HARSH REALITY AS REFLECTED IN MIN JIN LEE'S "PACHINKO"

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Abstract: Min Jin Lee's novel "Pachinko", a sweeping saga which follows four generations of a family, deals with painfully real issues: poverty, humiliation, immigration, lifelong suffering, discrimination, death. It is also a story of love, loyalty, Christianity, resilience and kindness. The tightly cinched plotline relies on minute and accurate research work. Lee's characters too are composites and rely on numerous interviews with real people. The historical background consists of a series of actual events in the lives of poor Koreans, starting with 1910 during the Japanese colonization, World War II, and the aftermath of the war, the Korean War, and ends in 1989. This article endeavors to highlight ways in which Min Jin Lee succeeds in making fiction more real than reality itself.

Keywords: immigrant, kimchi, pachinko, yakusa, zainichi

History has failed us, but no matter. (Lee 2020, 3) This first sentence of the 530 page long novel definitely raises the reader's curiosity from the very beginning. As a quasi ignorant reader I sensed that by "us" she meant Koreans, but the history of the Korean people between 1910 to 1989 was completely unknown to me (I imagine most of the millions of readers of "Pachinko" were in the same situation). When the novel ends with Sunja visiting her suicidal son's grave: …*Sunja dug a hole and dropped the key ring photograph inside. She covered the hole with dirt and grass, then did what she could to clean her hands with her handkerchief, but dirt remained beneath her nails, (Lee 2020, 531)* it became clear that Min Jin Lee's "us" are the poor Koreans, the immigrants in Japan, who do not have a voice, and that history has been exceedingly cruel to them. The ending of the novel, though, closes the circle of suffering, Sunja and her people have prevailed. It did not matter that the people in charge were driven by personal, mean interests; ordinary people resisted, thrived, and survived in the worst of conditions. Poor, wronged people are sturdy and strong-willed, proving once again that being broken also means to be stronger.

Min Jin Lee worked for more than two decades on "Pachinko", an epic saga which follows four generations of a Korean family through poverty, humiliation, tragedy, and despair in colonized Korea and Japan. A sweeping, overbearing book, Lee's novel takes on cumbersome political themes, terrible experiences of the Korean diaspora, the humiliation and marginalization of humble Koreans, racial and genre discrimination. "Pachinko" is also a story of love, sacrifice, ambition and loyalty. No matter how harsh reality is, how desperate circumstances get, Lee's characters keep fighting. Complex, stubborn and resilient women, hardworking, devoted mothers and daughters but also fathers and sons ready to sacrifice their lives for their families fall and rise again, triumph in the face of an inimical history.

Contemporary literature continues to surprise the twenty-first century reader by a complex, direct anchoring in reality. Modernism and the stream of consciousness technique engaged the readers in a complicated process of deciphering the characters' thoughts and feelings, and very often they faced open endings and confusion. Postmodernism made the task of unpacking meaning even more difficult. Readers were left to err apparently aimlessly in an intricate fictional web. Fantasy complicated things even more: readers retreated into a mysterious, 'un-real' world, refusing to get involved in everyday social, political or economic

issues. Post-postmodernism with its more and more problematical, often overwhelming realities inspired contemporary authors to accurately showcase real concerns of contemporary society. One can safely argue that a new kind of realism dominates the literary scene, and Min Jin Lee is definitely part of this community.

When asked which authors she admired, she stated: *I adore nineteenth century writers Bronte, Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Balzac. I also love Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, William Faulkner, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, Zora Neale Hurston, Mark Twain, Tanizaki, Henry James, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. (Lee 2020, 545).* Inspired by nineteenth century realists - but also by modern and contemporary novelists who wrote in the realist tradition – she took her mission seriously, and embarked upon thorough research. While living for a while in Japan and having the opportunity to visit South Korea, she took the painful decision to rewrite the first version of the novel, sensing that she had not grasped the historical truth about Koreans and Korean immigrants in Japan (zainichi): *But after I wrote the whole manuscript, I knew there was something wrong with it as a novel draft […] it didn't match the vision I had of the work I had in my mind. (Lee 2020, 541)*

Lee's family immigrated to U.S. from Seoul when she was seven years old. She first found out about the Korean immigrants in Japan when she was in college. As a first-generation immigrant and member of the Korean diaspora, she started gathering information about this community during the Japanese colonization from 1910 to 1945, during WWII and after to the end of the 20th century. In 1910 Japan annexed Korea which became part of the Japanese Empire. In the 1920s and during the Second World War, Koreans were enslaved and forced to work in factories, in mines under appalling conditions. About sixty thousand Koreans are estimated to have died between 1939 and 1945. In Lee's novel, for instance, Yoseb Baek was seriously injured during the bombings in Nagasaki and died years later because of the severe burns all over his body. Sunja, Kyunghee, Yangjin sold kimchi (a Korean dish consisting of stuffed cucumbers) or bakery products for meager sums of money at the Japanese markets. Another wave of migration started after South Korea was devastated by the Korean War in the 1950s. Many Koreans entered Japan illegally avoiding torture and murder at the hands of the Korean dictator. Even in the 1970s and 80s native Koreans born in Japan were not accepted as Japanese citizens (they were holding Korean passports although they had been living all their lives in Japan), and no matter how capable and educated, they were considered as inferior to the Japanese. Noa Baek tragically succumbed to this unjust and cruel treatment. Having decided to conceal his Korean identity, he was torn by guilt and committed suicide. Solomon Baek, a representative of the fourth generation of Korean immigrants, even though a graduate from an ivy league American university, lost his job at a British bank in Japan for no real fault. Significantly, he then decided to join his father, Mozasu, in the pachinko business (pachinko is a kind of vertical pinball game played by adults in Japan and which generates huge amounts of money). As of 2015 pachinko has proved to generate revenues of about nineteen trillion yen (meaning about 190 billion US dollars). Nowadays, there are about twelve thousand parlors officially registered in Japan, and eleven million Japanese play pachinko regularly. Although the pachinko business was started in Japan, a great number of 'dirty Korean immigrants' have operated pachinko parlors, and were considered to be yakuza adepts (a transnational crime organization originating in Japan). Solomon, thus, a thoroughly educated and able young man was not granted a place in the Japanese high society and had to step back. The game itself and gambling become leitmotifs all through the novel, signifying the precarious, often perilous condition of the discriminated Koreans in Japan. Here's Lee's opinion about the role of pachinko: *For me, the pachinko business and the game itself serve as metaphors for the*

history of Koreans in Japan – a people caught in seemingly random global conflicts – as they win, lose, and struggle for their place and for their lives. (Lee 2020, 549)

By diligently researching and interviewing, Min Jin Lee discovered that Korean history and Korean immigration are dominated by discrimination and injustice, which work on several levels. On the one hand, especially first and second generation Korean women were considered inferior to their male partners. Yangjin repeatedly told her daughter, Sunja, that a woman's lot would always be suffering. Undoubtedly, Yangjin, Sunja, Kyunghee are hardworking, resilient women whose lives mean sacrifice, disease and pain. But the most terrifying kind of discrimination is the one involving members of the same race, in this case the Koreans and the Japanese. Bigotry and intolerance went so far that Koreans were attributed new names, Japanese-sounding ones, as a sign of their annihilation as an independent nation: *Sunja was born a Kim, yet in Japan, where women went by their husband's family name, she was Sunja Baek, which was translated into Sunja Boku, and on her identity papers, her 'tsumei' was now Junko Bando. (Lee 2020, 139)* The only Koreans who made money in Japan and were accepted by the Japanese, were cunning and fierce businessmen like Koh Hansu. The price these Koreans had to pay for their luxurious life was a complete obliteration of their personality: "*For people like us, home does not exist."[…]Patriotism is just an idea, so is capitalism or communism. And the guys in charge will exploit men who believe in ideas too much. You can't fix Korea. Not even a hundred of you or a hundred of me can fix Korea. (Lee 2020, 254)*

Just like nineteenth century social realists, only even more accurately, Min Jin Lee went about creating her characters by minutely researching, analyzing, interviewing many Korean-Japanese men and women from 2007 to 2011. Consequently, her characters are as she herself put it 'composites'; nothing about them is invented, they are practically extracted from real life and made into flesh and blood people transposed into fiction. In 1871, in a letter to Blackpool George Eliot wrote referring to "Middlemarch": *I don't see how I can leave anything out, because I hope there is nothing that will be seen to be irrelevant to my design, which is to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional…*This is exactly what readers feel about "Pachinko". The book is not about heroic deeds, about exceptional people in exceptional situations. It is rather about common Koreans, toiling, hard-working women and men, those whom history has denied recognition or fame. When writing and re-writing her saga, Lee was impressed by the compelling stories of individuals who struggled to face historical catastrophes. Just as minor plotlines are as important and necessary as major plotlines, minor characters find their significant role in the novel along with the major ones. Minor or major – if there are any major characters in the novel – the primordial issue for Lee is: *My characters are very real to me…(Lee 2020, 545)*

A great many of Lee's interviewees mentioned a first-generation matriarch who sacrificed her whole life for the benefit of the next generation. To earn money for their families first-generation Korean immigrant women worked in open-air markets, raised pigs, sold rags and scrap metal or homemade goods from carts. Although history does not mention them, they often were the breadwinners and pillars of the poor Korean families. This is how Sunja and her world came to life. Sunja, like Yangjin and Kyunghee live in the shadow of male characters, whom they need to blindly obey, but they are the driving forces of the story. In the same spirit, male characters like Koh Hansu, Isak, Noa, Mozasu, Solomon are no heroes, but they are part of a community, of a network of relationships which highlight the socio-historical background of the novel.

"Pachinko", like Min Jin Lee's first published novel "Free Food for Millionaires" is written from an omniscient point of view. Interestingly and not unlike in nineteenth century realist literature, there is an empowered narrator – 'the manager of the performance' in Thackeray's terms – who knows the viewpoints of each character at all times, who controls

the storyline. Paradoxically, by constantly shifting from one character's perspective to another one, the narrator's objectivity is enhanced. In addition to being truthful and reliable, the narrator is sympathetic to his characters' predicament. Due to the cohesive role of the narrator, the numerous plotlines are brought together and fiction becomes a place of order and peace emerging from chaos. One reason why Lee chose a fair/ objective narrator was that she wanted the readers to have a truthful picture of the Korean-Japanese people about whom very few artists have written in English. The author wanted the true tragic story of Korean immigrants to be known by the world. Lee knew that the narrative history of ordinary, poor, humiliated people needs to be told by a strong voice like hers. The twenty-first century reader is informed of the Japanese occupation, World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, as well as Confucianism, Buddhism, Communism and Christianity.

The task set by the writer in the beginning of this article was to demonstrate that Min Jin Lee's novel ,"Pachinko", first published in 2017, finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction, written much in the tradition of the nineteenth century realism – at times even more so – relies on direct and minute research, interviews, the hard work of a scientist. Also, it is obvious that the broader picture of the literary world has definitely changed: we are facing a comeback of an active engagement of artists in social, political and economic issues.

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