

Blurring Boundaries: Fact, Fiction, and the Limits of Self-Narration in Cho Nam-Joo's "Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982"

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In her novel "Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982" (2016, engl. 2018), South Korean author Cho Nam-Joo blurs the boundaries between self-narration, fiction, and documentary testimony. The novel follows the life of Kim Jiyoung, whose relentless experiences of gender discrimination and misogyny cause her to speak in other women's voices about events she did not experience. While this phenomenon allows her to become a representative of Korean women's struggles, it also results in her being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. The novel's framing device—revealing at the end that the entire text is mediated through Jiyoung's male psychiatrist—further complicates its status as a self-narrative, raising questions about voice, authority, and the limits of trauma representation.

Despite being told by a third person narrator, "Kim Jiyoung" has widely been read as an autobiographical text, with Cho Nam-Joo deliberately constructing her protagonist as a Korean "everywoman." The novel employs strategies of autofiction by blending the author's own experiences with fictional elements, while simultaneously asserting factual accuracy by incorporating real-world statistics via footnotes. This interplay between fiction and documentary reinforces as well as problematizes the novel's claim to truth, raising general questions regarding the relationship of factuality vs. fictionality and re-enactment vs. representation in self-narratives. Drawing on Hanna Meretoja's concept of narratively mediated interpretative processes, I examine how the novel enables readers to situate their own experiences within a broader sociopolitical framework. The text functions as both an individualized trauma narrative and a collective testimony, demonstrating how self-narration is shaped by overarching cultural narratives.

The novel's reception further highlights the performative dimensions of self-narration. In what has been called an "Uncle Tom's Cabin' effect," "Kim Jiyoung" became a flashpoint for debates about feminism and gender inequality in South Korea. Its publication galvanized feminist discourse but also provoked significant backlash, with female celebrities facing online harassment for reading the book. This cultural response underscores the novel's role in what Judith Butler describes as the performed self—Jiyoung's story is not just a narrative but a socially enacted provocation that forces readers to position themselves within a polarized gender discourse.

Finally, the novel's engagement with trauma culture raises questions about the limits of representation in self-narratives. While trauma narratives often function as acts of witnessing and empowerment, Cho Nam-Joo places Jiyoung's story within a psychiatric framework that delegitimizes her voice. The novel thus exposes a paradox: while it claims to represent the collective experience of Korean women, it ultimately repositions Jiyoung as a psychiatric subject whose story is mediated by a male authority figure. This tension between self-narration and institutional framing reflects the ethical and formal constraints of trauma storytelling, particularly when the authority to narrate is compromised.

By exploring these intersecting concerns, my presentation will demonstrate how "Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982" challenges the limits of self-narratives, raising critical questions about factuality, performativity, and the ethics of representing trauma in contemporary literature.