

# Women's Dilemma and Social Reflection in Film Narrative: A Case Study of Kim Ji-young, Born 1982

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## Abstract

Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 portrays the life experiences of an ordinary woman navigating family, work, and society, exposing the patriarchal structures, female discipline, and reproductive oppression in South Korean society. Adapted from Cho Nam-joo's novel, the film recounts Ji-young's struggles in childhood and marriage, along with the mental distress caused by the pressures of balancing career and family. It powerfully illustrates how societal expectations lead women to lose their sense of self, highlighting the exploitation of emotional labor and unpaid housework. Ji-young's story transcends individual experience, reflecting the broader structural gender inequality embedded in society. Upon release, the film sparked intense social debate, particularly from South Korean men, some of whom petitioned the Blue House to block the screening, accusing it of fueling gender conflict. This opposition reveals the patriarchal structure's defensive response to challenges and men's anxiety over losing status and privilege. This paper explores how government pro-natalist policies, under the guise of preserving family structures, further entrench the oppression of women's reproductive and labor value.

**Keywords:** feminist theory, patriarchy, gender inequality, film narrative, ethical

## 1. Introduction

The film *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* employs a delicate and authentic narrative to deeply explore the dilemmas faced by Korean women across multiple spheres—family, workplace, and society. The storyline follows the life trajectory of Kim Ji-young, illustrating how social norms and expectations discipline female identity and gradually erode her sense of self and individual value. Through the use of flashbacks and retrospections, the film intertwines Kim Ji-young's psychological struggles with her childhood memories, revealing how she has been constrained by gender biases and societal expectations from a young age. Raised in a patriarchal family environment, Kim Ji-young's parents and elders placed greater emphasis on molding her into a "qualified" wife and mother rather than supporting her personal development. This gendered education implicitly channels her life along a predetermined path, compelling her to adapt to these expectations and, after marriage, progressively lose clarity about her identity.

The film transcends the personal realm, using Kim Ji-young's individual experiences to critique broader social issues by linking her personal struggles with systemic structures. Marriage amplifies her dilemmas, with the film employing subtle domestic scenes to portray the invisible oppression she endures. At her in-laws' house, she bears the burden of exhausting household chores, which are framed as inherent female responsibilities—unpaid and unacknowledged. Through these everyday details, the film demonstrates how the domestic sphere becomes a hidden site of female discipline. The monotony of daily chores and emotional labor erodes Kim Ji-young's sense of personal value, reducing her to roles shaped by social expectations: a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law. Through these unspoken pressures, the narrative depicts how Kim Ji-young is forced to conform to familial discipline, leading her to gradually lose her sense of self in an oppressive environment (Yang, X. 2024).

The film not only portrays Kim Ji-young's personal struggles but also reflects the widespread identity crises and social discrimination faced by contemporary Korean women. A significant part of this narrative focuses on Kim Ji-young's challenges in the workplace. Despite her professional competence and recognition by colleagues and superiors, gender discrimination blocks her path to career advancement. When forced to choose between motherhood and career, she resigns and becomes a full-time housewife. This plotline underscores the narrow definition of women's value, limiting it to the domestic sphere and discouraging professional self-fulfillment. Kim Ji-young's resignation is not a voluntary decision but rather a result of societal and familial expectations that

confine women's roles, pushing her to the margins of domestic life. This choice not only symbolizes her personal defeat but also reflects the instrumentalization of women's reproductive responsibilities by society, which consumes her career aspirations over time.

Simultaneously, the film further delves into the profound emotional impacts of Kim Ji-young's psychological struggles, illustrating the long-term consequences of emotional repression. Unable to express her true feelings, she gradually develops multiple personalities, channeling her internal pain through different identity roles. This transformation is not merely an expression of her psychological crisis but also a subtle form of resistance against societal discipline. Through this narrative technique, the film reveals how women strive for self-redemption under the weight of emotional burdens, with the shifts between multiple personas becoming a silent rebellion against oppression. Kim Ji-young's mental breakdown reflects the inevitability of emotional collapse when an individual fails to find self-recognition within societal norms. This narrative strategy resonates with audiences emotionally, prompting reflection on the oppressive definitions of female identity imposed by society. In its seemingly tranquil storytelling, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* exposes profound societal fractures, urging viewers to recognize the struggles and awakenings of women during social transformation.

## 2. Visual Aesthetics and the Amplification of Emotional Expression

*Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* masterfully employs visual aesthetics and audiovisual language to tightly weave the characters' inner emotions with the narrative, amplifying the film's expressive impact. Unlike traditional verbal language, cinema possesses a unique system of representation, where imagery and sound act as narrative tools to convey emotions and the underlying meaning of events directly. The film's use of composition, color, and lighting enhances the expression of Kim Ji-young's inner state and the emotional weight of societal oppression.

The film's color strategy is particularly striking, with the interplay of warm and cool tones used to distinguish between reality and memory, externalizing the characters' emotional states. Cool tones are predominantly employed to reflect Kim Ji-young's feelings of repression and helplessness in her everyday life (Chadwell, F. 2020). Scenes where she is overwhelmed by household chores at her mother-in-law's home are often depicted with dim, cool hues, symbolizing her depressed mindset as she becomes trapped in domestic obligations. Blue plays a pivotal role in the film, functioning as a key element in the externalization of emotion: from a psychological perspective, blue is associated with melancholy and frustration. The varying saturations of blue—ranging from pale blue to deep blue and jewel-toned sapphire—mirror Kim Ji-young's emotional states across different phases of her life. In the workplace, she is seen wearing light blue, symbolizing youthfulness and energy (Triarisanti, R., & Purnaman, E. S. 2024). After becoming a mother, she dons a dark blue coat, reflecting the heaviness and isolation of her new reality. When she eventually re-enters the workforce, her choice of sapphire blue attire conveys a sense of renewed confidence and vitality.



Figure 1.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Kim Ji-young holds her child in a tense and defensive posture, cradling the baby with one arm while pressing her other hand against her head, conveying a sense of helplessness and exhaustion. This posture not only reflects the physical and emotional burden she endures as a mother but also symbolizes the internal pressure she cannot release. Her closed eyes and slightly bowed head further suggest her fatigue and resignation. This detail highlights the suppression of her emotions, buried deep within her, with no outlet for expression. The child, too, remains silent in her arms, emphasizing the caregiving responsibility that weighs heavily upon her. This

silent interaction accentuates the film's portrayal of the invisible burdens of motherhood—Kim Ji-young must not only meet her child's needs but also repress her own emotions and fatigue, fully committing to the selfless role of a mother.

The lighting in the scene employs noticeably dim and cool tones, dominated by deep blues and grays, symbolizing repression, exhaustion, and inner loneliness. The interplay of light and shadow divides the scene into contrasting areas, with most of Kim Ji-young's face and body shrouded in darkness, hinting at her emotional turmoil and struggles. The kitchen setting, depicted in cold tones, contributes to the stifling atmosphere, transforming the domestic space into an invisible confinement. A faint light filters in from the upper right corner of the frame, but it is insufficient to dispel the pervasive dimness. This weak light source symbolizes a distant and unattainable hope, reinforcing Kim Ji-young's sense of powerlessness under the weight of life's demands. The contrast between light and dark further illustrates her repressed state within the family and her longing for freedom.



Figure 2.

In Figure 2, the foreground depicts family members seated together, engaging in cheerful conversation, exuding a sense of ease and comfort, reflecting their acceptance and endorsement of traditional family dynamics. In contrast, Kim Ji-young stands alone in the background, isolated in the kitchen. This composition emphasizes her state of “present absence” within the family—although physically present, she lacks a true sense of involvement or voice. Despite her substantial contributions to the family, her efforts do not earn her equivalent respect or recognition. The scene is predominantly rendered in soft, warm tones, creating the illusion of a harmonious family atmosphere. These warm hues symbolize the idealized image of traditional familial unity but subtly hint at the invisible oppression women endure within such settings. While the warm lighting illuminates the main characters in the scene, Kim Ji-young is positioned in the dimly lit corner of the kitchen. This contrast accentuates her marginalized position within the family—though she is present, her presence remains unacknowledged (Yang, F. 2022).



Figure 3.

Figure 3 employs lighting aesthetics and color use to delicately portray Kim Ji-young's inner sense of helplessness and repression, illustrating the plight and isolation modern women face within family life. The scene is dominated by cool tones, with gray-green shades on the walls, floor, and washing machine creating an oppressive, desolate atmosphere. The low saturation enhances the monotony and suffocation in her life, as though her world is devoid of vitality. This color palette symbolizes her emotional exhaustion, highlighting how she is trapped by household chores and traditional roles, unable to find space for self-expression. Natural light gently filters in from the side, bringing a hint of warmth, yet the light is soft and dispersed, almost overwhelmed by the cool tones. This faint light represents her yearning for connection and her inner struggle, as if she is searching for an escape, but the surrounding environment hinders her from breaking free. The "separation" effect created by the light underscores her repressed state, evoking a silent sense of isolation.

The camera uses a medium shot, placing Kim Ji-young in front of the washing machine, gazing downward, resting her head on her hand, which intensifies her sense of isolation and helplessness. The laundry room, as a space tied to domestic chores, symbolizes the way her life is consumed by household duties. Here, she seems confined by her familial role, with little room for self-fulfillment. This scene not only portrays her resignation but also allows the audience to deeply feel the struggle modern women endure between family responsibilities and self-identity. Through the intricate combination of light, color, and setting, the film reflects Kim Ji-young's inner conflict and the clash with societal expectations. Her role within the family brings exhaustion and reveals the pain of being misunderstood and unappreciated under traditional views. The entire scene uses visual symbols to depict her helplessness, conveying the inescapable plight faced by many women.

### **3. Women's Labor and Reproductive Value in Ethical Dilemmas**

Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 reflects the multiple injustices women face under the influence of patriarchal values, particularly in cultures that favor men over women (M2 Presswire. 2021). This is not just the story of Korean women but also a reflection of the lives of countless women worldwide. From an early age, Kim Ji-young is marginalized because of her gender: her family prioritizes her brother, her school tolerates harassment from male students, and women's rights and status are suppressed in every aspect. As she grows up, her sister sacrifices her future for the family, and although Kim Ji-young is capable at work, she repeatedly encounters gender discrimination, missing out on promotions that go to her male colleagues. After marriage, the expectation to bear children becomes inescapable—if she doesn't have children, she is considered abnormal; but once she becomes a mother, she is forced to abandon her career, ultimately being cast aside by society. This lifelong oppression leads to her mental breakdown, exposing the marginalization and deprivation women endure in society, family, and the workplace.

Patriarchal norms not only restrict women's life choices but are also perpetuated across generations, ensuring the continuation of gender inequality. Women oppressed by societal norms often internalize these ideas through prolonged socialization within familial structures. They transform the traditional notion that "women are supposed to be this way" into self-identity and actively pass it on to the next generation. This internalization not only reflects women's resignation to structural inequality but also reveals the deep-seated roots of these oppressive mechanisms. Gender discrimination and male favoritism are not only perpetuated by men but are also transmitted by women who unconsciously reinforce these biases. Many women, having experienced discrimination and oppression regarding marriage and reproduction, unknowingly impart these same oppressive beliefs to their children. In Kim Ji-young, Born 1982, Kim Ji-young's story does not end as readers might hope—with liberation from these constraints and a new life like the heroines in passionate feminist dramas. Instead, like many women before her, she succumbs to a life trapped by inescapable burdens. The fact that she is educated and aware of her situation only exacerbates her internal conflict, as she struggles between rebellion and resignation, ultimately leading to her mental collapse (Tian, Q. 2024).

Behind this intergenerational transmission lies the reproduction of patriarchal norms through family structures and societal values. Society not only ties women's worth to their reproductive abilities but also reinforces these expectations through familial persuasion and the idea of "family responsibility." For instance, a mother who has experienced shame and guilt for failing to bear a son may still urge her daughter-in-law to "try for a boy" during pregnancy, perpetuating the cultural inertia of gender discrimination. This intergenerational transmission sustains inequality within families and society, fostering a pattern of self-domestication among women subjected to structural oppression.

In marriage and family relationships, women are often burdened with childcare and domestic responsibilities, while men view these tasks as "help" or "favors" for women rather than shared obligations. This reveals the institutional support for gendered division of labor. Even when men claim to participate in household

responsibilities, their involvement is still perceived as supplementary rather than equal. Society expects women to provide invisible emotional support during family caregiving and childcare, which is not only unquantifiable but often overlooked. The invisibility of this emotional labor erodes women's self-worth, leading them to seek validation within family relationships—validation that is rarely acknowledged. Women are not only expected to manage domestic responsibilities but also to unconditionally understand and accommodate their partners' emotional needs, creating an asymmetrical emotional dynamic that fosters self-doubt and guilt within women.

In China and other Asian countries, women often experience career interruptions due to childbirth, and even those who continue working must simultaneously bear the burden of housework and childcare. This "double burden" limits women's career advancement, making it difficult for them to compete with men in the workplace. Under similar conditions, men are more likely to receive promotions and job opportunities, while women's career trajectories are diminished due to breaks caused by childbirth. The instrumentalization of reproductive responsibility further exacerbates women's plight. Women's reproductive abilities are treated as the foundation of family and societal stability, rather than as a matter of personal choice (Wang, Y. N 2024). This phenomenon reflects how society disciplines women's bodies, incorporating reproduction into social systems of operation.

The tragic case of Fang Mouyang, a girl from Fangzhuang Village in Dezhou, Shandong, exemplifies the extreme instrumentalization of women's reproductive value. Due to her inability to conceive, her husband and his family regarded her as "useless" and subjected her to brutal abuse. Such cases highlight how women's bodies and reproductive capacities are reduced to tools for maintaining family honor and ensuring generational continuity. When women fail to meet these expectations, they become targets of discrimination and even violence.

#### **4. Examining South Korean Policies and Laws through Kim Ji-Young, Born 1982**

The intertwining of patriarchy and capitalism has profoundly impacted South Korean women's reproductive issues, subjecting them to multiple forms of oppression within family, workplace, and society. Patriarchy is most evident in its control over women's reproductive rights, defining women as "reproducers" and subordinating their reproductive and sexual rights to patriarchal power. In traditional Korean views, women are expected to assume primary responsibility for the family after marriage, especially in terms of childbirth and child-rearing, which significantly undermines women's self-worth. Childbearing becomes not only a social responsibility for women but also often entails career interruptions and limits to personal development. This systemic oppression makes it difficult for women to attain equal career opportunities and societal recognition compared to men.

The capitalist system intensifies the exploitation of women, especially within the labor market. South Korea's rapid capitalist development has led to intense competition, with long hours and high-intensity work becoming the norm. Although childcare support measures have been introduced, they have not had a fundamentally positive impact on women. After childbirth, women often bear additional family responsibilities, while society fails to recognize their unpaid labor. Women's reproductive and childcare labor is regarded by the capitalist system as "unpaid service," which further devalues women's status and places them at a disadvantage in workplace competition, leading to economic dependency.

Legally, the South Korean government has attempted to support women's reproductive rights through policies such as childcare allowances, after-school care services, and the establishment of anonymous childbirth systems. However, the effectiveness of these policies remains limited, as the fundamental issues of societal attitudes and structural inequities persist. In 2024, South Korea introduced the "Protected Birth Act," allowing women to give birth anonymously to protect their privacy and reproductive choices in specific circumstances. However, the intent and impact of this policy are still subject to further examination. At a deeper level, patriarchy seeks to control women's reproductive labor through "ownership of sexuality." Although a woman's womb is biologically part of her own body, its control is often vested in male-dominated social structures. Even though women possess the biological means of reproduction, patriarchy attempts to exert control over it, depriving women of reproductive autonomy. Policies such as "exempt from military service for bearing multiple children" only reinforce the restrictions on women's reproductive rights, adding to their burdens and further complicating reproductive issues.

Under the collusion of the capitalist market and patriarchy, the "cost" of reproduction for women sharply conflicts with their personal development needs. South Korean women face a harsh reality that goes beyond the question of "whether or not to have children," entailing self-sacrifice, identity, and societal expectations. Thus, the path to women's liberation must include calls for gender equality and a redefinition of social gender roles. Modern women need to find a balance between family and career without being forced to sacrifice their own lives and development. More comprehensive gender equality policies, childcare support, recognition of women's labor, and the removal of societal biases against unpaid labor are essential solutions to reproductive issues.

In the future, the path to liberation for South Korean women should include reflection on traditional values and a

critical examination of the capitalist system to break the combined control of women by patriarchy and capitalism. Such reflections can help women in South Korea and China become aware of the fundamental issues of identity and status, advancing gender equality and ensuring women's reproductive and career rights, creating a fairer and freer social environment for women (Kim, S. 2024).

### **5. Understanding Feminism and Analyzing Nordic Policies**

In the film *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, Ji-young's story reveals the multifaceted challenges modern women face in balancing family, work, and societal expectations. After marriage, Ji-young gives up her career, taking on the full weight of household and childcare duties. Although her husband is supportive, her efforts are taken for granted by both his family and society. When she begins experiencing health issues from overwork, even the doctor questions why she feels exhausted, implying that a housewife's role is "stress-free." At work, Ji-young encounters gender bias; despite her excellent performance, she is excluded from important projects due to the possibility of her future marriage and motherhood, eventually leading her to resign. This existence erodes her self-identity, leaving her with mental health struggles. At times, she "becomes" someone else to release her repressed frustration and anger. Raised in a household where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained, Ji-young was taught from a young age that women must be compliant. She saw her mother and sister deprived of opportunities due to their gender, and after marriage, she continues to find it difficult to balance marital and family responsibilities with personal aspirations. Through Ji-young's life, the film reflects society's undervaluing of women's sacrifices, its disregard for women's mental health, and its constraints on women's self-realization. These ingrained biases trap many women in societal and familial "expectations," hindering their pursuit of independence and equality. The film reveals how women, in such an environment, are forced to compromise and lose their sense of self, offering a profound critique of modern gender inequality.

While feminism is increasingly supported worldwide, its principles of equality still face criticism, particularly from those who see it as overly one-sided or extreme. Firstly, such criticism often comes from men who fear feminism's advancement will erode their privileges. Deep-seated traditional beliefs cast women as submissive family supporters and primary caregivers, and critics often uphold this view, promoting an image of women as passive, compliant figures. However, feminism's core goal is equality, not domination. Feminism does not advocate for "keeping men at home to raise children to hinder their careers"; it simply calls for fair sharing of childcare responsibilities. Misunderstandings have led certain groups to view feminism as advocating for female "privilege" rather than equality. In South Korea, this perspective is sometimes echoed in policy, as illustrated by Seoul's past release of a "pregnancy guide," advising pregnant women to prepare meals for their husbands and maintain their appearance before hospital visits to avoid inconveniencing family members. Such guidance, which reinforced women's passive role in family care, drew widespread criticism, with women arguing that these policies disregarded their rights under the guise of "helpful advice."

In contrast, Nordic countries have taken a vastly different approach. Known for their comprehensive social welfare systems, these nations are models in promoting gender equality and supporting women. They not only ensure women's rights through legislation but also provide comprehensive benefits across work, family, and social welfare, allowing women more freedom to balance family and career. These policies not only empower women but also fundamentally promote gender equality by fostering a culture in which men and women share family responsibilities. Nordic countries implement flexible work systems. In Finland, for instance, flexible work hours and the four-day, six-hour work week are widely discussed. This policy, intended to allow employees more time for family and personal life, exemplifies the balance between work and life. Microsoft Japan's experiment with a four-day work week revealed substantial productivity gains, lending support to Nordic pilot programs. For women, especially mothers, such policies provide crucial support in balancing family and career without the pressure of long working hours. Men also gain more time to share parenting duties with their partners.

While in-laws and family relationships do exist in the Nordics, tensions are generally mitigated by the cultural emphasis on independence and robust social support systems. Nordic culture values individual autonomy, with adult children typically living independently, reducing family interference in their private lives and minimizing intergenerational conflict. Nordic family members typically respect boundaries, with parents less involved in their adult children's decisions, avoiding unnecessary disputes. Further, the Nordic emphasis on personal freedom and equality encourages respectful relationships. The robust social welfare system means families are less reliant on extended family support for childcare, sparing women from the heavy familial obligations that burden Ji-young in the film.

Nordic countries also offer generous and flexible parental leave policies. Sweden provides parents with up to 480 days of leave, which can be shared between both parents, effectively promoting equal parenting roles. Norway and

Denmark offer similar parental leave arrangements, reducing the burden on mothers while fostering equitable family dynamics. Additionally, high-paid parental leave ensures minimal impact on household income, supporting women's return to work. Public childcare services in countries like Finland and Sweden are almost free, with the government covering a large portion of the costs. This allows mothers to work full- or part-time even with young children, safeguarding women's career opportunities and ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for children's growth. Accessible childcare increases flexibility for working mothers, enabling them to stay in the workforce while raising children. Nordic legal protections further support gender equality. For example, Sweden and Norway have gender equality monitoring agencies that handle workplace discrimination and require businesses to report gender parity data. Legislation promotes balanced gender representation, providing women with equal advancement opportunities and ensuring workplace equity. Government incentives encourage companies to provide women with fair promotion paths, resulting in greater representation of women in leadership roles. In terms of annual leave, Nordic countries offer world-leading policies. Employees in Denmark and Sweden receive at least five weeks of paid leave, with full pay during vacations. Norway even provides an additional holiday stipend the following year, reducing family financial burdens. Generous leave policies foster work-life balance, allowing women to manage family needs flexibly without compromising career performance. The significant achievements of Nordic countries in women's career advancement can be attributed to the widespread access to higher education, a robust social welfare system, a gender-equal workplace environment, and strong policy support. For instance, Iceland's gross enrollment rate in higher education reaches an impressive 103%, and it leads globally in workplace gender equality, having closed over 85% of the gender gap. Additionally, countries like Sweden and Finland show high proportions of women in government and executive roles, reflecting a proactive policy environment that fosters women's advancement. In contrast, although women's higher education levels in South Korea have steadily improved, career advancement opportunities remain limited, with strong societal expectations for women to prioritize traditional family roles. As of 2021, only 10% of senior officials in South Korea's public sector were women, a figure markedly lower than that of the Nordic countries, highlighting that gender biases and insufficient institutional support continue to hinder women's career progression in South Korea.

The Nordic social security system offers comprehensive support for families, ensuring "cradle-to-grave" benefits covering healthcare, education, and unemployment. In Sweden, newborns receive mother-child health screenings, while Denmark's free education and healthcare serve all family members. Such universal welfare significantly reduces financial burdens, enabling women to balance child-rearing with career pursuits. The Nordics also nurture a unique parenting culture where fathers are increasingly involved, supported by policies that make paternal involvement commonplace. Government support for men's active parenting roles has normalized shared family responsibilities, leading to a shift in traditional gender roles. In some families, women are primary breadwinners while men take on primary caregiving roles, an arrangement widely accepted and supported. This cultural inclusivity reduces the burden on women and transforms conventional gender expectations. Notably, Nordic workplace culture discourages excessive overtime, prioritizing efficiency and work-life balance. Sweden's six-hour workday trial effectively improved both employee well-being and productivity, and labor unions in Denmark and Norway protect labor rights, ensuring work hours remain reasonable to prevent burnout. This balanced workplace environment grants women, particularly mothers, more time to spend with their families without sacrificing career development.

## **6. Emotional Suppression and Isolation from Kim Ji-young's Perspective**

Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 delves into the life and psychological development of its protagonist, Kim Ji-young, unveiling the multiple layers of oppression faced by South Korean women under traditional societal expectations. Through Kim Ji-young's journey, the film highlights the emotional suppression and psychological challenges encountered by women within the realms of family, work, and society. In a culture steeped in gender preferences, she has been considered lesser from a young age. Despite a supportive husband, her struggle to meet the demands of her in-laws, assume familial responsibilities, and forgo her career leaves her in a crisis of identity, with her emotions continually suppressed, eventually leading to emotional isolation.

From a psychological standpoint, Kim Ji-young's emotional suppression and isolation can be understood through the theory of "emotional inhibition." When individuals face prolonged unfair treatment in social or familial settings, without an outlet for expression, these emotions become internalized and suppressed. This accumulated suppression may lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. In the film, Kim Ji-young is unable to convey her true feelings to those around her and is even incapable of articulating her inner needs under mounting pressures, resorting instead to "becoming other people" to express her repressed dissatisfaction. This "role-switching" not only serves as a psychological defense mechanism but also reflects her desire for recognition and understanding.

According to data from the South Korean Ministry of Health, psychological health issues among South Korean women have worsened over recent years. A 2019 survey found that among South Koreans aged 25 to 69, 60% reported experiencing mental health issues in the past year, with a higher percentage among women than men. This trend is especially pronounced among women aged 20–29, showing that young women are more likely to experience psychological distress under pressure. By 2022, the number of South Koreans receiving treatment for depression had reached one million, of which 674,000 were women—almost twice the number of men. Additionally, from 2017 to 2022, female patients treated for depression and anxiety totaled 9.06 million, accounting for 64% of all cases. These statistics reveal that South Korean women are more vulnerable to mental health crises when facing societal expectations and gender inequality.

Kim Ji-young's crisis of identity can be explained by Erik Erikson's "identity vs. role confusion" theory. Erikson suggests that individuals may experience an "identity crisis" when they cannot clearly define their sense of self, especially when social roles conflict. In the film, Kim Ji-young is not only responsible for family duties but is also restricted by maternal obligations, which gradually weaken her sense of purpose and personal value. Emotionally, she becomes increasingly disconnected from herself, questioning her own existence, which ultimately results in a psychological breakdown. Her breakdown reflects not only personal psychological conflict but also how, in an oppressive society, many women are forced to abandon their true selves, follow traditional expectations, and thereby compromise their sense of identity and mental well-being.

Furthermore, Kim Ji-young's life illustrates the concept of "learned helplessness" in women's lives. Psychologist Martin Seligman's learned helplessness theory suggests that individuals may develop a sense of helplessness when they find themselves repeatedly in situations where they lack control. In Kim Ji-young's life, the pressures of marriage, parenting, and work gradually instill a feeling of helplessness, leading her to accept the status quo without actively seeking change. A report from KB Financial Group highlights that while 40.9% of South Korean respondents expressed concerns about their mental health, only 34.2% sought professional assistance when facing issues. This "self-resolution" approach is particularly prevalent among individuals in their fifties and sixties, reflecting the internalized stigma and reluctance to seek mental health treatment in South Korea. This stigma and psychological burden are mirrored in Kim Ji-young's story, where societal prejudice and disregard for mental health leave her emotionally isolated, exacerbating her psychological problems.

Role conflict arising from motherhood also plays a significant part in Kim Ji-young's psychological distress. After becoming a mother, she faces the challenge of balancing personal career aspirations and maternal responsibilities. In psychology, role conflict theory posits that individuals may experience psychological distress when fulfilling multiple roles with conflicting expectations. While Kim Ji-young longs for self-fulfillment in her career, she is primarily seen as a caregiver within the family. She feels bound by familial expectations, preventing her from pursuing her career aspirations freely. This role conflict intensifies her emotional suppression and psychological strain. In South Korean society, the traditional family structure often lacks adequate emotional support for women, leaving many of them in emotional isolation, unable to find comfort within marriage and family. Under these circumstances, many women's psychological issues are overlooked, contributing to a higher suicide rate among women compared to men. Although Kim Ji-young's husband offers her some support, the traditional expectations within her in-laws' family prevent her emotional needs from being fully addressed, ultimately leading to emotional isolation and a breakdown (Park, M. J. 2024). This emotional isolation has widespread implications within South Korean culture, further exacerbating women's psychological issues.

## 7. Discussion

Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 vividly exposes the gendered power structures in patriarchal society and their oppressive effects on women. Within this framework, men enjoy natural privileges by dominating family, workplace, and social spaces. However, these privileges not only impede women's self-development but also induce deep anxiety in men when faced with social change. When women like Kim Ji-young begin to pursue career ambitions and personal autonomy, the traditional power of men becomes destabilized. To defend their privileges, men often resort to cultural narratives and social institutions to consolidate patriarchal order, obstructing progress toward gender equality and intensifying gender conflict (Choi, C., & Kim, E. 2024).

While Kim Ji-young's choices in the film appear personal, they reveal the deep constraints imposed by gender roles. Forced to sacrifice either her career or family, her situation illustrates how women's pursuit of equality is perceived as a threat to traditional family structures, provoking defensive reactions from men. As the film portrays, male resistance is not limited to public discourse but is also expressed through intense backlash against the legitimacy of the narrative. Even during the film's production, petitions were launched to halt it, with opponents arguing that the film would "exacerbate gender conflict and hinder societal development." This strong opposition



reveals that the film lifts the veil on patriarchal society, exposing men's sense of powerlessness and discomfort when their privileges are questioned. Literary and cinematic works that reveal gender inequality often trigger resistance from men. The backlash against Kim Ji-young, *Born 1982* after its publication and release exemplifies this pattern. Some men felt uneasy with the portrayal of women's struggles, interpreting it as a challenge to their status and responding with harsh criticism and ridicule. Such defensive reactions indicate society's unpreparedness to confront gender issues, hindering meaningful dialogue about gender equality.

At the same time, modern pro-natalist policies further reflect the instrumentalization of reproductive responsibilities. In the face of demographic crises, women are cast as the primary agents responsible for reproduction. The pressures Kim Ji-young faces in her family life exemplify this reproductive burden—not only is she urged by her family to have children, but she is also forced to leave the workforce because of childcare responsibilities. However, these policies are not merely about encouraging childbirth; they also act as tests of women's compliance. If the government's genuine goal were to address population decline, it could adopt diverse solutions, such as recognizing mixed-race children or reforming immigration policies to attract and retain foreign talent and international students graduating from Korean universities. Yet, the government's emphasis on childbirth policies reveals a deeper agenda: reinforcing traditional gender expectations and confining women to roles that serve men and families. The essence of these pro-natalist policies lies not in solving population issues but in maintaining the patriarchal structure by placing women in the bonds of family and reproduction. Through these strategies, society ensures that women's time and energy are consumed by domestic responsibilities, reducing their participation in the workforce and public affairs. This approach not only exacerbates gender inequality but also highlights the hidden power dynamics that control women under the guise of reproductive responsibility. While these policies may appear to promote societal development, they reinforce gender divisions by positioning women as unpaid caregivers within families and society.

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