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Korea's 'Mother Syndrome'

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Panel: The new sexualities. The author discusses the role that sexuality and gender roles play in their work Does literature mirror society, or nudge it along?

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Korea's 'Mother Syndrome'

By Kim Seoryung (South Korea)

Here's a story. You might have heard it.

A baby monkey and its mother were placed on a thick iron plate and the temperature of the plate was gradually raised. Ultimately, the mother monkey placed its baby on her stomach and died. Then, a baby monkey and its father were placed on the slowly heating plate. The father monkey stepped on top of the baby monkey to stay alive.

This is one of the stories that is often told when talking about the sublimity and greatness of maternal love.

But have you ever thought about the repression and violence hidden within this story? Today, I would like to speak about the compulsive maternal love that harshly torments Korean women.

Few years ago, a novel swept the bookstores all across Korea. Written by Kyung-Suk Shin, it was published in the U.S. under the title '*Please Look After Mom*'. It sold 2 million copies just in Korea. An old mother suffering from dementia goes missing in the city and her family members go searching for her. The author focused on the vivid description of the mother's sacrifice for her family, and many readers wept while witnessing the maternal love of the mother in the novel. As if to say that all the pain and suffering that we face while living in this time is due to the absence of such beautiful and sacrificial maternal love, the readers dreamed of returning their kind and familiar mother's arms. This was the beginning of the 'Mother Syndrome'.

Korean society is exhausting to the degree that is barely conceivable. Children enter various private institutes before the age of 3. These little children study English and art, and learn to play instruments to build creativity. They even go to private institutes to build with Lego blocks and private sand playgrounds to play with sand. Mothers quit their jobs to manage their children's schedule, while fathers are required to work harder to afford the outrageous expenses for private education. They all want someone to hug their exhausted bodies without saying a single word. They desire to cry a few tears in another's arms. That is why they need their mother, a mother who gives unconditional love. The Mother Syndrome in Korea is not that strange.

No one can live another's life for them but we tend to think that mothers can. Numerous of literature teach us that a woman must destroy herself when trying to become a great mother. This is because to be a mother is to exist for someone other than themselves.

The Mother Syndrome as caused by Kyung-Suk Shin's '*Please Look After Mom*' arouses the patriarchal ideology firmly settled in Korean society. People do not like unfamiliar stories, preferring the familiar and recognizable ideology. They tend to find stability in the fact that they can agree or have already agreed, rather than in the psychological inconvenience and irritation caused by an unfamiliar ideology. This is even more true when talking about the elemental thirst for maternal love.

The young generation of Korean authors have thought long and hard about this issue. Their literary focus is on the oppression that results from the patriarchal idealization of maternal love. It is the same with me. The 'defamilializing' that I speak of in my novel does not mean 'disbanding the family' but rather disbanding the existing concept or perspective of family. Defamilializing must be based on the premise of social and political criticism rather than just the individual dimension.

People must understand that maternal love is not only the responsibility of women but also men, and think critically about a society idealizes not only compulsive maternal love but also the guilty conscience caused by the compulsive maternal love. Furthermore, if an author is convinced that they

must be the person who poses the question in this day and age, the question must be part of their writing. My novels will continue to speak about this topic for a long time.