

Untangling the convolutions of Violence in Kyung –sook Shin’s I’ll Be Right There

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Abstract

Literature infiltrates into life that is deep and sublime. It embarks into the gloomier corners of life and presents the plight of people and nation in a tone that is allusive and straight. One of the prominent writers of South Korea, Kyung –sook Shin is known for her lucid and honest display of life through words that are modest and precise. The novel *I’ll Be Right There*, presents the political, economic and emotional turmoil of youngsters, set during the period of 1980’s. The novel is one of Shin’s heart wrenching portrayal of South Korean life amidst the 1980’s Political revolution that has jeopardized the freedom and economic condition of the middle class people. This paper highlights the social political and economic crisis of South Korea under the light of Kyung –Sook Shin’s *I’ll Be Right There*. The paper deals with the 1980’s political revolution, the conflict and crisis that emerged out of the revolution. The themes of violence and conflict is dealt with the ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’ theory of Johan Galtung and ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’ by Immanuel Kant.

Key words: Physical Violence, Psychological Violence, Structural Violence, Gwangju Uprising

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The fountain of literature always flows with life and landscape. Its grandeur gleams even between the lines of creative work of art. South Korean literature is distinct and noteworthy with its splendid rendition of reality and life. This literature reinstates a living that is simple, humble and honored. South Korean Literature celebrates the modest life of a common man and picturizes the social transformation, political upheaval and economic turmoil of South Korea.

The New York Times records, “Shin’s prose, intimate and hauntingly spare in this translation by Chi-Young Kim, moves from first to second and third person, and powerfully conveys grief’s bewildering immediacy”. Kyung- Sook Shin is one of the celebrated and renowned novelists of South Korea whose realistic narrations have carved a niche in the hearts of the readers. She is a woman of letters whose artistic portrayal oozes out with the social, political and economic crisis in the society. The recipient of the ‘Man Asian Literary Prize’, Kyung – Sook Shin was part of the Korean wave due to her magnum opus, *Please Look After Mother*. Her scintillating narration has earned her a few coveted awards like The Manhae Grand Prize for Literature, the Dong- in Literature Prize and also Isang Literary Prize.

“The shimmering, lucid tones and silver melancholy of *I’ll Be Right There* give readers a South Korea peopled with citizens fighting for honor and intellectual freedom, and longing for love and solace. Kyung-Sook Shin’s characters have unforgettable voices”, states Susan Straight, the author of *Between Heaven and Here*. The novel *I’ll Be Right There* is one of Shin’s heart wrenching portrayal of South Korean life amidst the 1980’s Political revolution that has jeopardized the freedom and economic condition of the middle class people. The novel opens with the phone call to the protagonist of the novel Jung Yoon that brings the news of her beloved professor dying. This news engages her the nostalgic memories of her youth, her friends and her love relationship. The novel travels through the turns and bends of friendship, remembrance, loss and violence and it simmers between the tears and grief of people who mourns for their missing loved ones during the riot.

This paper highlights the social political and economic crisis of South Korea under the light of Kyung-Sook Shin’s *I’ll Be Right There*. The paper deals with the 1980’s political revolution, the conflict and crisis that emerged out of the revolution. The themes of violence and conflict is dealt with the ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’ theory of Johan Galtung and ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’ by Immanuel Kant. The paper aims to bring out the political and personal conflict of South Korean people under the backdrop of the appalling Gwangju uprising during May 18th to May 27th, 1980.

The Norwegian sociologist, Johan Galtung is the founder of the discipline Peace and Conflict theories. According to Johan Galtung’s theory of ‘Violence, Peace and Peace Research’, ‘Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations’. The difference between potential and actual could be described as what could have been and what is. Galtung distinguishes the actual and the potential through a simple instance that is during the Neolithic period the life expectancy is just 30 years and this is not a manifestation of violence; whereas, today if the same 30 years is considered as life expectancy due to war and social injustice, then it is absolutely an act of violence.

The social injustice in South Korea that occurred during the Gwangju uprising is a disheartening example of what Galtung calls as violence. The instigation of the Gwangju uprising was due to the assassination of the President Park Chung Hee in October 1979 by his spy chief. This assassination lead to the declaration of martial law in South Korea. Unhappy with the martial law, the people engaged in protests in Gwangju region, starting from 18th May 1980. Even the Chonnam National university students joined the demonstrations along with the civilians to fight against the martial law. This Gwangju uprising was suppressed brutally by a military coup in 1980, which was ordered by the Army Major General Chun Doo – hwan. He unleashed tanks, armed personals and helicopters to curb the protest. Within two hours, the military crushed the civilians and students, leaving a total of around 2000 people killed. Women were brutally raped and harassed, students were trampled and beaten to death by the military. Numerous people were reported missing during the uprising and no traces were found regarding their survival.

In the novel, Shin depicts the demonstration of the Chonnam University students against the Gwangju incident, an uprising that was triggered in contrary to the martial law and military coup. The opposition of the students and the public resulted in exploitation of the civilians and students by the military officials. The suffering and aftermath of the incident has been realistically portrayed by Shin through her characters. The incident has created a void in the life of people and has questioned

the morality and principles of the nation. Women have been abused, harassed and raped by the soldiers who are supposed to protect the nation. The political upheaval of the country has up surged chaos and calamity in the nation. Shin has never failed to picturize the reality in her novel though it illustrates the darker side of the nation.

The essay 'Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch' by Immanuel Kant attempts to bring to light the primary elements of a sovereign nation, deliberating the attitude of government and masses in exercising peaceful coexistence. Kant insists on such elements namely treaties of peace without any precaution, formulating a social agreement between government and people, terminating the standing army to evade wars, working on economic self-sufficiency, ensuring nation's independence without intervening in internal affairs and finally maintaining ethics during wars with enemies. These six aspects of peaceful coexistence has to be inculcated not only between nations but also within nation to avoid conflict and disaster. A balance in power framework is expected to be maintained within the nation in order to maintain peaceful coexistence. Kant proposes that a nation should initiate interactions with their people to have a conducive environment for survival.

Considering the six aspects of Kant, the political scenario of South Korea as enumerated by Shin, reassures the fact that the government of the nation has paid little heed towards the voices of the people. Lack of social agreement between the government and the state is evident. Want of economic self-sufficiency has disfigured the peace of common people. Even in the beginning of the novel, *I'll Be Right There*, Shin remarks about the prevailing anarchy due to intervention of military coup in the internal affairs of the nation. The protagonist Jung Yoon recollects her first day of her college when her professor Yoon after entering into the class, gazed at the students demonstrating against the martial law through the window. "The shouting of the student demonstrators outside had been disrupting classes. Tear gas wafted into the room, carried on the still-cold March wind...Professor Yoon stood in the window for a long time, watching the demonstrators... Riot police were chasing a group of students" (Shin 6 & 7).

In his *Violence, Peace and Peace Research*, Galtung elucidates physical violence, psychological violence and structural violence. When people are hurt somatically, it could be characterized under psychical violence. Considering psychological violence, brainwashing, indoctrination and threats affect the soul to a greater extent and it decreases mental potentialities. Structural violence, according to Galtung is the revolution that is brought by a hierarchical military organization, it also includes threatening people to subordination. Galtung remarks, "in a highly dynamic society ... structural violence becomes apparent because it stands out like an enormous rock in a creek, impeding the free flow, creating all kinds of eddies and turbulences" (Galtung 173).

Shin's novel *I'll Be Right There* is a manifestation of physical, psychological and structural violence. The Industrial revolution and political upheaval have transformed the society into a place that is haunted by violence and turmoil. The prominent characters of the novel Yoon, Myungsuh and Miru directly or indirectly fall prey at the hands of either physical, psychological or structural violence. Having troubled by the cruelty of violence, Yoon, Myungsuh and Miru undergo an emotional turmoil and are consequently fettered by anxiety, despair, alienation, guilt and suicide. The political upheaval and exploitation of the public by the military made their life restless and resulted in the death of the dear and near ones. The physical violence and structural violence of the society resulted in psychological violence in the family.

The Demonstrations confused the students and made them to be in a dilemma. They were disoriented and muddled at the scenario of the society and nation. To be responsible towards the nation or to themselves was a tough decision to make and it kept them in lurch regarding their future. Neither the situation nor the nation was favorable towards the students, yet they were not terrified to fight. All of a sudden, life took a twisting turn that left in a maze and everything became complicated and difficult to explain. Yoon's friend Myungsoh confesses to the reason why he had to be late to class, "Every morning, I open my eyes and I ask myself: Should I go to school, or should I demonstrate? I can't sit still in class, but it's the same when I'm out in the streets. I felt like something is pushing me to join the demonstrations, but I often wind up getting separated from others" (Shin 93).

During the evening, Yoon had the habit of walking from the university through the City Hall to reach her apartment. One day, she was caught amidst the demonstrations and witnessed the intensity of protest, leaving her perplexed. Shin's portrayal of this episode brings out her experience during the political upheaval. This incident also remarks the physical violence endured by the university students during the demonstration. "I got caught in a wave of protesters and was pressed up against the glass doors of the Koreana Hotel, unable to move. All of the stores in the area had their metal roll-down gates shut tight. Even the glass doors that led into the hotel were firmly locked. The hotel employees were watching that commotion in streets from inside...Just then, a tear gas canister exploded overhead, and a huge crowd of protesters surged into the underpass to try to avoid it" (77). Yoon has no clue how she came out of the underpass. When she opened her eyes, neither could she breathe nor see, her knees were hurt and blood was all over her pants. She then again collapsed on the ground. After some time, when she regained consciousness, her soles were embedded with gravels, as she has lost her belongings and shoes. She couldn't see the demonstrators, but hear the shouts of slogans, only then she realized that the demonstration has not ended but pushed back to the end of the street. Later, Myungsoh came to her aid and took her out of the chaotic situation.

With respect to Galtung's view on physical violence, "When a person, a group, a nation, is displaying the means of physical violence, whether throwing stones around or testing nuclear arms, there may not be violence in the sense that anyone is hit or hurt, but there is nevertheless the threat of physical violence and indirect threat of mental violence that may even be characterized as some type of psychological violence since it constrains human action (Galtung 170). As Galtung remarks, Shin in her novel portrays not only the physical violence due to demonstration also the mental trauma that accompanies it. Though Yoon was able to come out of the demonstration with the support of Myungsoh, tears rolled out from her eyes, as a result of the violence demonstration, she thought about her mother feeling lonely and distressed. She felt alienated and anxiety and fear tormented her to the core. She felt, "I felt like I was the only one to survive the chaos. I felt bad for the ones who did not- ones I could not even see – and my heart grew heavy for them" (Shin 87). Thus the riot created an anguished feeling in the minds of people and affected them psychologically.

Shin very lucidly picturises the catastrophic and psychological effect of this Gwangju incident. The incident has left an everlasting stain in the lives of people, a scar that is painful even after years of cure. Anxiety, fear and despair has become part and parcel of people's life, disturbing them emotionally and psychologically. Though people attempt to come out of the psychological tumult, it seems hardly possible for the victims and dear ones of the victim. After experiencing the

demonstration closely, it has left a perpetual mark in the mind of Yoon and has affected her psychologically. She feels, "Everything is the same. It only feels like time is passing, and only the characters change. We are torn apart and chased around. We fight back and get chased some more... We all stare at the walls and complain of loneliness. All we have to do is turn around, but instead we keep our faces to the walls. It's depressing to think that this will never change. Things were no different last spring, either" (Shin 91).

The violence caused against the people by the military is an act of structural violence. Structural violence is an outcome of an authoritative government that questions liberty, equality and safety. It puts people in peril at the cost of social and economic independence. "In case of structural violence, individuals and peoples suffer inequality in the distribution of power" (Al- Abedine 85). Any society that imposes authoritative rule over the people demands transformation and change.

The demand of bringing a change in the society triggers a revolution in the form of demonstration. The military not only attacked the people through tear gas but also impaired and harassed them irrespective of the gender. During the riot, many protestors were found to be missing in the riot. Many believe that the missing persons were abused and tortured to death in the riot. In the novel, Miru's sister Mirae commits suicide after learning the fact that Mirae's boyfriend is murdered. Mirae's boyfriend is one of those protestors who participated in the demonstration, at first he was found missing during the demonstration. The frustration of her sister Mirae, provoked Miru to join the search and she relentlessly attempted to find the boyfriend of her sister Mirae to make her sister come out of the grief. "Listed in Miru's notebook were the names of people who had disappeared for suspicious reasons and the details of their cases... As we continued searching for him, all we found were other missing people who had died gruesome deaths --- we never found any trace of Mirae's boyfriend" (Shin 142). The news of him missing troubled Mirae psychologically. She used to stare at a certain thing for a long period of time and suddenly would rush out in search of him. When she learnt that he was dead, she committed suicide by burning herself.

People are exposed to a state of dilemma about the security of their life and this leaves them to doubt the credibility of the government. The structural violence caused by the Korean government by imposing military, resulted in arousing fear and anxiety among people. Inequality and dominance over the people has damaged the structure of the society, proving the rule of a corrupt officials. "How do we judge truth and goodness? Where are justice and righteousness hiding? A society that is violent or corrupt prohibits mutual communication. A society that fears communication is unable to solve any problem. It looks for someone to shift the responsibility to and turns even more violent" (Shin 158).

A nation that is stormed by power and dominance must seek its healing by offering a conducive environment to the people. Liberty, equality and safety have to be sought by the government for a peaceful social structure. The government must earn the credibility and trust of the people in order to build friendly coexistence between different classes of society. The thin line of economic and social difference between the communities must be merged into one. Shin wishes all these chaos and commotion come to an end in harmony with peace and liberty. Towards the end of the novel she portrays that everything has come to a close without much change. Life of people have become very simple and mundane devoid of friction and change. Myungsuh states, "The streets are quite now. All of that excitement, like we were going to make something happen, has vanished. Our push

for change has come to a standstill. Even our solidarity is now just another phenomenon. The people I once marched with have all scattered and dispersed without having changed anything” (Shin 263).

“Tender and mournful, the latest novel from best-selling South Korean novelist Shin, considers young love and loss in an era of political ferment...Shin’s uncomplicated yet allusive narrative voice delivers another calmly affecting story, simultaneously foreign and familiar” remarks the Kirkus review. Shin has lucidly carved a picture that is true to reality and close to the heart of the readers. Her words create a visual that enumerates the plight of people; their trials and tribulations, needs and demands and rights and assertions. The novel thus brings to light the darker yet the honest portrayal of South Korea during the political and Industrial upheaval. Needless to say, Shin’s depiction has touched the souls of many and moved the minds of the activists.

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