

# DEPRESSION, GENDER AND PATRIARCHY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF THE PROTAGONIST IN CHO NAM-JOO'S *KIM JI-YEONG, BORN 1982*

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## Abstract

This article investigates the forms and causes of depression experienced by the protagonist in Cho Nam-Joo's novel *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982*, situating the narrative within the intersection of psychology, gender studies, and feminist literary criticism. Drawing on Bhowmik et al.'s (2012) framework of depression, the study applies a qualitative descriptive method to examine the protagonist's psychological decline, which unfolds through three stages: baby blues, postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis. Textual analysis reveals that Ji-Yeong's condition is triggered by sleep disturbances, stressful life events, and the forced resignation from her professional career. These immediate causes, however, are embedded within broader patriarchal structures that regulate women's identities and diminish their autonomy. The findings underscore that Ji-Yeong's depression is not merely an individual pathology but a cultural and political condition shaped by systemic gender inequality. The novel dramatizes how patriarchal surveillance, misogyny, and intergenerational trauma exacerbate women's mental health struggles. By portraying Ji-Yeong's breakdown as both personal and collective, Cho Nam-Joo transforms literature into a form of feminist critique. This article contributes to literary psychology by demonstrating how fiction can illuminate the sociocultural dimensions of depression, offering insights that extend beyond psychiatry into the realm of social justice.

**Keywords:** *Depression; feminist criticism; literary psychology; patriarchy postpartum depression*

## 1. Introduction

Depression remains one of the most pressing global mental health challenges, with approximately 280 million people affected worldwide (WHO, 2023). Gender differences in depression are striking: women are significantly more vulnerable due to the intersection of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors (Maji, 2018). Scholars argue that patriarchal systems intensify women's mental health struggles by reinforcing social expectations, restricting autonomy, and devaluing women's identities (Gupta et al., 2023; Ussher, 2023).

Literature provides a unique lens to examine these dynamics. As Middleton (2021) notes, literature has historically served as a space to portray women's psychological suffering and critique patriarchal oppression. Novels often function as cultural mirrors, revealing how gender roles and systemic inequalities shape women's mental health experiences (Paley, 2019). In particular, feminist literary criticism highlights how narratives of women's depression are intertwined with broader questions of power, identity, and social justice (Hambur, 2019).

Cho Nam-Joo's novel *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* exemplifies this intersection of literature, gender, and mental health. Since its publication in 2016, the novel has become a cultural touchstone in South Korea and beyond, sparking debates on feminism, patriarchy, and women's rights. The protagonist, Kim Ji-Yeong, embodies the struggles of women subjected to systemic discrimination, from childhood neglect in favor of male siblings to workplace exclusion and marital pressures. Her eventual psychological breakdown represents both an individual crisis and a collective indictment of patriarchal society.

This article situates *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* within the discourse on depression, gender, and patriarchy. By applying Bhowmik et al.'s (2012) theory of depression, it aims to (1) identify the forms of depression experienced by the protagonist and (2) analyze the social and psychological causes underlying her condition. In doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship exploring how literature both reflects and critiques the psychological consequences of patriarchal oppression (Gupta et al., 2023; Ussher, 2023).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Depression in Literature

Literary works often serve as mirrors to human psychological struggles, particularly depression. Depression in literature is not merely a reflection of clinical symptoms but also a cultural narrative of marginalization and identity crises. Khan and Wakeel (2025) highlight how contemporary fiction frequently represents depression, PTSD, and trauma as narrative strategies that engage with broader social issues, offering insight into the intersection of mental health and storytelling. Similarly, Radden and Varga (2013) argue that literary accounts of depression, including memoirs and fictionalized narratives, hold epistemological value, as they bridge subjective experience with collective understanding.

This perspective resonates with Wiyatmi (2011), who emphasizes that literary psychology provides a framework for interpreting fictional characters' emotions and mental states. As Purwarno and Efrizal (2025) further note, literature traces the human condition across history, revealing not only aesthetic creativity but also the ways in which literature engages with social, cultural, and psychological realities. By applying psychological theories to literature, scholars can uncover how narratives articulate both personal suffering and societal critique.

### 2.2 Postpartum Depression and Gender Norms

Postpartum depression is particularly significant in feminist literary analysis. Bhowmik et al. (2012) classify postpartum mood disorders into baby blues, postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis, each representing different degrees of severity. More recent feminist critiques, however, expand the focus by emphasizing how patriarchal norms exacerbate these conditions. For example, Gupta et al. (2023) argue

that patriarchal systems interfere with women's psychological development, making them more vulnerable to depressive disorders.

Ussher (2023) similarly critiques the medical pathologization of women's mental health, suggesting that depression is often a byproduct of oppressive gender roles rather than a purely individual pathology. Within literary contexts, this implies that depictions of postpartum depression in fiction often double as critiques of the cultural expectations placed upon women, especially around motherhood and caregiving.

### **2.3 Feminist Literary Criticism and Mental Health**

Feminist literary criticism offers critical tools for analyzing how narratives of depression intersect with gender and power. Hambur (2019) shows that depictions of depressed housewives in short stories reflect systemic oppression, turning domestic spaces into sites of psychological entrapment. This aligns with earlier feminist readings of classics such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Bell Jar*, but contemporary feminist criticism expands this discussion to global narratives of women's suffering.

Khan and Wakeel (2025) emphasize that feminist fiction often engages with trauma and mental illness as a way to challenge cultural silencing of women's pain. By representing psychological disorders in fiction, authors not only document but also resist patriarchal narratives that delegitimize women's experiences.

### **2.4 Previous Research on *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982***

Prior scholarship on Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* has predominantly emphasized its feminist and sociological dimensions. Rahmah et al. (2020) explored the pervasive patriarchal oppression depicted in the narrative, while Alfarini and Tetty (2022) analyzed the novel through the lens of gender-based inequality. Similarly, Baruna and Lestari (2022) situated the text within a broader biographical critique of patriarchal culture in South Korea, underscoring its sociocultural resonance. However, these studies largely overlook the psychological dimension of Ji-Yeong's character, particularly the manifestations of her depression. This study addresses that gap by integrating literary psychology with feminist criticism, thereby extending existing scholarship on the novel. In doing so, it contributes not only to the literary analysis of contemporary Korean fiction but also to the wider discourse on gendered mental health and its representation in literature.

## **3. Research Method**

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive method, which is suitable for analyzing complex social and psychological phenomena as represented in literature. According to Kim, Sefcik, & Bradway (2017), qualitative descriptive studies are effective in providing rich, straightforward accounts of human experiences without reducing them to rigid categories. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for literary analysis, where narrative detail and character psychology require nuanced interpretation.

The primary source of this study is Cho Nam-Joo's novel *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982*. The text was closely read to identify passages that portray symptoms of depression, including emotional instability, anxiety, loss of control, and dissociative behaviors. These passages were then analyzed using Bhowmik et al.'s (2012) theoretical framework of depression, which classifies depressive disorders into baby blues, postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis.

In addition, the analysis is informed by feminist literary criticism to contextualize the protagonist's depression within patriarchal and gendered social structures. As Carrera-Fernandez and Guardia-Olmos (2014) note, qualitative methods in psychology are particularly valuable for understanding mental health as embedded in sociocultural contexts. By integrating literary psychology with feminist critique, this study ensures a multi-layered reading of the novel.

Secondary data were drawn from scholarly articles, theses, and books on depression, feminist criticism, and literary psychology published between 2012 and 2024. These sources provide both theoretical grounding and contemporary relevance, ensuring that the analysis reflects current debates in psychology and gender studies.

## 4. Discussion

Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* presents depression not as an isolated illness but as a cultural symptom of systemic patriarchy. Recent feminist analyses argue that postpartum depression should not only be understood medically but also socially, as an embodied response to gendered oppression (Champ, 2022). Ji-Yeong's struggles resonate with what Gawron (2020) terms an "illness of the soul, body, or culture," reflecting how depressive states emerge at the intersection of personal suffering and collective conditions.

This reading situates the protagonist's mental illness within a continuum of oppression, aligning with Bhowmik et al.'s (2012) categorization of depression but extending it by considering how patriarchal structures aggravate psychological distress.

### 4.2 Baby Blues as the First Stage of Breakdown

Ji-Yeong's early struggles with motherhood reflect symptoms of *baby blues*, a condition often minimized in both medical and social discourses. She confesses:

*"Ji Yeong thanked him, saying that she had indeed been feeling blue and enervated and that she suspected baby blues."* (Joo, 2016, p. 14)

This passage highlights her awareness but also her vulnerability to dismissal. According to Held and Rutherford (2012), postpartum distress is often culturally silenced, as dominant ideologies of motherhood expect women to be joyful and fulfilled. Ji-Yeong's simple admission that she feels "blue" becomes radical within a society that denies mothers' suffering.

By situating this condition in a patriarchal setting, the novel exposes how women's mental health is routinely disregarded. Champ (2022) emphasizes that feminist resignification of postpartum depression reframes such conditions as legitimate responses to systemic inequalities, not mere hormonal imbalances.

### 4.3 Postpartum Depression and the Weight of Patriarchal Surveillance

Ji-Yeong's emotional decline worsens into postpartum depression, evident when she reacts to privacy violations:

*"That's repulsive. Just repulsive... Then it occurred to her that her photo might have been taken, and this made her wonder... if they were floating around on the internet right this minute."* (Joo, 2016, p. 14)

This moment illustrates heightened paranoia and loss of security, core features of postpartum depression. Research confirms that postpartum depression is shaped by

societal pressures, including unrealistic maternal ideals and gendered expectations (Mollard, 2015; Ussher, 2023). In Ji-Yeong's case, patriarchal surveillance transforms private despair into public vulnerability, showing how gender norms amplify psychological harm.

Cain (2009) describes how narratives of depressed mothers expose the ways women are regulated both publicly and privately. Ji-Yeong's panic about surveillance echoes this insight: her body and identity are continuously monitored, judged, and devalued.

#### 4.4 Postpartum Psychosis: Fractured Identity and Collective Trauma

The climax of Ji-Yeong's psychological breakdown manifests as postpartum psychosis, where she dissociates and speaks as if she were other women:

*"A few days later, Ji-Yeong said that she was Cha Seung-yeon, a college friend who had died a year before."* (Joo, 2016, p. 3)

*"Oh, Mrs. Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Ji-Yeong gets sick from exhaustion every holiday!"* (Joo, 2016, p. 12)

Such moments of identity displacement align with psychiatric definitions of psychosis but also hold symbolic weight. Mauthner (2010) argues that women's narratives of postpartum depression often reflect struggles of authenticity, where women no longer "feel true to themselves" under the weight of societal expectations. Ji-Yeong's fractured identity represents not only her own crisis but also the generational trauma inherited from other women, echoing the "collective voice" of female suffering under patriarchy (Gawron, 2020).

This suggests that postpartum psychosis in literature can be read as both pathology and resistance—an embodied refusal to conform to prescribed roles (Champ, 2022).

#### 4.5 Causes of Depression

##### 4.5.1 Sleep Problems and Medicalization

Sleep disturbance is a recurring motif:

*"In order to alleviate her depression and insomnia, I have prescribed her a set of antidepressants and sleeping pills."* (Joo, 2016, p. 193)

Feminist critiques warn against reducing postpartum depression to medical terms alone. Godderis (2010) shows that psychiatric discourses often "responsibilize" women by framing their suffering as individual pathology, overlooking structural factors. Ji-Yeong's medicalization through pills reflects this tension—while providing short-term relief, it obscures the systemic roots of her despair.

##### 4.5.2 Stressful Life Events and Misogyny

Ji-Yeong's humiliation in public illustrates the psychological toll of casual misogyny: *"I wish I could live off my husband's paycheck... mom-roaches got it real cushy."* (Joo, 2016, p. 190) These insults reinforce what Taylor (2016) calls "chains of patriarchal discourse," whereby women are demeaned for conforming to the very roles imposed upon them. Such events intensify depression by attacking women's dignity in public spaces.

#### 4.5.3 Loss of a Job and Erasure of Identity

Perhaps the most devastating trigger is her forced resignation:

*"In the end, they concluded that one of them had to be a stay-at-home parent, and that one person, of course, was Ji-Yeong."* (Joo, 2016, p. 161)

Work is not merely economic but also existential. Shaikh and Kauppi (2015) argue that postpartum depression must be understood through a social constructionist lens, where identity and self-worth are deeply tied to social roles. Ji-Yeong's loss of employment erases her professional identity, confirming that her worth is reduced to domestic functions. This resonates with Burgard et al.'s (2007) finding that job loss significantly correlates with depressive disorders.

#### 4.6 Literature as Social Critique

By blending fiction with social critique, Cho Nam-Joo situates Ji-Yeong's depression as evidence of structural injustice. At several points, the narrator explicitly integrates real social data into the fictional narrative, blurring the line between novel and sociological report:

*"More than 70 percent of women in their thirties quit their jobs after having children. And more than half of them never return to the workforce."* (Joo, 2016, p. 117)

This narrative technique positions Ji-Yeong's breakdown as not only personal but representative of broader systemic patterns, reinforcing what Gawron (2020) identifies as the dual function of postpartum depression in literature: both artistic theme and feminist critique of oppressive gender norms. Ji-Yeong's struggles thus transform private pain into political commentary.

The novel also demonstrates how literature can challenge psychiatric reductionism by linking mental illness to systemic inequality. For instance, when Ji-Yeong's psychiatrist records her symptoms, the clinical frame is juxtaposed with social critique: *"The patient shows signs of depression and anxiety caused by long-term gender discrimination, workplace harassment, and loss of professional identity."* (Joo, 2016, p. 194) Here, the medical gaze is subverted to expose structural causes of her condition, aligning with Champ's (2022) argument that feminist resignification reframes postpartum depression from "illness to be treated" into "injustice to be confronted." Thus, *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* exemplifies literature's power to reframe women's suffering as both personal and collective, psychological and political. The interweaving of narrative, statistics, and medical records reinforces the idea that depression cannot be disentangled from patriarchy and gender inequality.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study has examined the protagonist's experiences of depression in Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* through the framework of Bhowmik et al. (2012), supported by feminist literary criticism and recent scholarship on women's mental health. The findings reveal that Ji-Yeong undergoes three distinct stages of depression—baby blues, postpartum depression, and postpartum psychosis—each progressively illustrating the profound toll of patriarchal oppression on women's psychological well-being.

The analysis demonstrates that Ji-Yeong's depression cannot be explained solely through biological or individual factors. Instead, her condition reflects the intersection of personal vulnerability and systemic inequality. Sleep disturbances, stressful life events, and the forced abandonment of her professional career emerge as significant triggers. Yet these immediate causes are embedded within broader cultural structures that devalue women, normalize misogyny, and enforce rigid gender roles. Thus, depression in the novel functions as both a personal crisis and a symbolic critique of society.

From an academic perspective, this article contributes to the field of literary psychology by illustrating how fiction can serve as a vital site for exploring mental health issues. As recent scholarship emphasizes (Champ, 2022; Gawron, 2020; Ussher, 2023), postpartum depression must be understood not only as a clinical disorder but also as a cultural phenomenon shaped by patriarchy. *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* dramatizes this intersection, transforming the protagonist's breakdown into a narrative that speaks for countless women whose suffering is often marginalized or silenced.

Socially, the novel underscores the urgent need to recognize depression as a structural problem, not merely a private pathology. By portraying Ji-Yeong's struggles in detail, Cho Nam-Joo compels readers to confront the hidden costs of gender inequality—costs that manifest in women's bodies, identities, and relationships. This aligns with feminist critiques of psychiatry, which caution against medicalizing women's distress without addressing the systemic forces that produce it (Godderis, 2010; Shaikh & Kauppi, 2015).

Furthermore, the conclusion of Ji-Yeong's story—her reliance on psychiatric treatment and her family's reluctant acknowledgment of her illness—raises important questions about the adequacy of current responses to women's mental health. While therapy and medication provide relief, they cannot dismantle the patriarchal structures that perpetuate suffering. This suggests that future interventions must integrate medical, psychological, and sociocultural approaches, ensuring that women are supported not only as patients but also as individuals entitled to dignity and equality.

In closing, *Kim Ji-Yeong, Born 1982* is more than a novel about one woman's depression; it is a feminist testimony that challenges readers to rethink the relationship between gender and mental health. By analyzing the protagonist's psychological struggles, this article highlights literature's capacity to reveal the hidden dimensions of social injustice and to amplify women's voices in contexts where they are often silenced.

Future research might extend this analysis by comparing Ji-Yeong's narrative with other contemporary literary works that depict postpartum depression and female psychological distress, thereby mapping a broader cultural discourse on gendered mental health in global literature. Such comparative studies could enrich our understanding of how different cultural contexts shape women's experiences of depression, while reinforcing the universal need to dismantle patriarchal structures that continue to undermine women's well-being.

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