

## ***HWABYEONG, A KOREAN CULTURAL SYNDROME: THE CASE OF *THE VEGETARIAN* BY HAN KANG AND *KIM JIYEONG, BORN 1982* BY CHO NAM-JOO***

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### **Abstract**

*Hwabyeong*<sup>1</sup> is known as a Korean culturally-bound syndrome situated at the intersection of depression and anger. Translated as “anger illness” or “fire illness”, *hwabyeong* is a mental illness resulted from repressed feelings, which has a specific somatization in middle-aged Korean women: lump in throat or chest, feeling of suffocation, palpitations, heat sensation, burning feeling in the stomach, insomnia, etc. While this syndrome is more frequently discussed as a clinical study case, representations of *hwabyeong* can also be found in Korean literature, proving the prominence it holds within the society. Two such cases from Korean contemporary literature are featured in *The Vegetarian*, by Han Kang, and *Kim Jiyeong, born 1982*, by Cho Nam-joo. Despite the fact that no one mentions *hwabyeong*, the main characters show clear symptoms of this disorder. At first glance, one might say that the characters have gone mad, but looking more closely at their background, symptoms and behavior, they are no different from many other Korean women suffering from *hwabyeong*: Yeong-hye and Kim Jiyeong are two women who experience bodily rebellion because of society’s failure to let them express as individuals with their personal needs, ambitions and feelings.

**Keywords:** *hwabyeong, han, cultural syndrome, collectivism, repressed feelings, female disorder, feminine identity.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanization of the Korean words throughout this paper is done in the Revised Romanization system.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, everybody speaks about mental health, depression, emotional distress, and individual or trans-generational trauma. Nevertheless, these conditions are in fact overlooked. Actually, these terms started to be used so often and with such ease that they have lost the real power they should contain. Thus, when someone says they suffer from depression, they are not necessarily taken seriously. If in the 80s or 90s confessing to have a mental distress would have been considered something taboo and was rarely brought into attention, it has now started to become worn out. In both cases, the person in question would feel ashamed to admit their illness.

South Korea is apparently one of the countries where mental health does not receive enough attention, even though it is a serious issue which concerns almost the entire population. In this regard, Harvard International Review (2022) revealed that "95 percent of South Koreans report being stressed" or depressed, being the country with the highest suicide rate from OECD (OECD Data 2020). It seems that discussing about mental health within the Korean society is still a cultural taboo. But why is that? One reason is that shame is a strong feeling in the Korean culture, so no one is talking that much with family or friends about their mental state. Discussing about it implies admitting to have a mental issue. Individuals find themselves forced to hide the hardships they go through, the injustices they endure, the negative emotions they feel, all this in order not to embarrass themselves, their family or even the community. Otherwise, once an individual shares their struggles or asks for help, it means that they have failed not only themselves, but also their family. In other words, if an individual is mentally ill, they are not the only ones to be blamed for being "deformed" or "abnormal", but the family too could be at fault for not raising them well.

Another reason for Korea having a significant number of mental cases and yet refusing to discuss openly about it is that personal concerns are not regarded as a priority. In a collective society, community and family come first. The well-being of the community has priority, so no matter what concerns the individual is facing, they should be repressed. In a situation of distress or hardship, one will probably not say a word or ask for help from parents or relatives because of shame. As the well-being and harmony of the family matters most, it is one's responsibility to preserve the family's reputation. Talking about emotional problems and mental disorder is therefore taboo. One prefers to pretend they are fine than to be causing trouble or losing face. However, living in a society where one learns that suppressing their own feelings is better than expressing them can do no good to its individuals. The not so surprising negative effects of this socio-

cultural practice come to the extent that we can talk about the existence of a culturally-bound syndrome or illness: *hwabyeong*.

Lee (2014: IV) argues that “Hwa-byung develops when the emotions of anger have been suppressed for a long period of time and it becomes difficult to control those feelings.” He also states that this issue has drawn more attention from researchers, as the number of Korean immigrants increased these past years. Therefore, Lee conducted a study in 2014 on cultural differences in *hwabyeong* between Koreans who live in South Korea and Korean immigrants who live in the U.S. In order to conduct his survey, Lee used five instruments: the *hwabyeong* scale, life stress for Korean women, stress response inventory (SRI), anger regulation, and demographic background that measured the variables used in his study (ibidem: V). Study results showed that the major differences between native Koreans having *hwabyeong* and Korean immigrants are the relationship they have with their spouses and friends. In fact, Lee uses a more specific word. He uses the term “husband”, which means he refers to women. He and other researchers argue that *hwabyeong* affects the majority of women passed the age 30. Even though men too can suffer from this illness, it represents only a small number, and that is because the Korean society has certain specific expectations from women.

Ganadhi (2021) claims that discrimination against women can cause mental problems, and studies have shown that *hwabyeong* occurs most often to middle-aged married women. Kim (2013) found that the main causes of *hwabyeong* in women in their thirties are family conflicts and their social roles as mothers and wives. The most common symptoms in patients are lumps in the throat or chest, followed by the feeling that something is erupting from the stomach, anxiety, despair, depression, insomnia, redness of the face, heat sensation, palpitations, pain, anger and nervous impulses etc. (Rhi, 2004; Min et al. 2009). Even though some symptoms are common to those of state anger and depressive mood, they do not match entirely, having a different somatization.

## **2. WHAT IS HWABYEONG AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT KOREAN LIFE?**

*Hwabyeong* means “anger illness” (*hwa* □ – “fire”, “anger” and *byeong* □ – “illness”) and in medical terms it indicates “a certain physical and emotional suffering” (Rhi, 2004: 21). Frequently called a “culture-bound syndrome”, *hwabyeong* is not easy to be defined or put into a category (Park, 2004). That is also due to the fact that too little scientific research was done on this subject. However, throughout recent years, the number of works covering *hwabyeong* has increased. Especially in the last 10-20 years, due to the increase in the percentage of people who suffer from depression or other mental illnesses, special attention

was paid to this cultural syndrome. Researchers argued that this so-called folk cultural syndrome is an actual disease, different from depression or anger, with specific symptoms, affecting a certain category of people. Besides, the increasing number of Korean immigrants in other countries who experience *hwabyeong* pushed psychologists and psychiatrists to write about it, in order to differentiate, understand *hwabyeong*, and improve welfare conditions.

Studies by those who manifested interest in different aspects of *hwabyeong* show that most of the patients are women past thirty years old, married, with family conflicts, and who come from a lower educational background (Rhi, 2004; Min et. Al., 2009). The little extent research has proved that this condition exists and is present in many Korean women’s lives, affecting their health both psychologically and physically. In fact, *hwabyeong* is so common in the Korean culture that is mostly overlooked as a common “anger issue”.

The main reason for which this illness is said to be exclusively specific to Korean culture is that *hwabyeong* is assumed to arise from *han* (한), a Korean untranslatable notion that expresses a heart full of resentment, unfairness or sadness.<sup>2</sup> The existence of this culturally-specific feeling is often associated with Korea’s painful past, which leads to the idea that the Korean society has a strong post-memory. In a recent podcast called “The Halfie Podcast” (2021) the topic *hwabyeong* was brought into discussion. Beside other aspects, it was argued that all that is suppressed, all negative emotions that have not been expressed turn into *hwabyeong*. In addition to that, Korean society is identified as giving a hard time to women, due to its traditional principles. Korean women are expected to fulfill their role as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and mother without complaining; otherwise it would affect the family’s harmony. Even though *hwabyeong* is a mental disorder resulted from repressed feelings, it also has somatic symptoms (Min et. al., 2009). Specialists in psychology and psychotherapy consider that somatization appears when emotional feelings are converted into physical symptoms, and that happens when the body is emotionally overloaded.

The *hwabyeong* syndrome has a long history. Apparently, the first recorded case of *hwabyeong* in Korea is the one of Prince Sado. In his overview of *hwabyeong* from 2004, professor Rhi argues that Lady Hyegyong (1735-1816), the wife of the heir to the throne, mentions many times in her autobiography<sup>3</sup> about her husband’s anger and symptoms. She relates that the main cause of his impulsive actions was the unfair treatment he received from his father, king Yeongjo. As a consequence, the injustice Prince Sado suffered from his father’s side led to a piled-up anger poured onto others. Prince’s Sado case of

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<sup>2</sup> Definition from the standard dictionary of the National Institute of Korean Language (□□□□ □□□□□□).

<sup>3</sup> *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong* (□□□), 1795-1805.

*hwabyeong* is also illustrated in the movie “The Throne - Sado”. This also shows that, even though rarely, *hwabyeong* cases also can appear in men.

Leaving the story of Prince Sado behind, it is worth enquiring why this syndrome affects more women than men. One explanation can be found in contemporary Korean literature.

According to Ganadhi (2021), the factors that contribute to the development of *hwabyeong* are: society – gender roles and the stigma of suffering from a mental illness, the community – can create a sense of guilt in the individual for not fulfilling some duties, interpersonal – conflicts in the family (between spouses and/or between daughter-in-law and in-laws) and individual – age, personality, degree of attachment to traditional Korean values, etc. Thus, the woman as an individual comes into conflict with her own person. The body acts independently and the mind is confused, causing a disagreement between the two human components. The woman cannot express her misery towards her family or friends, because she has to protect the family unity, she does not want to cause disharmony within the family (The Halfie Project Podcast, 2021). The lack of reconciliation does nothing but lead to an alienation of the mind from the body.

The stress life level in Korea women appears to be significantly higher than in West. For instance, women tend to lose their place at work once they get married and have children. They are regarded as the center of the family, which means they are responsible for almost everything that happens inside the house. With these responsibilities comes the burden of trying to be the perfect mother, the perfect wife. That also implies that, if something wrong happens inside the household, the woman is the one to blame. Moreover, sharing one’s struggles as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law is taboo. As a Korean woman, if one complains in front of your family or friends, that is considered to bring shame, in Korean terms this is called “losing face” and it means the woman brings prejudice not only to herself, but also to her family and her husband’s family. In other words, reaching out for help brings a stigma, so Korean women and society in general avoid revealing their emotional state.

### **3. HWABYEONG: SYMPTOMS AND FACTORS. IS THERE A (LITERARY) CURE FOR IT?**

The female protagonists of the two contemporary novels *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, and *Kim Jiyoung, born 1982* by Cho Nam-joo showcase symptoms of *hwabyeong* and, as such, illustrate women’s life in Korean society: what it means living the life others want for her, putting the well-being of their family before her own, enduring unfairness, discrimination, abuse, etc.; then, when the woman finds herself unable to identify herself as an individual with personal

needs, when her body rebels, she is stigmatized, blamed and helped only in the way the others want, in regards of their own benefit.

*The Vegetarian* and *Kim Jiyeong, born 1982* follow the story of two women struggling in a society which instructed them to repress their emotions. Yeong-hye and Kim Jiyeong are the exact two women who represent their generation, if not their mothers' generation too. They are expected to be good daughters and wives, then good mothers, leaving behind their ambitions as individuals. The main difference between the society in which they live and a Western society is that women are expected to leave their careers and personal ambitions once they get married. The social environment does not offer them the possibility to maintain a balance between personal and professional life. As a woman, they constantly have to give up on something, which eventually leads to giving up on themselves as an individual with personal needs. As both authors portray two characters that experience suffering from the same culture-bound syndrome, the novels offer a better understanding of *hwabyeong*, first as a mental illness and second, as a physical suffering.

In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye wants to give up on eating meat and become a plant. Later, her desire to stop eating at all is the expression of her wish to renounce the human form that is so similar to the ones who were cruel towards her. In *Jiyeong, born 1982*, the protagonist does not feel like herself anymore, so she gives up on herself from time to time and takes the identity of other women from her life. These two women are haunted by traumas and start to act in a strange way in front of the others. Yet, behind the crazy actions lay untold problems.

According to Min et al.'s theory (2009), a total of 14 symptoms should be included in the diagnostic criteria of *hwabyeong* – of which those present in Yeong-hye and Jiyeong's case would be: feeling of unfairness, anger expressed mostly verbal, heat sensation, *han*, hatred, pushing-up in the chest, palpitation, and respiratory stuffiness. Based on the symptoms of the two protagonists, they show some serious signs of *hwabyeong*. Their background and familial context also favor the appearance of the illness. This disease manifests itself as a consequence of Yeong-hye and Jiyeong repressing their anger, frustrations, and sorrow for too long. All these unexpressed and accumulated experiences led to both mental and physical symptoms. The somatization of the mental illness could also be interpreted as a form of the body taking the right to say no to further distress, searching its own freedom, a freedom not granted to the mind. But the individual experiences of both Yeong-hye and Jiyeong show that most of their traumas and trigger buttons are common to their generation, even common to those of their mothers and grandmothers' generations. That means that their trauma is transgenerational and also collective, and this feeling called *han* that encompasses every internalized negative experience in fact can lead to *hwabyeong*.

Yeong-hye and Jiyeong lived a life dictated by others, they were subjected to oppression, therefore repressed many frustrations and sufferings. Whereas Yeong-hye was mostly subjected to physical abuse, Jiyeong was constantly exposed to psychological abuse. During childhood, the abuser was the father – symbol of absolute authority – and during adulthood, it is the social circle. Furthermore, given that Jiyeong takes on the personalities of other women in her life, she is a bearer of the sufferings of multiple generations. In other words, *han* can result from disappointment, anger, desire for revenge, or other feelings and emotions that, once accumulated too much, can cause *hwabyeong* (Cho, 2019). Certainly, both characters are sick, society perceives them as such, they themselves sense that something is contradictory inside of them, and the symptoms suggest there is something more than just a middle-age crisis or a common case of depression or anger syndrome.

### 3.1. The case of Yeong-hye

Yeong-hye is diagnosed by the psychiatrist with schizophrenia and anorexia. However, her family is almost convinced that it is not a case of schizophrenia, because no medicine has an effect on her. Yeong-hye is totally different from other schizophrenic patients because she is aware of what she is doing. Furthermore, through closer observation of its evolution, she can be seen to suffer from something more than the simple loss of contact with reality encountered in other cases. Yeong-hye's illness is related to personal experiences which caused deep traumas and repressed feelings. She feels that she is suffocating: "Nobody can make me breathe." (Han, 2021: 49). The bra suffocates her, her dreams suffocate her. The meat, the animals from her dreams and those from her abdomen suffocate her, all symbolizing the social oppressions brought upon her that limit her identity and human existence.

The moment Yeong-hye is surrounded by her family and forced to eat meat against her will, the beast inside her is unleashed. Anger, a sign of *hwabyeong*, engulfs her body in an attempt to escape the family' grip. She struggles when her father tries to crush the piece of meat on her lips, and the moment they manage to stuff the piece of meat into her mouth, she growls and spits it out, while "an animal cry of distress burst from her lips." (Han, 40) Moreover, Yeong-hye feels like a huge weight that she cannot get rid of presses down on her body: "I want to shout. I want to throw myself through the pitch-black window. Maybe that would finally get this lump out of my body." (Han, 49) She feels a lump in her chest; in an inexplicable way, something presses on her solar plexus and causes an unbearable pain: "The thing that hurts is my chest. Something is stuck in my solar plexus. [...] I can feel this lump all the time. No

matter how deeply I inhale, it doesn't go away." (Han, 49) She does not know what exactly is, but it presses on her chest, it suffocates her, burns her from the inside. She wants to get rid of everything that is hidden in her stomach, faces of people, animals, everything: "The face is inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach." (Han, 115). Ultimately, she believes that her solar plexus holds all the lives of the animals she ate that are now devouring her. Besides, the violent acts she dreams of repeatedly are a reflection of the violence she suffered and witnessed during childhood. In fact, her symptoms are driven by feelings of guilt and trauma that she cannot escape.

Although she has given up meat as a way of trying to escape the weight of her trauma, the dreams and the feeling of suffocation do not go away, she cannot give them up. Thus, Yeong-hye decides to stop eating at all and feed only on sunlight and water, like a plant. She intends to give up on what makes her human as the only way to escape what is suffocating her.

### 3.2. The case of Kim Jiyeong

As for Kim Jiyeong, the psychiatrist does not diagnose her with *hwabyeong*, but confesses that he is not convinced of the illness from which the character suffers. The psychiatrist's first diagnosis, based on the husband's described symptoms, is that Jiyeong suffers from split personality or dissociative identity disorder. After the first sessions with Jiyeong, he believes that in fact Jiyeong is suffering from prolonged postnatal depression, but he cannot be sure of this diagnosis either. As he proceeds with the prescribed treatment, the psychiatrist is no longer convinced of any diagnosis, as he cannot tell precisely from Jiyeong's behavior what she is suffering from: "She doesn't open up without encouragement, but once she gets going, she unearths long-buried memories on her own and describes them articulately, in a calm, logical manner." (Cho, 2018: 157) Thus, the patient does not seem withdrawn or uncooperative, but neither cooperative all the time. Moreover, the psychiatrist does not shy away from confessing that there is a possibility he may have made a hasty diagnosis. He argues that his difficulty in giving a proper diagnosis is due to the symptoms and the sessions with Jiyeong which are not clear or conclusive enough.

Jiyeong experiences some dissociative episodes, during which she takes on the persona of other women. These episodes are not constant, nor do they follow the entire pattern of people suffering from this disease. Furthermore, Jiyeong does not develop alternate personalities to vent her frustrations in certain circumstances like patients with multiple personality disorder. She transforms into women she knows (Ganadhi, 2021). The symptoms show that Jiyeong is actually suffering from *hwabyeong*. At the first symptoms of illness, Jiyeong finds herself staring blankly for longer periods of time or crying out of nowhere: "He had found

her staring off into space or crying over sad songs." (Cho, 2018: 2) This symptom is shared with patients who suffer from depression (Lee et. al., 2014). It was a strange thing of her to act like that, considering that she was a cheerful person. However, these signs were put down to fatigue and overlooked by Daehyeon, her husband. At other times, Kim Jiyeong often blushes when faced with a situation where she feels wronged, overwhelmed, or angry. Heat sensation and/or redness is another symptom of *hwabyeong*, this time a specific one. For example, at the Chuseok family reunion, when Jiyeong is asked if it is hard for her to do so much work during the holidays, her face turns red and begins to cry, as if scolded: "At this, Jiyoung's expression softened, her cheeks flushed into a gentle pink" (Cho, 2018: 9). Then, when Daehyeon tries to stop her from a nervous outburst full of reproaches towards him and her parents, Jiyeong becomes aggressive and pushes him twice.

These manifestations occur before and during Jiyeong's dissociative episode in front of her husband's family. After this episode, Daehyeon decides to go to a psychiatrist to discuss his wife's health. The blushing, crying, and aggressive, angry reactions are all signs of Jiyeong's repressed resentments, such as the fact that she's never been asked if she's having a hard time with all the chores around the house and in-laws, or if she needed help. In fact, she could not even ask for help because she was supposed to be able to do it all and well, just like her mother and mother-in-law did. In her society, asking for her husband's help would be a shameful gesture on her part, showing a lack of filial piety, respect for her husband, and feminine virtue.

When Jiyeong remembers the job interview where she was asked what she would do if a client put his hand on her thighs, she feels the anger that she could not express at the time for fear of losing a possible job: "She would lie in bed frustrated and indignant, kicking off the blankets that clung to her legs." (Cho, 90) She is so consumed by frustration and anger that she has insomnia, the heat in her body, the suffocating sensation, again all these symptoms being signs of *hwabyeong*. Also, after giving birth, Kim Jiyeong is very sensitive and depressed. Not only does she cry often, but when she does not seem to understand, she throws a tantrum, only to feel sorry and apologize afterwards. Jiyeong has no recollection of the dissociative episodes where she imitates her mother perfectly, her old friend, or other women in her life: "She didn't seem to remember what had happened the night before." (Cho, 6) She acts as if nothing had happened, as she was not aware of her health problem. Yet, her husband could not help but notice her obvious change. However, unlike Yeong-hye, Kim Jiyeong seems to have a chance of healing. She agrees to see a psychiatrist and talk to him about her sufferings and unexpressed emotions.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the shared characteristics with other syndromes, studies have shown that *hwabyeong* is a specific mental illness which arises from suppressed feelings and has a certain somatization. This culture-bound syndrome remains a serious concern for the Korean society, where the individual identity of women is restrained to the point one goes “mad”. Beside the clinical approach, *hwabyeong* is worth looking at from another perspective as well. Contemporary Korean literature, in particular, offers some examples that put into the spotlight this sensitive issue that affects a large number of Korean women.

In *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang and *Kim Jiyeong, born in 1982* by Cho Nam-joo, both characters show obvious signs of *hwabyeong*, while some of their symptoms are common to other illnesses and therefore misleading. However, the condition is not clearly stated in either novel, just like it is not fully admitted in Korean society. Their diagnoses given by doctors are not convincing, because the two women present a different symptomatology compared to other patients with the same diseases. Both Yeong-hye and Jiyeong seem to suffer from this disease so specific to the Korean culture, which would have its origins in the feeling of the *han*. Consumed by the traumas of family conflicts and gender roles, angered, their bodies retaliate by causing abjection. The protagonists become alienated from themselves, from a body that has become alien.

Watching closely the case of the two protagonists Yeong-hye and Jiyeong, one can guess that the life of a woman from the Korean society is far from easy; living under social pressure, putting the well-being of the family before her own, enduring unfairness, discrimination, abuse etc. When the woman’s mind and body rebel, she is being stigmatized and blamed, not helped. Thus, factors such as family conflicts, individual trauma, and gender-biased roles, accumulated with blame and shame impact the personal development of the woman.

*Hwabyeong* is also an illness whose symptoms allow society to easily call out the sick women “crazy”, “hysterical”, “overreacting” or simply having anger management issues maybe transmitted from their mother. But if the anger can be transmitted from a generation to another, that also implies transmitting the memory of trauma and negative feelings. Piling up societal stigma, community’s pressure and self-blame can lead to serious affection of the woman as an individual.

Since *hwabyeong* is more of a culture-bound syndrome, there is no specific cure yet. Given the fact that *hwabyeong* is regarded as a disorder and a somatization of suppressed *han* feeling, some argue that releasing *han* could help cure the illness. In other words, it implies releasing all that has been repressed before (negative emotions, trauma, etc.). Regardless, curing *hwabyeong* would also imply making some societal changes, giving women more opportunities and

career options according to their needs, to normalize talking about mental health, renouncing traditional gender roles, et. As this is a socially-tied illness, societal changes are needed in order to cure those who suffer from *hwabyeong*.

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