conducted in Korea.

For example, Kim Soo-youn, in her article titled “Reactivating Theology within ‘In-between’ Spaces,” seeks to reshape the theological framework through Korean women’s religio-aesthetic spirituality. She challenges Western dualistic divisions, reactivating the “in-between” as a transformative and creative space for redemption, particularly for ethnic Asian and Korean women. She emphasizes the importance of reactivating in-between characteristics, such as the interconnectedness of life, the relational aspect of the divine, and the fluidity of identities, and advocates for a theology that recognizes the permeable relationality between the divine and the non-divine and fosters a space where healing and liberation can occur for colonized women.⁵⁰ Ahn Deok-weon discusses Christian initiation through postcolonial perspectives, highlighting contributions from Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. Ahn underscores the power dynamics in interpreting texts and emphasizes the importance of context and tradition in theological reflection. Christian baptism is analyzed as a form of resistance and a pursuit of hybridity, where Paul envisions a new world of equality. This “Third Space” facilitates encounters between oppressors and oppressed, fostering a unified identity through

⁵⁰ Kim, Soo-youn, “Reactivating Theology within ‘In-between’ Spaces: Toward a Korean Women’s Postcolonial Theology,” *Trans-Humanities* 7 (2014): 95–117

Christian initiation. The study challenges traditional liturgical views and advocates for radical transformation in contexts of injustice.⁵¹

Yet, when considering the decolonizing “agency,” it becomes essential to approach decolonization strategies with a refined understanding of the diverse experiences and abilities of the colonized. The unique historical, social, and political paths taken by various postcolonial societies lead to variations in their potential to engage in decolonizing endeavors. As many theologians aptly underscore, subversive creativity is not inherent in the hybrid subject but necessitates deliberate cultivation and intentional efforts to provide a conducive environment for their growth and activation.

The conception of hybridity, while powerful, does not always account for the moral limitation that impedes the colonized subject’s capacity to initiate ethical action that transcends the structural confines imposed by historical subjugation. The pressing question is, then, not solely about the hybrid subject’s potential for subversion but also about their “capability” to conceptualize and act upon conceptions of the good life when their faculties have been compromised.

The unique narratives of the orphaned subject can be characterized by a lack of imaginative aptitude and difficulty relating with others, which impede their capacity to envisage a meaningful life beyond the parameters of neoliberal ideals of freedom, peace, and prosperity. This limitation is linked to a certain level of impairment of their morality incurred during their experiences within the neo/colonial context. The ramifications of

⁵¹ Ahn, Deok-weon, “Christian Initiation from the Perspective of Postcolonialism: Resistance, Apophasis, and the Third Space,” *Theological Discourse* 9 (2015): 257–282.

colonization, encompassing the obliteration of culture and local traditions, oppressive policies, and the imposition of dominant ideologies, have undermined their political agency and confined their ability to formulate an alternative moral imagination and engage it with courage and hope.

With this concern, this dissertation engages with the pervasive and often unacknowledged impact of colonial and neocolonial legacies on the moral agency within Korean society. It addresses the moral debilitation that continues to afflict the “orphaned subjects”—those whose sense of self and capacity for ethical action have been stunted by the historical traumas and systemic injustices of colonization. Crucially, this endeavor does not aim to assign accusations to the colonized whose moral capacities have been affected by colonial experiences. Instead, it seeks to shed light on the impact of colonialism, which undermines not only political and economic agency but also moral agency. The dissertation explores the compromised moral agency in challenging circumstances by utilizing Korean literature, ethical theories, and trauma studies, as outlined in Chapter II. Through this approach, the dissertation seeks to reconcile the theoretical concepts of postcolonial theology with the fundamental moral challenges faced by the orphaned subject in postcolonial Korea, providing a distinctive contribution to the field.

I.3. The Author’s Personal and Intellectual Perspective

While this dissertation aims to contribute to postcolonial theological discourse, I must clarify that I do not identify myself as a theologian. From my undergraduate and

graduate studies in Korea, where I began exploring Christian studies, to pursuing a doctoral degree in theological ethics in the United States, I have consistently tried to become a Christian theologian, grounded in faith and commitment. While my academic pursuits have been steeped in the discipline of Christian theology, a resonant connection with theological language remained elusive. Over decades of study, however, this language of faith and commitment has left me spiritually precarious. As I studied in the United States, detached from my homeland and immersed in various fields of studies, particularly postcolonial studies, I was able to contextualize my struggle within the broader Korean national history. I discerned its roots in the inherited orphan consciousness, a legacy of the fractured histories and silent struggles of my nation. This contextualization offered a lens through which to understand my experiences as part of a collective postcolonial condition.

The orphan consciousness is, as stated above, a prevailing sentiment of our generation. The national rendition of Korean history conventionally delineates the “nations”—e.g., two Koreas, the Japanese Empire, and the United States—as the principal actors in its colonial history. This perspective has systematically expunged the deleterious impacts of colonial occupations on the populace. As a result, local stories that register endurance and defiance have been marginalized, rendering innumerable casualties and leaving the ensuing physical and psychological traumas unacknowledged. In the vacuum of narratives of life and death of the generations before us, we grew up as intellectual and spiritual orphans. It is pertinent to note that the use of the term “we” in this context is not an assertion of identity but rather a reflective narration of the

experiences of a generation with which I share a profound resonance. We are constantly reminded how humiliating our past has been and, on the contrary, how marvelous the “West” is and how it saved us.

For this orphaned generation, navigating and negotiating in postcolonial Korea, there is a go-to moral script: that of freedom and autonomy. The US military, who had replaced, utilized, and fortified the same governing and regulating colonial system established by the Japanese empire—who also slaughtered thousands and thousands of civilians during and after the Korean War—has presented itself as the savior of the nation, the guardian and protector of freedom, peace, and prosperity. This guardian of freedom has demanded and coerced a particular mode of allegiance to itself as something superior and inevitable by demonizing North Korea and by constantly comparing its destitution to the miraculous and glaring growth of the South under more than twenty-five years of military dictatorship supported by the US and its anti-communist propaganda. Through the production of historical narratives, images, and cultural artifacts, we are constantly reminded of how only those Western ideals of freedom and autonomy—no one and nothing else—can pull us out of our humiliating, shameful colonial past. We are indoctrinated with a very particular moral script that would make a nation comparable to the “global standard.” This neoliberal narrative has plagued us for years and years, debilitating our cognitive skills and moral capacity to imagine and pursue a life outside of the liberal market ideals of freedom and autonomy. The “good life,” as it is enshrined, equates to a life ensconced within the global market—replete with the freedom to consume, to traverse, to exercise one’s will unimpededly, and to claim

rights, thus purportedly obviating the transgressions suffered by forebears and ensuring an escape from a harrowing historical narrative.

Postcolonial critiques of this neoliberal conception of the good life abound, pointing to inherent limitations and problematic aspects of this idea. Especially, postcolonial theologians have examined how neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual autonomy, market-driven economies, and the primacy of personal choice, perpetuates and reinforces systems of inequality, exploitation, and cultural imperialism. Mark Taylor, for example, distinguishes the “practical liberalism” from the “contractual liberalism” of modernity, arguing that the latter, together with romanticized American exceptionalism, has been a driving force behind American neo-conservatism. Under George W. Bush’s presidency, contractual liberalism shaped US policies by promoting principles of limited government intervention, economic deregulation, and the advancement of personal freedoms. This ideology also aligns with the values championed by the Christian Right and neoconservatives, echoing themes of self-reliance, free enterprise, and the preservation of traditional social norms.⁵² Taylor symbolizes the persistent sway of neoliberal hegemony as the “spectral force” of the US that possesses the capacity to mold complete realities, as witnessed in their post-9/11 manifestation through military interventions that imposed the country’s principles of “freedom” and

⁵² Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), Ch. 4.

“democracy” on foreign nations, and excluded debates on social legislation that threatened to bring into question the privileged status of the powerful elite.⁵³

Postcolonial theologies also highlight how neoliberalism, often propagated by Western powers and institutions, exerts a dominant influence over global economies and political structures. They emphasize that this form of freedom privileges the interests of powerful nations and corporations, enabling them to exert control over resources, labor, and markets in postcolonial regions. An edited volume by Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh, *Feminist Praxis Against U.S. Militarism*, scrutinizes the US as an embodiment of warfare and counterterrorism, underscoring the profound repercussions these have on the daily existence of women, particularly women of color, both within local and global contexts.

This is further exacerbated by the persistent idea of the United States as the arbiter of international rule of law under the notion of its version of democracy. With the latter, a ruse of justification of U.S. military intervention is often invoked as necessary humanitarian interventions and even outright military involvement. However, the so-called humanitarian intervention proffered by the United States often comes as nothing less than military intervention. One of the most justifiable rationales for any form of U.S. intervention in various global regions is to trot out colonial logic that the other nations are incapable of self-determination and self-governance rooted in the Western style of democracy.⁵⁴

These theologians argue that the neoliberal understanding of freedom and democracy is deeply rooted in Western-centric ideals and fails to consider postcolonial societies’ diverse cultural, historical, and socioeconomic contexts.

⁵³ Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, Ch. 1.

⁵⁴ Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh, “Introduction,” in *Feminist Praxis Against U.S. Militarism*, ed. Nami Kim and Wonhee Anne Joh (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 3.

In response to this neoliberal conceptualization of freedom, postcolonial theologians propose alternative visions of freedom rooted in the liberation of oppressed communities and the pursuit of justice and solidarity. Andrea Smith, in her work titled *Native Americans and the Christian Right*, contends that liberation and freedom in postcolonial contexts cannot be aligned with idealistic notions of freedom. Smith reclaims the term “sovereignty,” tainted by imperialistic and nationalistic misuses, and disentangles it from its imperialistic associations of control and dominance. She embraces a Native American perspective of interresponsibility and interconnectedness with the land and its inhabitants.⁵⁵ Native women activists see spirituality as “inextricably linked to their political work.” Sovereignty means a vision of “living outside the constraints of both US colonialism and multinational capitalism.”⁵⁶

Similarly, in *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty*, Sharon Krause offers the concept of “non-sovereign agency,” wherein the effects of actions are influenced by the perceptions, words, and actions of others, in contrast to the liberal definition of individual sovereignty and agency as conditioned to one’s state of being free “from” something, such as interference, domination, and oppression.⁵⁷ However, Krause contends that agency is socially shared with other individuals and integral to an individual’s actions. Krause extends this positively defined individual non-sovereign agency to the state level, arguing

⁵⁵ Andrea Smith, *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2008), 255–270.

⁵⁶ Smith, *Native Americans*, 41.

⁵⁷ Sharon Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 92–93.

that states also exercise agency within complex networks of relationships and institutions rather than complete self-determination.⁵⁸

Overall, prioritizing marginalized voices and social justice, postcolonial theology critiques the economy-centric and individual-centric ideas of neoliberal freedom. Additionally, it embraces diverse traditions and alternative worldviews, fostering dialogue and collaboration across cultural and religious boundaries. Centering social justice, communal identity, decolonial praxis, and alternative worldviews, postcolonial theology aims to envision and work towards a more inclusive, just, liberating praxis of freedom.

In the quest for collective agency and communal identity that postcolonial theologies prescribe, I embarked on a search for roots, a foundational journey back to the very essence of my being and belonging. This exploration led me to unearth the hitherto untold stories of my family, narratives steeped in the realities of the postcolonial condition. In the textured recounting of my grandmother's and father's lives, the postcolonial critiques of neoliberalism and their prescriptions for an alternative good life began to fall short for me. The theoretical frameworks, while robust in their critique of economic and political systems, seemed to lack the depth required to address the relational and moral voids exposed by my family's experiences.

The lived experience of my grandmother, Park Kyung-soon, is basically a marvelous narrative of resilience and creativity against dehumanizing colonization and

⁵⁸ Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 22.

war. She paved her way against all odds with remarkable endurance and adaptability, achieving an astonishing level of autonomy and economic stability later in her life. However, she also exhibited an undeniable self-centeredness and a life of solitude that kept her at arm's length from even the closest of familial bonds. It seems that her trauma molded her into a specific personhood that limited her from engaging with others with full-heartedness. Can a life that demonstrated such remarkable resilience in the face of relentless challenges be considered fully flourished when weighed against the character flaws in the individual?

Furthermore, my grandmother's narrative also led me to a reflective inquiry into the challenges I face in forging connections with others and dedicating myself to causes with unwavering faith and commitment. Have the relational and moral ineptitude exhibited by my ancestors, born of necessity and survival, become a template for my interactions, manifesting as hesitance and reservation in my trust towards others and my scholarly engagements? The answers to these questions are not straightforward. Still, they underscore a compelling aspect of my journey to understand and articulate my identity within a postcolonial context—a journey marked by the desire to transcend these inherited patterns of reticence and explore new possibilities of engagement and belonging.

Reflecting on my grandmother's story and her influence on me has led me to a more nuanced understanding of moral agency within a postcolonial context. There seems to be "the moral costs" of colonization that often go unspoken in postcolonial theology. I found that the damages wrought by colonial and neocolonial ideologies are more

profound than the misrepresentation or suppression of indigenous relationality; they actively debilitate the very capacity of the colonized to form such connectedness. The capacity for collective agency, the ability to create deep and meaningful connections that transcend the atomizing forces of neoliberal individualism, seems not to be something one can easily restore with cognitive change or achieving political and economic agency.

Postcolonial theologies have offered an abundance of resources that have been instrumental in my understanding and processing of the political, economic, and social conditions of my life as contextualized within Korea's historical narrative. These theologies, however, while expansive, do not fully address the question of generationally transmitted moral inaptitude, nor do they entirely explicate how being disenfranchised can limit a person's flourishing in a holistic sense. There seems to be an underlying assumption that hybridized subjects inherently possess the power to engage in decolonizing transformations. It is barely discussed that such commitment demands a high level of moral capacity, which may not be attainable for everyone.

It was ethical studies—particularly virtue ethics, the capabilities approach, and the concept of moral luck—and postcolonial trauma studies that have been instrumental in exploring the complex questions within myself. These fields have helped me understand the difficulties in relating to others and engaging with faith and commitment that I have encountered, which may stem from the generational experiences of my family. Virtue ethics, with its focus on the moral agent's broader life and ethical performance, has illuminated alternative paths toward the good life and moral flourishing. The capabilities approach, mainly as developed by Martha Nussbaum, has offered language for

recognizing the conditions necessary for proper human development, which extends beyond economic or utilitarian considerations. This approach has helped me discern how systemic structures and personal capacities contribute to or impede one's ability to lead a flourishing life. The concept of moral luck has brought to the forefront the ways in which uncontrollable circumstances can influence moral responsibility and ethical judgment. These studies highlight the ongoing impact of trauma across generations, affecting moral agency in complex ways. Postcolonial trauma studies, in particular, have provided insights into the collective and transgenerational nature of trauma, which not only resonate with my family's narrative but also shed light on my own struggles with orphan consciousness and relational difficulties.

By integrating these diverse perspectives, I am positioned as an ethicist who seeks to explore the intricacies of moral agency affected by historical and ongoing colonial influences. This complementary perspective allows for a more profound inquiry into the moral landscapes shaped by historical legacies and their transmission across generations. My approach intends to enrich the field of postcolonial theologies by addressing the nuances of moral capacity and its impairment under the weight of historical and ongoing colonial influences. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I hope to bring a fresh perspective to the conversation, one that underscores the vital role of moral capacity in the larger project of decolonization and the pursuit of ethical living.

Despite its potentially contentious nature, I support the strategic pessimistic approach advocated by moral philosopher Lisa Tessman for delineating the compromised agency of the marginalized:

And yet, simply denying that there is anything wrong with the self obscures from the view of liberatory thinkers the need to theorize what sort of a self one ought to try to be to survive and resist oppression and steers activists away from projects—difficult as they may be—of transforming the self. Thus, despite the strategic dangers of exposing moral damage in the oppressed, I argue for its value.⁵⁹

This methodological choice stems from a deeply personal resonance with the narrative of orphaned individuals. This resonance mirrors my own experience as a subject enmeshed within the intricate moral predicament of neocolonial circumstances. My aspiration for decolonizing theologies is to facilitate a candid observation and understanding of moral damages inflicted on the colonized. A genuine acknowledgment of oppression encompasses an acceptance of the associated “moral failures,” borrowing Tessman’s term.⁶⁰

Acknowledging the compromised moral agency of the colonized, I argue, is crucial for advancing broader decolonization and empowerment efforts. It is imperative to confront their limited imaginative capacity. Ultimately, the aim is to shift the focus from celebrating hybridity and creativity towards recognizing and addressing the compromised moral agency caused by colonization. By doing so, this dissertation advocates for a more extensive decolonization effort that not only acknowledges but also actualizes overcoming of the limitations imposed on the moral capacities of the colonized. This shift is crucial for empowering these communities and fostering genuine transformation. By bringing these points into sharper focus, the goal is to make the

⁵⁹ Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

⁶⁰ Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 14-18; 31-55.

argument more coherent and impactful, underlining the importance of addressing the deeper, often overlooked aspects of decolonization and the empowerment of marginalized communities.

I.4. Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation unfolds across several chapters, each exploring different dimensions of the postcolonial experience and its impact on moral consciousness in Korean society.

Chapter II: Methods outlines the methods for exploring the debilitated moral agency of the colonized: virtue ethics, the capabilities approach, the concept of moral luck, and the concept of moral debilitation. Virtue ethics provides an overarching framework, emphasizing a comprehensive understanding of moral life, motives, intentions, and emotional reactions. The capabilities approach helps to consider the systemic constraints that might limit the individual's moral agency. The concept of moral luck provides a holistic account of systemic injustice in the moral lives of individuals. Additionally, the chapter discusses moral debilitation as a key concept, expanding the understanding of moral challenges beyond intrinsic flaws to consider the external, oppressive conditions the colonized endure. Postcolonial trauma theory and disability studies provide valuable insights in developing this concept. Moral debilitation as a concept underscores the collective and transgenerational nature of trauma, elucidating how historical atrocities, systemic oppression, and inherited psychological scars impact the moral agency and ethical development of individuals and communities.

Chapter III: Historical Background sets the stage for subsequent literary analysis by linking the historical contexts of orphanage literature. It probes into the societal impacts and the resultant psychological and emotional traumas from the Japanese colonial era, the Korean War, and the consequent dictatorships, which have been selectively narrated within South Korea's national history. This analysis culminates in exploring the neoliberal impact of the IMF crisis, illustrating how contemporary societal shifts continue to reflect the themes of loss and dislocation.

Chapter IV: The Orphanage Trope explores the evolution of the orphan figure in modern Korean literature, starting from the Japanese colonial era through the Korean War and extending into the periods of military dictatorship and modernization. This chapter tracks how these characters transfigure from symbols of national awakening and modern subjectivity to embodiments of confusion, shame and, eventually, distrust and disillusionment with societal changes and the older generation's complacency. By examining these shifts, the chapter aims to illustrate orphaned characters' emotional and moral conditions, reflecting the collective Korean consciousness grappling with historical traumas and societal transformations.

Chapter V: The Orphaned Subject analyzes the transition of the orphaned subject within the contemporary Korean context, particularly under the influence of neoliberal order. It examines how the narrative of self-improvement and personal autonomy transforms and redefines the orphan consciousness residing in Korean minds. This transformation is marked by a shift from external oppression by state and traditional authorities to internalized control through self-governance, leading individuals to

constantly seek self-optimization in a market-driven society. The chapter further discusses the social impacts of this self-governance ethos, challenging the meritocratic promise that hard work leads to success. It highlights the psychological repercussions of living under such conditions, where the pressure to improve oneself constantly leads to a state of “damage”—a profound erosion of the moral imagination and the ability to envisage a just, equitable future. The chapter concludes by exploring contemporary literary representations of this neoliberal anxiety, portraying a “hellish” world where the orphaned subjects are caught between the unrealistic demands of self-development and the harsh realities of an unforgiving society.

Chapter VI: Moral Debilitation addresses the concept of moral debilitation, highlighting how colonization has restricted the orphaned subject’s political agency and ability to formulate an alternative moral imagination, leading to a state of moral inertia. This exploration emphasizes the importance of recognizing limitations on moral agency in decolonization discussions, paving the way for a deeper engagement with the ethical dimensions of colonization and its aftermath in the concluding chapter.

Chapter VII: Conclusion synthesizes the findings and arguments presented, offering reflections on the implications for postcolonial theology, moral philosophy, and the broader efforts to address the lingering effects of colonial legacies and contemporary challenges in Korea.

Chapter II:

Methods

This chapter delineates the methodological approach of this study and defines the key concept. By integrating insights from moral philosophies, postcolonial trauma studies, and disability studies, this dissertation aspires to provide a framework for a holistic understanding of the postcolonial condition, which takes the compromised moral capacity of the colonized into consideration.

II.1. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, with its emphasis on the moral agent's broader life and ethical performance, serves as the foundational underpinning for this study. Virtue ethics represents a departure from trends in Anglo-American moral philosophy from the early- to mid-twentieth century when there was a noticeable emphasis on the context of choice in ethical discussions. The normative ethical theories of this time, such as Kantian deontology and utilitarianism, primarily engaged in discussions on how one ought to make choices in complex moral situations.⁶¹ The focus was on their capacity to guide

⁶¹ The shift from ancient and medieval ethics, which focused on agent characteristics and traditions, to modern normative ethics like deontology and utilitarianism, emphasizes the evaluation of actions themselves. This shift reflects the challenges posed by increasing cultural, moral, and religious diversity in making moral judgments based on shared "common sense." Kant's deontological ethics centers on the categorical imperative, stressing unconditional obedience to universal moral laws over considerations of character or consequences. Conversely, consequentialism, exemplified by Jeremy Bentham's hedonistic utilitarianism, evaluates moral choices based on their outcomes, particularly the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. While classical ethics, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics and Thomistic natural law ethics, prioritize objective goodness and virtue cultivation, modern deontology and utilitarianism diverge from this perfectionist perspective. While utilitarians like Bentham equate goodness with pleasure, Mill expands this notion to include higher pleasures, yet still adheres to the teleological

decision-making, often ignoring critical elements of the ethical life, such as the moral agent's motives, emotions, and desires. Consequently, these theories offered a limited perspective by neglecting to explore how choices are both an expression and a formation of an individual's character and how one's character interacts with broader ethical and personal commitments.

Virtue ethics is essentially a pursuit of a fulfilling life. Happiness, or human flourishing (*eudaimonia*), is a central concept in Aristotelian virtue ethics that signifies the highest human good, i.e., the end or purpose (*telos*). All human action must be directed towards this highest form of good. All human activities should aim towards achieving a positive outcome, with the highest priority being the achievement of flourishing. The essence of virtue ethics is rooted in the belief that virtues are inherently connected to *eudaimonia* as an ultimate goal of human beings, reflecting a perspective that is both eudaimonist and teleological.⁶²

Aristotle divides the human soul into two parts: the rational and irrational elements. The rational part, known as "reason" (*logos*), leads us toward virtuous behavior, while the irrational part, which encompasses desires and appetites, often

premise that happiness is the ultimate end of human life. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, c1785; 1998); *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, c1787; 2000); Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislations*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (London: Methuen, c1789; 1982); John Stuart Mill, "On Liberty," in *"On Liberty" and Other Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), ed. Stephan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, c1859; 1989).

⁶² This paragraph is derived from the author's unpublished comprehensive exam.

conflicts with reason.⁶³ Aristotle recognizes the importance of reason in directing correct thoughts and behaviors but also stresses the significance of cultivating one's habits to manage the irrational elements of the soul. This cultivation is essential for individuals to regulate the irrational aspects of their soul and lead a life governed by reason. Human function is closely tied to rationality, with virtue representing the effective fulfillment of this function. Virtues and human flourishing are interconnected, as flourishing involves participating in activities that align with virtuous behavior. Practicing virtues ultimately leads to a fulfilling and joyful life in all aspects.⁶⁴

However, the pursuit of happiness and the cultivation of virtues are not limited to a single moral choice. Essentially, our well-being depends on how we interact with others and our place within societal structures. I have found the link between virtues and human flourishing within the virtue ethical framework to be valuable in addressing the compromised moral agency of the colonized. This ethical approach inserts a pause between identifying the problem and proposing a solution by broadening the focus of ethical discussions from a specific and momentary action or choice to the cultivation of virtue throughout a person's lifetime and the pursuit of a good life.

In short, virtue ethics enables ethical thinkers to incorporate individuals' overall moral character into consideration when it comes to evaluating ethical behavior. It takes unconventional factors such as motives, intentions, decision-making processes, and

⁶³ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson, further rev. ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), 1.13. 1102b13–30.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.13. 1102a28.

emotional responses as crucial elements in making moral decisions. Although this dissertation does not extensively explore virtue ethics, it significantly draws upon this ethical underpinning to provide a foundation for examining the various dimensions of moral agents, including situations, contexts, abilities, personalities, and emotions, beyond merely assessing the correctness of actions in isolated incidents.

This dissertation seeks to develop its central thesis grounded in the following fundamental insight of virtue ethics: 1) Decolonization necessitates a substantial moral *capacity*. 2) The colonial legacy may occasionally diminish the moral capacity of the colonized. 3) Consequently, it is imperative to address not only the ultimate objectives, methods, and specific contents of decolonization but also to evaluate whether the agents tasked with this endeavor possess the requisite moral capabilities and preparedness to ultimately achieve postcolonial flourishing.

II.2. Capabilities Approach

Moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum advocates for the nation's responsibility to provide its citizens with the adequate circumstances to cultivate their capabilities for leading themselves toward flourishing. Nussbaum employs the plural term "capabilities" (potentialities or possibilities), indicating that if the state appropriately guarantees aspects such as health, physical preservation, education, and environment, everyone can freely develop their capabilities. A fulfilled life flows out of such capabilities.⁶⁵ She roots her

⁶⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 33–34.

approach in a pluralism that values human diversity rather than technical and quantitative indicators such as distribution, economics, or utility. Capabilities are also considered the foundational underpinning for freedom, which is necessary for human dignity. As Nussbaum posits human freedom as not inherent but rather as something to be developed,⁶⁶ creating capabilities is an indispensable condition for enjoying freedom.

Nussbaum's approach pertains to human flourishing in that she perceives the development and flourishing of capabilities as encompassing the teleological significance of living as a human and becoming human. From this perspective, the realization of human freedom is unattainable without the substantive guarantee of capabilities. Notably, the ten core capabilities Nussbaum advocates are specific, diverse, and universal so that they can serve as substantive benchmarks to measure whether human dignity and basic rights are ensured.⁶⁷ These ten capabilities function as metrics to determine whether government policies are adequately safeguarding citizens' quality of life.⁶⁸

Nussbaum's threshold marks the minimum conditions for a life that is worthy of human dignity, thus aligning with the theme of flourishing even under oppressive

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 35.

⁶⁷ Kim, Yeon-mi, "Nussbaum's Capability Approach and Justice," *Jeonbuk Law Review* 61 (December 2019): 73–107.

⁶⁸ In this sense, Lisa Tessman argues that Nussbaum's version of the capabilities approach is normative while Amartya Sen's version is only comparative. Tessman, *Moral Failure*, 51.

Amartya Sen has elucidated the role of capabilities in the realization of justice. Sen's conception of capabilities is characterized as "substantive freedom" and a set of (typically interrelated) opportunities to choose and act. In essence, his capability concept represents a selectable combination of achievable functionings. Thus, capability, in Sen's framework, is a type of "freedom"—the freedom to attain combinations of potential functionings. In contrast, for Nussbaum, capability answers the question, "What can this person do and become?" Kim, "Nussbaum's Capability Approach," 80.

conditions. Human flourishing is not just about resources or subjective states of satisfaction but about what people are actually able to do and be.⁶⁹ I will unfold my investigation of the orphaned subject and their debilitated moral agency with insight from virtue ethics and, especially, from Nussbaum's capabilities approach. By highlighting the need to equip individuals with the necessary political, intellectual, and moral resources to develop their capabilities, Nussbaum illuminates the broader social obstacles that hinder the moral agency of the colonized. It goes beyond an ethical assessment of an individual's choices and considers the systemic and societal constraints that might limit the individual's agency. This approach aligns with the main object of this dissertation, aiming to understand the challenges beyond material conditions faced by the orphaned subject in their pursuit of a good life.

II.3. Moral Luck

The debate on moral luck was initiated by moral philosophers Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel and it soon drew significant attention from ethicists.⁷⁰ The concept of moral luck involves the contentious idea that factors beyond an individual's will can

⁶⁹ "Despite Nussbaum's embrace of universal goods, her overall aim is a liberal one: she uses an account of human nature that assumes that humans engage in choices as autonomous individuals (though highly influenced socially) and privileges the preservation of an individual's capability to choose to develop and maintain certain human functions. Nussbaum thus believes that she allows for plurality despite the universality of her account of human functions, since no individual is required to develop a particular function." Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 51f15.

⁷⁰ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

impact the moral assessment of their conduct or character. Despite the general assumption that morality should be insusceptible to luck, people often hold arbitrary standards when it comes to evaluating ones' actions and character. For example, people often praise the survivors of tragic accidents for their courage or fortitude, as if their survival was the result of their exemplary moral character. In a similar vein, when a doctor fails a risky surgery, her decisions may be viewed as reckless, and her competence may be questioned. This means that, to some extent, people assign responsibility based on factors outside the agent's control. However, there is also a prevailing belief that individuals should not be held accountable for things they cannot control. This tension between morality and luck creates the paradox of moral luck. Thus, the concept of moral luck challenges the traditional understanding of ethical judgment and responsibility by suggesting that our ethical evaluations can be influenced by luck. It urges ethicists to consider how historical events, cultural norms, and the arbitrariness of individual situations can profoundly influence moral actions.

Feminist moral philosophers Claudia Card and Lisa Tessman's expansion of the concept provides a framework for examining the influence of seemingly arbitrary external factors that significantly affect one's life chances and moral choices.⁷¹ They call attention to how historical and socio-political contexts impinge upon the moral lives of individuals and collectives. They articulate that moral luck encompasses not just isolated

⁷¹ Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*.

incidents of fortune or misfortune but also the broad, structural conditions that disadvantage certain groups while privileging others.

Incorporating the concept of moral luck into this dissertation, as executed in Chapter VI, underscores the intricate relationship between individual moral agency and the broader historical and societal forces at play. It allows for an acknowledgment of moral debilitation as a legacy of colonization, which continues to undermine the colonized subject's capacity for moral action. By interweaving the philosophical insights of virtue ethics and the capabilities approach with postcolonial studies, this dissertation explores the ramifications of moral luck for the orphaned subjects of a postcolonial world. This exploration is committed to providing a thorough account of its implications for the moral lives of individuals affected by historical trauma and systemic injustice.

II.4. Defining Moral Debilitation

The pervasive and lingering impacts of colonial and neocolonial violence that ripples through generations necessitate a model for comprehending not only the material, economic, political, and psychological, but also moral consequences. Acknowledging and accounting for the compromised moral agency of the colonized is crucial for fully capturing the range of damages stemming from colonialism and its lasting impacts. To this end, I propose the concept of moral debilitation building on insights from various fields of studies.

Moral Injury

Recent research on the moral shortcomings induced by trauma has placed a significant focus on this concept of moral injury. Moral injury finds its most extensive elucidation in the model developed by Brett T. Litz et al., centered on the experiences of military veterans.⁷² In the context of military service, the tasks and responsibilities undertaken during combat or warfare can infringe upon an individual's belief systems. Specifically, human beings may maintain a belief asserting that they or the world are fundamentally good. Actions or responsibilities during combat may generate incongruities with this belief. Cognitive dissonance is stimulated when such inconsistencies arise through engaging in or witnessing actions incompatible with the previously held belief. This cognitive dissonance activates a process of "reconciliation," the outcome of which may often result in psychological distress.⁷³ It is important to note that the severity of moral injury depends on how individuals involved in the incident interpret the causality of the event. The more "global, internal, and stable" the causality is, the more severe mental health issues, such as post-traumatic disorder or depression, are likely to be.⁷⁴ Thus, the concept of moral injury provides an invaluable lens for scrutinizing the intricate psychological phenomena that occur when personal belief

⁷² Brett T. Litz, N. Stein, E. Delaney, L. Lebowitz, W. P. Nash, C. Silva, and S. Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.

⁷³ Litz et al., "Moral Injury," 699.

⁷⁴ Litz et al., "Moral Injury," 700.

systems are at odds with one's professional or situational obligations, particularly in contexts characterized by high emotional and ethical stakes.

Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay's definition of moral injury sheds light on the possibilities of expanding the concept into a broader scope. He defines moral injury as "psychological maladjustment that can occur in an individual who has suffered harm due to the immoral or wrong actions of an authority figure in situations of high risk, such as war."⁷⁵ Subsequently, this concept has expanded through a sociocultural approach to influence not just the victims but also the perpetrators of immoral actions, bystanders, and those who could not prevent such actions. Attempts to apply the concept of moral injury are increasing beyond combat veterans to include their families, teachers who frequently experience ethical dilemmas, children of parents who have committed suicide, survivors of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, Nazi doctors involved in human experimentation on Jews, and others who struggle to adapt to reality after experiencing unjust or unethical events.⁷⁶ According to Joan McCarthy and Rick Deady's study, nurses who witnessed futile treatments or unnecessary tests being administered to patients experienced a loss of solidarity with colleagues, suffered ethical distress, or found that their previously held values were compromised.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994).

⁷⁶ Arthur Kleinman, *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life Amidst Uncertainty and Danger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–26; Wendy Haight, Erin Sugrue, Molly Calhoun, and James Black, "A Scoping Study of Moral Injury: Identifying Directions for Social Work Research," *Children and Youth Services Review* 70 (2016): 190–200.

⁷⁷ Joan McCarthy and Rick Deady, "Moral Distress Reconsidered," *Nursing Ethics* 15, no. 2 (2008): 254–262.

Moral injury elucidates circumstances wherein individuals sustain consequential psychological harm arising from unintended actions or events. This notion shares a resemblance with the idea of moral difficulties of the orphaned subject induced by postcolonial trauma, particularly in the context of grappling with the psychological aftermaths of events the moral agent underwent. However, at its core, moral injury predominantly pertains to an individual's experience when one's professional or other obligations clash with deeply held moral beliefs. The individualistic nature of moral injury is well captured in Kent D. Drescher et al.'s delineation between a "Moral Injury Event" (MIE) and "Moral Injury" (MI). This study defines MIE as an event that transgresses an individual's belief system, while MI is defined as the psychological, emotional, and spiritual response to such events.⁷⁸ The internal conflict resulting from exposure to a MIE primarily manifests as feelings of guilt, shame, an inability to forgive oneself or others, and social withdrawal.⁷⁹ Drescher et al. argue that it is crucial to differentiate between these two concepts when discussing moral injury, given that not everyone who experiences a MIE necessarily incurs MI—not everyone who witnesses or partakes in the same event will experience moral injury. It depends on an individual's interpretation of the event and their personal beliefs. This subjectivity underscores the individualistic nature of moral injury. Moreover, individuals' emotional and

⁷⁸ Kent D. Drescher, David W. Foy, Carline Kelly, Anna Leshner, Kerrie Schutz, and Brett Litz, "An Exploration of the Viability and Usefulness of the Construct of Moral Injury in War Veterans," *Traumatology* 17, no. 1 (2011): 8–13.

⁷⁹ Allison Battles, Adrian Bravo, Michelle Kelley, Tyler White, Abby Braitman, and Hannah Hamrick, "Moral Injury and PTSD as Mediators of the Associations Between Morally Injurious," *Traumatology* 24, no. 4 (2018): 246–254. Litz et al., "Moral Injury."

psychological responses to morally injurious events can vary greatly. Feelings of shame, guilt, betrayal, or anger are commonly observed among the partakers,⁸⁰ but their intensity and manifestation are tailored to the individual.⁸¹

Postcolonial Trauma

Postcolonial trauma studies have expanded traditional trauma studies to address collective trauma. Michael Rothberg put forth a critical perspective that challenges the Eurocentric bias inherent in trauma theory. He contended that the prevailing emphasis on event-specific trauma overlooks extended, persistent trauma processes, such as those experienced under colonialism. Rothberg's approach advocated for a conceptual shift to view trauma as collective, spatial, and material rather than individual, temporal, and linguistic. This proposition steers the discourse away from its Eurocentric origins, emphasizing the need to recognize the layered and diffuse impacts of historical traumas.⁸²

Stef Craps also critiques the early theorists for their oversight of non-Western cultures' traumas, arguing to extend the discourse beyond the preoccupation with representational crises. These theorists aim to examine the material conditions (social and cultural) that shape trauma narratives, as well as the circumstances under which these

⁸⁰ Battles et al., "Moral Injury," 250.

⁸¹ Haleigh A. Barnes, Robin A. Hurley, and Katherine H. Taber, "Moral Injury and PTSD: Often Co-Occurring yet Mechanistically Different," *Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 31, no. 2 (2019): A4–103.

⁸² Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," *Studies in the Novel* 40 (2008): 224–234; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

narratives are produced and received.⁸³ Echoing Craps, several academics have highlighted the limitations of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis—the foundational theoretical frameworks for analyzing trauma and memory in literary studies—due to their Eurocentric origins.⁸⁴

Jeffrey C. Alexander addresses the important definition of “collective trauma.” He emphasizes the role of literature in the “trauma process,” which gives shape and meaning to phenomena that deeply harm collective identity.⁸⁵ The trauma process involves constructing and examining the history of colonialism and decolonization through narratives.⁸⁶

⁸³ Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: A Trauma Theory for the Global Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.

⁸⁴ Irene Visser cautions against the uncritical application of Western trauma paradigms and advocates for the inclusion of non-Western viewpoints on trauma-related psychological disorders. This shift towards the integration of diverse postcolonial perspectives is in harmony with broader calls for the acknowledgment and incorporation of non-Western knowledge systems. Irene Visser, “Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (2011): 270–282. Leela Gandhi argues for a discourse that honors non-Western epistemologies with the aim of more effectively representing the global community and nurturing democratic dialogue among those grappling with the legacy of colonialism. Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

⁸⁵ Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Berhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 1–30.

⁸⁶ Alexander, “Toward a Theory,” 10.

Transgenerational Trauma

Large-scale acts of violence, such as colonial genocide and politicide, inflict trauma not only on the immediate victims and their contemporary cohorts but also on the next generations.⁸⁷ Yael Danieli explains the mechanism of transmission as follows:

The intergenerational perspective reveals the impact of trauma, its contagion, and repeated patterns within the family. It may help explain certain behavior patterns, symptoms, roles, and values adopted by family members, family sources of vulnerability as well as resilience and strength, and job choices (following in the footsteps of a relative, a namesake) through the generations. Viewed from a family systems perspective, what happened in one generation will affect what happens in the older or younger generation, though the actual behavior may take a variety of forms. Within an intergenerational context, the trauma and its impact may be passed down as the family legacy even to children born after the trauma.⁸⁸

Thus, children and grandchildren of trauma survivors may inherit a sense of fear, anxiety, or specific phobias without direct exposure to the initial traumatic event.

Research has shown that trauma can be passed down through behavioral patterns, narratives, and even potential epigenetic changes. Bessel van der Kolk's work on childhood trauma illustrated how such experiences demonstrate a propensity for passing down negative attitudes and maladaptive behaviors within and across generations and the perpetuation of historical trauma in familial and societal structures.⁸⁹ He presented

⁸⁷ Yael Danieli, ed., *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (New York: Plenum, 1998).

⁸⁸ Danieli, ed., *International Handbook*, 9.

⁸⁹ Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Developmental Impact of Childhood Trauma," in *Understanding Trauma: Integrating Biological, Clinical, and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. L. J. Kirmayer, R. Lemelson, and M. Barad (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 224–241.

evidence indicating that those who endured childhood trauma faced challenges in forging and sustaining bonds with caregivers, peers, and romantic partners.⁹⁰

Holocaust scholar Jeffrey Prager approaches the trauma of descendants from the perspective of “Secondary Traumatic Stress” (STS).⁹¹ Perella Perlstein and Robert W. Motta, through their research on the trauma of Jewish families who experienced the Holocaust, assert that children identify with their parents, subsequently forming an identity where they see themselves as protectors of their suffering parents, thus facilitating the “transmission” of trauma.⁹² In Prager’s study, the second and third generations of trauma victims manifested various symptoms like “anger, anxiety, degradation, emotional exhaustion, diminished concentration, intrusive and unwanted thoughts, low self-esteem, physical pain, sleep disorders, changes in eating patterns, increased addictive behaviors, and social withdrawal.”⁹³ Lotem Giladi’s study also indicates that descendants of Holocaust trauma groups display higher STS levels than

⁹⁰ Childhood trauma, according to Van der Kolk, fundamentally disrupts a child’s foundational sense of security and self-worth. It exacerbates emotional turmoil, intensifies feelings of shame and grief, and broadens the array of harmful behaviors a child might exhibit. Such behaviors range from unchecked aggression, adolescent suicidal tendencies, and substance abuse to sexual recklessness, sedentary lifestyles, smoking, and obesity. Van der Kolk, “The Developmental Impact,” 226–227.

⁹¹ Jeffrey Prager, “Lost Childhood, Lost Generations: The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma,” *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 2 (2003): 173–181.

⁹² Perella Perlstein and Robert W. Motta, “An Investigation of Potential Holocaust-Related Secondary Trauma in the Third Generation,” *Traumatology* 19, no. 2 (2012): 95–106.

⁹³ Perlstein and Motta, “An Investigation,” 96.

descendants of non-Holocaust trauma groups. Additionally, they face challenges in the process of differentiating themselves from their parents.⁹⁴

Merida Blanco's portrayal of the impact of violence over five generations in South America significantly illustrates the intergenerational transmission of trauma and its profound repercussions on the broader society.

- 1st generation: The first generation to be conquered, the males are killed, imprisoned, enslaved, or in some other way deprived of the ability to provide for their families.
- 2nd generation: Many men turn towards alcohol or drugs, as their cultural identity has been destroyed with a predictable, accompanying loss of self-worth.
- 3rd generation: Spousal abuse and other forms of domestic violence are spawned. By this generation, the connection to its antecedent from societal trauma only two generations before has been weakened or lost.
- 4th generation: At this stage, abuse moves from spousal abuse to child abuse or both.
- 5th generation: This cycle repeats over and over as trauma begets violence and more trauma and violence, with increasing societal degradation, including abuse of our Earth and her natural resources as sustainability is disregarded.⁹⁵

Blanco's depiction resembles the trajectory outlined in Judy Atkinson's six-generation genogram in an Aboriginal family.⁹⁶ Atkinson connected historical events tied to the colonization of Aboriginal territories—such as unplanned epidemics, mass killings, famines, and relocations to reserves—to surging instances of domestic violence, child

⁹⁴ Lotem Giladi and Terece S. Bell, "Protective Factors for Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma among Second and Third Generation Holocaust Survivors," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 5, no. 4 (2013): 384–391.

⁹⁵ It was unpublished research that was published by Peter A. Levine and Maggie Kline in their book *Trauma Through a Child's Eyes: Awakening the Ordinary Miracle of Healing* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2007).

⁹⁶ Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2002), 185–186.

abuse, and family disintegration within Indigenous communities. By examining a single-family lineage spanning six generations, she documented instances of being victims or perpetrators of violence, experiencing mental health disorders, suicide attempts, and struggles with substance abuse.⁹⁷ Blanco and Atkinson offer compelling evidence that unaddressed traumas from earlier generations can lead to dysfunction in subsequent ones within a broad familial and social context.

Joy DeGruy, in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, proposes that the descendants of slaves are likely to exhibit residual coping and adaptive behaviors stemming from the psychological, physical, and mental horrors of slavery.⁹⁸ She characterizes Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) as a syndrome, in contrast to the more common characterization of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In this context, “syndrome” refers to “a pattern of behaviors.” DeGruy argues that PTSS is a manifestation of multigenerational trauma, ongoing oppression, and the perception of a real or perceived lack of access.⁹⁹ The resulting pattern of behavior is not singular but rather encompasses “vacant esteem,” “ever-present anger,” and “racist socialization.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Atkinson, *Trauma Trails*, 185–186.

⁹⁸ Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Baltimore, MD: Uptown Press, 2005).

⁹⁹ DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, 162.

¹⁰⁰ DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, chapter 4.

Debility

In disability studies, the term “debility” encompasses a broader spectrum than merely physical or mental limitations. It encapsulates a condition systematically sustained by sociopolitical forces, which devalue certain individuals on the basis of their bodily and cognitive differences. This concept implicates societal structures in the persistent undervaluing and undermining of certain populations, highlighting the role of sociopolitical dynamics in determining the worth and capabilities ascribed to various bodies and minds.

Rachel Adams et al. define the term “debility” in disability studies as follows:

Some scholars have offered the concept of “debility” as a supplement to disability, which they see as entangled with Western ideas about individuality, autonomy, and bodily integrity. The dictionary meaning of “debility” overlaps with “disability”: it is the “condition of being weak or feeble,” in either physical or mental capacity. But a secondary meaning—“political, social, or pecuniary weakness”—makes it useful for scholars attuned to populations made vulnerable by political and economic forces globally.¹⁰¹

Among various scholars, including Jasbir Puar, Robert McRuer, Sharon Betcher, and Nirmala Erevelles,¹⁰² who have endeavored to examine identity-based models of disability intricately, Puar provides the most comprehensive utilization of the concept of

¹⁰¹ Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, “Disability,” in *Keywords for Disability Studies* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 5–11.

¹⁰² Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); “Spatial Debilities: Slow Life and Carceral Capitalism in Palestine,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 120 (April 2021): 393–414; Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (United Kingdom: NYU Press, 2006); Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); *Spirit and the Obligation of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology for the Global City* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

debility to elucidate the mechanisms that perpetuate inequalities and injustices within the context of the racialized state.

In *The Right to Maim*, Puar offers an incisive examination of how debility functions within biopolitics, distinct from the focus on “necropolitics.”¹⁰³ Puar posits that the creation of disability is a goal of biopolitics:

Addressing disability directly forces a new, discrete component into the living/dying pendulum that forms most discussions of biopolitics: the living dead, death worlds, necropolitics, slow death, life itself. These frames presume death to be the ultimate assault, transgression, or goal, and the biopolitical end point or opposite of life. I am arguing that debilitation and the production of disability are in fact biopolitical ends unto themselves, with moving neither toward life nor toward death as the aim.¹⁰⁴

This principle, which Puar terms “the right to maim,” serves as an extension of sovereign power, distinct from the power to take life.¹⁰⁵ Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “slow death,”¹⁰⁶ Puar opines that the biopolitical tools of neoliberalism and empire incorporate affective strategies, including the use of nonhuman elements and technologies, to erode biopolitical agency. Puar explores the biopolitics of settler

¹⁰³ Necropolitics is a theoretical concept developed by philosopher Achille Mbembe, in Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). It refers to the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Emerging from Foucault’s idea of biopower, which examines the state’s power over life, necropolitics extends this to the power to impose death, making it central to politics, especially in the context of sovereignty, warfare, and the governance of populations deemed disposable by the state. Puar, *Right to Maim*, 136–137.

¹⁰⁴ Puar, *Right to Maim*, xviii.

¹⁰⁵ Puar, *Right to Maim*, xviii.

¹⁰⁶ Puar, *Right to Maim*, 1–2, 11–12. Lauren Berlant’s concept of “slow death” refers to the gradual wearing down of individuals through precarious conditions that are often normalized in society. It highlights how certain populations experience a prolonged deterioration of their physical and mental health due to systemic economic and social neglect. This process is not marked by an immediate death but rather a slow attrition of vitality, often overlooked by broader society and politics. Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 754–780.

colonialism in the context of Palestine, where a policy of inflicting crippling injuries has become a marker of occupation.¹⁰⁷ She examines the use of weapons and tactics that are designed to disable, illustrating how these have shaped the interactions between Israeli forces and Palestinian populations. Puar's analysis uncovers the strategic use of physical debilitation by Israel to undermine Palestinian resistance and agency, highlighting the use of bodily harm as a means of asserting biopolitical control and suppressing dissent.

In "Spatial Debilities," Puar articulates how capitalism's debilitating influence extends from the physical bodies to the broader spatial contexts in which they exist. Her exploration inspects the ways capitalist structures and ideologies contribute to the spatial debilitation of communities of Palestine by affecting their mobility, access to resources, and overall quality of life.¹⁰⁸ It is a strategic move by Israeli settler-colonial powers that transcends physical control, aiming to govern the very spaces in which life unfolds, thus exerting a more pervasive and enduring form of control. Puar's examination critiques disaster capitalism for commodifying debility and disaster, shifting global humanitarian focus towards the immediate medical needs of populations impacted by "spectacular forms of violence" rather than the dynamic movements for liberation.¹⁰⁹

The point here is that disaster capitalism is not forged in relation to the nondisaster but, rather, relies on the strictures of carceral capitalism, securing the unspectacular slow deaths, the disposability of those who will be left rather than recycled. What the disaster-carceral relation means for Palestine is that Gaza is the humanitarian rescue object par excellence while quotidian

¹⁰⁷ Puar, *Right to Maim*, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Puar, "Spatial Debilities," 393–414.

¹⁰⁹ Puar, "Spatial Debilities," 397.

debilitation is unremarkable. Conditions continue to deteriorate in parts of the West Bank also, particularly in relatively spatially remote and confined refugee camps, some of which are the oldest in the world. “Disaster,” then, is a perverse recognition designated to some populations (and events) and withheld from others.¹¹⁰

“Disaster capitalism,” as Puar puts it, highlights the most sinister aspect of capitalist control, where economic interest is not only prioritized over but also planted on the ground fertilized by the prolonged suffering and debilitation of populations. It perpetuates cycles of exploitation and debilitation and further entrenches inequalities, making the recovery of affected bodies even more unattainable. The long-term impacts of conflict, therefore, extend beyond immediate physical harm to include the socioeconomic degradation of communities, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive view of the consequences of colonialism and occupation.¹¹¹

Moral Debilitation

To summarize, postcolonial trauma theorists have expanded the conventional concept of moral injury, which is typically individualistic and event-specific, by incorporating the collective and historical dimensions of trauma. Conventional moral injury models focus on the psychological distress individuals experience when their actions, often within a military context, conflict with their moral beliefs. These models revolve around a singular event or series of events that disrupt an individual’s moral compass, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, and loss of integrity. Postcolonial theorists,

¹¹⁰ Puar, “Spatial Debilities,” 398.

¹¹¹ Puar, “Spatial Debilities,” 398.

however, assert that moral injury can also arise from sustained, systemic, and intergenerational traumas such as colonialism and slavery, which go beyond the immediate and individual. These traumas are not isolated incidents but ongoing conditions that affect the entire moral soundness of communities and cultures over generations.

The concept of debility advanced by Puar encompasses not just the medical dimensions of disability but also the political, economic, and social processes that render and sustain certain bodies as debilitated. This concept, together with insights from postcolonial trauma studies, could extend from the historical and systemic damage to the moral capabilities of the colonized. As the concepts of corporeal and spatial debility address how systemic structures produce and maintain certain forms of impairment, moral debility examines how colonial systems and their lingering effects have impaired or weakened the moral capacities of entire communities over transgenerational histories.

The term “moral debilitation” thus reflects not an inherent deficiency within these communities but a systemically induced condition from oppressive colonial conditions. The concept also addresses how postcolonial trauma might hinder the orphaned subjects’ capabilities for flourishing and how it undercut society’s ability to provide adequate circumstances to individuals for cultivating such capabilities. To understand the intersection of these two concepts, one must emphasize the importance of societal structures in supporting or inhibiting citizens’ moral development, especially those impacted by historical trauma. The capabilities approach to moral agency, then, not only

outlines a path to human flourishing but also stresses the broader societal responsibility of facilitating it.

II.5. Summary

This chapter has outlined the methods of this dissertation and defined the key concept. The following chapters will unravel the interplay between history, literature, and transgenerational trauma, seeking to build an argument for a new narrative within postcolonial theologies—one that recognizes the moral damages caused by systemic oppression. The strategic pessimism that pinpoints the debilitated moral agency of the colonized sets the stage for constructing more realistic pathways to reparation from colonial harm—an endeavor that will likely extend into future projects.

Chapter III:

Historical Context of the Orphan Consciousness

This chapter introduces the historical contexts of the orphan consciousness. The orphan consciousness does not derive from the actual state of being an orphan. The term denotes the psychological and emotional effects resulting from the pervasive experience of loss and the deprivation of parental figures and safety nets due to traumatic historical events. It refers to the sense of loss and abandonment and the impact it has on Koreans' self-understandings, relationships, and views of the world. In connecting the orphan consciousness in literature analyzed in Chapter IV to a broader historical context, this chapter draws inspiration from scholars who have explored trauma's political and cultural aspects, moving beyond conventional approaches that solely focus on the symptomatic and psychological dimensions of trauma. Through an examination of the historical background of the orphan consciousness, I hope to lay a foundation for further discussions on the orphaned subject as a distinctive and problematic mode of colonial self-formation and their moral predicaments.

III.1. The Demise of King and Colonial Subjugation (1910s~1940s)

On January 21, 1919, the abdicated emperor Gojong passed away unexpectedly. The emperor Gojong proclaimed the establishment of the Korean Empire and claimed himself as the first Emperor on October 12, 1897. He abandoned the name of Joseon, which was a medieval feudal society that lasted for 500 years, in order to strengthen and

modernize Korea in response to the threats posed by the world powers. He instituted modernized factories, banks, and companies to promote industry and introduced power plants to Korea for the first time.¹¹² However, following Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japan forced Korea to sign the *Eulsa* Treaty in 1905, stripping the Korean Empire of its diplomatic sovereignty. Then, in 1907, Japan forced Emperor Gojong to abdicate and placed his son, Sunjong, on the throne as the second Emperor of the Korean Empire. Soon after, the Korean Empire's army was disbanded, and in 1910, with the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty,¹¹³ the Korean Empire was annexed and absorbed into the Japanese Empire. During the Japanese colonial era, Gojong, now called King I-tae (the Japanese gave him this name to undermine his authority), remained in seclusion at *Deoksugung* Palace.¹¹⁴

The day after Gojong's demise, *Maeil Shinbo*, a press outlet controlled by the Japanese Colonial Government in Korea, announced his death, attributing it to a cerebral hemorrhage.¹¹⁵ However, rumors soon spread that the Japanese collaborators poisoned

¹¹² Choi, Seon-hye, "Changes and Developments of the Chosŏn Society in the Daewongun Period: A Book Review of James B. Palais's 'Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea,'" *Korean Studies* 24 (2011): 493–532.

¹¹³ In 1910, Terauchi Masatake, who became the third Resident-General of Korea, completely seized control of judicial and police powers, including general police authority. On August 16, Terauchi presented the annexation treaty proposal to Prime Minister Lee Wan-yong and pressured him to accept it. The treaty was signed on August 22, turning Korea into a colony. From that point on, Japan abolished the Residency-General and established the Government-General of Korea to begin colonial rule. Yoon, So-young, "The Assassination Rumor of Emperor Gojong and the March 1st Movement," *Opening the History of Tomorrow* 74 (2019): 47.

¹¹⁴ Hwang, Kyung-moon, *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 134.

¹¹⁵ *Maeil Shinbo*, January 22, 1919, "The Demise of King I-tae," in Korea History Information Integration System, accessed March 12, 2024, <http://viewer.nl.go.kr:8080/main.wviewer#>.

King Gojong.¹¹⁶ The impending royal wedding between the Korean Crown Prince Yi Un and the Japanese Princess Nasimotonomiya Masako further fueled speculations that Japan sought to depose Gojong due to his opposition to the marriage. It was widely believed that Japan forced the marriage in an attempt to weaken the Korean Empire's royal lineage.¹¹⁷ The court ladies testified to seeing King Gojong's body being suspiciously decomposed right after the news of his death spread through the royal palace wall, feeding Korean people's suspicion and rage.¹¹⁸ Historians of today have a broad consensus on that Japan had no motive to depose Gojong, given that he had already been abdicated. However, the rumors on his assassination fueled public distrust and anger towards the Japanese.¹¹⁹

The Japanese colonial government implemented a strong, centralized, and highly effective bureaucracy that exerted absolute influence over the entire nation. It monitored and restricted all political, economic, and cultural affairs. The colonial bureaucracy brought about a profound transformation in the social structure of Korea.¹²⁰ Korean society went through the disintegration of traditional social networks, widespread poverty, a massive influx of the rural population to urban centers and, naturally,

¹¹⁶ Yoon, "The Assassination Rumor," 48.

¹¹⁷ Yoon, "The Assassination Rumor," 53~54.

¹¹⁸ Yoon, "The Assassination Rumor," 54.

¹¹⁹ Yoon, "The Assassination Rumor," 60.

¹²⁰ One of the most significant challenges of this transformation arose in the agricultural industry. Korean peasants were subjected to exploitation and heavy taxes to fund technical improvements such as irrigation, electricity, and transportation. As a result, many former landowners and agricultural workers lost their land and livelihoods almost overnight due to their inability to meet these tax demands. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 148–156.

widespread discontent and dissent against the colonial regime. In order to suppress the inevitable discontent, the first colonial governor-general of Korea, Terauchi Masatake, exercised strong military control over the country—so-called “military rule”—to stifle any outward expression of people’s discontent.¹²¹

The sudden death of Gojong ignited people’s fury over Japan’s extensive control. Historian Yoon So-young discovered an anonymous declaration that starts with the line, “Alas! Our fellow compatriots! Do you know what caused our Emperor Gojong’s death?” This declaration, blaming the famous Japanese collaborator Yi Wan-yong, Yoon Duck-young, and Han Sang-hak for poisoning Gojong, was posted on the walls of streets of Seoul and distributed to the people gathered from all parts of the country to participate in Gojong’s national funeral scheduled for March 3, 1919.¹²² On March 1, 1919, the March First Independence Movement took place, with mass demonstrations demanding independence from Japanese rule.

Despite its significance in modern Korean history, the March First Independence Movement was ultimately a failed attempt as it could not attain its final goal, the independence.¹²³ Yet, this movement showed the Japanese that harsh military rule could be counterproductive. Hence, the second Japanese governor-general in Korea, Saito

¹²¹ Hwang, Kyung-moon, *A History of Korea: An Episodic Narrative* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 135–6.

¹²² Yoon, “The Assassination Rumor,” 47.

¹²³ It led to the foundation of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korean in Shanghai in April 1919, which gathered the disparate resistant groups together. Kwon, Bo-due-rae, “Kim Sngkyu and Kim Uchin: A Case Study on the Generational Conflict around the March 1st Movement,” *Journal of Korean Studies* 31 (2013): 261–303.

Takashi, administered gradual reforms in the country's colonial policies.¹²⁴ He introduced the so-called “cultural rule” approach, which aimed to assimilate Koreans into the Japanese imperial ideology through the rhetoric of *Naisen Ittai* (Japan and Korea as one body). This rhetoric promised prosperity and peace to the colonized and urged them to participate in the noble historical task of the Japanese empire.

The crucial point is that those who had to endure the colonial rule of the nation—the suspicious death of the king, the “Pater Patriae” in a literal sense, and the subsequent oppressive policies that led to the deaths of many anonymous parents—were bound to experience identity confusion during the 1930s and 1940s when they encountered the assimilation policies. Through the cultural policy of eradicating Korean surnames and the prohibition of using the Korean language, they naturally grew up as bilingual individuals and were compelled to adopt Japanese-style names.¹²⁵ The influx of new literature and Western ideas introduced through Japan, brought about through modernization and colonial policies, left them with a sense of shame and ambivalence towards pre-modern Korean society. Consequently, these colonial-generation individuals came to possess complex identities and loyalties, resulting in a state of confusion. Works that depict the turmoil of these colonial orphaned individuals will be discussed in more detail below.

¹²⁴ Mark Caprio, *Japanese Assimilation Policies 1910–1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 123. This turn to so-called “cultural rule” policies included lifting press restriction; easing the restrictions on the native enterprises; reducing discriminatory acts and policies; including more Koreans into the colonial administration; and allowing Koreans to form social, political, and cultural associations.

¹²⁵ Kwon, “Kim Sngkyu and Kim Uchin,” 270–21.

III.2. The Korean War and the Epidemic of Death (1950s~1960s)

Beginning in the spring of 1946, the USAMG and Korean rightist armed forces, commonly known as the “*Seobuk* Young Men’s Association,” carried out a campaign of repression against leftist activists in South Korea. During this era, numerous individuals associated with leftist or communist ideologies faced imprisonment. By early 1950, during President Rhee Syng-man’s administration, approximately 30,000 people suspected of communism were incarcerated, while another 300,000 were forcibly enrolled in an official reeducation campaign known as the “*Bodo* League,” accused of being communists or sympathizing with communism.¹²⁶ Following the invasion of South Korea by the North Korean People’s Army on June 25, 1950, retreating South Korean forces executed political prisoners and many members of the *Bodo* League, regardless of their imprisonment status, throughout the country. The magnitude of this massacre was significant and remained concealed from official records until subsequent investigations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005.¹²⁷

To comprehend the tragic state-sanctioned massacre, one must trace back to Korea’s independence from Japanese colonial rule. When Japan’s imperial ambition erupted with the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, world powers, including the

¹²⁶ Baek, Yun-chul, “A Study on The Bodo League Massacre,” *World Constitutional Law Review* 15 (2009): 329-350. The “*Bodo* League” is the English translation of the Korean term “*Bodo Yeonmaeng*,” which is derived from the official title “*Gungmin Bodo Yeonmaeng*.” Ironically, “*Bodo*” means “to protect and to guide” in Korean.

¹²⁷ National Archives of Korea, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” accessed June 16, 2024, <https://www.archives.go.kr/next/newsearch/viewDescClassContents.do?sitePage=&page=1&doctype=M&businessFunctionId=G00000000999&descClassDiv=G&descFullId=T00000000010%2FT00000000015%2FG00000000999&viewSel=archive>.

US and Soviet Union, decided to invade Japanese colonies, including Korea, under the Allied command. Following Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945, the US and Soviet Union agreed to divide Korea along the thirty-eighth parallel line.¹²⁸ The USAMG trusteeship stifled the indigenous political experiments and discussions that flourished after Korea's independence, fostering a toxic anti-communist environment.¹²⁹ The USAMG invalidated the newly formed People's Republic of Korea, claiming itself as the only lawful government in South Korea. It formed alliances with right-wing groups and retained Japanese colonial systems, opposing mass-based movements for resource redistribution. Over fierce resistance among Koreans wanting a united nation, on May 10, 1948, the UN and the USAMG decided to push the election ahead. They established a government for only South Korea and chose representatives for the National Assembly.¹³⁰ On June 20, the National Assembly elected Rhee Syng-man as the first president of South Korea. On August 15, 1948, the South Korean state was inaugurated, setting the stage for the ensuing war.¹³¹

The Korean War, also known as the Fatherland Liberation War in North Korea, began on June 25, 1950, after exchanges of fire across the thirty-eighth parallel between

¹²⁸ Kim, Hak-joon, "The American Military Government in South Korea, 1945–1948: Its Formation, Policies, and Legacies," *Asian Perspective* 12, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 1988): 51–83.

¹²⁹ Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2010), 135–146.

¹³⁰ Lyuh and other leftist leaders of the Korean People's Republic were fiercely against this decision, therefore they refused to participate in any USAMG advisory council, which resulted in having more rightists in the government and council. Cumings, *The Korean War*, 147.

¹³¹ This indirect election established a toxic pattern of indirect presidential elections that continued until 1987, to maintain the dictatorial rule. Hwang, *A History of Korea*, 173.

North and South Korea for nearly two years. By July 1953, when the Armistice was made between the US Army and North Korea that ultimately left the country divided, the entire peninsula was razed to the ground, leaving more than a million casualties.¹³² The most atrocious and tragic quality of this war is its fratricidal nature, with the *Bodo* League massacre being just one tragic episode in its history. As the Northern army swiftly advanced into South Korea during the early stages of the war, retreating South Korean forces executed political prisoners and numerous *Bodo* League members across the nation without discrimination. The Northern forces were joined by leftist guerrillas and communist sympathizers, who implemented revolutionary changes in the occupied territories. They reorganized the administration, redistributed land and properties, and executed prominent rightist local leaders, intellectuals, and former Japanese collaborators.¹³³ When the Southern forces recaptured towns with the assistance of the US forces, they often failed to distinguish between possible northern collaborators and

¹³² According to the government's official tally, there were 370,000 civilian deaths, 230,000 injuries, and 380,000 missing persons, during the Korean War. However, the estimated number of civilian victims solely from various civilian massacres reaches around 1 million. The scale of civilian casualties due to the war far exceeds the level reported in the official statistics. No, Young-gi, "Current Status and Research on Civilian Massacres During the Korean War," *Historiography and Reality* 54 (2004): 8; Estimated North Korean casualties numbered 2 million, including about one million civilians and 520,000 soldiers. Cumings, *The Korean War*, 35.

¹³³ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea (TRCK) report in 2009 documented several massacres perpetrated by North Korean and local leftist forces, with the number of civilian casualties ranging from 140 to 250 in Dangjin, between 70 and 120 in Gochang-myeon and 61 in Yangpyeong, among many other unrecorded incidents. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Korea, "Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Vol. III: Incidents of Civilian Massacres," 2010, <https://theme.archives.go.kr/viewer/common/archWebViewer.do?bsid=201003412097&gubun=search>.

regular citizens. With the slightest suspicion, they rounded up and shot the suspects, leaving their bodies in unmarked graves.¹³⁴

Considering the number of war orphans, widows, and separated families created in this chaos, it would be challenging to find someone who did not lose their parents or guardians during this time.¹³⁵ Those born and raised during the time of the Korean War, if they were fortunate enough to survive, had to learn to survive an epidemic of death. The vicious cycle of revenge and “cleansing” extended beyond the battlefield, permeating the entire country and resulting in numerous massacres, oppressive surveillance, and pervasive fear among the people. A simple act of kindness or innocent association with others could be misinterpreted as affiliations with either the “communist” or “reactionary imperialist” side, often leading to deadly consequences. Ironically, many caught in this fratricidal conflict had little understanding of the ideological differences between the North and South. The concepts of communism and anti-communism were unfamiliar to most, and only a few were genuinely committed to either cause. The majority were unwitting bystanders trapped in the violence and chaos of war.

¹³⁴ During the early stages of the Korean War, from July 26–29, 1950, a US air raid targeting a railroad bridge near Nogeun-ri village in Chung-cheong province resulted in the death of 163 Korean refugees and injuries to 55 others. Official reports in 2005 revealed that approximately five to six hundred residents from Jugok-ri and Imgye-ri were led by four or five American soldiers to the area. The incident, known as the Nogeun-ri Massacre, remained largely unrecognized domestically and internationally until September 29, 1999, when the Associated Press (AP) published an article detailing accounts from US veterans (7th Cavalry troops) and Korean survivors.

¹³⁵ There were 3.7 million refugees, 300,000 war widows, 100,000 war orphans, and 10 million separated families between South and North Korea. No, “Current Status and Research,” 82.

Given the tragic history of the Korean War, it is not surprising that a pervasive “concentration of silence” prevailed in post-war Korea on both sides.¹³⁶ The memories of the war were manipulated by subsequent regimes to strengthen anti-communist or anti-capitalist identities, resulting in militarization and control, which obscured the atrocities committed by both states. As anti-communism became deeply ingrained in the state ideology in the South, the Rhee regime implemented and strengthened stringent national security laws to suppress dissent.¹³⁷ In such a political climate, survival often requires people to remain ignorant or indifferent to politics. Fear and distrust among neighbors became deeply entrenched, fostering an aversion to politics and hindering opportunities for the Korean people to overcome the deep psychological and moral wounds from colonial occupation. It was in this atmosphere that dictatorship emerged.

III.3. The Chain of Dictatorships (1970s~1980s)

On October 26, 1979, an assassination occurred during a banquet held at the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) safehouse located within the Blue House presidential compound in Seoul, Korea. President Park Chung-hee was fatally shot in the

¹³⁶ Grace Cho, in her book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, coined the term “the concentration of silence” to describe the pervasive deaths and organized silencing in post-war Korea. She argues that this concentrated silence persists and haunts subsequent generations with memories of the past. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 15.

¹³⁷ The Rhee Syng-man administration passed the Revised National Security Laws in January 1959. These laws expanded the perimeter of treasonous acts to a ridiculous degree, in order to preempt progressives and anyone who dissented from the administration’s practices. These laws forbade people to make positive statements about North Korea and punished such acts by imprisonment. Moon, Byung-joo, “The Second Republic and Collapsed Democracy in Korea,” *Democracy and Human Rights Journal* 5 (2005): 32, 42.

chest and head by Kim Jae-gyu, the director of the KCIA and the president's security chief. This event is commonly known as the "10.26 incident" in South Korea. Prior to Park's assassination, South Korea had witnessed political turmoil, including the April 19, 1960 student revolution that resulted in the downfall of President Rhee Syng-man's regime, which had maintained power through three consecutive presidencies with the support of USAMG.¹³⁸

After Rhee's resignation, a short-lived Yun Po-sun administration took office, creating a power vacuum that eventually led to Park Chung-hee seizing power through a military coup on May 16, 1961. Park governed the country with almost two decades of military dictatorship, which frustrated the people who yearned for democratization after decades of colonial occupation, the Korean War, and Rhee Syng-man's despotic regime. Park Chung-hee implemented rapid industrialization and modernization strategies during his regime, known as "The Five-Year Plans for Economic Development" and the "New Village Movement." These efforts were heavily supported by anti-communism and substantial economic aid from the United States, as Korea played a strategically important role in the US's Cold War strategy. In 1972, Park proclaimed the "Yushin Constitution" and consolidated his iron-fisted dictatorship.¹³⁹

Park Chung-hee's despotic reign came to an unexpected end with his assassination on October 26, 1979. This event created a political vacuum, which was

¹³⁸ Chung, Joo-shin, "The Background Analysis of the 10.26 Incident," *Journal of Social Science Research* 18 (2007): 113–144.

¹³⁹ Chung, "The Background Analysis of the 10.26 Incident," 121–125.

filled by another military coup led by Chun Doo-hwan on December 12, 1979.

Frustrating Korean citizens' aspiration for democratization, Chun's regime wielded even more despotic power, resulting in the deaths and incarcerations of countless students, protestors, and politicians. In June 1987, a massive citizen protest known as the "June Revolution" led to the end of Chun Doo-hwan's administration and the abolition of the unconstitutional indirect election system.¹⁴⁰

During this period, marked by strong anti-communist military dictatorships and rapid economic growth, South Korea experienced extensive social changes. The rigorous state-driven economic growth plan, called the "*Saemaul Undong*" (New Village Movement or New Community Movement), exploited labor with long hours and low wages.¹⁴¹ Consequently, income inequality amplified and urban slums developed. The government aggressively suppressed dissent and opposition, restricted freedom of speech and assembly, and prosecuted political and student activists. Education was tightly controlled by the government to promote an anti-communist and developmentalist ideology. Citizens lived under constant surveillance, with informants encouraged to report on their neighbors, fostering an atmosphere of suspicion within society.¹⁴²

Amid the horrifying state-sanctioned violence, poverty, and social conflicts, Korea experienced an unprecedented form of generational conflict. I agree with the

¹⁴⁰ Moon, Min-ki, "The Background and Aspects of University Purges during the Chun Doo-hwan Regime," *Journal for the Studies of Korean History* 93 (2023): 157–188.

¹⁴¹ Kim, Dae-young, "A study on the mechanism of Park Chung Hee regime's state-mobilization-Focused on The New Community Movement," *Economy and Society* 61 (2004): 184-221.

¹⁴² Moon, "The Background and Aspects of University Purges," 162–183.

analysis of sociologist Yi Hee-young, who argues that the massive student movement of this era's younger generation should be understood as a response to the state violence experienced by the parent generation in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁴³ The state utilized violence to suppress leftist ideologies, enforcing gruesome methods to stifle and marginalize non-communist political orientations and beliefs, as well as imposing anti-communism as the sole political ideology. This violence, deeply rooted in political ideologies, intertwines with patriarchal social structures perpetuated throughout the nation. In the private sphere, it resulted in violence against women and children within families. In schools and universities, students endured physical violence and state-driven ideological indoctrination. Prisons and mental institutions were filled with urban poor and individuals labeled as mentally ill by society. In labor settings, workers had to fight for their survival, shedding blood and burning their bodies to claim their right to life.¹⁴⁴

In this environment, the younger generation raised their voices against the values represented by the strong Father figures of the dictators Rhee Syng-man, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan, who emphasized national security and economic prosperity for the established generation. They studied leftist socialism, advocated solidarity and reunification with North Korea, and discussed the liberation of laborers and women. The

¹⁴³ Yi, Hee-young, "Experienced Violence and Generational Dialogues: A Biography-Reconstructive Study on Experiences in the Student's Movement of the 1980's," *Economy and Society* 68 (2005): 107–283.

¹⁴⁴ The statement might sound hyperbolic, but it accurately reflects historical realities. The "Gwangju Democratization Movement" in 1980 involved significant violence and casualties, with protesters enduring brutal crackdowns by government forces, resulting in loss of life and injuries. Similarly, a South Korean labor activist, Jeon Tae-il's self-immolation in 1970 was a desperate act of protest against the dire working conditions faced by laborers, symbolizing the extreme lengths individuals were willing to go to highlight and combat social injustices.

younger generation loathed their unfortunate Fathers, who also suffered from the violence within and around His broken family while coping with frustrations and anger by resorting to violence against their wives and children after laboring hard in the newly relocated city. These young individuals opposed government, police authority, and the military while also condemning United States imperialism for its role in causing the Korean War and national division.

On the other hand, this new generation also reaped the benefits of Korea's first-ever economic growth spurt since modernization. They experienced improving living standards, aspired to the progressive Western societies they learned about in higher education, and yearned for the prosperity and freedom of the "advanced countries" conveyed through the media. The contrasting nature of these two aspects characterizes the youth of the 1970s and 1980s. They confronted the established generation with passion and dreamt of an upward curve of synthesis through Hegelian dialectics. However, like the seemingly everlasting military dictatorship and the endless economic prosperity, the era of abundance also came to an end, and Korean society now faces the emergence of a new generation on the horizon.

III.4. The IMF Suicides (1997~)

On May 16, 2002, an article titled "The IMF Suicide Log: Do You Remember That Time?" was published by *Pressian*, one of the most progressive internet-based news

media outlets in South Korea.¹⁴⁵ The article documented nineteen suicide cases that occurred in 1998, which were believed to be a result of desperation related to the so-called “IMF Crisis.”¹⁴⁶ To highlight just a few cases from the log, here are some examples:

April 23, 1998

In a motel room in Shinjung-dong, Nam-gu, Ulsan-si, Mr. Kim Mun-hyun (37, unemployed) was found dead, strangled by a hiking boot lace. Mr. Kim was a board member of a construction company based in Ulsan-si. It is assumed that he committed suicide, despondent about the company’s bankruptcy and the 170 million won of liability he took over.

April 24, 1998

Early that morning, in a home located in Heungdeok-gu, Cheongju-si, Chungcheongbuk-do, Mr. Kim Gyeong-hwan (47, unemployed) was found dead, hanging from a persimmon tree in the garden, with his wife making the discovery. Mr. Kim had recently provided a debt guarantee of 200 million won to his friends, but when they went bankrupt, he faced debt collection from creditors and struggled with worries, leading to his decision to take his own life. It is presumed that Mr. Kim, who had divorced his wife and lived in a 6-*pyeong* (approximately 20 square meters) basement room with his university student son and high school daughter, chose suicide due to the burden of a 30 million won debt and pessimistic circumstances.

April 26, 1998

In the main bedroom of a residence in Sinwol 1-dong, Yangcheon-gu, Seoul, the body of Mr. Jang Myeong-sam (32, a company employee) was found hanging from the doorknob with a cellphone charger. His wife made the discovery. Family members testified that the deceased Mr. Jang had been under pressure from debt collectors due to a 10 million won promissory note that he discounted for a friend last June. The promissory note had defaulted, and in addition to this financial burden, Mr. Jang had been worried about the possibility of being laid off from his position as a manager due to recent economic difficulties.

April 28, 1998

¹⁴⁵ Park, Taeg-yeon, “The IMF Suicide Log: Do You Remember That Time?” *Pressian*, accessed August 2, 2023, <https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/22937>. Translated by the author.

¹⁴⁶ “The IMF Crisis” is commonly used term to refer to 1997 Foreign Exchange Crisis.

In an apartment located in Bundang-gu, Seongnam-si, Gyeonggi-do, Mr. Kwon Hyeok-do (36, Manager at J Company), after killing his wife and son by strangling them, also hanged himself. In a suicide note, he expressed remorse for being unable to repay his debts and apologized to his sister-in-law and mother-in-law. He stated, "I am leaving, feeling sorry for my wife and son." It was revealed that he had borrowed money from his sister-in-law and mother-in-law five years ago for stock investments but faced repeated failures, leading to his debts reaching 1 billion won.

April 29, 1998

In a house located in Asan-si, Chungcheongnam-do, Mr. Kim Gap-sik (53, a painter) committed suicide by dousing himself with petroleum and setting himself on fire. Mr. Kim had been suffering from alcohol addiction and recently faced unemployment, which caused him great distress.

May 8, 1998

Mr. Jang Jong-hwan (44, miner) was found dead from self-poisoning near the cemetery in Beomseo-myun, Ulju-gun, Ulsan-si, by his maternal cousin. The maternal cousin witnessed, "I got a phone call from Jong-hwan saying that he came to Ulsan to kill himself in front of his father's grave. I went to the grave and found him dead and the empty poison bottles." Mr. Jang was running a mining company that recently went into bankruptcy. He disappeared on May 1 and left a note to his family saying, "I am sorry." It is assumed that he killed himself on Parents' Day (May 8) in front of his father's grave, despondent about the business failure.

The "IMF Crisis" in South Korea began with internal social and economic instability caused by non-performing loans associated with the bankruptcy of the *Hanbo* Group.¹⁴⁷ As the country's foreign credit rates plunged, international financial institutions refused to extend debt repayments for Korean companies. It led to more conglomerates going bankrupt. Obtaining foreign exchange became increasingly difficult, and the Korean won's value declined significantly. In November 1997, the Korean government requested an emergency relief loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to deal with the

¹⁴⁷ Lee, Byung-chun, "The Economic Crisis in Korea and the IMF Regime: The Adventure of Dependent Neoliberalization," *Social and Economic Critique* 13 (1999): 118.

crisis. The IMF agreed to provide a total of \$57 billion in loans with conditions requiring extensive structural reforms in the Korean economy, following a neoliberal agenda that emphasized chaebol and financial reform, privatization of public enterprises, the opening of the stock market, and labor flexibility.

The IMF crisis engendered widespread layoffs and deepened economic inequality. People could not but feel hopeless as the social and economic distress permeated the entire nation. The ubiquitous sense of hopelessness during this time tragically resulted in an alarming suicide rate. The crisis also exposed the vulnerabilities of traditional patriarchy. The economic downturn significantly affected men, leaving many unemployed and burdened with insurmountable debts.¹⁴⁸ The striking observation that men committed the vast majority of suicide cases reported by *Pressian* speaks volumes about the psychological toll the crisis took on Korean men who found themselves unable to fulfill their expected roles as providers and protectors for their families. The deeply ingrained patriarchal norms have placed immense pressure on men to embody responsibilities and duties as heads of their households. Consequently, those who failed to meet these expectations during the financial crisis experienced intensified feelings of shame and failure.

The IMF crisis experience also greatly impacted the younger generation. The term “IMF Generation” became widely popular, and many similar neologisms followed.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Kim, Hye-kyung, “Failure of the Patrilineal Stem Family System?: Familialism and Individualization among the Generation of Economic Crisis of Korea in 1998,” *Korean Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 2 (April 2013): 101–141.

¹⁴⁹ The term “IMF generation” is widely used to refer to the cohort that grew up and entered adulthood during the crisis of 1997 and was shaped by the significant impact of it. Although no specific individual or

Among them, the term “880,000 won Generation,” coined by Woo Suk-hoon and Park Kwon-il in their book of the same name, captures the essence of the situation.¹⁵⁰ The term “880,000 won Generation” carries two symbolic meanings: 1) the average monthly wage of non-regular workers in their 20s at that time was around 880,000 won;¹⁵¹ 2) the publication year, 2007 marked the time when those born in 1988 just became adults, standing at the threshold of a low-growth era. Consumerist tendencies, indifference to social issues, and obsession with career-building characterize this generation.¹⁵² Woo and Park diagnosed the obsession that those in their 20s had with building their resumes stems from their exposure to a society where there is no safety net, referred to as a “barricade,” to mitigate competition. They are thrown into a competitive environment of “winner-takes-all,” where only the most exceptional individuals, often referred to as the “children of tiger moms and tiger dads,” can succeed.¹⁵³

organization is credited with coining the term, it has gained prominence in Korean media, academia, and political and economic discourse.

¹⁵⁰ Woo, Seok-hoon and Park, Kwon-il, *The 88 Million Won Generation: Economics of Hope for the Generation of Despair* (Seoul: Redian, 2007).

¹⁵¹ Calculated by multiplying 73%, the ratio of their earnings to the average wage of non-regular workers, 1,190,000 won. Woo and Park, *88 Million Won Generation*, 5. Considering fact that the average exchange rate for the year 2007 was approximately 1 USD = 936.1 KRW, 880,000 won was approximately 939.42 USD in 2007. In reality, however, the monthly wage of the young generation at that time was even lower than 880,000 won. In 2010, after three years, they still hadn’t reached the 880,000 won mark, as the minimum hourly wage was 4,110 won, and the minimum monthly wage (based on 209 working hours per month) was 858,990 won. From *Daum Policy Briefing*, “Next year, the minimum wage will increase by 12.3%, reaching 3480 won per hour (June 29, 2006),” accessed August 2, 2023, <https://v.daum.net/v/20060629145017486?f=o>.

¹⁵² Woo and Park, *88 Million Won Generation*, 52.

¹⁵³ Woo and Park, *88 Million Won Generation*, 79–81.

During this period, family disintegration took on a different form compared to previous generations. While under war and dictatorship, families suffered and disintegrated due to multi-layered and overlapping physical violence orchestrated by the state. However, during the IMF crisis, families were dismantled by an abstract, global neoliberal market wielding its merciless impact. Fathers forced into early retirement were driven to suicide or hopelessly broken while mothers were busy struggling to support their crumbling families. Children, seeking to escape from being one of the “880,000 won generation,” worked part-time jobs while managing their academic responsibilities and attending English academies from the early hours of the morning. The younger generation, labeled as the “generation of despair,” experiences the influence of Western culture on Korean society. This influence is driven by intense competition and the adoption of neoliberal policies.¹⁵⁴ As multinational corporations flood in and media spreads, the confused younger generation is bombarded with stories of their fortunate peers seeking opportunities abroad. They witness the promises of salvation from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, which rescued the country, yet they are faced with the challenging demand: “Be a better self, then you’ll be free.”

¹⁵⁴ The IMF crisis marked a decisive turning point for South Korea as it transitioned into a full-fledged neoliberal regime, entering the deep phase of neoliberalism. During the Kim Dae-jung administration, the overall framework of neoliberalism was established through the IMF bailout program, and in this context, South Korea’s experience clearly reflects the “imposed” nature of neoliberalism. Kim, “Failure of the Patrilineal Stem Family System?” 124; also see Cho, Young-chul, *The Globalization of Finance and the Path of the Korean Economy: Toward a Democratic Market Economy* (Seoul: Humanitas, 2007), 34; Yoon, Sang-woo, “A Comparative Study on Internalization of Neoliberalism in Korea and Brazil,” *Journal of Asiatic Studies* 56, no. 3 (September 2013): 364–395.

III.5. Neoliberal Transformation

After the Foreign Exchange Financial Crisis in 1997, social safety nets such as permanent employment, corporate welfare, and seniority-based wage systems were dismantled in South Korea.¹⁵⁵ A flexible labor market, layoffs, and merit-based wage system were implemented and many Korean workers had to take responsibility for their survival in the labor market without the safeguard of national protection. Consequently, the unemployment rate rose from 2.6% in 1997 to 8.6% in 1999. The proportion of temporary and day laborers among non-regular workers increased by 6.3%, from 45.9% in 1997 to 52.2% in 1999.¹⁵⁶ Wage disparities between regular and non-regular workers within the internal labor market widened, and discrimination became prevalent. From 2002 to 2003, non-regular workers rose from 120,000 to 7.84 million, making up 55.4% of wage workers. Wages between regular and non-regular workers diverged, with non-regular wages dropping to 51% of regular wages and their workweek shortening to only 1.4 hours compared to 3.2 hours for regular workers.¹⁵⁷

These massive shifts in the labor market led to both class polarization and polarization within classes. The situation in the external labor market worsened further. Laborers transitioned into small business owners, freelancers, and precariat (precarious

¹⁵⁵ Yoon, "A Comparative Study, 364–395.

¹⁵⁶ Im, Hyuk-baek, "Fairness of 'Our Time': Fairness in the Post-Neoliberal Era," *Philosophy and Reality* 128 (2021): 95~117.

¹⁵⁷ Kim, Yu-sun, "The Scale and Reality of Non-Regular Workers," *Korean Labor & Society Institute* 82 (2003), http://klsi.org/bbs/board.php?bo_table=B07&wr_id=490&sfl=wr_subject&sop=and.

proletariat) workers.¹⁵⁸ They did not get the benefits of overtime pay, paid leave, employment insurance, health insurance, and labor union membership.¹⁵⁹ A flexible labor market ousted the laborers from job security, turning them into non-regular workers bereft of state protection and benefits.

Following the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun from 1998 to 2008, the conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye consecutively came to power from 2008 to 2017, reinforcing neoliberalism. The libertarian fairness theory of the new right wing, which prioritizes fairness of rights and processes, was applied to resource distribution, sidelining the social democratic resource distribution of John Rawls, which emphasizes the fairness of outcomes.¹⁶⁰ As a result, unprecedented inequality and polarization occurred in Korean society. During the developmental era of industrialization, the World Bank praised South Korea for its

¹⁵⁸ Kim, Soh-yeong, "Precarious Work of Korea," *Labor Law Journal* 31 (2009): 209–235.

¹⁵⁹ Kim, "Precarious Work," 225.

¹⁶⁰ Im, "Fairness of 'Our Time,'" 103–104. John Rawls, a prominent theorist of modern liberalism, offers a theory of distributive justice that resolves the paradox where an individual's freedom infringes upon others' freedom and equality. He normatively justifies this theory on the basis that any rational individual would agree to it, thus reconciling the importance of individual rights in liberalism with the concept of redistributive equality previously seen as an infringement in libertarianism. Rawls introduces the principles of equal basic liberties and the principle of difference, asserting that principles of justice must be inherently fair and universally agreeable, rather than beneficial to specific individuals or groups. Through the constructs of the original position and the veil of ignorance, Rawls explores how rational individuals, ignorant of their own circumstances, would choose principles of justice that are fair and right, emphasizing the importance of improving the situation of the least advantaged in society. His theory, which focuses on the distribution of liberty and socioeconomic goods, seeks to ensure that justice is not determined by one's natural talents or social background but by principles that are inherently equitable and just, thus providing a rigorous and logical framework for understanding justice in a democratic society. John Rawls, "Distributive Justice," in *John Rawls: Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

“growth with equity” model.¹⁶¹ In the industrialization phase, corporate and family welfare served as substitutes for comprehensive state welfare, providing a safety net for individuals. As these systems began to erode, personalistic competition grew fiercer, and the escalating need for welfare provisions remained unaddressed.¹⁶² After the global financial crisis of 2008, the administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye pursued a typical neoliberal policy, “cutting taxes, deregulation, and establishing the rule of law.”¹⁶³

After a decade of neoliberal rule, South Korean society has become more polarized, and the middle class has crumbled. The population structure, once pyramid-shaped with a robust middle class formed through growth with equity, has transformed into an hourglass-shaped structure, with the middle class shrinking.¹⁶⁴ Sociologists Cha Moon-kyung and Leem Hee-tae correlate the shrinking middle class with the cost of quality education, which for affluent households is only a fraction of their income, while it is often unaffordable for less privileged families.¹⁶⁵ This has resulted in an educational gap, where children from more prosperous families receive superior, expensive private

¹⁶¹ World Bank, “Poverty and Inequality: What Have We Learned from the 1990s?” in *Economic Growth in the 1990s: Learning from a Decade of Reform* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2005), 120–129.

¹⁶² Yoon, Hong-sik, “Korean Welfare Regime in the Conservative Administration, 2008–2016,” *Korean Journal of Social Policy* 25 (2018): 163–198.

¹⁶³ Yoon, “Korean Welfare Regime,” 168.

¹⁶⁴ Cho, Gwi-dong, *Inherited Middle-Class Society: How Is Inequality Different for Those Born in the 90s?* (Seoul: The Power of Thought, 2020), 13–15.

¹⁶⁵ Cha, Moon-kyung and Leem, Hee-tae, “The Effect of Income Inequality on Educational Expenses, Consumer Happiness and Meaningful Life Through Anxiety: Focusing on the Moderating Effect of Perceived Intergenerational Mobility,” *Journal of Consumer Culture Studies* 20 (2017): 143–168.

education, enabling them to enter prestigious law schools or medical schools, become lawyers and doctors, and inherit their parents' class and stratum.

The financial burden of maintaining a standard of living renders a significant portion of the younger demographic to relinquish conventional milestones such as marriage and childbirth. This trend has been encapsulated in the term “*Sampo* generation,” referring to the group that forgoes these aspects of life due to the overwhelming pressures and uncertainties of contemporary societal structures.¹⁶⁶ This label became prominent around 2014, when the unemployment rate for people in their 20s reached 9.7%, marking the highest level since 11.4% in 1998 and 10.1% in 1999. The proportion of non-regular workers aged 15–24 was in the low 40% range, and for those aged 25–29, it approached the low 20% range in 2014.¹⁶⁷ However, the younger generation has not stopped at just giving up on dating, marriage, and childbirth. With skyrocketing real estate prices and the emergence of a credentials-based society, the younger generation has evolved into the *Ohpo* (given up five) generation, giving up on owning a house and building a career in addition to the previous *Sampo*.¹⁶⁸

The consequences of social instability and increasing inequality, evidenced by various indicators, filled the public squares and social media with lamentations, prominently featuring hashtags “#HowIsThisANation?” expressing widespread dismay

¹⁶⁶ Hwang, Bo-yeon, “How Did the ‘*Sampo* Generation’ become MZ,” *Hankyoreh Newspaper*, April 30, 2023, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/opinion/column/1089952.html>.

¹⁶⁷ “Last Year, the Number of New Employees Increased by 540,000 . . . The Largest Increase in 12 Years,” *Seoul Economic Daily*, January 5, 2015, <https://www.seoul.co.kr/news/newsView.php?id=20150105800045>.

¹⁶⁸ Hwang, “How Did the ‘*Sampo* Generation’ become MZ.”

and questions regarding the state of the nation.¹⁶⁹ During the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye regime of neoliberalism, the public raised issues regarding the fairness of procedural matters such as educational opportunities. However, as the distribution structure deteriorated, more attention was drawn to the unfairness in distribution outcomes.¹⁷⁰ As the perception spread that the escape from the crisis came at the cost of exacerbating polarization, the people, including the middle class, staged a “revolution at the ballot box” in the local elections of June 2010, shaking the government’s support base.¹⁷¹ In response, the Lee Myung-bak government, in the August 15 Declaration of 2010, emphasized the construction of a “fair society” as its new policy direction.¹⁷² The Lee Myung-bak government’s vision of a fair society asserted that “providing equal opportunities to everyone is the foundation of a fair society. Individuals must take responsibility for the results that follow.”¹⁷³ Adhering to the principle of neoliberal fair distribution, the Lee administration limited the government to strictly legal and institutional roles for procedural fairness.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁹ Choi, Jong-ryeol, “‘How Is This a Nation?’: South Korea’s Presidential Scandal and Civil Sphere,” *Culture and Society* 23 (2017): 101–153.

¹⁷⁰ Lee, Chang-hee, “An Evaluation on Conservatism of Lee Government: Market Ideology and State Ideology,” *Korean Political Science Review* 20 (2012): 23–45.

¹⁷¹ Kim, Won-hong and Kim, Eun-kyung, “2010 Local Elections and the Study on Political Consciousness and Voting Behavior of Male and Female Voters,” Korean Women’s Development Institute, 2010, <https://www.kwdi.re.kr/publications/reportView.do?p=98&idx=114801>.

¹⁷² “President Lee Myung-bak Stresses Equal Opportunities as Foundation of a Fair Society,” *The Korea Economic Daily*, September 8, 2010, <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/201009087959i>.

¹⁷³ “President Lee Myung-bak Stresses Equal Opportunities.”

¹⁷⁴ Lee, “An Evaluation on Conservatism of Lee Government,” 32–34.

In response to the growing concerns about fairness among citizens, the Lee administration expanded its social policies starting in 2010, which included employment stability, education cost support, and housing supply.¹⁷⁵ However, the government's welfare policies were oriented more towards libertarian ones, such as "Sunshine Loan," "Smile Microcredit," and "New Hope Seed Loan," which aimed to assist citizens in self-reliance through financial support rather than demand-driven social welfare that directly provided welfare to the people.¹⁷⁶ Instead of providing public rental housing, the policies encouraged individuals to own their homes through long-term savings. Rather than offering free school meals, it encouraged students to take out loans to pay for their education after they entered the workforce.

Under the Park Geun-hye government during 2013–2016, the central theme of fairness shifted towards "inheritance of wealth, power, and status."¹⁷⁷ President Park Geun-hye was a daughter of the former dictator Park Chung-hee. She fortified privilege and power by forming a coalition with the conglomerate and politicians. Social welfare scientist Joo Eun-sun evaluated the Park Geun-hye government as "an authoritarian government with little interest in citizen participation in power" and "an incompetent

¹⁷⁵ Jeon, Byung-Yoo, "Polarization after the Global Financial Crisis and the Policy Response in Korea: Critical Review of the Middle-of-the-Road Policy of President Lee and Alternative Social Policy Plan," *Democratic Society and Policy Research* 18 (2010): 13–46.

¹⁷⁶ The "Sunshine Loan" was introduced in July 2010 to assist low-income individuals with their financial needs. The program operates by the government providing guarantees for applicants, and secondary financial institutions issuing loans based on this guarantee. The "Smile Microcredit" was designed to support entrepreneurial aspirations among low-income individuals who have the will to achieve self-reliance. The policy provided these individuals with small loans at a low interest rate of 4.5% to help them start businesses and foster economic self-sufficiency. "The 'New Hope Seed Loan' was introduced in 2011 to loans of up to KRW 20 million to individuals regardless of credit rating. Jeon, "Polarization," 15–17.

¹⁷⁷ Im, "Fairness of 'Our Time,'" 107.

government that neglected achievements other than achieving political power.”¹⁷⁸

Without proactive state intervention, ongoing social polarization has exacerbated and stifled the prospects of upward mobility, making self-made success more difficult.¹⁷⁹ This administration has given rise to a so-called “spoon class system theory,” a popular theory widely discussed online that suggests one’s socioeconomic fate is determined by one’s initial status.¹⁸⁰

In sum, the IMF crisis dismantled South Korea’s social safety nets, giving way to a flexible labor market characterized by layoffs and a merit-based wage system. These changes led to increased unemployment, wage disparities, and class polarization. The conservative administrations that followed further reinforced neoliberal procedural fairness. This transition led to a polarized society with a shrinking middle class and a younger generation giving up traditional life milestones. This critical exploration of the neoliberal transformation in South Korea sets the stage for an in-depth analysis of the rise of meritocracy and its implications on social dynamics and individual aspirations, which will be examined in the following chapter.

¹⁷⁸ Joo, Eun-sun, “Can Our Retirement Be Secure?” *Monthly Welfare Trends* 185 (2014): 9-15.

¹⁷⁹ Lee, Jeong-min and Jung, Je-young, “Critical Discourse Analysis of the ‘Spoon Class Theory’ with Focus on Educational Inequality,” *Research in Educational Policy and Politics* 27 (2020): 73–96.

¹⁸⁰ The Spoon Class Theory is a neologism derived from the traditional Korean expression “born with a golden spoon,” referring to hereditary wealth. According to this popular theory, individuals or households are categorized based on wealth and income: “Gold spoons” have assets over 2 billion won or an annual household income over 200 million won, “Silver spoons” are those with assets over 1 billion won or an annual income over 100 million won, and “Bronze spoons” have assets over 500 million won or an income over 55 million won. Those who do not fit into any of these categories, typically coming from families with assets under 50 million won or an annual income less than 20 million won, are referred to as “Dirt spoons.” “Spoon Class Theory? Delving into the Meaning of ‘Golden Spoon,’” JoongAng Ilbo Online, November 9, 2015, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/19034962#home>.

III.6. Summary

By overviewing Korea's modern history, from colonial subjugation to the impacts of war, dictatorships, and the shifts brought on by neoliberal economic policies, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the literary analysis that follows. In Chapter IV, "The Orphanhood Trope," the discussion shifts from a broad historical perspective to a more focused analysis of how orphan consciousness is manifested in literary representations. By bridging the macroscopic view of Korea's history with the microscopic lens of literary analysis, the dissertation continues to inquire about the moral landscapes of contemporary Koreans shaped by historical legacies and their transmission across generations.

Chapter IV: The Orphanhood Trope

The archetype of the orphan in modern Korean literature represents a notable departure from its counterparts in the Western literary tradition, which may be more familiar to the readers of this dissertation.¹⁸¹ Specifically, due to the inception of modern Korean literature in the context of colonial rule, the orphan does not primarily appear as a modern subject, as is often the case in the works of Charles Dickens or Mark Twain. Instead, the figure materializes as what Julin Everett describes as “victims of calculations and wars.”¹⁸²

This chapter highlights how the orphan figures in modern Korean literature repeatedly appear but differently, bearing a semblance of continuity after experiencing a

¹⁸¹ In the modern Western literary tradition—for example, in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—the orphan archetype serves as the face of “the other. These orphan characters are typically born into destitution and instabilities and become the unassimilable who challenge the boundaries of society, law, and national identity. In these narratives, the orphans typically undertake journeys to discover their true identities and find a place of belonging. The orphans are also generally depicted as embodiments of virtue and resilience because of which they can achieve a happy ending. See Park, Sun-ju, “Artificial Humans, Bare Life, Posthumanism,” in *Orphans, Those Without Lineage: Modernity, Nation-States, Individuals*, ed. Park, Sun-ju, Oh, Kyung-hwan, and Hong, Yang-hee (Seoul: Withbook Publisher, 2014), 37~60; Ko, Ji-hye, “Study on Orphan Characters of The Collection of World Literature for Children from the 1960’s till the 1970’s,” in *The Korea Association of Literature for Children and Young Adult* 15 (2014): 251–282; Heo, Byung-sik, “Orphans and Mixed Blood: The Remnants of Modernity,” in *Orphans, Those without Lineage: Modernity, Nation-States, Individuals*, ed. Park, Sun-ju, Oh, Kyung-hwan, and Hong, Yang-hee (Seoul: Withbook Publisher, 2014): 3~35.

¹⁸² Julin Everett, “The Postcolonial Orphan’s Autobiography: Authoring the Self in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Mr. Potter* and Calixthe Beyala’s *La Petite Fille du Réverbère*,” *College Literature* 36, no. 3 (2009): 45–65. “The term ‘orphan,’ as it has been understood throughout the ages, is a concomitant of the state of the postcolony. The Latin *orbis* meaning ‘bereft,’ and the German *Erbe* or ‘non-inheritor’ could easily refer to the condition of the colony and the colonized. The English term ‘orphan’ which has come to mean ‘one deprived of some protection or advantage,’ also defines the state of those affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the European carving-up of Africa into colonies.” Everett, “The Postcolonial Orphan’s Autobiography,” 47–48.

series of significant events. During the initial years of colonial rule from 1910 to the 1930s, writers like Yi Kwang-su began to introduce orphan figures as a form of modern subjectivity, particularly as nation-builders.¹⁸³ However, as the decades of the 1930s unfolded and colonial rule became further entrenched, the characterization of orphans began to shift dramatically. The orphans in the literature of the 1930s and 1940s embody emotions of confusion and shame. Those of the 1950s and 1960s post-war period evoke feelings of abhorrence arising from the horrors of war. In 1970s and 1980s literature, the orphans manifest distrust towards the complacent older generation and the military dictatorship, as well as ambivalence towards the West. By the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the orphans express resignation and ennui towards the real world. Through the lens of modern Korean literature, this chapter intends to map the orphaned characters' multifaceted emotional and moral landscape. It reflects the more extensive changes taking place within the collective consciousness of a nation grappling with colonialism, war, authoritarian rule, and rapid modernization.

IV.1. The Orphans Ashamed (1930s~1940s)

Many Korean literary scholars draw a connection between the surge in self-portrait poems during the late 1930s and early 1940s and the specific sociopolitical

¹⁸³ See Yi Kwang-su, "The Heartless," trans. Ann Sung-Hi Lee, in *Yi Kwang-su and Modern Korean Literature: Mujǒng* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 2005). Yuh interprets that the orphan characters in Yi Kwang-su's literature closely resemble Western prototypes of orphans. Leighanne Yuh, "Moral Education, Modernization Imperatives, and the People's Element Reader (1895): Accommodation in the Early History of Modern Education in Korea," *Acta Koreana* 18 (2015): 327–355.

climate of that era.¹⁸⁴ By then, the oppressive colonial occupation had persisted for approximately two decades, with the Japanese empire's influence growing increasingly pervasive and unassailable with each passing day. Eminent public figures and intellectuals were hastily adopting Japanese names, propagating the *Naisen Ittai* ideology in their public writings, and encouraging the youth to lay down their lives in the imminent conflict, all in the name of glorifying the Japanese emperor and the concept of "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity."¹⁸⁵ The nation's inevitable loss seemed all but certain; in fact, it felt as though it had already succumbed to this fate. The only apparent options were either to join in the triumph of the "greatest" empire or face certain death for resisting its dominance.

In the Western literary tradition, modern self-portrait poems commonly reflect the desire to break free from the constraints of pre-modern norms and traditions, aiming to enlighten the old self that these conventions had subdued.¹⁸⁶ These poems embody the spirit of autonomous modern social practice while striving to liberate both individual minds and society as a whole from the pre-modern era, relying on reason as their guiding light. From a sociological standpoint, modern Western self-portrait poems encapsulate the quintessential pursuit of transcending both tangible realities and one's sense of identity. However, in the Korean colonial context, self-portrait poetry took on a distinct

¹⁸⁴ Kwon, Sung-hun, "Psychoanalytic Analysis of Self-Portraits During the Japanese Colonial Era," *Journal of Korean Studies* 42, no. 9 (2012): 37–67; Lee, Jee-na, "An Aspect of Self-Recognition Appeared in the Self-Portraits," *Korean Poetics Studies* 8, no. 4 (2003): 189–211.

¹⁸⁵ See pervious chapter, III–1.

¹⁸⁶ Lee, "An Aspect of Self-Recognition," 190.

character. Given the systematic surveillance and punitive consequences for making public comments on political matters, it became a natural inclination for writers to turn inward, distancing themselves from the external world. The self-portrait emerged as a literary device through which writers sought to explore their reality by means of language and self-objectification.¹⁸⁷

The poem “Self-Portrait” by Midang Seo Jeong-ju, written in 1939, encapsulates the emotional and existential quandaries explored earlier in the context of orphans and self-portrait poems in Korean literature during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Pa was a serf. The night deepened, still he didn't come.
The only ones left standing were Grandmother, old as onion roots, and one
flowering date tree.
Though Ma, moon-bellied, said she craved for a green apricot . . .
Earthen walls withstanding the wind, beneath the oil lamp,
this Ma's son has blackened nails.
Grandfather who went out to sea in the year of *Gabo* and never returned.
They say I take after his thick hair and those big eyes.¹⁸⁸
[continues below, translated by the author]

The absence of father figures, particularly “Pa” and the “Grandfather,” reverberates as a haunting emptiness in the narrator's life and, by extension, in Korean society experiencing the oppression and colonial subjugation of the era. The derogatory term for Father, “Pa,” is deployed to signify a deliberate distancing from a heritage mired in servitude and poverty.¹⁸⁹ It also gestures towards the collapse of traditional family

¹⁸⁷ Lee, “An Aspect of Self-Recognition,” 190.

¹⁸⁸ As it is loved long and widely, this poem has millions of different formats. In this translation, I followed the format from the first edition of *Hwa-Sa Collection* (1941), the first published collection of Midang. On the debates around the format of this poem, see Park, Ho-Young, “Review on Suh, Jung-Ju's ‘A Self-Portrait,’” *Korean Literary Criticism and Analysis* 40, no. 3 (2013): 88–92.

¹⁸⁹ “Serf” is a translation from a Korean word, “*jong*.” *Jong* means a male “*nobi*,” which was the slave class during the medieval Korean dynasties. Like the slaves, serfs, and indentured servants of the West, *nobi*

structures, a theme consistent with the characterization of orphans in Korean literature. The theme of abandonment and emptiness is further emphasized by the mention of the Grandfather who vanished during the year of *Gabo*.¹⁹⁰ The fragile condition of the mother figures—whether it is “Ma” with her unfulfilled desire for a green apricot or the silent “Grandmother”—complements the idea of an abandoned generation that has lost its roots.¹⁹¹ This aligns closely with how orphans in Korean literature of the 1930s and 1940s are portrayed as subjects filled with confusion and shame.

The detailing of the young narrator’s upbringing, marked by blackened nails and isolation, extends the theme of impoverishment and destitution present in both self-portrait poems and the character of the orphan. The narrator represents a generation that had to fend for itself against a backdrop of sociopolitical turmoil, much like the orphans who were shaped by these external conditions.

[continued]

For twenty-three years, the eight-tenths of what has raised me was the wind.

consisted of the lowest rank of Joseon society and were considered as property that could be sold, bought, or bequeathed. Encyclopedia of Korean Culture, “Nobi,” accessed April 20, 2018, <http://encykorea.aks.ac.kr/Contents/SearchNavi?keyword=%EB%85%B8%EB%B9%84&ridx=0&tot=366>.

¹⁹⁰ The year of Gabo was a period marked by significant turmoil as the premodern Joseon Dynasty grappled with mounting pressures from various global powers to establish trade and diplomatic relations. In response to the *Donghak* Peasant Movement, Japan dispatched its troops to Joseon, ultimately leading to the country’s colonization. Social unrest escalated, and signs of uprisings against corruption and foreign interference emerged throughout the nation. As a result, the disappearance of adult males who were likely involved in the peasant revolution or conscripted into government forces became common during this era. Park, “Review on Suh Jung-Ju’s ‘A Self-portrait,’” 85–107.

¹⁹¹ “Moon-bellied” is a translation from a Korean term “달을 두고,” meaning “shortly before the month.” Yoon Jae-woong convincingly points out that this phrase should be understood according to the conventional use of “the month” as “the birthing month,” considering the appetite for sour taste of a green apricot. The word “달 (month)” also means the moon, which is also often related to women’s menstrual cycle in conventional knowledge. My translation intended to convey this dual meaning of the term. See Yoon, Jae-woong, “Reading ‘*Hwa-sa Collection*’ in Detail,” *Korean Literature Research* 22 (2000): 194–195.

The more I come to the world, the more ashamed I am.
Some read a sinner in my eyes,
others read a moron in my lips,
But I will repent nothing.
[omit]

The line “For twenty-three years, the eight-tenths of what has raised me was the wind” is particularly resonant. The wind, traditionally symbolic of change and impermanence, becomes the guardian of the narrator, reinforcing the idea of emotional and social void.

The sense of isolation and detachment is sharpened by societal judgment, as people “read a sinner in [his] eyes” or “a moron in [his] lips.” These lines evoke the stigmatization of the “other,” much like orphans in literature who often become unassimilable subjects challenging the rigid boundaries of society, law, and national identity. Such judgments may derive from the internalized shame and social alienation inherent to living in colonial Korea. This society compelled its individuals to choose between surrendering to foreign domination and a life of subversion and resistance.

The exploration of self and identity in a fractured, colonized world is a recurring theme in the self-portrait poems of this era, as in Lee Sang’s “Self-Portrait,” published in 1936.

Here, it is impossible to discern which country this is. There, only a pattern that has been inherited from antiquity exists. Here, it is ruin. There is a nose like a pyramid. Through its nostrils, something eternal passes. The air does not fade. That is also the air that my ancestors or my previous life breathed. The pupils contain the cosmos, the rough map of the image of antiquity. Here, no memory is bequeathed. Like a stone tablet from which letters have worn away, the idle talk of civilization simply passes through the ears. Someone said that this is a death mask. Another said that the death mask had been stolen. The corpse lies down like frost, and the beard does not grow but only roughens as if grass withers. The

mouth recites in a loud voice in accordance with the shape of the sky—like a torrent.¹⁹² [entire text, translated by the author]

The narrator closely examines his reflection and discerns only a vestige of antiquity in which both space and time are disentangled from their geographical and historical contexts. Similar to Midang's self-portrait, the narrator evinces a pronounced sense of displacement and neglect. This aligns with the experiences of colonial orphans, who find themselves detached from familial bonds and societal frameworks, residing in an environment that is increasingly apathetic toward their existence. Such sentiments reflect the broader erosion of national and cultural identities commonly endured by individuals under colonial subjugation.¹⁹³

The narrator appears to be divested of any ancestral legacy, such as when he says, “a stone tablet from which letters have worn away.” This metaphor underscores a lack of cultural memory and the erosion of any trace of past wisdom or identity. Historical traditions, cultural mores, and civilizational achievements are reduced to mere “idle talk,” which flits ineffectually past his consciousness without leaving any impression. This sense of erasure is mirrored in his perception of himself as a “death mask,” an object that captures the finality and inescapability of loss. Yet, the complexity deepens as someone remarks that even this remnant has been stolen, amplifying the layers of dispossession and erasure. The theft of the death mask, in essence, represents the colonial power's

¹⁹² Lee, Sang, “Self-Portrait,” in *The Complete Works of Lee Sang Volume 1: Poetry*, ed. Lee, Seung-hoon (Seoul: Literature and Thought, 1989), 94.

¹⁹³ Jeong, Hyo-gu, “Aspects and Significance of Self-Portrait Poems in Modern and Contemporary Korean Poetry: A Theoretical Approach to Overcoming Modern Self-Awareness,” in *Chungbuk National University Institute for Humanities Research* 43 (2011): 153~179.

usurpation of the very ability to represent oneself, even in death. Such a theft casts a long, disorienting shadow over the subject, plunging him into deeper layers of confusion, a disarray that mirrors the psychological dislocation often experienced under colonial regimes. This captures a tragic irony: the narrator is so stripped of identity that even the simulacrum of what he once was is considered pirated. It illuminates the profound destabilization and ontological crises often experienced by subjects of colonization, further exploring themes of erasure, loss, and existential despair. This absence, induced by colonial rule, disrupts the transgenerational transmission of cultural norms and practices, thus inhibiting the formation of an individual's social identity.

The depiction of the narrator's body as a "corpse [lying] down like frost" serves as an evocative illustration of the colonial desecration of both corporeal and psychosocial integrity.¹⁹⁴ This image extends the theme of erasure and dispossession into the realm of the biological and elemental. In the void, there is no growth, only a suspension of life's vital processes, signified by how the narrator's "beard does not grow but only roughens as if grass withers." In this bodily portrayal, the narrator becomes akin to a landscape despoiled by colonial activity. His "roughening beard" parallels the degradation of native lands and the depletion of their natural resources. The narrator's body encapsulates the enduring impacts of colonialism, which extend beyond mere territorial acquisition and exploitation to the systematic degradation of human dignity and agency.

¹⁹⁴ Kwon, Sung-hun, "Psychoanalytic Analysis of Poet Portraits During the Japanese Colonial Era" in *Journal of Korean Studies*, 42 (September 30, 2012): 37–67.

The Korean self-portrait poems, written during a time of colonial rule and national crisis, not only mirror the orphans' internal struggles but also serve as vehicles for veiled social critique, capturing the sentiment of an era marked by oppressive foreign rule and the collapse of traditional hierarchies. The emotional complexity and evolving characterizations of orphans in modern Korean literature started with the rise of self-portrait poems in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁹⁵ As expressions of self, isolated from the collective experience and yet intrinsically bound to it, these self-portraits serve as an affective repository of the same kinds of confusion, shame, and internal conflict that orphans in the literature of the same era exhibit. The landscape of emotions articulated through these colonial orphans and self-portrait poems paints a vivid tableau of the social and psychological pressures of living under such conditions. This depiction offers a unique perspective through which the broader cultural and historical experiences can be interpreted.

IV.2. The Orphans Disgusted (1950s~1960s)

It is crucial to underscore that in much of the Korean literature produced in the post-war era of the 1950s and 1960s, there exists a noticeable dearth of references to wartime experiences that the subsequent generation endured. A plethora of authors from this period appear to have willfully excluded or obscured their personal war memories,

¹⁹⁵ Lee, Ji-na, "Aspects of Self-Awareness in 'Self-Portrait'," *Korean Poetry Studies Association* 24 (2004): 45~72.

giving rise to a phenomenon that can be termed “suppressed or concealed memories.”¹⁹⁶

Such a pattern indicates an intentional distancing by these authors from the agonizing and traumatic elements of their wartime history, as if these experiences are too distressing or unsettling to confront directly within their oeuvre. Consequently, their literary output frequently diminishes or omits these crucial episodes, leaving these memories latent.¹⁹⁷

Moreover, stringent ideological censorship, known as the “1953 System,” prevailed during this period.¹⁹⁸ Authors who had lived through the war were compelled to demonstrate their ideological purity in light of Rhee Syng-man’s aggressive anti-communist stance. Descriptions of poverty, death, family separation, or anything related to the horrific aftermath of the war were closely scrutinized as the Southern regime aimed to surpass the North in every aspect.¹⁹⁹ This restrictive environment constrained writers from candidly addressing the brutalities of war. Consequently, 1950s war narratives, as exemplified by Jang Yong-hak and Oh Sang-won, often presented the conflict through an abstract, philosophical lens, pondering life’s meaning.²⁰⁰ In the 1960s, however, authors

¹⁹⁶ Leela Gandhi, “Postcolonial Amnesia,” in *Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 16.

¹⁹⁷ Kim, Eun-ah, “A Study into Korean Novels on National Division” (PhD diss., Hong Ik University, 2013).

¹⁹⁸ The year 1953 is when the armistice was made. “The 1953 System” is commonly used among Korean intellectual to characterize the strong anti-communist administration continued through Rhee, Park and Chun, which culminated by the June 1987 Revolution. Lee, Bong-beom, “Closed Openness, Permitted Deviation” in Kwon, Bo-drae et al. eds, *Reading the Intellectual Realm through ‘Apregirl’: Freedom and Control in 1950s Culture* (Seoul: Dongguk University Press, 2009): 13–57.

¹⁹⁹ Lee, “Closed Openness,” 25.

²⁰⁰ See Jang, Yong-hak, *The Poetry of John*, vol. 108, bilingual edition, trans. Kevin O’Rourke (Beijing: Asia Press, 2015); Oh, Sang-won, *Probation* (Seoul: Literature and Thought, 2008). Cha Won-hyun calls this tendency “Indulgent Humanism,” which refers to limiting critical engagement with the contradictions in societal reality that lead to intellectual confusion and unhappiness. It involves easily surrendering and

like Choi In-hun began to offer more profound insights into the war's tragic and ideological dimensions.²⁰¹

Distinctly set against this socio-literary backdrop of the 1950s is Son Chang-seop, whose oeuvre is characterized by acutely realistic scrutiny of the marginal spaces in post-war urban landscapes. Initiating his literary career in 1952 with the publication of a short story titled "Holiday," Son published twenty-eight short stories throughout the decade.²⁰² The protagonists of his short stories are uniformly beset the impoverishment and despair, setting the overarching tone of his oeuvre.

In one of his autobiographical essays, Son mentions:

The first time I discovered myself, the person miserably looking at me was a malnourished orphan of the body and mind who had no parents, no siblings, no hometown, no home, no country, no money, and no birthday.²⁰³

resigning oneself to personal misfortune, primarily manifesting as defeatism or self-pity. It has been criticized for weakening active critique of the contradictions in society and for failing to provide concrete prospects for overcoming the challenges of reality. Cha, Won-hyun, "5.18 and Korean Novels," *Journal of Modern Korean Literature Studies* 31 (2010): 439-467.

²⁰¹ Seo, Eun-ju, "Summoned History and Memory of Revolution: Focusing on the Novels of Choi In-hoon and Lee Byung-joo," *Sangheo Academic Journal* 30 (2010): 35-72.

²⁰² His style and themes are significantly changed during the 1960s when he started to write full-length novels serially in newspapers. Among many collections of Son Chang-seop's 1950s short stories that have ever been published, I am using Son Chang-seop, *Superfluous Men and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (Seoul: Minumsa, 2005).

²⁰³ Son Chang-seop was born in Pyongyang in 1922. As he confesses in "My Autobiographical Theory of Novel," after losing his father at an early age, he was raised by his mother who worked in "a red-light district." His traumatic experiences of this time provided the background for understanding his early short stories. In 1936, he flew to Manchuria by himself and, from there, moved to Japan to study. It is not known how he afforded his study in Japan as an orphaned boy at the age of fourteen, but he lived in penury. He managed to study at Nihon University and there he was heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Rousseau. After the Liberation (1945), he went back to Pyongyang, but during wartime, he came to the South and started his career as a writer. Son, Chang-seop, "My Autobiographical Theory of Novel: Self-Advocacy of an Amateur Writer," *Intellectual Circle* 7 (1965): 45-127.

Son often ascribes this autobiographical sense of alienation to his protagonists.²⁰⁴ For instance, Dong-sik, the main character of “Record of a Deadly Relationship” (1953), belongs to the landlord class in Pyongyang but is forced to flee southward following the confiscation of his family’s estate and the lynching of his father under communist rule. Although he resettles in Seoul and takes up a teaching position, he is haunted by “constant restlessness, anxiety, resentment, fear, and ennui.”²⁰⁵ In “The Living-Like” (1954), the protagonist Dong-joo, who had just been released from a prisoner of war (POW) camp,²⁰⁶ spent most of his days lying down like a “piece of rag” in his *hakkobang* located on a hill in Busan.²⁰⁷ Due to the physical and mental wounds he sustained in the POW camp, Dong-joo lost all of his vitality. Struggling with the “meaninglessness and melancholy that weighed down on his body,”²⁰⁸ he remained in his room all day like “a forgotten object,” only occasionally thinking about the parents and wife he had abandoned in Pyongyang when he chose to stay in the South after his release.²⁰⁹ Jong-bae

²⁰⁴ Hong, Ju-young, “Son Chang-seop, A Study on Perverted Writing,” *The Learned Society of Korean Modern Literature* (June 2007): 75–88.

²⁰⁵ Son, “Record of a Deadly Relationship,” in *Superfluous Men*, 181.

²⁰⁶ Most likely, the POW camp mentioned in this story is “Geoje Prison Camp,” where the notorious uprising and murder among two divided prisoner groups—the communists and the anti-communists—had occurred. Kang, Yoo-jin, “[Author Theory] Son Chang-seop, Life on the Edge and His Novels,” *Writer’s World* 27 (2015): 18–29; 20.

²⁰⁷ Busan, the second largest city of Korea, located in the southernmost part of the peninsula, became one of the most popular sites where refugees from the South were settled during the war. *Hakkobang* is a term made of the Japanese word “Hakko” which means “the box” and the Korean word “bang” which means a room to refer to the poor housing of the refugee towns. These rooms were cheap, but not free. The refugees made their rent and living usually with menial labor, prostitution, army-related work, or begging. Kang, “[Author Theory]” 21.

²⁰⁸ Son, “The Living-Like,” in *Superfluous Men*, 56.

²⁰⁹ Son, “The Living-Like,” in *Superfluous Men*, 59.

from “The Will of Spume” (1959) was born as the illegitimate child of a “whore.” When he was still a child, his mother took her own life due to discord with her sister, who disapproved of her occupation, leaving Jong-bae to be raised by his aunt. His aunt and uncle were fervent Christians who viewed Jong-bae as “a seed of vice” or “an odious Satan locked up in a cage.”²¹⁰ Jong-bae grew into an adult who “had no place to settle,” resembling a “running spume swept away by a turbid stream.”²¹¹ However, Jong-bae did not have the will to change his condition. Even at the age of thirty, still living with his abusive aunt, he adapted himself to the world’s hostility and “did not bother to escape the cage.”²¹²

These weak-willed, passive, lifeless protagonists adopt a cynical and hostile stance toward the world. Their surroundings easily repulse these characters so that they maintain emotional distance from the world. Dong-sik from “Record of a Deadly Relationship” is repulsed by Sung-gyu, his childhood friend from Pyongyang, who has become parasitically dependent on him. After a painful escape from the North, Dong-sik becomes a high school teacher in Seoul and provides for Sung-gyu, his wife Jung-sook, and their two sons in his house. Although Dong-sik feels a sense of responsibility for Sung-gyu’s family, he cannot help but be disgusted by Sung-gyu’s deteriorating health and insatiable desire for life.

Whenever Dong-sik entered Sung-gyu’s room, he was reminded of a dismal cave. Sung-gyu leaned against the wall, as always, and glared fiercely at Dong-sik as if

²¹⁰ Son, “The Will of Spume,” in *Superfluous Men*, 61.

²¹¹ Son, “The Will of Spume,” in *Superfluous Men*, 254.

²¹² Son, “The Will of Spume,” in *Superfluous Men*, 255.

he were studying him. Despite his thin chest, resembling a dried slice of meat, his long, thin limbs reminiscent of a spider, and his lifeless body, Sung-gyu's eyes always sparkled, though they lacked vitality. It seemed as though they were burning the last remnants of his spirit. Dong-sik despised those eyes. They were ghastly, unlike those of a healthy person. Dong-sik believed that if there were a ghost, it must have eyes like Sung-gyu's.²¹³

In "The Living-Like," Dong-joo describes his town as "full of feces and urine. Even the air is saturated with odors."²¹⁴ The people living there resemble "maggots," "wriggling in such a massive heap of manure."²¹⁵ Dong-joo also finds his neighbor Bong-soo unbearable due to his "oinking laughter," shameless boasting about his past "relationships," and generally crude demeanor. He is even repulsed by his de facto wife Chun-ja's "energetic body" and ceaseless sexual appetite, which drain his already depleted vitality.²¹⁶

Even when dealing with certain characters for whom the protagonists had developed a sense of compassion, the prevailing feeling of disgust does not easily dissipate from their interactions. This sense of repulsion hinders the protagonist from actively engaging with them or altering their dire circumstances. For instance, in "Record of a Deadly Relationship," Dong-sik feels great compassion and a sense of responsibility for Jung-sook, Sung-gyu's wife. In fact, they were in love back in Pyongyang when they were still teenagers. However, when the communists came to power in the North, Sung-gyu, as a member of the communist party, used his authority to take Jung-sook away

²¹³ Son, "Record of a Deadly Relationship," in *Superfluous Men*, 260.

²¹⁴ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 40.

²¹⁵ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 47.

²¹⁶ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 56.

from Dong-sik, who was the son of a prominent landlord. Now, Sung-gyu, who has become like a lifeless body, emitting the stench of death, freeloads at Dong-sik's house and viciously torments both Dong-sik and Jung-sook out of jealousy and resentment toward the living. Jung-sook's once perceptive and bright eyes, which are fading with each passing day, sadden Dong-sik. One night, Sung-gyu summoned Dong-sik to his room, seated him in front of Jung-sook, and subjected him to various forms of torment—such as defecating in a chamber pot while maintaining eye contact with Dong-sik—finally insisting that Dong-sik should marry Jung-sook after his own death. Sung-gyu even urged Dong-sik to take Jung-sook to his room immediately. Upon returning to his own room, Dong-sik pondered that he “won't have the strength to resist this new twist of fate to the end.”²¹⁷ Not long after, however, Dong-sik overheard a quarrel between the couple:

Sung-gyu was picking up the blackish blood clot he spat on the floor with his shaking hands and rubbing it to Jung-sook's mouth who was just sitting like a stone Buddha.

“This bitch! Die. Die with me! We must die together. I am not afraid of my own death. But I cannot die all by myself! Do you wanna live? No, you can't! You wanna roll with Dong-sik after I die? Right? I knew it. I knew it all. Where is Dong-sik? He's not home yet? Dong-sik! Dong-sik! You swine, you are waiting for me to die, right? I won't die! I won't die! I cannot let you two hustle! I won't die! This bitch! Eat my blood! Eat!”²¹⁸

That night, appalled by Sung-gyu's malice and hatred, Dong-sik dreamt of killing him.

However, Dong-sik could not overcome Sung-gyu's zombie-like strength and ended up

²¹⁷ Son, “Record of a Deadly Relationship,” in *Superfluous Men*, 180.

²¹⁸ Son, “Record of a Deadly Relationship,” in *Superfluous Men*, 184.

consuming his coagulated, steaming blood clot. Overwhelmed by despair and thinking that he would soon meet his demise, Dong-sik looked up at Sung-gyu, but Jung-sook offered him the blood clot. The following day, Sung-gyu passed away. Upon returning home from the crematory with Jung-sook, Dong-sik felt as though she were his own shadow, or rather, the shadow of Sung-gyu. It was indeed “a deadly relationship” that the three of them had. While Dong-sik was contemplating Jung-sook and her children’s future, Jung-sook took her own life, leaving behind a note that her eldest son had ears that resembled those of Dong-sik.

The omnipresent, all-powerful specter of death is what compels the protagonists to adapt to their predicaments without resistance. In “The Living-Like,” the sole activity Dong-joo engages in all day within his coffin-like *hakkobang* is listening to the agonizing groans of the girl next door, Soon-yi. Soon-yi happens to be the stepdaughter of his neighbor, Bong-soo. Bong-soo had married a wealthy widow, who was Soon-yi’s mother in Pyongyang. However, when the communist revolution swept through the North, he fled to the South with Soon-yi, intending to reunite with her mother in Seoul after selling off their assets. Unfortunately, the outbreak of war disrupted their plans, and they found themselves in a refugee town adjacent to Dong-joo’s room. Soon-yi was slowly wasting away for reasons unknown, and Bong-soo merely awaited her demise to free himself from the burden of her care. As Dong-joo listened to the pitiful groans of this young girl through the paper-thin walls, he contemplated:

It is a gloomy sound, like a corpse crying in the casket, that compels the listener to think about death. Anybody who listens to her mourning for the first time

would surely shiver . . . Soon-yi doesn't seem to sleep even during the night. She groans days and nights. She is like a machine to make groaning sounds.²¹⁹

Recognizing that Soon-yi's intense and seemingly hopeless groaning is her way of trying her best to endure her deteriorating life, Dong-joo developed a sense of camaraderie with her and "chose to cherish" her despite the annoying sound she produced.²²⁰ One day, when Soon-yi's groaning ceased after more than a hundred counts that he counted, Dong-joo became frightened, thinking that she might have already passed away. Consequently, he went to the next-door to check on her.

It was the hottest day of this year, but the door was closed. When Dong-joo opened the door halfway and peeped inside, a bizarre scene flashed in his eyes. Without a stitch of clothing on, Soon-yi was bending her back while lying down, diligently looking into her crotch. Naturally, Dong-joo followed her gaze and found a bunch of little things smaller than a grain of rice wriggling down there. Dong-joo first thought that they might be lice. Soon-yi soon found out Dong-joo was watching her, covered her body with a blanket, and gave him a side-eye. Dong-joo came back to his room and realized that those little things were maggots. Dong-joo thought that Soon-yi would die soon. Or, he thought that it could be him who would die first.²²¹

From Soon-yi's dying body covered with maggots, Dong-joo reads the death sentence given to him. Submitting himself to his fate, Dong-joo "endures" the rest of his days with indifference and weariness. "As if defying the fact that he is still living, he is tossing and turning his heavy body."²²² Nothing in real life bothers Dong-joo anymore. The story

²¹⁹ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 41.

²²⁰ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 42.

²²¹ Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 52.

²²² Son, "The Living-Like," in *Superfluous Men*, 59.

with an ironic title, “The Living-Like,” ends with Soon-yi’s expected death and Dong-joo’s necrophiliac moment of mourning, kissing her dead face.

From Son Chang-seop’s perspective, post-war Korea represents a world of despair where familiar faces take on the role of angels of death, maliciously dragging the living into a quagmire of hopelessness. Even for those who are alive, as Dong-joo in “The Living-Like” illustrates, death appears to be the only conceivable future. Their desperate attempts to forge meaningful and nurturing relationships are consistently thwarted. Son Chang-seop deliberately avoids providing resolutions or exits for his characters’ predicaments. This omission serves as a deliberate departure from the naive humanism and superficial practices that many of his contemporaries were desperately clinging to. For Son Chang-seop, the more urgent task for writers is to depict the weighty and boundless despair that enveloped the 1950s. Through this approach, he manages to convey a certain authenticity that effectively portrays the damaged individuals and their weakened ways of engaging with others and the world. These characters are unable to view others as objects they can relate to or depend on.²²³ This bleak portrayal serves as a reflection of the harsh realities of the time, emphasizing the depth of their struggles and the lack of easy solutions.

²²³ Kang Jin-ho suggests that the principal subjects in Son’s early works exhibit a rudimentary and infantile state, corresponding to what psychoanalytic theory might term the “imaginary identification” phase before the evolution into a social subject. Furthermore, Kang posits that this particular character trait is not merely confined to the fictional persona but could also be interpreted as a reflection of the author’s state of being. The statement suggests a convergence between the character and the author, wherein the former serves as both a representative and an extension of the latter. Kang, Jin-ho, “A Study on Son Chang-seop’s Novels: Focusing on the Issues of Subject and Speaker,” *Korean Language and Literature* 129 (2001), 397–398.

Son Chang-seop's obsessively detailed portrayals of grotesque and repulsive figures, plagued by destitution and afflictions, stirred considerable controversy. Rather than explicitly attributing these hardships to the war, Son Chang-seop employed microscopic observations of the war's aftermath, using them as a lens to reveal the profound impact it had on the people. Son Chang-seop's hyper-realistic approach, replete with grotesque descriptions, is a form of social commentary. By depicting the marginalized and suffering individuals in post-war urban spaces, he aimed to shed light on the harsh living conditions and social injustices that persisted after the war. The grotesque imagery starkly contrasts the sanitized narratives of the time, making his stories a powerful vehicle for social critique.

IV.3. The Orphans Antagonizing (1970s~1980s)

The decade of the 1950s, marred by the harrowing experiences of the Korean War, etched ineradicable scars on the collective consciousness of the Korean people. The intergenerational trauma born with the colonial occupation and amplified by the bifurcation of the Korean Peninsula extended into the 1970s and 1980s. Memories of conflict, familial dislocation, and political instability prompted a political and social conservatism that was both a reaction to and a strategy for navigating the turbulences of their time.

The conservative turn of the 1970s and 1980s manifested in the prioritization of national security. This turn can be interpreted as a form of collective psychological

defense against further destabilization.²²⁴ The ideological divide between North and South Korea remained a source of ongoing tension, exacerbated by the global geopolitics of the Cold War era. The growing role of the United States on the Korean Peninsula, fortified by military alliances and economic partnerships, was another facet of this ideological orientation.²²⁵ The looming specter of communist encroachment perpetuated existential anxiety, thus fortifying the conservative disposition among the 1970s and 1980s generation. Consequently, the Western form of democracy and freedom were not merely political ideals but perceived geopolitical appropriateness in countering the ideological “other”: communism.²²⁶

The orphan characters in 1970s~1980s novels bear the emotional burden of these societal shifts and serve as an allegory to explore the collective psychic wounds and coping mechanisms of the generation of this time. Their often-complicated relationship with authority figures, a sense of abandonment, and their quest for stability echo the broader social concerns and defensive postures of a society that had lived through decades of upheaval. Therefore, the conservative leanings of the 1970s and 1980s generation and their heightened focus on national security find a literary parallel in the evolving depiction of orphans, revealing the inextricable links between sociopolitical realities and their literary representations.

²²⁴ Heo, Min, “A Study on the Aspects of How Korean Novels’ Narrative Structures Were Reorganized During the Democratic Transition Period” (PhD diss., Sungkyunkwan University, 2022), 54–58.

²²⁵ Kim, Gyo-on, “U.S. Cultural Policy and Occupied Korea,” *Journal of Korean Society for Journalism and Communication Studies* 44, no. 3 (July 2000): 40–75.

²²⁶ Lee, Hye-ryeong, “A Portrait of the Bodiless Worker: A Study of the Discourses of the 1980s South Korean Labor Literature,” *Dongbang Hakji Journal* 175 (2016): 295–320.

Lee Chang-dong's short story "Burning Paper" (1987) explores the intricate familial dynamics profoundly shaped by the historical and sociopolitical milieu of 1980s South Korea.²²⁷ The main character is an unnamed woman who takes on the caregiver role for her grandson. In the absence of her daughter-in-law, she sustains the household through her sewing work. Her husband, who had been active in a leftist movement, has been absent for three decades, rendering him with no direct influence on the family's present circumstances. She has two sons: the older Kim Sung-guk, employed as a low-ranking civil servant, and the younger Sung-ho, engaged in student activism.

Sung-guk had the ambition to be a politician but experienced obstacles in both academic and professional career due to his father's leftist background. He failed a military academy entrance exam and had to give up on advanced education. He settles into a mundane occupation with continuous setbacks and limited career mobility. Sung-guk copes with this adverse situation with remarkable emotional restraint. Therefore, Sung-guk's anger at and disapproval of his younger brother Sung-ho's involvement in student activism is understandable given his own struggles and the sacrifices he had to make for the sake of stability and survival.

At a deeper level, the conflict between the two siblings emerges from their divergent understandings of their father's legacy. Sung-ho engages in student movements because he perceived their father as a casualty of the national divisions and geopolitical ideologies. He himself becomes an advocate for democratic reforms and a critic of

²²⁷ Lee, Chang-dong, "Burning Paper (1987)," in *Burning Paper* (Seoul: Moonji Publishing, 2003): 100–128.

communism. Conversely, Sung-guk, whose life has been a continuous struggle due to his father's political background, repudiates his father's life, attributing his sufferings to the latter's political choices:

To me, there is no father. Even if a father were to walk through that door right now, it wouldn't matter to me. Since the time I failed the military academy exam and gave up on university, even before that, I buried my father with my own hands.²²⁸

This intense familial discord is rooted in and reflects the historical context of a divided nation, whereby the ideological and emotional wounds of their father's generation have been transmitted to the sons. The absence of the father serves as both a catalyst and a symbol for this unending strife, leaving their mother to act as a mediator. By burning a paper effigy created by Sung-ho, the mother invokes a spiritual reconciliation between her conflicting sons, attempting to mend the ruptured fabric of their familial relations. This ritualistic burning of the paper signifies the attempt to bridge the ideological chasm separating the generations while also addressing the broader sociopolitical divisions that continue to influence their lives.²²⁹ Thus, "Burning Paper" offers a nuanced examination of the enduring influence of the absent father's political legacy on his descendants' psychological and ideological landscape, contributing significantly to the discourse on the long-term effects of political and social division.

The pervasive specter of communism that has loomed over South Korea since the Korean War finds its most compelling literary representation in the works of author Yi

²²⁸ Lee, "Burning Paper," 129.

²²⁹ Lee, Nae-kwan, "Family Narrative and Logic of Reconciliation in Division Novels: Focusing on Lee Chang-dong's Novel," *Korean Journal of Modern Literary Criticism* 48 (December 2015): 117–144.

Mun-yol. His history is deeply entwined with the nation's ideological conflicts. His father, Yi Won-chul, was a left-wing intellectual steeped in communist ideology during his academic sojourn in Japan.²³⁰ Following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, Yi Won-chul was actively involved in left-wing political movements and eventually defected to North Korea, abandoning his family in the South. This complex family history informs much of Yi Mun-yol's oeuvre, most notably his epic novel, *The Margins* (1986~1989).²³¹ The narrative of *The Margins* functions as a sequel to Yi Mun-yol's earlier work, *The Age of Heroes* (1982~1984), in which he explores the transformation of a man from the traditional Korean aristocracy into a communist revolutionary.²³² This man, Yi Dong-young, is a substitute for the author's own father.²³³ *The Margins* expands upon this narrative to focus on the family that Yi Dong-young leaves behind, portraying their struggle for survival against the backdrop of crucial historical moments in Korea.

The Yi family's—the mother and four children, Myung-hoon, Young-hee, In-chul, and Ok-kyung—ongoing quest for stability is presented through their repeated relocations and the myriad of challenges they face due to being branded as the family of a communist defector. They are subject to state surveillance, enduring episodes of harassment and interrogation. The societal implications extend beyond legal sanctions;

²³⁰ Kwon, Juria, "The Discovery of Literature, the Border, the Epic of Transcendence: A Study of Moon Yeul Lee's Work of The Border," *The Association of North-East Asian Cultures* (2005): 79–92.

²³¹ Yi, Mun-yol, *The Margins*, vols. 1–12 (Seoul: Moonji Publishing, 1998). Subsequent citations will indicate only volume and page numbers.

²³² Yi, Mun-yol, *The Age of Heroes*, vols. 1–2 (Seoul: Minumsa, 2000).

²³³ Kwon, "Discovery of Literature," 84.

the family is also excluded from various opportunities, which has cascading consequences for their social and economic status. In this context, the system, imbued with anti-communist sentiment, essentially molds these “sons of communists” into compliant citizens who are cynical about their entitlements within the system. A complex web of sentiments emanates from the children toward their absent father:

Ah, Father, Father. That vague abstraction whose face I had never seen even in the photo. Yet he is the scary and dreary specter who haunts every corner of the house, ceaselessly bringing forth the dark cloud of misfortune and calamity. The burden of my life is way too heavy for just a few drops of semen; the nightmare that overlaid the unfathomable original sin to my pallid spirit . . .²³⁴

These range from resentment, owing to the burdens imposed by his defection, to a strange inheritance of pride stemming from their aristocratic lineage. This duality of consciousness—comprising both “original sin” and a “sense of downfall”—serves as a psychological undertow that shapes their life choices and underpins their relationship with broader societal structures.

Indeed, my mind has formed a unique consciousness that can be called a sense of downfall. It is, namely, a consciousness that I am not where I belong, that I am unfairly abused and suffering by unjust power. It might be a superstition to comfort the deprivation and anxiety in reality because we were once rich, our father studied in Tokyo, or our mother went to college. But when the time-honored old houses once belonged to our family, I saw during our refugee years in my hometown became a robust foundation of my sense of downfall. . . . For a long time, that tragic sensitivity and pride have controlled many of my choices and decisions.²³⁵

In examining the Yi family’s life choices within the confines of a rigid system, it is evident that they are trying to adapt and capitalize on opportunities within that

²³⁴ Yi, *The Margins*, Vol. 1, 26.

²³⁵ Yi, *The Margins*, Vol. 4, 76.

framework. For instance, In-chul's (whose character is a persona of the author himself) choice to pursue law instead of a literary career,²³⁶ Myung-hoon's attempt to become a farmer, and Young-hee's speculative real estate investments all signify a longing to be integrated as model citizens, as opposed to resisting a system that has ostracized them.

The Margins also serves as an allegorical representation of Korea's peripheral status on the world stage, particularly concerning global superpowers like the United States and the Soviet Union. The era encapsulated in the novel sees South Korea under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung-hee, whose regime is heavily dependent on American economic and military aid. Concurrently, North Korea relies on the Soviet Union for its development.²³⁷ Thus, the novel illuminates the comprehensive implications of political and economic subservience, reflected through a single family's challenges.

In summary, the enduring scars of familial separation, ideological divergence, and political instability loom large in the literary representation of the 1970s and 1980s. These works' orphaned characters serve as witnesses and participants in a collective history marked by a fractured national identity and ideological polarization. They encapsulate the struggles, anxieties, and ambitions of generations navigating a landscape fraught with social and political upheaval. These narratives contribute significantly to understanding how national history can infiltrate the domestic sphere, disrupting individual life trajectories and shaping communal ideologies.

²³⁶ Kwon, Juria, "Colonial Consciousness Revealed in the Process of Searching for 'Real Father,'" *Collection of Korean Literature Essays* 44 (2006): 389-423; 390.

²³⁷ Kwon, "Colonial Consciousness," 410.

IV.4. The Orphans Despaired (1990s~2000s)

In the contemporary landscape of Korean literature, spanning the late 1990s to the early 2000s, the recurrent archetype of orphan characters undergoes another marked transformation. This transformation is situated within the sociopolitical and economic crisis engendered by the financial turmoil of Korea in 1997. Once portrayed as resilient survivors navigating the complex tapestry of sociopolitical realities, the orphan figures of this era represent a generation disenchanting and disillusioned by the unyielding harshness of their material conditions. Rather than actively engaging with their external environment, they increasingly exhibit traits of resignation and withdrawal. Confronted with the brutal realities of a failing economy and diminishing social safety nets, these characters retreat into fantastical realms of imagination as a sanctuary from the hostile world.²³⁸ This shift in the characterization of orphan figures not only reflects changing social attitudes but also raises critical questions about the role of literature in capturing and critiquing the collective psyche of a nation under pressure.

Situated within the highly competitive context of late-capitalist South Korean society, Park Min-gyu's 2005 short story collection, *Castella*, comprises ten narratives that spotlight a new demographic of marginalized, young, working-class individuals.²³⁹ Park Min-gyu features exclusively male protagonists who narrativize their experiences through first-person accounts. This narrative consistency establishes a thematic cohesion

²³⁸ An, Nam-yeon, "Realistic Context and New Imagination in Modern Fiction," *Korean Journal of Modern Literary Criticism* 21 (2006): 163–177.

²³⁹ Park, Min-gyu, *Castella* (Gyeonggi-do, Korea: Munhakdongne Publishing Corp, 2005). Subsequent citations will indicate only page numbers.

across the collection, enhancing the reader's empathic engagement with the characters. These characters epitomize individuals relegated to societal peripheries, disenchanting by the unforgiving competition inherent in late capitalism. The collection has been met with considerable critical and public acclaim, particularly resonating with the "IMF generation," who find authentic representation in Park's unique characterizations of these societal underdogs.²⁴⁰

In this collection, Park's characters—often termed "losers" in the framework of post-industrial society—are beset by economic volatility and suboptimal working conditions. The protagonists are rendered in various states of economic precarity, whether it be the intern who is only paid transportation fees for overnight work or the employee of a failing amusement park who has unsuccessfully applied for seventy-three jobs. Each character is depicted in a state of resignation rather than rebellion. What differentiates these "losers" from the orphan characters examined in earlier sections is an air of fatalism and an uncanny emotional equilibrium they strive to maintain. For example, the protagonist of "Is That So? I'm a Giraffe" gains a premature understanding of life's limited possibilities after visiting his father's dismal workspace (he makes three dollars an hour at the age of forty-five), which prompts a shift from youthful exuberance to subdued acceptance.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ See Kwon, Juria, "Homo Ludens, The Playing Man: Park Min-gyu's *Castella*," *Today's Literary Review* (2005): 258–264; Kwon, Juria, "Global Exiles: On Park Min-gyu," *Today's Literary Review* (2007): 28–45; Kim, Hyung-jung, "Democratic Fighter Park Min-gyu: On Park Min-gyu," *Writer's World* 22 (December 2010): 64–81.

²⁴¹ The protagonist of "Is That So? I'm a Giraffe" goes to a vocational high school and works multiple temp jobs. He is paid about a dollar per hour in a convenience store and gas station and about three dollars as a "pushman" in the Seoul Metro. This surreal job actually existed. Starting from February 1st, 1990, the

That was my arithmetic. Laugh if you want, but some people in this world have to do that kind of arithmetic to get by. There just are.

“I’m sorry.”

That’s what Father always said. There he goes again. It was the same every time I said I’d started working. I liked hearing it the first time, but now it had lost all meaning.²⁴²

He comes to understand his economic constraints as a probable inheritance from his father’s limited earning potential.

Such acceptance illustrates a fatalistic perspective that permeates Park Min-gyu’s characters, which starkly contrasts previous generations of orphaned figures in Korean literature. Unlike the active, resilient orphans of the precedent literary creation, who often embark on quests for identity or challenge social norms, Park’s characters embody a generation marked by resignation and ennui. This shift toward a fatalistic acceptance of their socioeconomic circumstances underlines a disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of modernity and economic advancement. The backdrop of these stories is the increasing economic precarity and intense competitive characteristic of late-capitalist South Korean society, highlighting the existential and material struggles of individuals navigating a world of limited social mobility and fragmented support systems. Despite facing significant adversities, these characters maintain an emotional equilibrium characterized by passivity rather than the defiance or resilience seen in the orphans of

Seoul Metro hired 132 college-aged workers to help passengers boarding the subway cars with the most traffic during rush hours from 7 to 10 am. Hankook Ilbo, “Push-man,” June 26, 2008, <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/200806260075433800>.

²⁴² Park, *Castella*, 16–17.

previous narratives. This equilibrium is not indicative of contentment but rather a coping mechanism in a world perceived as indifferent to individual suffering.

This recurring emotional equipoise is consistently present across various works in the 1990s and 2000s. For example, in “Record on Days in *Gab-ul Goshiwon*,” the main character recounts his experiences in a *goshiwon* a decade prior when his family was financially ruined in 1991.²⁴³ Facing the dissolution of his home and the scattering of his family, he seeks temporary residence at friends’ homes before finally settling into a minimalist *goshiwon*. Though initially perturbed by its dismal conditions, he soon comes to terms with his reality. He decides to “accept this particular situation as a reality. I could do nothing otherwise, and I was kind of made that way. You are like your father. Mother always told me.”²⁴⁴ After all, “it was nobody’s to blame.”²⁴⁵ The decision to accept these dire circumstances culminates in his acknowledgment that he has no alternative, an admission influenced by the sense of fatalism instilled in him by his mother and the life lessons learned from observing his father.

Similarly, in “Thank You, You’re a Raccoon, Indeed,” the protagonist complacently engages in relentless competition for job security. Although overqualified, he performs menial tasks without complaint and tolerates sexual harassment from superiors as a survival strategy. “Letting him rub [his] thighs,” he thinks that there are

²⁴³ Originally intended as diminutive spaces to facilitate the concentrated study of students preparing for crucial examinations, *goshiwons* typically feature short-term leasing options and commonly lack private restroom facilities. However, with the acceleration of urbanization, these accommodations have evolved to serve as economical housing options for the financially disadvantaged urban populace.

²⁴⁴ Park, *Castella*, 284.

²⁴⁵ Park, *Castella*, 274.

things that can be worse. He, too, constantly reminds himself that “it is not something I can blame anyone for. The world is already in this shape.”²⁴⁶

These figures, deeply embedded in the complex interplay of global capitalism, do not possess a discernible antagonist. Unlike their predecessors, who could attribute their struggles to tangible entities like colonial rule or familial failure, these “losers of late capitalism” find their plight inexplicable. For them, societal misfortunes are indiscriminate attacks, almost as if emerging from nowhere, for which no specific blame can be assigned. Literary critic Sim Jin-kyung identifies this archetype as the “miserable individualist,” contrasting them with the anti-heroic figures of the 1970s and 1980s.²⁴⁷ While the latter rejected capitalist values in pursuit of a unique identity, these new figures lack such defiant individualism. They neither perceive themselves as rebels nor manifest optimism for alternative futures. Instead, they are characterized by a deeply ingrained fatalism and a reluctance to challenge their circumstances. These individuals embody a learned hopelessness and an internalized acceptance of social inequality, quietly succumbing to their circumstances without aspiration for change.

Therefore, for the characters crafted by Park Min-gyu, their dissatisfaction with the world fails to manifest in any explicit form of critique or resistance. Instead, it sporadically surfaces as vague utterances in the narratives, such as “How corrupt the

²⁴⁶ Park, *Castella*, 40.

²⁴⁷ Sim, Jin-kyung, “Miserable Individualism, The Ecology of Monadic Ethics,” in *Wandering Voices* (Seoul: Jaecum & Moeum Publishing Company, 2009), 17–42.

world is?” or “Life, the world, is always shaking.”²⁴⁸ These nebulous grievances about the state of the world and the human condition do not coalesce into a substantive examination or rebellion against societal inequities. In a world characterized by instability, chaos, and isolation, these losers “float aimlessly through life, carrying around with them the pain of being on the periphery of society.”²⁴⁹

In the absence of tangible avenues for altering reality, they resort to imaginative escapism. Utilizing their fanciful imaginations, Park Min-gyu’s protagonists transmute an otherwise unyielding reality into a realm so absurd or outlandish that it becomes unworthy of earnest engagement. For example, in “Castella,” the collection’s title story, the main character forms an unconventional companionship with his refrigerator. With its incessant noise, this appliance serves as a diversion from his solitude. Upon realizing that refrigeration technology itself symbolizes a battle against decay, he concludes that “from the refrigerator’s world, the world is too corrupt.”²⁵⁰ This epiphany leads him to a peculiar course of action: disposing of anything that he perceives as either invaluable or detrimental into the refrigerator. His selections range from literary classics like Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* to broader societal constructs such as unemployment rates and political figures. One day, when his father visits and asks him to help with family debts, the protagonist also decides to put him in the refrigerator.

²⁴⁸ Park, *Castella*, 22, 89.

²⁴⁹ Kim, Young-chan, “A Theory on the Blowfish Universe and the Manual for Single-User Raccoon Novels: On Park Min-gyu,” *Quarterly Munhakdongne* 42 (2005): 1–18.

²⁵⁰ Park, *Castella*, 22.

I needed some time. This “Father” thing is a very complicated being. Some might say it is precious, but it is definitely a malaise to the world. What on earth is this thing?

Anyhow, I thought, I followed the procedure as it was. The procedure literally means 1) open the door, 2) put the father in, and 3) close the door. In so doing, I succeeded in putting my father in the refrigerator.²⁵¹

There is no need to be serious about the father’s request for help. After all, the world does not make sense, so no one needs to take it seriously. After putting even his mother in the refrigerator, he drank beer with a bar master, thinking, “Refrigeration is the greatest blessing humanity ever received.”²⁵² The more things he put in the refrigerator, the more noise it made. Then, one morning, it stopped making noise. When the protagonist opened the door, there was just one piece of castella cake, which tasted like one can forgive everything. Eating that warm, soft piece of castella, he cries, and the story ends.²⁵³

²⁵¹ Park, *Castella*, 26–27.

²⁵² Park, *Castella*, 28.

²⁵³ Such unexpected and incongruous developments in the narrative are recurrent in other stories as well. In “Thank You, You’re a Raccoon, Indeed,” firms exploiting labor—like the telecommunications company where the protagonist is an intern—are afflicted by a mutated strain of raccoon rabies transmitted through an archaic video game named “Raccoon.” Upon infection, erstwhile productive employees metamorphose into raccoon-like entities—obese, lethargic, and with pronounced dark eye circles—who engage in video gaming incessantly and eventually vanish into subterranean realms. Despite expenditures ranging from two to ten billion dollars annually by the United States to combat this malady (43), an increasing number of workers worldwide continue to undergo this transformation, thereby posing a considerable threat to corporate structures and humanity at large. Park Min-gyu’s imaginative prowess is boundless, subverting demarcations between human and animal, nation-states, terrestrial and extraterrestrial settings, as well as reality and fantasy. In “Open Your Mouth, Mr. Pelican,” a reservoir in an amusement park where the protagonist is employed becomes inundated with duck-shaped paddle boats. An affable Argentine traveler in one such boat identifies as part of the “International Coalition of Citizens of the Duck Pedalo (76),” a collective that migrates from one country to another seeking employment opportunities. They accidentally reach the reservoir due to inclement weather. The beleaguered business owner, inspired by this, opts to migrate to Los Angeles with his family. In “It Doesn’t Make Sense, a Sunfish?” a twenty-year-old creationist and a college student elect to “leave the Earth” as they find the world unexceptional (99). Aided by an enigmatic global coalition skeptical of Earth’s spheroid shape, they venture into space, discovering Earth to be a colossal sunfish navigating the cosmos.

The deployment of fantastical elements injects the narratives with a transformative perspective. Readers who empathize with the characters' debilitating experiences in a fiercely competitive reality find rejuvenation through imaginative constructs. Employing this distinct style, which effortlessly traverses any pre-existing boundaries, Park Min-gyu delivers a form of playful catharsis to readers, establishing him as one of the most prominent writers of the twenty-first century.²⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that such imaginative interventions do not resolve, either subjectively or objectively, the conflicts ensnaring the characters. As elucidated by literary critic Kim Young-chan, the fantastical elements in Park Min-gyu's narratives serve primarily as distractions, diverting attention away from painful realities without offering resolutions.²⁵⁵ These series of extraordinary events cease to function as transformative "happenings" and fail to culminate in a significant alteration of the character's psyche or plot trajectory. For instance, in "Thank You, You're a Raccoon, Indeed," the protagonist loses a team leader and close friend to raccoon rabies and encounters a UFO as well as raccoon aliens. Yet, the narrative concludes with the protagonist receiving an email about a prospective promotion from the human resources head, compelling him only to muse that "no matter how people try to hush up, they will eventually realize how messy the

²⁵⁴ Kim, Hyung-jung, "Democratic Fighter Park Min-gyu: A Study on Park Min-gyu," *Writer's World* 22 (December 2010): 64–81.

²⁵⁵ Kim "A Theory on the Blowfish Universe," 102.

world is. As if they will eventually realize that there are raccoons, no matter how they try to hush up.”²⁵⁶

In “Is That So? I’m a Giraffe,” the protagonist occasionally encounters his father at *Sindorim* station while employed as a “pushman”—a role encapsulating the grim absurdity of forcibly inserting passengers into overcrowded trains to preserve employment. The emotional gravity of this task is exacerbated when he pushes his father into a train, comparing him to “an ostrich that suddenly lost the use of one leg in the middle of a savanna” or a “wild goose” that flies away in the morning chill.²⁵⁷ Despite these poignant moments, Park Min-gyu does not dwell in this emotional state. The father vanishes one winter day, prompting law enforcement to remark that such disappearances are increasingly common.²⁵⁸ In the subsequent spring, at the same station, the protagonist notices a suited giraffe, which he inexplicably identifies as his father. Despite his emotional appeals, the giraffe remains unresponsive. In a desperate bid to connect, the protagonist implores the giraffe to return home, asserting that conditions are improving.²⁵⁹

At last, the indifferent but ash-colored eyes turned to look at me vacantly. The giraffe laid its hoof over my hand and slowly spoke.

“Is that so? I’m a giraffe.”²⁶⁰

²⁵⁶ Park, *Castella*, 59.

²⁵⁷ Park, *Castella*, 51; 53.

²⁵⁸ Park, *Castella*, 67.

²⁵⁹ Park, *Castella*, 75.

²⁶⁰ Park, *Castella*, 76.

The author subverts the expectations of readers, accustomed to conventional literary narratives, by concluding the story abruptly. The giraffe donning a suit and sauntering on the platform offers a momentary diversion, but it has no transformative impact on the protagonist's reality.

In modern Korean literature, the archetype of the orphaned character frequently grapples with explicit forms of social marginalization and existential despair. However, a nuanced layer is added to this intricate tapestry through millennial orphans' narratives exploring internal exile and engagement with whimsical or surreal elements as coping mechanisms. These orphaned characters channel their focus and emotional energy toward such elements, offering momentary relief without resolving their core struggles. The unfolding of events without rationalized plotlines resonates with the illogicality of the real world. In individualized spheres devoid of meaningful participation, serious inquiry, or emotional investment, these characters find a form of evasion, which, as Cho Yeon-jung articulates, may represent "the least humiliating way to adapt to a world that is otherwise insurmountable."²⁶¹ Such narratives contribute a nuanced understanding of the varied strategies orphaned characters employ to negotiate their places within society and the broader literary narratives that contain them.

²⁶¹ Cho, Yeon-jung, "The Pain We Chose: Park Min-gyu's Short Story Collection 'The Double,'" *The Quarterly Changbi* 39 (2011): 380–388.

IV.5. Summary

In synthesizing the diverse manifestations of orphaned characters in Korean literature from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century, this chapter has elucidated the evolving sociopolitical landscapes and psychological nuances that have influenced the orphanage trope. This trope should be read as an allegory for the emotional and psychological quandary of individuals who are born on the fringes of society or pushed to its boundaries by historical and political circumstances.

In the early twentieth century, the orphan figures emerged as symbols of modern subjectivity and potential nation-builders. Writers like Yi Kwang-su depicted the orphans as the embodiment of modern ideals and aspirations toward building a new nation, instilling a sense of hope amidst the challenges of colonial subjugation. However, as the 1930s and 1940s unfolded with the deepening of colonial rule, the characterization of orphans began to shift, reflecting emotions of confusion and shame. The literature of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by the aftermath of the Korean War, portrayed orphans with feelings of abhorrence towards the horrors of war, reflecting the collective trauma and disillusionment of a nation recovering from the devastation of conflict. This portrayal symbolizes the deep scars left by war on both the individual and societal psyche. Moving into the 1970s and 1980s, orphans were depicted with distrust toward the older generation and ambivalence towards the West, mirroring societal tensions under military dictatorship. These characters symbolized a generation in search of stability amidst political repression and ideological conflicts, questioning the legacy of their predecessors and the influence of external powers.

By the late 1990s and into the 2000s, the characterization of orphans was marked by resignation and ennui towards the real world, illustrating a generation disillusioned by rapid modernization and the failures of economic development to deliver on its promises. These characters, often retreating into fantasy or passivity, embodied the existential crises and moral disorientation of a society grappling with neoliberal pressures and the aftermath of the financial crisis. The tendency is aggravated as the economic situation worsens and the neoliberal order becomes settled in Korea.

This chapter set the stage for an in-depth examination of the orphaned subject in contemporary Korea, focusing on the impact of neoliberal transformation on individual and societal values. The next chapter aims to shed light on the transition of Korean literature's portrayal of orphaned figures through the shifting sociopolitical and economic contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Chapter V:

The Orphaned Subject

As presented in the preceding chapters, the orphan consciousness has emerged as a literary and cultural symptom reflecting historical calamities' moral and psychological repercussions from the colonial era to the economic upheavals of the late twentieth century. Building upon the preceding expositions, this chapter proposes a tripartite progression of orphan consciousness and introduces the emergence of "the orphaned subject."

The first stage of orphan consciousness is epitomized by my grandmother's generation, spanning approximately the years 1910 to the 1950s. This generation experienced firsthand the catastrophic loss of family and deprivation through the brutalities of colonization, embedding within the Korean consciousness the original orphan archetype, rooted in direct personal tragedy and the acute pain of displacement.

The second stage of orphan consciousness encompasses the subsequent generations from the late 1950s up to the 2000s. Although not directly orphaned in the traditional sense, these individuals inherited an intense legacy of abandonment, loss, and powerlessness from their forebears. The patterns of emotional and moral ineptitude manifest in the literature of these eras reveal a population struggling with relational integrity and a fractured sense of self.

The current chapter pivots towards the third phase of orphan consciousness: a generational state marked by moral debilitation and combined with the accumulative

trauma of the past generations, which I term “the orphaned subject.” This condition arises amidst the great transformation ushered in by the neoliberal global market in contemporary Korean society.

This chapter interrogates the neoliberal transformation of Korean society, positing the “self-developing individual” as the modern incarnation of orphanhood. By scrutinizing the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics reshaping contemporary Korean life, the chapter traces the morphing of historical traumas into the alienating forces of neoliberalism and the meritocratic illusion. In this context, the 1997 financial crisis emerged as a pivotal juncture that catalyzed social stratification and entrenched the ethos of competitive individualism. In addition, this chapter examines the representation of these themes within current Korean literature, dissecting how narratives of self-actualization and the quest for success mask a deeper moral and emotional dislocation. This literary analysis will show how the orphan character in modern Korean literature has once again transformed into an image of a despondent individual under the influence of neoliberalism.

In tracing the transformation of orphan consciousness from a symbol of national trauma to a representation of neoliberal subjectivity, this chapter argues that the neoliberal emphasis on self-sufficiency and competitive individualism exacerbates the moral and psychological dislocation experienced by individuals, particularly the youth, in modern Korea. This evolution underscores the persistence of colonial patterns of displacement and disempowerment, albeit under new guises. Furthermore, the chapter’s focus on contemporary literary portrayals of orphanhood offers a lens through which to

assess the depth of moral debilitation in the face of societal changes driven by neoliberal policies.

V.1. The Rise of Meritocracy

In 2016, a major historical event signaled the onset of the post-neoliberal era in Korea: the Candlelight Revolution.²⁶² This event represented the intensifying disparities and societal splits of the neoliberal period. The tensions created by neoliberalization came to a head, making themselves known through widespread protests in public spaces.²⁶³ Though the multitude that constituted the Candlelight Revolution raised various issues, their demands converged on equality, fairness, and justice. The citizens were infuriated by the inherited power exemplified by President Park Geun-hye, who was elected under her father's fame, the former president Park Chung-hee. They also protested corrupt ties between political power and large conglomerates, as well as the unfair educational privileges that granted privileged children easy admission and benefits in prestigious universities.²⁶⁴

The Candlelight Revolution culminated in the impeachment and removal of Park Geun-hye. Consequently, the progressive Moon Jae-in administration, which emerged due to the protest, pledged to construct a society where “opportunities are equal,

²⁶² Kim, Sang-jun, “A System Change from the ‘Division System’ to the ‘Two States System’ on the Korean Peninsula: For the Huge Korean Candlelight Rallies to Be a True Revolution,” *Society and Theory* 31 (2017): 63–90.

²⁶³ Jeong, Tae-seok, “The 87 Regime and Ideology-Value Changes in Civil Society: Candlelight Revolution and the Prospect of Social Regime Transition,” *Economy and Society* 117 (2018): 18–61.

²⁶⁴ Jeong, “The 87 Regime and Ideology-Value Changes,” 34–38.

processes are fair, and outcomes are just.”²⁶⁵ President Moon’s advocacy for a fair society aligns with John Rawls’s theory of “justice as fairness,” which emphasizes three key principles: equal opportunity, competitive equality, and the veil of ignorance.²⁶⁶ The Moon administration has committed to ensuring equal opportunity while rectifying unfair starting points for competitors to ensure fair competition.²⁶⁷

However, the Moon administration’s policy has faced widespread criticism, not only from the privileged but also from the administration’s supporters, and it brought about the “meritocrat backlash” in Korea. The controversy on the Incheon International Airport irregular workers’ conversion to regular employment is a prominent example of meritocrat backlash. Immediately after his inauguration, President Moon promised to regularize all Incheon Airport employees as the initiative of his “zero irregular workers policy” implementation.²⁶⁸ However, when he announced this plan in June 2020, it sparked protests from various groups opposing the perceived unfair conversion to regular

²⁶⁵ Moon, Jae-in, “Presidential Inaugural Address,” *Hankyoreh Newspaper*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/bluehouse/1042216.html>.

²⁶⁶ Im, “Fairness of ‘Our Time,’” 95~117. In Rawls’ theorization, equal opportunity dictates that all positions and titles should be accessible to everyone. Competitive equality under the veil of ignorance ensures a fair, competitive process regardless of social or natural circumstances. This theory aims to achieve a differential distribution that maximizes benefits for the most disadvantaged. See Rawls, *Theory of Justice*; John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

²⁶⁷ Cho, Young-chul, “Evaluation on The Moon Jae-in Government’s Economic Policies,” *Economy and Society* 120 (2018): 134–157; Lee, Byung-hoon, “A Study on the Change of Labor Policy in Moon Jae-in Government,” *Korean Journal of Social Policy* 26 (2019): 101–130; Kang, Hee-jeong, “Issues and Policy Options for Moon Jae-in Care,” *Health and Welfare Policy Forum* 255 (2018): 23–37

²⁶⁸ On June 21, 2020, the Incheon International Airport Corporation announced the direct hiring of 2,143 security personnel, previously in non-regular positions, along with others from the airport fire brigade and wildlife control, out of 9,785 workers from subcontractors. The remaining 7,642 employees are to be hired through subsidiaries. Kim, Hae-in, “Analysis of Reports on the Conversion to Regular Workers of Incheon Airport,” *Region and World* 45 (2021): 239–285.

employment.²⁶⁹ Critics argued that the conversion lacked equal opportunity and a fair process, making the outcome unjust. Even young people opposed the decision, advocating for market competition as the only fair method. Although they recognized the unequal starting lines of inherited wealth, they still believed that the rules of the game should remain fair.²⁷⁰

The ideology of “meritocracy,” which believes only in the formal legitimacy of ability assessment through examinations, came to dominate the discourse on fairness in Korea. “Meritocracy,” a concept proposed by Michael Young, refers to a system where ability becomes the dominant value or power in society.²⁷¹ This concept has dual implications. On the one hand, it represents the transition from a society centered on hereditary status to one focused on merit, highlighting a rationalization process. On the other hand, as an ideology, it can overlook the social conditions and processes forming individual abilities, leading to thinking of success solely as a product of one’s capabilities

²⁶⁹ Kim, “Analysis of Reports on the Conversion to Regular Workers,” 240.

²⁷⁰ Kim, “Analysis of Reports on the Conversion to Regular Workers,” 257.

²⁷¹ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958). Meritocracy began as a socialist critique of inequality and later transformed into a neoliberal defense of it. An important figure at this juncture is American sociologist Daniel Bell. In his seminal 1973 work “The Coming of Post-Industrial Society,” Bell declares that “post-industrial society is inherently meritocratic.” This declaration is deemed the fate of post-industrial society, where the rise of new social divisions of labor requires high-income status to be associated with specialized skills and higher education. During the times of Rockefeller and Carnegie, success was not about degrees but about drive and ruthlessness. In contrast, in the post-industrial society, a university degree serves as a passport of recognition and human capital is necessary. Bell’s perspective highlights the shift in what is valued and required for success, moving from personal traits to formal educational qualifications as society progresses technologically and economically. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). For more contemporary works on meritocracy, see Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, 3rd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

and potentially justifying discrimination, thus entrenching an unequal society. Young highlighted meritocracy in the latter context with a satirical meaning, emphasizing its problematic aspects.

Studies on meritocracy have been translated and published in Korea in various ways, critiquing its limitations.²⁷² Recently, in Korean society, critical discussions have been published examining various specific cases that justify discrimination based on ability, discussing the unfairness of meritocracy or the unfairness of the fairness discourse reliant on meritocracy.²⁷³ In Korean scholarly circles, most research on meritocracy primarily focuses on its mythic and fictitious nature. Studies often examine class reproduction through educational credentials, scrutinize the realities and implications of meritocracy in the labor market centering on salary and personnel systems, or culturally analyze the social ethos of self-improvement and credential

²⁷² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* trans. Hwang, Gyeong-sik (Seoul: Ihaksa, 2003); Michael Walzer, *Justice and Pluralistic Equality: Spheres of Justice*, trans. Jeong, Won-seop et al. (Seoul: Philosophy and Reality Publishing, 1999); Robert Dahl, *On Political Equality* trans. Kim, Soon-young (Seoul: Humanitas, 2014); Stuart White, *What is Equality?* trans. Kang, Jeong-in and Kwon, Do-hyuk (Seoul: Magpie Publishing, 2016); Joseph Fishkin, *Bottleneck Society* trans. Yu, Gang-eun (Seoul: Munye Publishing House, 2016); Nancy Fraser, *Progressive Feminism*, trans. Im, Ok-hee (Paju-si, Korea: Dolbegae, 2017); Iris Young, *The Politics of Difference and Justice*, trans. Kim, Do-kyun and Cho, Guk (Seoul: Motive Book, 2017); Michael Young, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, trans. Yu, Gang-eun (Seoul: Imagine, 2020); Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, trans. Ham, Gyu-jin (Seoul: Wiseberry, 2020).

²⁷³ Kang, Jun-man, “Why Does Even Having Wealthy Parents Become an Ability?: The Psychological Mechanism of ‘Meritocratic Communications’,” in *Social Science Research* 55 (2016): 319–355. For the further discussion of meritocracy in Korean society, see Park, Won-ik and Jo, Yoon-ho, *Unfair* (Seoul: Ji & In, 2019); Park, Kwon-il, “Four Questions for Dissecting Meritocracy,” in *Meritocracy and Inequality* (Seoul: Commune But, 2020): 135–163; Hong, Se-hwa, “A Study on ‘Intellectual Racism,’” in *Meritocracy and Inequality* (Seoul: Commune But, 2020): 216–220; Chae, Hyo-jung, “Is the Academic Hierarchy Over?” in *Meritocracy and Inequality* (Seoul: Commune But, 2020): 93–132.

accumulation, especially in light of the disillusioned youth's "Hell Joseon" syndrome.²⁷⁴

In these studies, there is a prevailing argument that meritocracy manifests as a neoliberal form of governance. Thus, the concept of neoliberal meritocracy not only directs the mental and behavioral norms of individuals but also becomes an intrinsic standard of conduct within neoliberal ideology.²⁷⁵

In analyzing the 2018 Korean Research's "Perception of Fairness Survey Report," Park Kwon-il notes that, in Western contexts, meritocratic principles are favored by conservatives, the affluent, and the highly educated. In Korea, on the other hand, the inclination towards meritocracy is remarkably prevalent across all classes and political ideologies.²⁷⁶ This pervasive adherence to meritocracy underscores the distinct nature of the Korean socioeconomic system and corresponding educational system, where one's success disproportionately influences societal status and opportunities in a rigid competition. According to Park Kwon-il, this is markedly different from other countries

²⁷⁴ Ryu, Dong-min, "The Crisis of Meritocracy Ideology: The Social Psychology of 'Exit-Joseon'," *Hwanghae Culture* 90 (2016): 45–58. Recent studies also explore the psychological mechanisms sustaining meritocracy.

²⁷⁵ Kim, Mi-young, "The Dismantling of Communitarianism by Meritocracy: Complex Equality Theory of Ability, Merit, and Needs," *Economy and Society* 84 (2009): 256–277; Kim, Hong-jung, "The Ethical Dismantling of Embodied Neoliberalism," *Society and Theory* 14 (2009): 173–212.

Of course, there are opposing views within the liberal camp. Jeong Tae-seok examines the historical context of how meritocracy has been socially accepted and utilized in Korean society. His research seeks practical solutions to address the unfairness inherent in meritocracy, exploring various strategies and approaches that might mitigate the negative aspects of a merit-based system while considering its historical adoption and application in the context of Korean societal development. Jeong, Tae-seok, "The Dilemma of Meritocracy and Fairness: Competing Standards of Value Judgment," *Economy and Society* 132 (Winter 2021): 12–46.

²⁷⁶ Park, Kwon-il, "Perception and Characteristics of Meritocracy in Korea," in *Citizen and the World* 38 (2021): 1–39.

where status and success are adjusted based on actual contributions and achievements.²⁷⁷

In other words, the only realistic strategy for individual success has become relying solely on educational achievement gained through intense competition.

Furthermore, Park discusses the class-based “contempt” prevalent in Korean society. He notes that derogatory and dismissive remarks towards individuals based on their educational background or job status are increasingly prevalent.²⁷⁸ Such attitudes, which often lead to hate speech, are symptomatic of a deeper sociocultural problem where meritocracy is misused to justify prejudice and discrimination against the less privileged. The widespread contemptuous remarks and hate speeches towards the disadvantaged effectively undermine affirmative action and other measures intended to ensure equal opportunities.

In a society where structural unfairness is more pervasive than the unfairness of rewards based on ability and effort, many people have relied on meritocracy because they believe it ensures fairness in compensation. They also believe that fairness in evaluating abilities is crucial for this purpose. This reliance on and belief in meritocracy, due to the historical and contextual specificities of Korean society, is an essential factor that has led many Koreans to attribute fairness to meritocracy. In this sense, trust in meritocracy can be seen as an expression of self-interest by the successful middle class who have benefited from it. At the same time, it also reflects the discontent of the lower class or

²⁷⁷ Park, “Perception and Characteristics,” 14–17.

²⁷⁸ Park draws this analysis based the seventh “World Values Survey” by Ronald Inglehart and others, in where the recognition rate for inequality in Korea is exceptionally high at 64.8% compared to other countries. Park, “Perception and Characteristics,” 25.

low-income groups, who are frustrated by the larger incomes earned by others through unfair and irrational factors other than ability or effort.²⁷⁹ Consequently, Korean people have become sympathetic to the fairness discourse, as evident in young people who are increasingly supportive of fairness in educational opportunity or prefer income disparities as a legitimate reward for effort.²⁸⁰

The ideology of meritocracy is increasingly becoming a governing premise of collective consciousness and behavior of the younger generation of Korea. It embodies the belief that anyone can succeed through diligent effort and skill accumulation. Whether this belief holds true or not, it secures societal acceptance of the system's legitimacy. This narrative has propelled people to focus on self-improvement by investing in education or other means rather than social change, thereby perpetuating the cycle of effort and aspiration toward success and upward mobility. This discussion advances the debate by examining the formation of the "self-developing subject" within this ideological landscape, interrogating the implications of meritocratic ideals on the self-conception and agency of individuals within the larger socioeconomic matrix.

²⁷⁹ See Woo, Myung-sook and Nam, Eun-young, "Meritocracy and the Perception of Inequality as a Principle of Fairness: A Comparison of Korea and Japan," *Asian Studies* 64 (2021): 201–244; Jeong, Tae-seok, *The Energy of Koreans, Egalitarianism: The Contradictory Coexistence of Egalitarianism and Hierarchy* (Seoul: PiEoNa Books, 2020).

²⁸⁰ Park, Kwon-il, "Perception and Characteristics," 32.

V.2. The Self-Developing Subject

When combined with meritocracy, neoliberal values that emphasize efficiency and productivity shape-shift into a principle of action and a social pattern that society cultivates among capable individuals. In other words, neoliberal meritocracy becomes a normative principle guiding individuals' minds and actions,²⁸¹ as well as an embodied behavioral norm of neoliberalism.²⁸² This adaptation aligns with Foucault's understanding of "governmentality," where individuals are steered and self-regulate according to prevalent societal norms and values.

With the concept of governmentality, Foucault emphasizes the "technologies of power" that is distinctive to contemporary neoliberalism.²⁸³ Unlike the older forms of governance where the dominant group directly exercise their power over others, the neoliberal governance compels individuals to internalize the dominant principles and constitute their subjectivities according to those principles.

Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.²⁸⁴

²⁸¹ Kim, Mi-young, "Dismantling of Communitarianism," 263.

²⁸² Kim, Hong-jung, "Ethical Dismantling," 203.

²⁸³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2010).

²⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth" in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self*, ed. Mark Blasius, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 26.

What is critical is understanding that “technologies of domination” and “technologies of self” are not at opposite poles but “integrated into structures of coercion and domination.”²⁸⁵ This moves us beyond the dualism of freedom and limitation or consent and violence. Governance extends from political authority to forms of self-regulation, or technologies of the self.²⁸⁶ A significant feature of the neoliberal style of governance is not just direct interference but also indirect techniques that combine responsible, moral individuals with economic rationality to guide and control people. This means that the breadth of options for action, based on self-determination and free will, makes individual subjects responsible for the outcomes of their actions. Such governance strategies shift the responsibility for increasing social risks to the individual, transforming social responsibility into a matter of self-managing or self-governing.²⁸⁷

In fact, any dominant discourses within any given era, not only neoliberalism, are constructed and propagated through interaction with power, thereby shaping and endorsing an ideal type of person suited to the needs of the time. For instance, during the period of Japanese colonial rule, the discourse on modernization fostered the emergence of “nation-builders” and “proponents of enlightenment,” while the era of developmental dictatorship cultivated robust “pillars of industries” and staunch “anti-communists.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth, 25.

²⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, *Technology of the Self*, trans. Lee, Hee-won (Seoul: Dongmunseon, 1997); Graham Burchell, “Liberal Government and Techniques of the Self,” in *Foucault and Political Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1996), eBook.

²⁸⁷ Seo, Dong-jin, *The Will of Freedom, The Will of Self-Development: The Birth of Self-Development in South Korean Society under Neoliberalism* (Seoul: Dolbegae, 2009), 38.

²⁸⁸ Lee, Ki-hoon, *Youth, Youth, Our Youth: Calling Modern Youth* (Seoul: Dolbegae, 2014).

The democracy activists and creators of new culture in the 1980s and 1990s also served as vessels for predominant grand narratives.²⁸⁹ Such linguistic shifts not only alter perceptions but also generate knowledge and standards that delineate the proper conduct within their respective social contexts.

Now that meritocracy increasingly dictates social structure and individual worth, Korean academic conversations have been focused on dissecting the emergence of neoliberal subjectivity. In 2005, sociologist Seo Dong-jin influentially analyzed the production of “three different, yet resonating and intersecting forms of subjectivity” in neoliberal South Korean society.²⁹⁰ The social phenomena he analyzed included 1) new citizen formation programs initiated by the state, 2) new labor force projects under the name of restructuring by capital, and 3) acts of self-subjection pursued by individuals desiring a free life. From the perspective of the birth of the self-developing subject, this can be rearticulated as forming a flexible labor subject, forging citizens of autonomy and responsibility, and becoming free, self-reliant individuals.²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Joo, Eun-woo, “Youth of the April 19th Era and Youth of Today,” *Culture and Science* 37 (2004): 86–117.

²⁹⁰ Seo, *Will of Freedom*, 372.

²⁹¹ According to Seo Dong-jin, the self-developing subjects shape themselves by utilizing self-development discourses. The discourses on self-development can be analytically divided into three categories. Firstly, it constitutes “problematization,” where the self is defined as an object that must be changed and improved, with knowledge production centered around this need. This implies an awareness of the self as inherently deficient or in need of enhancement and the creation of discourses that highlight these deficiencies or potential areas for growth. Secondly, the act of “developing” or “managing” oneself involves a set of techniques that encompass evaluating, diagnosing, measuring, improving, and correcting one’s life and actions. This approach to self-development can be understood as a form of “technology,” in the Foucauldian sense, where the self becomes both the subject and object of these applied techniques. Lastly, this discourse is linked to specific “*telos*,” whether they be success, happiness, or other goals individuals are encouraged to approximate. The self-development narrative thus includes the notion that life should be directed toward particular ends, and it embeds within individuals the idea that they must strive for these often externally defined goals. These three aspects—problematization, technology, and *telos*—create a

Subsequently, Jeon Sang-jin sharpened the focus on the “entrepreneurial subject,” a figure emblematic of meritocratic success.²⁹² Park So-jin’s 2009 study probes into the “self-managing subject” and the uniquely Korean “family management” model, reflecting how familial roles and responsibilities are recalibrated to uphold and reproduce meritocratic values.²⁹³ Further expanding the discourse, Yum Hye-jin’s work interrogates the “snob” subjectivity prescribed to women, revealing how meritocracy intersects with gender to compound inequality,²⁹⁴ and Lee Sook-jin’s theological investigation critiques the Korean Church’s alignment with neoliberal meritocracy through its embrace of “self-technologies” and “coaching programs.”²⁹⁵ These critical scholarly works uniformly point out that the emergence of the self-development discourse is deeply related to the constructs of meritocracy, which equates worth with productivity, success with self-optimization, and social standing with competitive achievement.

The self-development discourse encourages individuals to reject the stringent controls of disciplinary institutions such as schools, factories, and the military,

framework in which individuals are led to constantly assess and cultivate themselves according to prevailing societal standards, which, in the neoliberal context, often emphasize efficiency, productivity, and the pursuit of success as defined by market values. Seo, *Will of Freedom*, 280–281.

²⁹² Jeon, Sang-jin, “The Sociology of Self-Development: What Alternatives Can We Suggest Beyond Self-Development?” *Culture and Society* 5 (2008): 103–140.

²⁹³ Park, So-jin, “Anxious Lives in the Period of ‘Self-Management’ and ‘Family Management’: Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Subjectivity,” *Economy and Society* 84 (2009): 12–39.

²⁹⁴ Yum, Hye-jin, “The Duality of Women’s Self Project and Birth of ‘Material Girls’ in Neoliberal Era: An Analysis of Best-Selling Women’s Self-Development Books,” *Korean Journal of Women’s Studies* 32 (2016): 31–69.

²⁹⁵ Lee, Sook-jin, “Self-Development Discourse in Korean Christianity in the Neoliberal Era: Focusing on the Subjectification of Female Believers,” *Religious Studies* 86 (2010): 181–219.

advocating instead for autonomous self-revolution as a means of creating value and achieving “freedom.” This freedom paradigm is at the very heart of neoliberalism, a familiar and resonant value, particularly amongst the youth across societies who are urged to design and govern their lives autonomously and freely, beyond the restraints of discipline and control.²⁹⁶ What is required now is not guidance, coaching, or discipline but rather acts of self-improvement that unleash one’s potential. The principle of self-improvement compels one to introspect, analyze strengths and weaknesses, and develop into a better version of oneself. It is an ethical approach that extends beyond economic concepts to encompass a contemplative attitude toward all facets of one’s identity and life. Following reflection, the results must be applied practically, measured, and judged, with these evaluations used to refine further and repeatedly enhance oneself. In this process, technologies that quantify and assess all aspects related to the self—time, body, and capabilities—are emphasized, including time management, healthcare, cosmetic surgery, language proficiency, writing, hobbies, reading, and social skills.²⁹⁷

The principles of self-management and self-improvement actively incorporate this principle of self-responsibility, thereby endowing the neoliberal subjectivation process with not only economic rationality but also ethical legitimacy.²⁹⁸ The ultimate goal of all these acts of self-improvement is ostensibly the development and maturation of the self.

²⁹⁶ Seo, *Will of Freedom*, Ch. 4; Jeon, “The Sociology of Self-Development,” 110–114.

²⁹⁷ Seo, *Will of Freedom*, 280-284.

²⁹⁸ Seo, *Will of Freedom*, 363-369.

Individuals must bear the responsibility of their choices as managers of their lives.

Indeed, this is the hallmark of a mature human being.

In this neoliberal “moral script,” individuals are expected to commit themselves to self-management through self-improvement. In the corporate realm, there are anecdotes of young professionals who, in their relentless pursuit of self-improvement, juggle full-time jobs with night classes, actively pursuing advanced degrees and certifications. They epitomize the idea of continuous learning and adaptability, viewing investments in further education not as a choice but as an essential aspect of career advancement. In the academic sphere, students aiming for the highly competitive university entrance exams embrace this ethos of self-development from a very young age. They follow rigorous study schedules, attend private tutoring sessions, and participate in extracurricular activities, all with the goal of crafting a well-rounded persona that excels academically and socially. These individuals, whether climbing the corporate ladder or pursuing creative endeavors, exemplify the contemporary Korean dedication to self-development—a social and moral narrative that intertwines personal ambition with the broader neoliberal framework, where the self serves as both the project and the entrepreneur.

The ethical imperative of self-development is critical to understanding the “orphaned subject” in the contemporary Korean context. Subjectivation in the era of neoliberalism does not occur through the strict discipline, control, and punishment of the state and capital as in previous times. Instead, it operates within alluring language such as reflection, freedom, and liberation, mandating that individuals take full responsibility for

their entire lives. In the age of self-improvement, there is no longer an external master to discipline us; we have become “masters of ourselves.” Capital, having become the sole power in the neoliberal age, now governs through the free choices of individuals. The subject continuously develops, manages, and governs themselves, thereby reinforcing the hegemony of capital. In other words, the neoliberal subjects are required to govern themselves.

Initially, the self-governance discourse appears to promise that we have the freedom to shape our destinies. However, it functions as a well-designed mechanism of control, subtly coercing people to comply with the imperatives of capital under the guise of autonomy and self-development. The internalized neoliberal values and imperatives of self-governance are the key features of the orphaned subject in the neoliberal age that distinguishes them from the orphans of the previous generation. The orphaned subject is allegedly free and no longer under the direct yoke of colonial rule or a dictatorship but is now bound by the invisible chains of market forces and the incessant demand for self-optimization.

Hence, the orphaned subject left without traditional support systems is not just a symbol of solitary struggle but also a result and promoter of the neoliberal mindset. When such individuals have to rely on their resources without the traditional guidance that once shaped personal and professional growth, they find themselves compelled to act as self-entrepreneurs. They constantly work on improving their marketability and productivity, caught in a never-ending cycle that ultimately benefits the capitalist system. In this scenario, the orphaned subject may appear to be emancipated. Still, they are

simultaneously subjected to the very forces that grant them this apparent freedom. The reality contradicts the meritocratic ideology, thus thwarting the promise of freedom. The neoliberal narrative purports that anyone, through hard work and perseverance, can ascend the socioeconomic ladder. Yet, this narrative overlooks the structural inequities and systemic barriers that preclude a significant portion of the population from realizing such upward mobility.

Marxist economist Ryu Dong-min points out that the upward mobility underpinning the meritocratic ideology and the self-development discourse is a phenomenon first and last enjoyed by the generation known as “the 86 generation”—those who were born in the 1960s and 1970s and entered university in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁹⁹ They were part of the Baby Boom generation who were the first to experience high school equalization policies, particularly in major cities like Seoul. Since college enrollment rates were below 10% in the 1980s, “the 86 generation,” especially those who were not born with a “golden spoon,” could enjoy the education equalization policies as the path to vertical class mobility was through acquiring educational capital.³⁰⁰ Due to dramatically increased average income and living standards, a significant portion of this rise was perceived as a result of ability or effort, fostering the development of a collective

²⁹⁹ Ryu, “Crisis of Meritocracy Ideology,” 45–58.

³⁰⁰ For instance, in 1987, a pivotal year for democratization, the per capita national income was barely \$3,500. It was not until 1994 that it exceeded \$10,000, meaning that in less than a decade from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, national income had increased almost threefold on average. Ryu, “Crisis of Meritocracy Ideology” 52–53.

consciousness that attributed these improvements to individual capabilities and diligence.

These events paved the way for the meritocracy ideology to settle in the popular mind.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the decrease in birth rates leading to intensive inheritance among a few children, wealth disparity increased across generations.³⁰¹ According to the October 2023 policy report by the Seoul Institute, “The State of Income Insecurity and Income Support Measures for Seoul Citizens,” from 2015 to 2020, there was an increasing trend in the probability of downward income mobility in Seoul and a decreasing trend in income stability.³⁰² The report termed this phenomenon a “sticky floor and ceiling,” where the lowest and highest income brackets tended to remain constant.³⁰³ Moreover, in the third quarter of 2022, the national real income of the bottom 20% was 1.03 million won, which is a decrease of over 6%, while the income of the top 20% decreased by about 2% compared to 2021.³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Ryu, “Crisis of Meritocracy Ideology,” 57.

³⁰² Byeon, Geum-seon and Lee, Hye-rim, *The State of Income Insecurity and Income Support Measures for Seoul Citizens: Policy Report No. 380* (Seoul: Seoul Institute, 2023).

³⁰³ Byeon and Lee, *The State of Income Insecurity*, 5. Particularly, the entry rate into poverty for the low-income group, earning between 50–85% of the median income, which lies outside the poverty line supported by basic security systems targeting mainly the elderly and those unable to work, increased from 11.3% in 2016 to 13.9% in 2020, revealing income instability among the low-income group, a demographic often overlooked by policies. Specifically, it is noted that 17.9% of Seoul citizens experienced poverty for at least one year in a six-year period, and 35.7% have experienced low income. Byeon and Lee, *The State of Income Insecurity*, 7–8.

³⁰⁴ “Deepening Income Polarization and Growing Regional Disparities,” SBS Business, November 21, 2022, <https://biz.sbs.co.kr/article/20000090283>. Specifically, the real income of the top 20% was 9.57 million won, almost ten times that of the bottom 20%, indicating a significant disparity. Such income polarization is evident not only across social strata but also regionally, as the combined labor income in the great capital area—including Seoul, Gyeonggi, and Incheon—amounts to 453 trillion won, surpassing 60% of the total labor income. In these areas, the income earned by the top 10% in Seoul and Gyeonggi alone accounted for 17% of the total labor income, which is more than the total income of the other fifteen provinces and cities, including Busan and Daegu.

Regarding this situation where the income gap between the upper and lower classes continues to widen, the Seoul Institute's 2021 policy report, "A Barrier Society: Characteristics and Challenges of Youth Inequality," diagnoses that modern Korean society has entered a phase as a "barrier society."³⁰⁵ It argues that Korean society has shifted from a "gap society" of the 1980s–1990s to a "barrier society" in the early 2000s, characterized by entrenched disparities that are increasingly difficult to overcome due to the reproduction of these gaps. Particularly, the inequalities faced by youth are multidimensional, stemming mainly from how the economic background of a family significantly impacts educational achievements. These achievements, in turn, determine employment opportunities, which then dictate income levels, solidifying a cyclical structure of inequality.³⁰⁶ The report further highlights the intensifying relationship between housing and asset inequality due to rising real estate prices and financialization. This leads to a direct link between asset gaps and housing disparities. This cycle of inequality in income and assets also significantly impacts family formation disparities, affecting decisions related to marriage and childbirth. The report notes an increasing trend in assortative mating, where individuals of similar economic and educational levels are more likely to pair up, thus reinforcing economic and educational disparities. Additionally, the report argues that Korean society is increasingly becoming a barrier society for the youth not deemed "capable" through status competition. These individuals

³⁰⁵ Kim, Seung-yeon and Park, Min-jin, "A Barrier Society, Characteristics and Challenges of Youth Inequality," *The Seoul Institute* 326 (2021): 2.

³⁰⁶ Kim and Park, "Characteristics and Tasks," 5.

are often marginalized or treated as expendables in the labor market, exacerbating the societal barriers they face.³⁰⁷

As such, the meritocratic promise appears more illusory, serving to perpetuate the dominance of those already in positions of privilege while placating the masses with the myth of equal opportunity. The notion that diligence and rational self-governance alone can break through entrenched societal hierarchies is increasingly challenged by evidence of a growing divide between the upper and lower classes. A “normal” society would not simply tolerate the proliferation of bad indicators such as the above. However, in a meritocratic society, the dominant self-development discourse demands competition grounded in individual capability, thereby attributing failure to personal deficiencies rather than systemic flaws. Thus, the neoliberal subject, constructed through the model of the rational economic person, is tasked with embracing a crucial contradiction as if it were fate. The responsibility for failure in self-improvement and self-management lies with the individual. The brutal “survival” is not an anomaly but the human condition, where those who survive are the ones who have earnestly developed their strengths and been recognized for their creative ideas. Substantial rewards await the successful, while those who fail plummet into the abyss.

In sum, the orphaned subjects of contemporary Korea, no longer restrained by direct institutional controls, face the paradox of “freedom”—a liberation that commits them to perpetual self-optimization within an unforgiving market economy. This self-

³⁰⁷ Kim and Park, “Characteristics and Tasks,” 7–9.

governance often masks a deeper subjugation to the very forces of capitalism that grant this illusory freedom, leaving the individual to navigate a precarious existence where systemic support is conspicuously absent. As we turn from the formation of these self-regulating subjects to the tangible repercussions of their endeavors, we confront the “damage”—the stark reality that not all efforts at self-improvement can surmount the structural barriers entrenched within society, revealing the limitations of meritocracy and the profound impact on the psyche of those who strive within its bounds.

V.3. Damage and Debilitation

As a result of the neoliberal overemphasis on individual responsibility, individuals who do not succeed often harbor shame rather than anger or resentment, opting to withdraw from the public eye instead of voicing their struggles. In the lexicon of the neoliberal epoch, pejorative labels such as “surplus,” “waste,” or “loser” succinctly capture the plight of those cast aside.³⁰⁸ Those who falter are considered responsible for their downfall, and many view investing public funds for their support as futile. These faltering individuals find themselves fading from the societal fabric. Meanwhile, rationally self-improving individuals carry a persistent anxiety that they could slip from the ladder of success at any moment. They grapple with the constant anxiety of falling short in the relentless pursuit of self-optimization. This looming trepidation dictates their

³⁰⁸ Eom, Ki-ho et al., *Humanities of Publicity from the Perspective of the “Surplus”* (Seoul: Ewha Womans University Press, 2011); Jeong, Myung-jung, “Neoliberalism and Self-Narrative,” *Human Beings, Environment and Their Future* 19 (October 2017): 3–28.

actions, choices, and aspirations, compelling them to strive tirelessly for progress and recognition.

To comprehend the characteristics of this neoliberal anxiety, it is necessary to consider the contemporary psychological distinction between fear (a physiological response) and anxiety (a psychosocial emotion). Anxiety, while similar to fear in that it pertains to a negative object that elicits fear or worry, emphasizes “worry about the future.”³⁰⁹ Anxiety arises in the process of predicting events that have not yet occurred. Freud initially understood anxiety merely as a reaction to danger, but later, through cases of anxiety without a well-defined object, discovered that anxiety is precisely related to the “anticipation of danger.”³¹⁰ While the object of fear can be specific, such as heights or darkness, the object of anxiety cannot. Humans feel anxious when the predicted future is adverse or uncontrollable, and this anxiety is accompanied by value judgments. This indicates anxiety’s social and cultural traits. For example, a PhD candidate working on her dissertation may experience anxiety when she feels uncertain about the success of the degree. This anxiety is not just because of the uncertainty about the future, but also because of the sociocultural expectation that a failure in obtaining the degree could lead to a negative judgment of her professional abilities and worth. Here, anxiety is not only an individual’s internal experience but also a response to the social values of success and excellence.

³⁰⁹ Kwon, Seok-man, *Modern Abnormal Psychology* (Seoul: Hakjisa, 2003).

³¹⁰ Renata Salecl, *The Tyranny of Choice*, trans. Park, Kwang-ho (Seoul: Humanitas, 2014).

An appropriate level of anxiety is natural and instrumental as it can help humans detect and prepare for everyday threats. However, feeling anxious in the absence of realistic threats or experiencing excessive anxiety can impair one's psychosocial life.³¹¹ Today, in Korea, not only is there an increase in diagnosable levels of anxiety disorders, but there is also a widespread chronic form of existential anxiety that transcends ontological dimensions. Slovene sociologist Renata Salecl diagnoses the common anxiety in modern society as being associated with the universal sense of instability induced by neoliberalism, and her analysis has been widely embraced within the Korean scholarly circle.³¹² This feeling of instability primarily stems from anticipated risks such as relative poverty, the risk of layoffs, and financial hardship. In Korea, the normalized anxiety cannot be understood separately from the 1997 financial crisis and the long-term economic recession and labor flexibilization that followed.³¹³

In the consumerist society flooded with free choices, the neoliberal subjects are constantly advised to pursue their values and rationality. It gives an elusive idea to them that they are becoming significantly freer from the social demands and cultural norms than in the past.³¹⁴ Yet the freedom of choice often disguises systemic inequalities that limit disadvantaged individuals' capacity to choose, attributing resultant disparities to their faults or deficiencies. Success in competition frequently equates to the outcome of

³¹¹ Kwon, *Modern Abnormal Psychology*, 154.

³¹² Salecl, *Tyranny of Choice*, 34.

³¹³ Park, Hyung-shin and Jeong, Su-nam, *How Emotions Move Society: The Macrosociology of Fear* (Paju-si: Hangilsa, 2015).

³¹⁴ Salecl, *Tyranny of Choice*, 126.

admirable virtues such as entrepreneurship and initiative, and failure to optimally govern oneself results in shame and guilt. Therefore, the new neoliberal subjects are sustained, on the one hand, by the belief in “unrestrained freedom” and, on the other, by moral values attributed to self-development.³¹⁵

Consequently, the notion of free choice of the rational subject creates the illusion that all desires are self-generated. In the process, the subject loses a place of reliance and experiences anxiety as a form of psychological trauma.³¹⁶ Free choice inherently involves submission to and responsibility for the outcomes, making this anxiety a tangible emotion with a clear object. In reality, the subject’s wrong choices can lead to negative consequences like poverty or failure. However, there is a blind, neurotic aspect to the anxiety that is intensified by the ideology of choice. Anxiety stems not so much from the anticipation of negative outcomes but from the uncertainty of the future itself. The fantasy of progress through free choice gives way to anxiety when confronted with the reality of an unpredictable future. Attempts to alleviate anxiety often involve another choice, such as the consumption of goods. Consequently, any genuine resolution remains indefinitely postponed.³¹⁷

In a society where even achieving something as essential as owning a house appears unattainable despite one’s hard work, many people lack optimism about

³¹⁵ Kim, Hong-jung, “Ethical Dismantling,” 173–212.

³¹⁶ Park, Ji-won and Kim, Hoy-yong, “Relationship between Overheated Educational Fever and Neoliberal Anxiety,” *Educational Philosophy Research* 34 (2020): 113–135.

³¹⁷ Park and Kim, “Relationship,” 124.

significant societal improvements. In such precarious circumstances, it becomes more practical and efficient to prioritize securing one's livelihood over discussing vague or long-term social changes. Even when there are many critics of meritocracy in Korean society, those who desire immediate changes and hope for a different tomorrow often find their aspirations unmet. Paradoxically, in a society that may have already passed the point where inequality could be rectified, individuals tend to refrain from making efforts toward broader societal improvements. This reluctance stems from the persistent presence of risks and uncertainties, forcing people to prioritize their safety. The value of "surviving on one's own" or "each for oneself" becomes a prominent pursuit in a society driven by survival instincts.

Feminist scholar Park Mi-sun characterizes the state of the neoliberal subject situated between the fantasy of a good life and the reality that continuously frustrates this fantasy as "abrasion."³¹⁸ Because so many in neoliberal society do not bother investigating blatant social disparities, society's violence goes unpunished. Even now, Korean society bizarrely refers to the ruthless expulsion of underperformers from supposedly free workplaces as "reform." Failing to call wrongs by their name, society becomes more brutal, and individuals face harsher circumstances. Those who cannot tolerate social inequality and have chosen to compete individually through their means now compete more with each other. In a context without a clue that the problem can be resolved, the only path for individuals is either withdrawal or compliance. However,

³¹⁸ Park, Mi-sun, "Lauren Berlant: 'Cruel Optimism' and the Affect of the Neoliberal Age," *Gender/Feminism Theory* 33 (December 2015): 99–125.

economically unstable people cannot easily deviate from the “rails” assigned to them because, in a competitive society, withdrawal equates to “irrecoverability.”³¹⁹

Eventually, the trauma and anxiety of the abraded subjects spurt out in the form of anger. However, their anger is distinctly different from the common anger towards injustice or cynicism towards humanity often seen in previous generations. This anger operates not towards society but in a way that excludes “some of us” from the competition. Cheon Gwan-yul and Jeong Han-wool emphasize that the prevalent hatred and anger toward women among young men in their twenties represent another version of the fairness issue engendered by endless competition. The authors point out that young men in their twenties are particularly harsh in evaluating whether other social groups truly “deserve” assistance, and they observe that “unless they meet these harsh criteria, unfair labels are attached to any form of social privilege or support policies.”³²⁰ Consequently, they display unexpectedly strong solidarity towards groups recognized as “deserving of assistance” according to traditional human rights standards (such as people with disabilities and foreign refugees). However, they consider any support or benefits for groups falling short of these criteria (most notably, women and individuals directly involved in competitive admission or employment processes who are perceived as “losers”) as “free rides.”³²¹ These individuals justify their anger as directed not towards

³¹⁹ Oh, Chang-ho, “The Reasons Why the New Class Society Is Truly Frightening,” *Hwanghae Review* 90 (2016): 28–44; 41.

³²⁰ Cheon, Gwan-yul and Jeong, Han-wool, *Men in Their 20s: The Emergence of “Male Minority” Self-Consciousness* (Seoul: Sisa IN Books, 2019).

³²¹ Cheon and Jeong, *Men in Their 20s*, 7–8.

women as a whole but towards the distorted reality of the “rules of the game” and the powers that have distorted these rules.³²² This argument contains a deeply paradoxical perception that the government’s gender equality policies aimed at addressing gender inequality are themselves the source of the distortion of the rules of the game, leading to the highly reductive belief that women receive more preferential treatment within the protection of power. However, within this backlash against feminism, we can also easily identify the outdated premises of meritocracy and the discourse of “context-removed fairness” or “flattened fairness” required to maintain it at its core.³²³

Kim Hyun-kyung also characterizes the pervasive misogyny and other-targeted hatred prevalent among the younger generation as “neoliberal meritocracy” that encompasses a process where all the causes of insults and discrimination are attributed to one’s shortcomings, inability to manage oneself or failure to achieve as outstandingly as others. This attribution fosters socially “justifiable” contempt and hatred towards others. In essence, neoliberal meritocracy serves as a framework that explains how society establishes a foundation for legitimate disdain and hatred towards others by making individuals perceive all forms of insult and discrimination as a result of their faults and inability to match the achievements of others.³²⁴

It is evident that something is damaged within the neoliberal subject in Korea, something of profound importance for individuals to nurture the hope of a better life.

³²² Cheon and Jeong, *Men in Their 20s*, 37.

³²³ Cheon and Jeong, *Men in Their 20s*, 8.

³²⁴ Kim, Hyun-kyung, *People, Place, Hospitality* (Seoul: Moonji Publishing, 2015).

Building upon Park Mi-sun’s discourse on “abraded subjects” and the concepts of moral injury and debility discussed in Chapter II, I posit the term “debilitation” to encapsulate the predicament of these worn-down individuals. The orphaned of our time find themselves ensnared within the relentless demands of neoliberalism, experiencing a trauma akin to generational orphanhood. In an era that ostensibly fosters aspirations for a brighter future and the cultivation of solidarity and hope, a core facet of our being is undergoing fundamental harm. This essential facet pertains to our capacity to dream beyond the confines of the present, the ability to recognize the injustices inherent in the current state of affairs, and the imaginative prowess to conceive a superior tomorrow—in essence, it embodies our moral imagination.

“Debilitation” also encapsulates a certain erosion of the moral imagination, the very capacity to envision a better future beyond the constraints of the present. This debilitation represents the corrosive system that exacerbates social disparities with the meritocrat ideology. When the promise of meritocracy converges with the reality of anxiety, this confluence exposes the abraded subjects to the fear of failure in a competitive society due to their perceived personal inadequacies. From the debilitated subject, a pervasive sentiment emerges—a misconception that there is no escape from the relentless cycle of self-advancement and fear of failing. The unremitting emphasis on self-improvement and autonomy renders the subject an orphan, stripped of their social safety net and vulnerable to the damaging effects of a system that privileges the few while neglecting the many. It is this very loss of protection and reliance that cements their status as orphaned, exacerbating the anxiety that arises not only from anticipated failure

but also from the larger threat of systemic exclusion and neglect. The resultant psychological damage is not a mere side effect but a fundamental characteristic of the neoliberal condition, marking the orphaned subject's internal landscape with the scars of an unforgiving meritocracy.

In delineating the nuances of damage as encountered by the contemporary orphaned subject, it becomes imperative to contextualize this phenomenon as part of a broader narrative that extends beyond the individual and into the collective realm of historical experiences. The term “debilitation,” in this respect, is germane to signify a compounded impairment of moral agency and emotional resilience—afflictions not borne solely of present circumstances but deeply rooted in the transgenerational transmission of trauma and loss.

This debilitation is not just an echo of past adversities but an amplification thereof; it embodies a novel phase in the evolution of orphan consciousness. This phase is not characterized by the visceral immediacy of the first-hand loss encountered by prior generations but by the inherited and internalized burdens of an existential void created by systemic disenfranchisement, now exacerbated under the spectral influence of neoliberalism. The orphaned subject of modern Korea thus emerges, bearing not only the weight of historical orphanhood but also the alienation fostered by the neoliberal drive for self-reliance and competitive individualism.

The evolution of the orphaned subject signifies a shift from the familial and communal disruptions of the past to the present state, where the disruption is self-inflicted under the guise of progress and self-development. Herein lies the paradox: the

attempt to heal the wounds of past traumas through the adoption of a neoliberal ethos results not in liberation but in further estrangement—a moral debilitation. The debilitated moral agency insidiously hinders the flourishing of the self. This moral debilitation is, therefore, the defining challenge of the third phase of orphan consciousness. It encapsulates the diminished capacity for emotional connection, trust, and the exercise of a compromised moral imagination—a vestige of collective memory warped by the unyielding pressures of a society that valorizes autonomy yet leaves its members adrift without a moral compass.

The critical examination of the impact of neoliberal self-improvement discourse reveals a dissonance between the ideology of meritocracy and the actual socioeconomic dynamics. Contemporary reports highlight the increasingly rigid stratification and the perpetuation of inequality, particularly among the youth. The social narrative of individualism and self-management is, in fact, incapacitating the collective psyche, eroding the moral imagination necessary for envisioning a just and equitable society. This erosion can be characterized as “debilitation,” a term that encapsulates the psychological and moral toll on individuals who navigate a system that both idolizes and undermines the principle of meritocracy.

V.4. The “Hellish” World and the Orphans Debilitated

The psychological state of the debilitated subjects is most starkly portrayed in contemporary literature. Contemporary literary expressions of neoliberal anxiety can be understood as the latest iteration of this long-standing motif, which has adeptly shape-

shifted to align with the *zeitgeist* of each era while retaining the essence of the trauma. The essence, distilled through the centuries, emerges from a historical continuum of abandonment and systemic disempowerment. In the current epoch, this trauma is reframed within the context of neoliberalism, which perpetuates the orphanhood narrative through the imposition of an ideology that champions individualism and self-reliance, often at the expense of community and collective welfare.

Literary critic Kim Hyung-joong draws an important line between the 2000s writers represented by Park Min-gyu (introduced in chapter IV) and Kim Ae-ran on the one hand, who depicted the confusion and disillusionment immediately following the IMF crisis in a cheerful and creative tone, and writers of the 2010s on the other. What characterizes the latter, according to Kim, is the sensibility of “de-sublimation.”³²⁵ Kim states that the tendencies of 2000s novels, such as obsession, fantasy, delusions, humor, and apocalyptic worldviews, can be seen as a form of “the economy of emotional expenditure” akin to sublimation.³²⁶ In other words, the various devices in 2000s novels

³²⁵ Kim Hyung-joong, “De-sublimation or Writing of Resentment,” in *Literature and Society* 201 (2013): 366–384.

³²⁶ In fact, Hwang Jong-yeon was the first to observe a shift away from the longstanding spirit of “sublimation” in Korean literary history, particularly noting a trend towards “de-sublimation” that emerged in the literature of the 2000s, led by several female writers. He argues that this shift was driven by a desire to vividly illuminate unique life experiences, which led to a flourishing of realist fiction characterized by intricate details that simultaneously sublated into the broader totality of the subject. Hwang suggests that these seemingly inconspicuous and trivial aspects of reality, once integrated according to a generative principle, transformed into the sublime. However, he also observes a departure from the earlier intention to transcend the pains of reality through writing in the late 1990s and 2000s literature. Instead, this period is marked by decentered and humorous tendencies, an exposure of extreme intricacies of reality, and a portrayal of real situations as implicit disasters, indicating a move away from the traditional notion of literary sublimation. Kim Hyung-joong further develops Hwang’s argument by drawing a distinction between writers of the 2000s, who employed various literary devices as a form of “the economy of emotional expenditure” akin to sublimation, and those of the 2010s. Hwang, Jong-yeon, “The Realism of

represent the realization of satisfaction in the text with the frustration of ascendance, a circumvented consumption of *libido*, and a symbolic convergence of the pleasure principle that has become impossible in reality. In the face of unprecedented despair, these literary works seek comfort and humor amidst the harsh realities. These works make efforts to find a way out of their circumstances, despite the frustration of real-world challenges. However, the novels of the 2010s clearly mark a turning point in de-sublimation, displaying visceral and primeval emotional reactions to reality, which can only be described by one word: “hellish.”³²⁷

In Park Sol-moe’s short novel “I Won’t,” the image of a subject caught between the command of self-development and unchanging reality is portrayed in a de-subliminal language, depicting a sense of powerlessness and resignation.³²⁸ The “man in black” who owns the karaoke establishment confines the narrator and Yeo-ju, who just casually visited the karaoke together, subjecting them to physical and verbal violence and coercing them to sing “diligently.” This seemingly impossible and absurd situation is a direct metaphor for the meritocratic society of endless competition, as revealed in the following statement by the man in black:

Since you have no idea what it truly means to work diligently, spend 30 minutes listening to my story and contemplating diligence. Diligence. It might not be easy at first, but as you diligently persist, you will come to understand. Diligence. Once you reach the pinnacle of diligence, your song will be complete, and when it

De-sublimation: The Landscape of Changing Novels,” *Literature Village*, 8 (August 2001): 1–17. Kim, “De-sublimation,” 374.

³²⁷ Kim, “De-sublimation,” 382.

³²⁸ Park, Sol-moe, “I Won’t,” in *Then What Shall I Sing?* (Seoul: Consonant and Vowel, 2014).

is complete, you will finally. . . finally become a song that soars into the world. That is what a song is.³²⁹

You must break yourself until the table breaks, simultaneously breaking and being born again, anew.³³⁰

The male owner continues to demand that his guests sing in his shop. If they do not sing according to his command, he resorts to violence and even commits murder. The reason behind this is his belief in the world of “diligence.” By singing “diligently,” one can complete the song, and once it is completed, it can “fly” to a new world. The man’s idea of a new world is one filled with “beauty, spirit, and passion.”³³¹ Therefore, he forces the protagonist and other captives, who are considered “just ordinary people,” to sing because he believes that they do not understand the concept of diligence at all. In this context, the man’s command to sing depicts the neoliberal coercion that represents the sovereignty of living diligently.

In the face of the violent coercion by the man in black, the protagonist remains entirely powerless. She offers no resistance, obediently carrying out the tasks assigned by the man in black. Even when she observes the active resistance of Yeo-ju, another captive, the narrator only thinks, “She has a good spirit,” as if it were someone else’s affair.³³² There is no sense of solidarity among the victims, and there is no sign of proactive efforts to address the situation. The protagonist simply iterates that she is

³²⁹ Park, “I Won’t,” 51.

³³⁰ Park, “I Won’t” 54.

³³¹ Park, “I Won’t,” 54.

³³² Park, “I Won’t,” 41.

“incapable of taking any action.”³³³ Even after escaping from the karaoke room and coming back for revenge against the man in black—by violently making the man acknowledge that he was wrong and declare that “I won’t, and I have no intention of working hard anymore, as there is no world of diligence”³³⁴—she anticipates returning to her estranged life, stumbling and getting up, wearing only black clothes, and starting again the next day. After the revenge, she monologues:

In hindsight, I haven’t really done anything. The man is alive, and he will continue to live well. The karaoke room hasn’t burned down or been destroyed, and I am just tired. But being tired is not so bad; it makes me sleep a lot. So, I shouldn’t work hard for anything in the future, just like now. Oh well, I should sleep hard; I should sleep really hard and not do anything. I haven’t done anything up until now, and I won’t do anything in the future. I won’t, absolutely won’t.³³⁵

Literary critic Kim Mi-hyun interprets Park Sol-moe’s declaration of “I Won’t” as an expression of political agency that disrupts the existing discourse and system through dedicated non-action. Kim Mi-hyun argues that by performing intentional “not doing,” Park Sol-moe’s protagonist executes resistance by deactivating oppressive commands.³³⁶ This perspective aligns with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of “potentiality” from *Homo Sacer*, where maintaining the capacity for not doing oneself becomes a political act.³³⁷ Kim Mi-hyun attempts to infuse a political voice into Park Sol-moe’s protagonist.

³³³ Park, “I Won’t.”

³³⁴ Park, “I Won’t,” 65.

³³⁵ Park, “I Won’t,” 69–70.

³³⁶ Kim, Mi-hyun, “Potentiality and (Im)possibility of Literature: Focusing on Novels by Park Sol-moe, Kim Sagwa, Han Yu-joo,” *Korean Literary Creation* 18 (2019), 16.

³³⁷ Kim, “Potentiality and (Im)possibility,” 12.

However, this effort appears to be a struggle of someone from the age of “sublimation” to comprehend and process the extreme, spasmodic expressions of despair prevalent in the literature of the 2010s. Park Sol-moe’s “I Won’t” may not fully embody the potential for disruption, given the consistent displays of powerlessness, despair, and unfiltered anger evident in her other works, which are too visceral and unrefined to be categorized as potentiality. It is symptomatic rather than potential.

Kim Sa-gwa’s 2010 novel *Poetry of Terror* epitomizes the de-sublimational excretion of gut emotion.

Sandstormblowingfromfarawayfarawaystillveryfarbutsoon comingvery
closecominghere tousall pouringdown aboveourheads noonecanescape
endlesslyrushinginthatwillkillusalldiedienoone survivestheendtheendtheendtheend
theendtheendwelltheworldisgoingtoend becarefulnobodycanescapefa
llfallfalldestructiondestruction destruction
destructiondestructiontheresnowaytodestruct thereisnothingtherefore becareful
extremely becareful thereisnowayescapego somewheredeeper
escapetosomewheredeeper go escape tothedeeperptothedeeper deepverydeep
deepverydeep moremoremore more.³³⁸

The narrative of *Poetry of Terror* revolves around the excruciating aspects of this era to the extent that it could be termed a “grotesque odyssey.”³³⁹ The story begins with an anonymous North Korean girl who was raised as a “bug” and a “pig” under her brutal father who abused her (she does not have a name, so she is called () in the text). She was named “Jenny” by the human trafficker who purchased her from her father, and she is

³³⁸ Kim, Sagwa, *Poetry of Terror* (Seoul: Minumsa, 2012), 140.

³³⁹ Yeon, Nam-kyung, “Narratology Analysis on Representation of Immigration Women,” *Journal of Korean Fiction Research* 62, (2016): 217.

sold “into a worse situation,” which is Seoul, “the entrapment of capital.”³⁴⁰ Her life in Seoul is marked by an even more malevolent cycle of exploitation and dehumanization. The above monologue emerges when Jenny, who has gone from domestic helper to prostitute, sets herself on fire along with the pastor who exploited her. It is unclear whether this monologue belongs to the speaker or the author. This unstructured utterance deliberately disregards proper grammar, arranges sentence flow haphazardly, and mixes informal and formal language. This soliloquy appears more as an excretion of gut feelings, a cry, a moan, or a curse rather than a refined expression of them.³⁴¹

If this novel were written during the era of sublimational writing of the 1980s or 1990s, as described by Hwang Jong-yeon and Kim Hyung-joong, Jenny would have ignited a determination not to be broken by oppression, even if she could not overcome the despairing situation. At the very least, if it were written during the 2000s, as described by Kim Hyung-joong, where the absurdities of the situation were depicted humorously, a sense of camaraderie among the losers might have unfolded within the depicted absurdity. However, in the 2010s, Jenny’s agonizing life is portrayed in excruciating detail. In the end, she simply flipped the typical victim’s plot, taking matters into her own hands by committing arson and murder against the perpetrator before ultimately committing suicide. There is no sign of any resolve to subvert or hope for solidarity. What remains is Jenny’s hazy consciousness, laden with substances and alcohol, as she seeks retribution that borders on criminality.

³⁴⁰ Kim, *Poetry of Terror*, 12.

³⁴¹ Kim, “De-Sublimation,” 381.

The fear of failure that seems everlasting is expressed thrillingly in Hwang Jeong-eun's work, "Fall."³⁴² The narrator in this novel is in a room that seems to have "no drain hole, no door, and probably no clock either, an incorrect and strange room,"³⁴³ yet they are perpetually falling into a space as vast and desolate as the universe.

Atom quantum atom quantic, I am quantically tiny. Falling with tiny things. Perhaps another tiny thing is falling alongside this tiny thing. Falling together, maybe. Quantumly, with the sensation of a tiny body, the concept of "next to" might be excessively distant, and we may not even sense it falling together. Hey, hey, I am falling here. Are you all right over there? Are you falling okay?³⁴⁴

Loneliness and fear became inertia.

Inertially, I felt lonely and scared,
Lonely and scared, and above all, bored.
I fall and fall and keep falling.³⁴⁵

The descent is endless to the point where they might wish for a violent end by colliding with anything. "After repeated thoughts, thought in that way, lonely falling falling lonely falling can't bear it at all who who who's not here me me me collide falling falling falling it rises faster."³⁴⁶ Like Kim Sagwa's monologue, Hwang Jeong-eun also deliberately disregards grammar and conveys fear and loneliness through the language before the sentence. The novel abruptly ends with this sentence, and there is no resolution. It is difficult to find any humor, solidarity, or hope. As Kim Hyeong-joong describes, it is "hellish."

³⁴² Hwang, Jeong-eun, "Fall," in *Introduction of Mr. Pa* (Paju-si, Korea: Changbi Publishers, 2010).

³⁴³ Hwang, "Fall," 63.

³⁴⁴ Hwang, "Fall," 76.

³⁴⁵ Hwang, "Fall," 77.

³⁴⁶ Hwang, "Fall," 78.

These emerging writers' obscure sentences, resonating with inherent despair and futility, represent the world the orphaned subjects face. Not too long ago, probably in the age of sublimation, the orphaned could believe that, even if the world was not exactly as we desired, the world still existed within their reach. The dilemma then was whether to assimilate into the world's order and live as mechanical parts or resist such a life. However, at some point, they found themselves in a situation where the world had become excessively narrow, leaving them gazing helplessly at a world far beyond their control. Even attaining a structured, predictable existence became difficult. The writers of today are born into this closed world. The sensitivity to a state of perpetual fall shared by the three authors above and many more is one of the dominant emotions governing our time. The fear of a never-ending state of falling, hoping that the downward motion will violently end in any kind of collision, is described as "hellish" in the reality portrayed by these authors. Without humor or fantasy, they now confront this hellish world with only anger, resentment, and pre-linguistic expressions. It is a fiery sentiment that seems impossible to sublimate or control.

V.5. Summary

Through the exploration of historical and literary narratives in this chapter, the concept of the orphaned subject and their moral predicament emerge. The damages done to the orphaned subject tangibly manifest in the unutterable desperation as depicted in contemporary Korean literature. The debilitation this chapter articulated is twofold. It mainly entails the orphaned subjects' impaired capabilities to engage the world and

imagine alternatives. Yet, it also speaks to society's collective failure to recognize and rectify the injustices that have led the orphaned subjects to moral debilitation. The task at hand, then, is to identify and confront the moral debilitation without casting blame on those affected. The following chapter investigates how to understand this moral debilitation and why it is imperative to bring it into the decolonizing conversation.

Chapter VI:

Moral Debilitation

The previous chapters examined the three stages of orphan consciousness in modern Korean historical and literary contexts to explore the enduring impact of colonialism on the moral prospects of Koreans. Chapter III traced the transformation of Korea's governance and socioeconomic conditions, highlighting the perpetuation of oppressive governance from Japanese colonial rule through the US military government to military dictatorships, laying a foundation for neocolonialism exacerbated by global capitalism. This perpetuation is evidenced by the governance techniques from the colonial era to the economic turmoil of the late twentieth century. Chapters IV and V discussed the psychological and emotional repercussions of historical trauma on orphaned characters across generations, illustrating how these impacts evolved from colonial rule to post-war disillusionment and authoritarianism. The emergence of "the orphaned subject" in the neoliberal era symbolizes individuals confronting the challenges of self-optimization and competitive individualism in a society marked by a significant emotional and moral breakdown, reflecting a deep-seated frustration and moral apathy.

This chapter ventures into a crucial phase of the dissertation, delving into the "moral costs" of historical and sociopolitical disruptions that have perpetuated states of ethical dislocation of the orphaned subject. The critical examination within this chapter is devoted to articulating the imperative role of moral debilitation within the domain of postcolonial theology while meticulously avoiding the attribution of blame to those

affected by such debilitation. The task is to shed light on the character of this inherited ethical impairment and to assimilate this comprehension into the broader endeavor of decolonization. The analysis aims to explore the ways in which this moral debilitation has shaped individual and communal narratives, emphasizing the persistent ethical transgressions that masquerade as societal advancement and personal agency in the postcolonial context. Consequently, the chapter seeks to express the compromised moral agency experienced by the colonized and to affirm that addressing moral debilitation is crucial for authentic progress and the re-establishment of ethical integrity.

The chapter seeks to unfold this task by examining the various ethical theories, addressing the interrelation of historical trauma, capabilities deprivation, and the enduring impacts of colonialism due to systemic, constitutive bad moral luck. It investigates the philosophical underpinnings of systemic injustice and moral debilitation while seeking to reconcile these with the lived realities of individuals who have been shaped by oppressive forces beyond their control.

The culmination of this investigation is not merely to outline the contours of the problem but to engage with moral debilitation as a tangible influence that has continuously shaped personal and communal narratives. It articulates moral debilitation as a persistent element of colonial harm that extends beyond physical, political, economic, and psychological dimensions, encroaching upon the very ethical fabric that is essential for a society's collective thriving and for the individual's capacity to envision a liberated future. Through this chapter, the dissertation asserts the necessity of incorporating the insights into moral debilitation into the broader framework of

decolonization to not only recognize the profound moral debilitation but also, eventually, to illuminate pathways toward realistic reparation.

VI.1. Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach was developed by Amartya Sen and expanded by Martha Nussbaum to evaluate the individuals' and societies' quality of life and construct theories on basic social justice.³⁴⁷ Sen first developed this approach as an alternative to the limited conception of utilitarian economic models' measures of well-being, where one's well-being is evaluated in terms of the amount of external resources one can access to achieve happiness.³⁴⁸ In such a limited view, justice is conceptualized as expanding opportunities and resources to those who are deprived, namely "welfarist."³⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the availability of "more resources" does not guarantee their effective utilization or the achievement of desired outcomes. To assess the well-being of individuals, it becomes imperative to take into account not only the quantity of resources at their disposal but also their capacity to leverage and actualize these resources in terms of their capabilities and potential. In this sense, Sen prioritizes "capability"—defined as

³⁴⁷ Amartya Sen, "Equality of What?" (1979) in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. McMurrin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 197–220; Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Nussbaum (2010).

³⁴⁸ Sen, "Equality of What?" 198–205.

³⁴⁹ Sen, "Equality of What?" 205.

“substantive freedom” to attain combinations of potential “functionings” (actual states of existence)—over external resources in pursuit of social justice.³⁵⁰

Nussbaum agrees with Sen in the sense that the necessary conditions for the performance of capabilities are substantial opportunities and the freedom to choose and advocate.³⁵¹ However, Nussbaum asserts that her approach differs from Sen’s in two ways. First, these two scholars differ in how they utilize the capabilities approach.³⁵² Sen argues that the concept of capabilities serves as a foundation for a comprehensive assessment of a nation’s life and uses it as a standard for comparative evaluation.³⁵³ In contrast, Nussbaum uses this approach as a framework for constructing theories of social justice from the standpoint of political liberalism, focusing on guaranteeing a minimum standard of essential capabilities for individuals.

Second, Sen and Nussbaum differ in their views on how freedom should relate to the kind of life the capabilities approach aims to realize.³⁵⁴ Sen speaks of capability as

³⁵⁰ Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992; 1995), 45; Sen defines “functionings” as the various things a person manages to do or be in life. They are the actual achievements and states of existence. Examples of functionings include being well-nourished, being in good health, achieving self-respect, or being socially integrated. “Capabilities,” on the other hand, refer to the different combinations of functionings that are possible for a person to achieve, from which they can choose. Capabilities represent a person’s freedom to pursue different ways of living that they value. For instance, the capability to be well-nourished involves not just the actual act of eating but also the ability to access food and the freedom to choose what to eat. Likewise, the capability for good health encompasses not only the current state of health but also access to healthcare and the ability to live in a healthy environment. Amartya Sen, “Capability and Well-Being,” in *The Quality of Life*, ed. Martha Craven Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 30–53; 31–32.

³⁵¹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 17–8.

³⁵² Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 70.

³⁵³ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 71.

³⁵⁴ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 70–72.

freedom itself and suggests that society must maximize freedom. He opposes the idea of a list of core capabilities because such a list could potentially limit freedom. Nussbaum, on the other hand, focuses on the content of freedom and uses a list of ten central capabilities as the basis for political principles and constitutions. She argues against promoting a universal concept of freedom because some freedoms can be maintained only by limiting others. For example, while society might value economic freedom, it may impose restrictions on the purchase of certain goods, like endangered species or harmful substances, because exercising such freedoms can lead to moral harm and undermine collective social and environmental well-being. Moreover, it is essential to differentiate between freedoms that are fundamental for leading a fulfilling life and those that are not. Societies that aspire to achieve equality or establish a comprehensive social minimum inevitably find themselves compelled to impose restrictions on specific aspects of freedom. Any society aiming for fair politics based on equal dignity must differentiate human freedoms into categories: those that are “central” versus “trivial,” beneficial versus harmful, and particularly worth protecting versus not.³⁵⁵

The differences mentioned above led to Nussbaum’s departure from Sen’s approach, resulting in her categorization and listing of core capabilities. Nussbaum defines capabilities as “what [a] person is able to do and to be.”³⁵⁶ She delineates three types of capabilities: basic, internal, and combined. Basic capabilities are innate and may develop over time, forming the foundation for moral concern and further capability

³⁵⁵ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 73–74.

³⁵⁶ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 24.

enhancement.³⁵⁷ Internal capabilities are developed traits and skills, often cultivated through interaction with one's environment, necessary for living a life of dignity.³⁵⁸ Combined capabilities are the freedoms or opportunities emerging from the interplay of societal conditions, constituting "substantial freedom."³⁵⁹ They are realized when internal capabilities and conducive external conditions align, allowing individuals to exercise their capabilities thoroughly. This framework underscores the importance of an environment that enables the actualization of core capabilities essential for a dignified life.

The three types of capabilities—basic, internal, and combined—should not be interpreted rigidly as distinct stages through which an individual or their capabilities progress, as they are interrelated and sometimes overlap from the perspective of development. It is not feasible to realize combined capabilities without internal capabilities, and without combined capabilities, it is challenging to develop internal capabilities.³⁶⁰ Basic capabilities can be included within internal capabilities insofar as they are targets for development. However, basic capabilities are also inherently part of human nature, imbued with innate powers present from birth, distinguishing them from internal capabilities, which are developed through education and environment.³⁶¹ Thus,

³⁵⁷ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 18.

³⁵⁸ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 22–23.

³⁵⁹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 19–20; 21.

³⁶⁰ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 22.

³⁶¹ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 24.

these three types of capabilities should be understood as integrated, supporting and reinforcing each other. This integrated understanding recognizes the complexity and interdependence of the capabilities necessary for achieving human flourishing.

After examining capabilities as three organically interconnected aspects, Nussbaum, in contrast to Sen, presents a list of core capabilities.³⁶² She argues that to fulfill the objectives of normative law and public policy using the concept of capabilities, one must consider the substance of these capabilities to discern which are more or less important and to make judgments about their value.³⁶³ Not all capabilities are inherently good; Nussbaum suggests that the list of core capabilities aligns closely with a universally defensible list of human rights. Acknowledging the abstract nature of the ten core capabilities she proposes, Nussbaum suggests that each country should concretize them in various ways, considering its constitutional system, fundamental principles of state governance, and unique traditions and history.³⁶⁴ This implies that while the core capabilities have a universal moral foundation, their application and prioritization might vary across different cultural and national contexts.

³⁶² Nussbaum's list of core capabilities is as follows: 1) Life: Achieving a full human lifespan; 2) Bodily Health: Maintaining overall health, nutrition, and shelter; 3) Bodily Integrity: Ensuring freedom of movement, safety, and reproductive choice; 4) Senses, Imagination, and Thought: Cultivating an educated and imaginative life with freedom of expression; 5) Emotions: Forming attachments, experiencing love, grief, and gratitude without damaging fear or anxiety; 6) Practical Reason: Developing personal good and life plans with liberty of conscience; 7) Affiliation: Engaging in social interactions, showing empathy, and being treated with dignity and respect without discrimination; 8) Other Species: Caring for and living in relation to nature; 9) Play: Enjoying leisure activities; 10) Control over Environment: Participating in political life and having property rights. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 33–34.

³⁶³ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 31–32.

³⁶⁴ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* 33.

VI.2. Capabilities Approach to Decolonization

It may seem odd to utilize the capabilities approach for a study of decolonizing ethics. The capabilities approach's historical association with the installation of global development programs and policies in the context of economic and social development has limited its relevance to the broader discourse on decolonization. Only a few works exist exploring potential congruence between the two. In contrast, many critiques, particularly from postcolonial viewpoints, have suggested that the capabilities approach covertly subscribes to a Eurocentric understanding of human welfare, one that is entrenched in the distinct presuppositions of Western philosophical thought.³⁶⁵ For example, Anna Millan and Ali Can Yildirim maintain that Nussbaum does not adequately address the lasting effects of colonial and neocolonial exploitation on the global South, focusing instead on the symptomatic consequences for women's diminished capabilities without examining the underlying capitalist structures.³⁶⁶ They also contend that despite Nussbaum's belief that her approach is not "parochial," her liberal universalism does not sufficiently consider its own highly specific liberal epistemic framework and presumes an

³⁶⁵ Carlo Argenton, and Enzo Rossi, "Pluralism, Preferences, and Deliberation: A Critique of Sen's Constructive Argument for Democracy: Pluralism, Preferences, and Deliberation," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 44 (2013): 129–145; Frances Stewart, "Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach, by MARTHA NUSSBAUM," *Journal of International Development* 13 (November 2001): 1191–1192; Matti Häyry, "Doctrines and Dimensions of Justice: Their Historical Backgrounds and Ideological Underpinnings," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 27 (2018): 188–216.

³⁶⁶ Anna Millan and Ali Can Yildirim, "Decolonizing Theories of Global Justice," in *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*, ed. Nikita Dhawan (Toronto: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2014), 195–208; 204.

oversimplified similarity between scholars in the global North and marginalized individuals in the global South.³⁶⁷

Indeed, Nussbaum is committed to liberal individualism in the sense that she presupposes humans as autonomous individuals who prioritize preserving the capacity to make choices and develop certain human functions.³⁶⁸ Moreover, although she possesses a keen insight into the fragility of human good, her liberal individualism still posits a rational subject grounded in universality.³⁶⁹ As she argues in other works like *Political Emotions* and *Hiding from Humanity*, the subject, to become a dignified and cultured global citizen in solidarity with others, must cultivate love, compassion, and empathy through “narrative imagination” while suppressing negative emotions such as disgust, jealousy, and shame.³⁷⁰

Also, Nussbaum argues not for abandoning universalism rooted in classical political liberalism but for their reinvention beyond the “parochial,” advocating for a humanism that recovers passion and love and seeks detachment from entanglements. Humanity is loving by nature; it is through love that individuals, isolated and free like islands, encounter the world, invent it, and take responsibility for it. Opening ourselves to

³⁶⁷ Millan and Yildirim, “Decolonizing Theories,” 202–203.

³⁶⁸ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 51.

³⁶⁹ See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In this book, Nussbaum examines the problem of moral luck in Greek philosophy, centering her argument in the inherent vulnerability of pursuing a moral life. Her thesis recognizes the precarious nature of goodness and advocates for the cultivation of empathy and passion as means for societal rejuvenation in light of this understanding.

³⁷⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, trans. Jo, Gyewon (Seoul: Minumsa, 2015).

others means exposing our vulnerabilities. If we do not reveal our vulnerabilities to one another, we do not love. In our uncertain and unstable times, the world we co-create with others, based on love, is the only world accessible to us, and thus we are responsible for it. Humans must bear this responsibility as free individuals. This prescription suggests a naïveté in believing that ideals of liberal universalism and adequate education can solve structural injustice. This liberal inclination is what might have led Rosi Braidotti to criticize Nussbaum for supporting an American neoliberal approach that appropriates Europe's classical humanism, especially the educational, cultural, and social ideals of the classical Greek era.³⁷¹ This criticism aligns with Millan and Yildirim's argument that Nussbaum's approach "purports to keep colonialism firmly in the past, thereby providing only a very limited critique of current neocolonial structures."³⁷²

Despite the valid critiques that postulate Nussbaum's approach as infused with political liberal commitment and a universalist tendency, I recognize the value in utilizing this framework for theorizing about social justice, especially in postcolonial contexts. I find her capabilities approach is particularly instrumental in framing the central argument of this dissertation as it underscores the essential conditions for a good life, aligning with the concept of flourishing in the face of oppression. This approach posits that human flourishing is about more than the availability of resources or subjective satisfaction; it is about the capabilities people have to live meaningful lives. The goal of this project is to explore the compromised moral agency of orphaned subjects, using Nussbaum's

³⁷¹ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 38–39.

³⁷² Millan and Yildirim, "Decolonizing Theories," 202.

framework to shift from merely noting the structural injustice of colonialism to assessing how it has compromised the necessary conditions to develop capabilities for a flourishing life.

This dissertation adopts Nussbaum's general conceptualization centered on the concept of capabilities as a means to address the issue of human flourishing and her emphasis on the necessity of creating a suitable political, intellectual, and moral environment for nurturing individual capabilities. To do so, however, it is first essential to highlight a crucial point. Many scholars have suggested that Nussbaum holds a normative commitment to expanding core capabilities. She advocates for a universal framework for human flourishing, asserting that all nations should provide support to their citizens to flourish. While many aspects of her framework are difficult to dispute as universally desirable due to their broad scope, implementing them in practical terms without compromising their universality presents significant challenges.

Conceptualizing the moral agency of the colonized through the lens of the capabilities approach can contribute to decolonization efforts. It does so by challenging the implicit premise on the readiness of the colonized for decolonization, which can be sometimes very demanding and requires a highly level of moral capacity. The capabilities approach helps postcolonial thinkers recognize that individuals may lack the necessary resources, including both internal virtues and external opportunities for action, to fully engage in decolonizing efforts. By emphasizing the development of capabilities as a prerequisite for flourishing, Nussbaum's framework advocates for a nuanced understanding of the preparedness of colonized individuals for this task. It acknowledges

that the lasting effects of colonialism can result in compromised moral agency, thus necessitating a more supportive and less presumptive environment that acknowledges the profound, intricate moral damage inflicted by systemic oppression. This perspective fosters a compassionate approach aimed at rebuilding the moral and emotional capacities crucial for decolonization work rather than making unwarranted judgments about the colonized individuals' readiness for such an endeavor.

VI.3. Moral Luck

The capabilities approach, with its emphasis on enabling individuals to lead lives they value, necessitates a consideration of the role of external factors beyond individual control in shaping opportunities and outcomes. Moral luck, as a philosophical concept, sheds light on the arbitrary nature of circumstances and the moral responsibilities entailed in addressing systemic injustices that hinder human flourishing. In modern moral philosophy, the problem of obstacles to pursuing virtue is often discussed with the concept of moral luck. Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel initially conducted substantive engagements in the discourse on morality and luck.

Bernard Williams opened his discourse by examining the historical relationship between luck and morality in philosophical thought, emphasizing that these two have been traditionally viewed as distinct.³⁷³ Philosophical traditions have not considered luck, whether good or bad, as a valid subject for moral assessment. For example, unexpected

³⁷³ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 20–22.

disasters or fortuitous gains like lottery wins are beyond moral appraisal. The impact of luck on moral evaluations of individuals was considered negligible, and moral evaluations have centered on the agent's will and intentions, not on outcomes influenced by luck. Kant, a key figure in this view, argued that moral actions are based on reason, and moral justification, a process free from the influence of luck, is paramount.³⁷⁴

Williams challenged Kant's perspective by distinguishing between rational and moral justification, scrutinizing their interplay with luck.³⁷⁵ He demonstrated that outcomes of choices, which can be swayed by luck, significantly affect the agents' rational justification. He used the case of Gauguin, whose decision to abandon artistry for a different path hinges on the success of the new life chosen; if Gauguin fails, it suggests a flaw in judgment. Yet, Williams acknowledged that common sense does not always consider such failures as reflective of poor choice when luck is involved. He distinguished between "external luck," which involves factors outside an individual's deliberation and control, and "internal luck," which pertains to aspects considered during decision-making.³⁷⁶ Gauguin's predicament illustrates the effect of luck on rational justification, with internal luck playing a pivotal role.

Williams investigated whether rational and moral justifications align, particularly in scenarios where luck affects outcomes. He argued that they are not synonymous; rational justification may allow for a positive outcome to validate a decision, but moral

³⁷⁴ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 22.

³⁷⁵ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 23.

³⁷⁶ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 25.

justification demands more.³⁷⁷ Even if rationalization for an action like Gauguin's relocation to Tahiti can be made on the grounds of its success, moral justification may fall short, especially when such actions entail significant personal or ethical costs, such as family abandonment. Williams contended that Kant's view of moral justification as the supreme value, which excludes the influence of luck, does not capture life's complexities. He further suggested that an individual's character and temperament, traits already influenced by luck from birth, should be considered.³⁷⁸

In other words, Williams acknowledged the existence of what ethical theorists commonly refer to as "constitutive luck," where factors beyond their control or choice can influence a person's disposition, intentions, or character.³⁷⁹ Despite accepting this truth, Williams maintained an interest in the ability of individuals to reflect on and evaluate their actions. If a person can introspectively assess their actions, they may come to realize that their failures stem from their own misguided decisions. In the context of moral justification, the author highlighted the importance of considering the "agent regret" when making moral judgments.³⁸⁰ If an actor can reflect on their own mistakes and assess them introspectively, they are capable of experiencing "regret" or "remorse." This means that from a first-person perspective, it is essential for an individual to recognize that they could have acted differently and better. In this regard, true moral

³⁷⁷ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 25.

³⁷⁸ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 25.

³⁷⁹ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 34.

³⁸⁰ Williams, *Moral Luck*, 36.

responsibility lies not in returning things to their original state but in the individual's capacity for introspective evaluation and regret regarding the outcomes of their actions. Such thinking challenges the concept of just punishment as an appropriate notion of moral responsibility. Ultimately, Williams aimed to reject Kantian positions that claim ethics is not influenced by luck and instead embraced an Aristotelian perspective, which acknowledges the impact of constitutive luck on our motives, intentions, and character traits.

Nagel advanced the discussion of moral luck's impact on moral agency, giving a clear definition of it as follows:

Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond [his] control, yet we continue to treat [him] in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck. Such luck can be good or bad. And the problem posed by this phenomenon, which led Kant to deny its possibility, is that the broad range of external influences here identified seems on close examination to undermine moral assessment as surely as does the narrower range of familiar excusing conditions. If the condition of control is consistently applied, it threatens to erode most of the moral assessments we find it natural to make. The things for which people are morally judged are determined in more ways than we at first realize by what is beyond their control. And when the seemingly natural requirement of fault or responsibility is applied in light of these facts, it leaves few pre-reflective moral judgments intact. Ultimately, nothing or almost nothing about what a person does seems to be under [his] control.³⁸¹

According to Nagel, moral luck's arbitrary quality creates moral distinctions. If some people must bear responsibility while others need not, the relationship of moral luck to moral blame and praise for voluntary actions inevitably raises questions. While addressing this issue, Nagel considers the close connection between "luck" and "lack of

³⁸¹ Nagel, "Moral Luck," 26.

control,” dividing moral luck into four categories: causal, circumstantial, resultant, and constitutive.³⁸²

1) Causal luck refers to the way past events (causes) determine current situations (effects). This encompasses fortune or misfortune related to our past constraining situations and is germane to discussions of responsibility and free will. However, causal luck is considered redundant in some philosophical contexts because constitutive luck and situational luck can encompass its domain.³⁸³

2) Circumstantial luck is related to the problems or situations a moral agent faces. Nagel provides an example by comparing two hypothetical individuals during World War II in Germany: one actively involved in the Holocaust due to their military position, and the other who, for business reasons, moved to Argentina just before the war, thereby avoiding collaboration with the Nazis.³⁸⁴ Nagel argues that we would morally criticize and hold the former accountable for their actions, while we might not do the same for the latter. However, if the latter had stayed in Germany during the same circumstances, they might have acted similarly to the former. In this case, circumstantial luck becomes the factor that differentiates the two individuals morally. Namely, it is a moral situation where the blame is directed not at those who cooperated with the Nazis, nor at the intentions of the two individuals, nor even at the fact of their actions resulting in Nazism. If someone else who went to Argentina had faced the same circumstances and decided to

³⁸² Nagel, “Moral Luck,” 27–38.

³⁸³ Andrew Latus, “Constitutive Luck,” *Metaphilosophy* 34 (2003): 460–475.

³⁸⁴ Latus, “Constitutive Luck,” 34.

cooperate with the Nazis, it would have been the same moral situation. That is, if it is argued that the situation in which actors find themselves can influence moral evaluation, then one is not actually accountable for one's actions, but rather, if others were in the same situation, they could also be blamed. And if one finds oneself in a different situation, it implies a responsibility to act differently. This leads to the consequence that "too many people are held responsible for too many things," as Daniel Statman points out.³⁸⁵ Consequently, one can argue that there is a problem with considering situational luck in moral evaluation.

3) Resultant luck is a concept where actions are evaluated solely based on their outcomes, irrespective of the agent's intentions or will. This notion is exemplified by comparing two drunk drivers: one who accidentally kills a child and another who, under similar circumstances, harms no one.³⁸⁶ The first driver faces moral and legal repercussions as a murderer, while the second is merely seen as careless, demonstrating a moral distinction based on outcome. Nagel suggests that the moral difference between causing harm or not is significant yet contingent on luck. Therefore, blame is appropriate when there is a lack of reasonable excuses and strong moral reasons. This leads to the notion that beyond the consequences of actions, an agent's emotions, character, and tendencies are crucial for moral evaluation, introducing the idea of "constitutive luck,"

³⁸⁵ Daniel Statman, "Introduction," in *Moral Luck*, ed. Daniel Statman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 20.

³⁸⁶ Statman, "Introduction," 25.

which pertains to the luck involved in forming one's character and dispositions, as a significant factor in discussions of moral luck.

4) Constitutive luck arises in the justification of action, even when one considers resultant and situational luck, as the focus eventually shifts to what lies within an agent's mind. According to Nagel, constitutive luck relates to the "uncontrollability" of an agent's "causes" in relation to who they are. This encompasses inherited genes, innate talents, the absence of genetic diseases, and the presence of healthy parents, all of which form the causes of one's actions but are beyond one's control, thus constituting luck. When luck is viewed, like Nagel does, as a "lack of control" and differentiated into a lack of control over outcomes and causes, it is clear that actors have less control over the causes.³⁸⁷

As Susan Hurley points out, constitutive luck might be seen as incompatible with responsibility, as accepting constitutive luck would lead to determinism, thereby rendering the concept of responsibility meaningless.³⁸⁸ In a given situation, an individual might not act with good intentions, possibly because they were born with genes that make them callous or malevolent. Why, then, should society blame someone for bad intentions or a personality that is beyond their control? Nagel argues that one should not blame people for bad intentions or traits that they did not choose.³⁸⁹ Just as one should not

³⁸⁷ Statman, "Introduction," 26.

³⁸⁸ Susan Hurley, "Debate: Luck, Responsibility, and the Natural Lottery," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10 (2002): 82.

³⁸⁹ Hurley, "Debate," 33.

blame someone for uncontrollable actions, society also cannot ignore judgments about a person's moral status based on such uncontrollable traits. Although situational luck and resultant luck are instrumental in evaluating someone's actions, people are ultimately judged not by how they came to act in a certain way but by what kind of people they are. In this context, as Andrew Latus notes, "If luck affects a person's character, even if resultant luck is disregarded, the issue of constitutive luck must be addressed."³⁹⁰ This is because when one encounters the problem of resultant luck, it can be argued that a person's moral status is determined more fundamentally by their intentions or character than by the results of their actions. However, when faced with the problem of constitutive moral luck, one cannot offer a more fundamental basis for evaluating a person than their character or intentions. Therefore, according to Latus, finding a way to avoid the problem of constitutive moral luck is extremely difficult.

Nagel's classification provides a structured framework for comprehending the diverse mechanisms through which factors external to an agent's control can influence the moral assessment process. Resultant luck and causal luck relate to the outcomes and antecedents of actions, respectively. Circumstantial luck pertains to the agent's external environment, while constitutive luck concerns internal characteristics that define the agent's identity. Thus, the most problematic aspect of the issue of moral luck is constitutive luck. As Hurley points out, the primary concern with constitutive luck is whether it is compatible with moral responsibility. This becomes increasingly complex

³⁹⁰ Latus, "Constitutive Luck," 462.

when intersected with issues of structural oppression and discrimination. The discussions on moral luck, initially limited to personal moral dilemmas as explored by philosophers like Williams and Nagel, have evolved into broader social issues through the contributions of feminist moral philosophers like Card and Tessman. In the next section, I will further examine their discussions on bad, constitutive moral luck that extends beyond individual accountability in order to encompass systemic factors into ethical judgment.

VI.4. Moral Luck and Systemic Injustice

Card's examination of constitutive moral luck in *The Unnatural Lottery* centers on the unfortunate moral luck associated with having one's character harmed due to oppression or abuse.³⁹¹ In contrast to Williams and Nagel, who are concerned with the connection between moral luck and individual responsibilities, Card examines moral luck within the context of structural oppression, specifically gendered discrimination.

Card posits that the main detrimental effect of oppression on moral agents lies in its capacity to hinder the development and functioning of an integrated self. She explains:

Oppression splinters us (both within ourselves, as individuals, and from each other, within a group) by putting us constantly into double binds. A damaged individual who has splintered into several personalities, identities, or personality or identity fragments may be importantly analogous to an oppressed group. Even those of us who have not splintered that far are likely to be sites of seriously warring inclinations, moods, likes, and dislikes elicited by the double-binds of oppressive institutions.³⁹²

³⁹¹ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*.

³⁹² Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 42.

The “double binds” created by oppression force individuals into the internal and relational conflicts that prevent individuals from forming a stable, integrated self. Internally, it becomes challenging for individuals without a coherent self to align their actions with their beliefs and desires, undermining their ability to take full moral responsibility. Relationally, the splintered selves find it difficult to form meaningful relationships, preventing them from constructing robust, healthy social unity. It creates barriers to empathy, understanding, and solidarity, which are fundamental to social cohesion and collective moral action. When individuals are unable to reconcile their fragmented selves, they are also less able to engage in collective efforts to resist or overcome the oppressive conditions that cause such fragmentation.

For example, oppression of women and lesbians and child abuse result in moral harm, with the detrimental effects of one often exacerbating the other. Oppression manipulates choice, rendering some decisions difficult and others overly appealing or effortless. It cultivates an environment conducive to child abuse by establishing deplorable childcare conditions and by designating the vulnerable—characterized by fragility and taught to embody childlike traits, as well as actual children—as targets for sexual abuse, all while shielding those responsible for care from being held accountable.³⁹³

This splintered self under oppression complicates the notion of moral responsibility, as it raises questions about the extent to which individuals can be held accountable for

³⁹³ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 41.

traits or behaviors that are significantly shaped by external, oppressive forces.³⁹⁴ In Williams' and Nagel's discussions on moral luck, the focus is on the unpredictable and uncontrollable traits of moral luck, which correct the conventional view on moral judgment and just punishment. Nagel maintains, "the area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink under this scrutiny to an extensionless point."³⁹⁵ In contrast, Card's focus is on the impact of moral luck on characters, dispositions, and tendencies of moral agents to develop virtues and vices.

I am interested, from the agent's forward-looking perspective, in the implications for taking responsibility for oneself of a history of bad moral luck, such as comes with a history of child abuse or a heritage of oppression. Taking responsibility here is likely to involve consciously developing an integrity that does not develop spontaneously. This is, I argue, not the same as developing autonomy. The idea is not to develop *boundaries* between ourselves and our environments, although some boundaries may be necessary as means. Rather, the idea is to develop such things as reliability and bases for self-esteem.³⁹⁶

Card argues that victims of oppression bear their responsibilities, particularly towards their peers and future generations, "despite our complicity."³⁹⁷ She calls upon the victims to take responsibility for certain situations, even for which they are not accountable. This is not about assigning blame to the victims, she argues, but rather about acknowledging their potential to enact change, both in their lives and in the broader societal context.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁴ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 47–48.

³⁹⁵ Nagel, "Moral Luck," 35.

³⁹⁶ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 24. Emphasis is by the original author.

³⁹⁷ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 41.

³⁹⁸ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 33.

The oppressed cannot be held accountable for the circumstances and environments that restrict their access to opportunities crucial for developing self-esteem and competence, both of which are essential for being recognized as complete moral agents. In these contexts, their behaviors and ways of existing are often misinterpreted or overlooked. Thus, in Card's view, one of the most critical ethical achievements is to cultivate and uphold personal integrity and to assume responsibility for the aspects of ourselves to which we can stay faithful, even in hostile conditions. She states, "to develop and maintain integrity, we need to discover, assess, and sometimes make changes in our values, traits, and capacities."³⁹⁹ In other words, the answer to the question that initiated her discussion of moral luck, "how is it possible for us as damaged agents to liberate ourselves from the damage?" lies in becoming an integrated self who is inclined to take responsibility for others.⁴⁰⁰

Tessman extends Card's examination of moral luck within oppressive systems, arguing that moral luck not only describes the misfortune of experiencing oppression and its ethical consequences but also significantly influences the potential for personal transformation amidst political resistance.⁴⁰¹ Since the development of one's character is primarily influenced by luck, it may be beyond an individual's power to foster or maintain dispositions that align with their principles of liberation. In Tessman's view, individuals might find themselves struggling to cultivate what would be considered

³⁹⁹ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 33.

⁴⁰⁰ Card, *Unnatural Lottery*, 41.

⁴⁰¹ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 6.

virtues from a perspective of liberation because factors beyond their control affect their ability to embody these traits.

The problem in feminist approaches to the liberatory project is that, according to Tessman, although they admit the seriousness of structural problems, they often ignore the difficulty of cultivating and changing one's character into something suitable for change.

Part of the failure of a feminist politics of personal transformation, then, is that it recognizes the need but not the difficulty, or even impossibility in some cases, of the transformation of character. According to the voluntarist account of character change employed by a politics of personal transformation, one would never experience a serious and unalterable conflict between desire and principles, for one could always simply choose to desire in accordance with one's principles, at most retaining oneself along a behavioral model. To allow moral luck a place is to necessarily reject this voluntarist account of agency in favor of the claim that although one is "the morally relevant center of agency" (Card 1996, 28) for one's own character, this does not imply that one can effectively will one's character to assume a particular shape.⁴⁰²

While Tessman agrees that striving for practices that can transform character is important, she also calls attention to the reluctance within progressive feminism to acknowledge this deficiency, leading feminists to theorize *as though the means for character transformation are easily accessible*. Tessman acknowledges Card's emphasis on the impact of bad moral luck on character but critiques her for too readily proposing a solution for rectifying moral damage.

In this regard, Tessman advocates for the development of an ethical theory tailored for those with irreversible damage and persistent oppression, an approach that

⁴⁰² Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 25.

acknowledges the ongoing challenges and choices faced by those in perpetual resistance. A comprehensive ethical approach, according to Tessman, must also include strategies for assuming responsibility for a self that is not entirely self-determined and may be beyond repair. A liberatory feminist moral theory must either find ways to repair the moral damage that contributes to this inner conflict or *accept that some moral injuries are irreversible and instead explore how to conduct oneself ethically despite these adverse conditions.*⁴⁰³

To address this, Tessman argues for the need to distinguish between the concept of “systemic, incident bad luck” and “systemic, constitutive bad luck.”⁴⁰⁴ According to her, oppression obstructs human flourishing in two ways. First, oppression impedes the flourishing of the oppressed by imposing external limits on oppressed agents—such as deprivation of freedom, material resources, or political power—which hinder their well-being. Resisting this systemic, incident bad luck can take the form of structural changes that aim to remove such obstacles, which is undoubtedly of primary importance. Secondly, oppressive conditions can create “inclinations that conflict with liberatory principles, thus barring the possibility of full virtue.”⁴⁰⁵ While both ways can be seen as bad luck, she considers the first method to be systemic, incident bad luck, and the second as systemic, constitutive bad luck. Ethicists who have pondered bad luck, such as Aristotle, Bernard Williams, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Margaret Urban Walker, have

⁴⁰³ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 23.

⁴⁰⁴ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 27.

⁴⁰⁵ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 27.

dealt with systemic, incident bad luck. They believe “there are virtues that are praiseworthy precisely because of how they shape one’s response to bad moral luck.”⁴⁰⁶

This aligns with the context of liberatory struggle, which often acknowledges the need for character change but frequently overlooks the difficulty of making such change. In this sense, Tessman advocates for revising bad luck, namely from incident bad luck to constitutive bad luck.

According to Tessman, the concept of systemic, constitutive bad luck situated in the virtue ethics framework can also correct the problem of moral responsibility. This is because, in virtue ethics, the ideas of psychic damage and moral damage are not separate.⁴⁰⁷ Act-based ethical theories such as deontology often emphasize moral responsibility and censure by distinguishing psychic and moral damage. These theories may acknowledge that external factors beyond one’s control—essentially, matters of luck—are responsible for causing psychological harm. Yet, if this psychological harm translates into character defects, the individual is perceived as morally responsible for these flaws and any resulting detrimental actions.⁴⁰⁸ For example, suppose a person who has experienced significant trauma develops a mistrustful attitude. In that case, act-based theories might criticize the person for any actions stemming from this mistrust, even though the initial psychic pain was inflicted by others. The mistrust developed as a coping mechanism. This perspective overlooks the complex interplay between psychic

⁴⁰⁶ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 29.

⁴⁰⁷ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 37.

⁴⁰⁸ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 36–37.

harm and character formation, potentially leading to an unjust allocation of moral blame to those who have been shaped by circumstances they did not choose.

In contrast, within virtue ethics, psychological harm that hampers human flourishing is regarded as moral damage, as leading a good life is inherently linked to possessing moral virtues.

Any psychological trait that can be labeled “damage” will in fact count as a moral trait, that is, a character trait, precisely because in calling it a form of damage, one is making a normative judgment about it, in this case a negative judgment, based on the trait’s tendency to interfere with flourishing. So while some psychological traits may be morally neutral, a damaged psyche represents a lack of virtue (if not the presence of a vice), a lack of a trait that could help one toward flourishing. For instance, all of the following possible forms of both psychic and moral damage: a tendency to feel guilt or resignation instead of anger when one is wronged, a disposition to feel persistent hopelessness, a habit of manipulating or lying to others, a lack of self-confidence.⁴⁰⁹

In this sense, Tessman argues that the notion of constitutive moral luck mitigates unwarranted blame by recognizing that moral shortcomings may stem from factors outside the individual’s control, even though they impact the individual’s ethical standing. Viewing the moral deficits of the oppressed as stemming from pervasive, systemic bad luck suggests a refined grasp of moral responsibility. While acknowledging systemic forces responsible for the adverse conditions shaping agents’ character and virtue, Tessman opines that individuals should hold moral responsibility over their actions, even when factors beyond their complete control have influenced their character. Adopting this view enables the oppressed individual to uphold their moral agency while maintaining moral accountability. Simultaneously, it avoids assigning blame to the

⁴⁰⁹ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 37–38.

oppressed agent in a manner that would exonerate all systemic or oppressive influences from their responsibilities.⁴¹⁰

Christine Koggel interprets Tessman as rejecting the notion of purely relativistic interpretations of human flourishing in light of the pervasive presence of oppression.⁴¹¹ Tessman highlights the broader harm inflicted by oppression on those subjected to it, emphasizing that the attainment of human flourishing cannot be oversimplified by merely providing resources and opportunities, as Nussbaum attempts with her capabilities approach. Tessman maintains that these measures alone do not empower individuals to break free from the clutches of oppression and its adverse consequences or equip them to confront and challenge oppression whenever and wherever it emerges consistently. Koggel maintains that while Nussbaum advocates for a perspective where social structures and conditions shape individual identities, from Tessman's understanding, Nussbaum's viewpoint lacks the requisite depth and complexity.⁴¹² In order to fully comprehend the extent of the damage inflicted by oppression, it is imperative to consider how this damage is inflicted on individuals' capacity to make virtuous choices that are unburdened by virtues deriving their significance solely from prevailing oppressive conditions.⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 38.

⁴¹¹ Christine Koggel, "Burdening the Burdened Virtues," *Hypatia* 23 (2008): 197–204.

⁴¹² Koggel, "Burdening the Burdened Virtues," 201.

⁴¹³ Koggel, "Burdening the Burdened Virtues," 199–201.

The issue at hand, therefore, is not solely a matter of endorsing the belief in the equality of all human beings and asserting that justice necessitates the provision of resources to ensure everyone has the opportunity to pursue their objectives and enhance their abilities. Instead of exclusively focusing on policies or practices designed to uplift the less privileged, enabling them to pursue their cherished projects and aspirations while improving their capabilities with individual liberty, Tessman’s perspective encourages liberatory thinkers to question whether the assumed and underlying conception of the good life should be unquestioningly accepted or esteemed.⁴¹⁴

VI.5. Systemic, Constitutive Bad Luck and Moral Debilitation

In her article “Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck,” theologian Kate Ward contrasts theological and philosophical approaches to the concept of moral luck.⁴¹⁵ Ward posits that while both approaches acknowledge the influence of factors beyond the moral agent’s control, the theological perspective of womanist theologians retains a sense of hope and agency through reliance on God’s action.

Feminist philosophers, . . . tend to emphasize the damage moral luck does to the moral subject. Womanist theologians acknowledge this reality, too, but distinct from feminist philosophers, womanist theologians’ accounts of moral luck move beyond caution or lament to emphasize the moral agency of persons subject to moral luck, an emphasis redolent of Christian hope. Distinct from feminist philosophers’ focus on communities as sites of harmful moral luck, womanist theologians identify communities as places of moral agency and virtue pursuit.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Koggel, “Burdening the Burdened Virtues,” 202.

⁴¹⁵ Kate Ward, “Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38 (2018): 131–145.

⁴¹⁶ Ward, “Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck,” 138.

She maintains that communities and God's grace play crucial roles in forming virtue, suggesting that moral luck, though it affects the development of virtue, is never the ultimate determinant of a person's moral status. Instead, Christian virtue ethics emphasizes the persistent possibility of moral improvement, the active role of the community in supporting virtue, and the transformative power of God's grace.⁴¹⁷

The approach to decolonizing agency within postcolonial theologies aligns with Ward's description of womanist theologians' engagement with the concept of moral luck. Womanist theologians, as noted by Ward, recognize how privilege and oppression can limit or enhance an individual's ability to pursue virtue. Similarly, postcolonial theologians understand the crucial role played by cultural, social, and historical contexts in influencing an individual's capacity for action and moral decision-making. Korean postcolonial theologians, in a similar way as the womanist theologians highlighted by Ward, maintain a hopeful standpoint on colonized agency despite their keen, critical acknowledgment of bad, systemic moral luck. Their approach suggests that while individuals may be subject to bad, systemic moral luck, these forces do not ultimately define their moral capacity. From Tessman's point of view, they do not take into consideration the "constitutive" aspect of systemic luck that might impact various moral capacities of the colonized.

Postcolonial theologians have been acutely aware of and passionate about exposing and dismantling systemic, incident bad luck that hinders human flourishing.

⁴¹⁷ Ward, "Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck," 139–141.

However, there has been a tendency to shy away from discussing systemic, constitutive bad luck and its damaging consequences on the oppressed agents' morality. While postcolonial theological endeavors often promote hope and can guide how to live or act against oppression, they seldom pause to acknowledge that, as Tessman points out, the best possible option under oppressive circumstances is often far from available due to the limitation of one's moral capacity.⁴¹⁸ It is challenging to tackle the pervasive and ingrained nature of constitutive bad luck without seeming to reinforce a narrative of inescapable victimhood that could demoralize or stigmatize the oppressed. Historically, there have been many cases in which the victims of bad luck are accused of bringing such luck due to their moral deficiency. There is also the potential difficulty in balancing the acknowledgment of systemic injustices with the empowerment of oppressed individuals, as focusing on systemic moral damage might overshadow the agency and resilience of these individuals. Emphasizing the constraints and hardships faced by individuals enduring and resisting oppression carries the potential to present an excessively pessimistic portrayal of oppression and the possibilities for both survival and the mitigation of its impact on individuals.

Here, Tessman's discourse on moral damage could provide a crucial bridge for postcolonial theologians to adequately address the moral damage inflicted upon the colonized without falling into victim blaming. Acknowledging the influence of systemic factors on not only external conditions but also individual morality allows for recognizing

⁴¹⁸ Tessman, *Burdened Virtues*, 5.

moral damage that is neither entirely within the individual's control nor indicative of their moral failure. It enables us to discuss how oppressive systems impinge upon individual moral agency and character without necessarily casting the oppressed in the light of hopeless victimhood. Tessman's perspective suggests a path to conceive moral damage as an aspect of systemic injustice that calls for attention, thereby enriching postcolonial theological narratives with a more accurate assessment and reparation of the harms of colonization and its transgenerational aftermath.

One compelling reason for postcolonial theology to engage with the concept of moral damage is that it directly impacts the capacity for moral agency, which is crucial in the process of decolonization. Decolonizing efforts call for moral responses like love, compassion, and repentance, which require a high level of moral sensibility and imagination. However, these moral capacities may not be readily available to all, especially those affected by systemic, bad, constitutive moral luck, which can impair one's moral integrity, sometimes irrevocably. Without addressing the moral damage of those who are expected to lead such demanding tasks of decolonization, the efforts can become "burdensome," echoing Tessman's concept of "burdened virtues." Thus, the discourse on postcolonial harm must consider the impact of colonialism on the moral agency of the colonized.

In this sense, the objective of this dissertation does not lie in constructing an account of what constitutes desirable or reprehensible moral characters (virtue or vice) for guiding decolonization efforts. Nor does this dissertation aim to define what flourishing means with limited capabilities and how one can achieve it. Instead, it

purports to illuminate the persistent and profound impact of colonial harm that extends beyond the physical, political, economic, and psychological dimensions to encompass the moral domain of the colonized. There are instances when the undertaking of self-decolonization and the transformation of the world are simply unattainable due to the magnitude of impinged harm, making it unrealistic to confront and resist oppression and venture down to liberation.

Tessman's concept of systemic, constitutive bad luck and her focus on addressing the moral damage exacted upon oppressed individuals provide invaluable insights into understanding the moral agency within oppressive systems. However, her framework tends to concentrate on individuals who endure or resist the oppression with a potential to address communal suffering, thereby not fully encompassing the moral harms inflicted by transgenerationally accumulated trauma. Moral damage Tessman examines in the context of systemic, constitutive moral luck attains the greater significance in the Korean postcolonial setting, where the repercussions of historical traumas further complicate the intricate challenge of nurturing moral agency within dysfunctional communities that have been systematically fractured by historical oppression and are continually strained by neoliberal economic structures.

Considering how the residual effects of colonial trauma can interfere with an individual's or community's moral capabilities, I propose the introduction of the concept of "moral debilitation." Drawing insights from other disciplines, such as trauma theories and disability studies discussed in Chapter II, the concept of moral debilitation considers the intergenerational aspect of moral damage, as well as emphasizes the passive nature of

such harm. It illustrates the impact of colonial systems and their enduring repercussions on the moral capacities of entire communities across generations. By highlighting the passive nature of this intergenerational moral damage, this concept signifies a condition systematically imposed by oppressive colonial forces. It also addresses how intergenerational trauma can obstruct the potential for flourishing among the orphaned, while also revealing how it diminishes society's capacity to provide the necessary environment for individuals to foster their moral agency fully.

This debilitation, reflected in the transmission of trauma that echoes the continuity of repressive neoliberal governance, reveals a collective experience of moral suffering that is more complex and far-reaching than individual instances of moral damage. It is a damage that compounds, intensifying with each generation, leading to entrenched feelings of shame, disgust, distrust, despair, and even moral inertia. This broader concept would enable decolonizing efforts to address the moral complexities that arise from historical and transnational injustices, illuminating the multilayered nature of moral debilitation.

Chapter VII:

Conclusion—Accounting for Postcolonial Pessimism

This dissertation has introduced historical and literary representations of the orphaned subject that posit an understanding of the decolonizing agency marked by what I have termed “moral debilitation.” It unfolded the historical and literary depiction of orphaned characters in modern Korean literature and the notion of the contemporary orphaned subject to illustrate the persistent nature of the systemic, constitutive bad luck of colonialism.

The historical context of orphan consciousness presented in Chapter III elucidates the evolution of Korea’s governance and socioeconomic landscape, shedding light on the continuity of oppressive governance from Japanese colonial rule to the US military government and subsequent military dictatorships. The techniques of rule employed during the Japanese occupation were transmitted and adapted first by the US military government and then by the autocratic regimes that followed, maintaining a model of dominance over the Korean populace. This legacy of governance laid the groundwork for what would become an evolved form of neocolonialism that peaked during economic crises. In this neocolonial landscape, the forces of global capitalism further entrenched control, manipulating Korea’s economy and exacerbating societal disparities.

The neo/colonial harm encompasses not just the material and external hindrances to prosperity but also the psychological and moral damages that are critical to living a good life. Chapters IV and V have traced the orphaned subjects’ symptomatic

psychological and emotional reactions to historical trauma through different periods. These emotional reactions are generationally accumulated and transferred from the confusion and shame experienced during colonial rule to a sense of post-war disgust. As the sociopolitical context evolves, so too does the portrayal of the orphaned, with later literature in 1980s and 1990s capturing feelings of distrust and despair in the face of authoritarianism and capitalism. The intrusion of neoliberal capitalism in Korea in the late 1990s and the beginning of 2000s instigated profound, significant transition in the emotive and moral state of individuals. This era saw the rise of the orphaned subject, a figure representative of a society grappling with the demanding imperatives of self-optimization and competitive individualism. In this financial and existential crisis, the orphaned, cast adrift as self-sufficient individuals, find themselves on a relentless quest for meaning and value amidst the unrelenting demand to optimize personal advancement in every facet of life. Any alternative way of life seems unobtainable for these orphaned subjects trapped in the false promise of freedom and autonomy.

Across all the presented literary and historical narratives, an important theme emerged: the moral debilitation that distinguishes itself from the commonly known concept of moral injury. Insights from postcolonial trauma theories and disability studies elucidate how systemic and historical traumas weaken the moral capacities of individual and communities over time. Moral debilitation expands the innately individualistic concept of moral injury, taking how oppressive colonial systems have impaired the agents' abilities to interact with others and the world. Importantly, however, the term moral debilitation does not aim to indicate an inherent deficiency within disenfranchised

individuals and communities. It rather aims to identify a more complex harm induced by systemic oppression, which has been relatively unexplored in postcolonial theorizing. It highlights the importance of noticing and recovering moral agency within communities fractured by historical oppression and strained by ongoing economic structures.

To argue this point, I have engaged with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach as a framework to examine the diminished moral agency of orphaned subjects. This perspective shifts the emphasis from a broad recognition of structural injustices to a more detailed examination of their effects on the essential conditions necessary for fostering capabilities that enable a flourishing life. This approach emphasizes the importance of human flourishing, which is more than the availability of resources or subjective satisfaction. It posits that human flourishing is about the capabilities people have to live meaningful lives. Thus, it contributes to decolonial theorizing by challenging premature judgments about the readiness of colonized individuals for the morally demanding process of decolonization. It acknowledges that due to the enduring legacy of colonialism, individuals may lack the necessary resources—including internal virtues and external opportunities—to engage in decolonization efforts fully.

The incorporation of moral luck into the discourse challenges postcolonial theologies by examining the degree to which colonized subjects can be held morally responsible for actions when the oppressive and debilitating forces of colonialism have compromised their moral agency. It probes the intersections of agency, culpability, and the systemic bad luck that arises from entrenched historical structures. The systemic, constitutive bad luck reveals that individual capacities or virtues do not solely determine

the moral agency of the colonized; this agency is also shaped by the broader, often deleterious, circumstances surrounding them. Thus, the concept of moral luck demands a reconceptualization of moral responsibility in light of systemic oppression. It underscores the need for postcolonial theologies to account for the ways in which colonial legacies continue to impede individuals from acting as fully capable moral agents.

Therefore, this dissertation posits that the moral debilitation wrought by systemic forms of oppression necessitates recognition and integration into the conversations of postcolonial theology. Such integration offers a more comprehensive picture of postcolonial reality, thereby enriching the broader endeavor of decolonization. This endeavor extends beyond the confines of political and economic emancipation to embrace the essential aspects of moral restoration.

The pessimism articulated in this dissertation is, I argue, a critical element for addressing decolonizing theologies. It provides a realistic assessment of the psychological and moral repercussions of colonialism and neocolonialism, which are often neglected in the decolonization discourse. This pessimism is not mere negativism but a sober recognition of the deep-seated, generational moral debilitation that impedes the colonized subjects' capacity to exercise full moral agency. This recognition is crucial because it confronts the often-overlooked moral and emotional damages caused by systemic oppression. By acknowledging these profound impacts, this dissertation challenges postcolonial theologies to move beyond narratives that may inadvertently minimize the entrenched nature of colonial harm. It underscores that decolonizing theologies must grapple with the moral complexities that persist in the consciousness of

the colonized. In doing so, it pushes for a more comprehensive approach to decolonization that includes moral and psychological healing rather than focusing solely on political and economic liberation.

The importance of this pessimism lies in its ability to illuminate often unspoken traumas and to offer a truthful account of the colonized subjects' conditions. It advocates for a theology that does not presume the readiness or the capacity of the colonized for decolonization endeavors but rather supports a gradual and nurturing process that takes into account the deep moral wounds inflicted by colonialism. This approach can lead to a more effective, authentic decolonization process that is sensitive to the real conditions and capabilities of the colonized.

Although this dissertation is steeped in an acknowledgment of the historical and ongoing moral impairments, it is far from succumbing to despair. Instead, it postulates that the true measure of its contribution lies in its capacity to discern and articulate the contours of colonial harm and its moral repercussions. Emphasizing the somber truth of the colonized subjects' conditions does not preclude hope; instead, it insists upon a hope that is informed and measured, one that is capable of guiding reparative actions with an empathetic understanding of the lingering wounds. This informed pessimism, therefore, is not an end in itself but a starting point for developing frameworks that incorporate the full complexity of the postcolonial predicament into strategies for communal and individual healing.

By taking stock of moral debilitation, this work encourages future theological and ethical explorations not merely to seek political emancipation or economic restitution but

to aspire for a holistic restoration of postcolonial agency. The task ahead—likely the work of a different project—necessitates an integrated approach that aligns the recognition of historical harms with actionable paths toward redress and recovery. In acknowledging the urgent need for such a comprehensive methodology, this dissertation sets forth to recognize the past’s shadows while illuminating potential avenues toward a reparative future.

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