VICTORIAN REALISM REVISITED IN MIN JIN LEE'S "FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRES"

Anca Bădulescu
Assoc. Prof., PhD, „Transilvania" University of Brașov

Abstract: The author of this article addresses a question we often ask nowadays: is nineteenth century realism dead and forgotten or rather can we claim that it was revived and refined in the last decades? Min Jin Lee certainly demonstrates that realism, Victorian realism in particular, has survived for around two hundred years and that it reemerged 'from its ashes' in a new, exciting shape. The aim of this paper is primarily to point at common characteristics in novels like "Middlemarch" by George Eliot or "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Bronte and Min Jin Lee's "Free Food for Millionaires". It ultimately endeavors to demonstrate that realism arose enriched and adapted to the life of a twenty-first century Dorothea Brook, or Jane Eyre. Casey Han, a Korean-American young woman, educated at Princeton, living in Elmhurst, strives to break the barriers of her modest origin just like famous Victorian heroines, but living in a completely 'brave new world'.

Keywords: Korean, Queens, Elmhurst, Princeton, Middlemarch

It is definitely hard to even begin to write about Min Jin Lee's 650-page long, eventful novel without fearing to miss something and not be able to render the thrill and suspense the author creates from the first to the last word of the text. This is why starting with Lee's few introductory pages which she titled "How I Learned to Write" is likely to help readers understand better the so very complex process of writing. This is how it starts: *I had already failed at two novel manuscripts. Publishers had rejected my first manuscript, and I rejected the second, because it was not good enough to send out. I was thirty-two years old and beginning my third novel. (Lee 2017, ix)* She is referring, in fact, to her debut novel "Free Food for Millionaires" which took a very long time to be finally published. She had tried to complete it since 1995, but only succeeded in 2007.

Min Jin Lee gave up being a lawyer and had to overcome debilitating health problems - financial ones as well – when she decided that she wanted to become a writer. A long and tedious, sometimes excruciating road started for the former lawyer: *…the more I studied fiction, the more I realized that writing novels required rigorous discipline and mastery, no different than the study of engineering or classical sculpture. (Lee 2017, x)*

The first thing she did was to read more widely. She had always been an eager reader of nineteenth century fiction, but by reading more attentively she soon discovered that really good fiction did not only require beautiful words and feelings, but it *demanded emotion, structure, ideals, and bravery. (Lee 2017, x)* She read widely. Every fine novel or short story turned into an object of study. She would even transcribe whole passages in her notebook only to reread the beautiful, elegant sentences. By doing so she felt as glad as when she was looking at a painting by a great master, when she was admiring the ocean at dusk or the face of a child.

Her next goal was to achieve mastery in the craft of writing by closely studying poetry. She studied prosody thus being acutely aware of words, their sounds and meanings: *Patterns surfaced in poems, stories and plays. There was music in sentences and paragraphs.*

I could hear the silences in a sentence. (Lee 2017, xii) One can easily say that Min Jin Lee self-curated her own literary education breaking new ground step by step by trying to answer questions like: how do writers send their readers into a completely new world, how could they make readers have those new feelings, and how did they know that they were on the right path? And it is safe to say that she did give answers to these questions by creating vibrant characters like Casey Han, Ella Shim, Unu, Jay, Ted, Leah and Joseph Han, to mention only a few of them. By characterization and sympathy, she makes us care and empathize with her characters.

The next level in her 'apprenticeship' was the minute research work, not unlike that of journalists: *After the classes, the readings, the discarded drafts, I started to research my novel like I was a journalist. (Lee 2017, xiii)* Having said that, it dawns on any attentive reader that this was the main concern and focus of realist fiction writers like Thackeray, Eliot, the Bronte sisters, Austen or Trollope, who are frequently mentioned in "Free Food for Millionaires". In keeping with her preoccupation with detail and real-life facts and emotions, while creating Ted Kim, the investment banker, for instance, she interviewed several people who went to Harvard Business School and even sat in on a class along twenty-five young, attractive, self-confident business students: *…that day changed me, because I started to value research, not for the details or the velvet scraps of dialogue, but for the feelings that new information made me have. (Lee 2017, xiv)*

Just like a true realist, Lee significantly covered the stages which led her to the creation of her amazingly realist debut novel "Free Food for Millionaires". Reading with intent, digging deeper into the layers of language, and thoroughly researching she brought a fresh breath to twenty-first century American realism, specifically Korean-American realist fiction. Casey Han, the Korean-American Princeton graduate, has much in common with Dorothea Brooke in "Middlemarch" and Jane Eyre, but she also is the product of a new outlook, of a complex, often stupefying world which relies on technology, on progress, on development at a break-neck speed.

Clearly, this novel strikes by its eventfulness – let's just consider its extent – the author never refraining from giving details about the appearances, the whereabouts, the feelings, the doubts and worries of her characters. Here is a relevant fragment: *Casey was unusually tall for a Korean, nearly five feet eight, slender, and self-conscious about what she wore. She kept her hair shoulder length, fastidiously powdered her nose, and wore wine-colored lipstick without variation. To save money, she wore her eye-glasses at home, but outside she wore contact lenses to correct her nearsightedness. She did not believe she was pretty but felt she had something – some sort of workable sex appeal. (Lee 2017, 3)* Minute descriptions of people, places, and feelings weave an intricate web, and give the novel a vibrant real-life sense but also a lot of suspense.

In order to validate the initial statement – nineteenth century Victorian realism is not extinct, but rather enriched and adapted to modern times – this short article refers to the technique known as 'mise en abime', a method frequently used in universal literature. We find out early on in the novel that Casey reads the Bible every morning and that she keeps rereading books she likes, her favorite being "Middlemarch". She carries it with her and reads it on the subway and on the bus, so much so that it is all worn out: *Each morning, Casey read the Bible, and on the subway, she reread her same books like a little child with a favorite storybook. (Lee 2017, 389)*

Nonetheless, there is more to Casey's 'obsession' with Victorian novels. Eliot's novel plays a twofold role in the economy of the book. On the one hand, we witness the use of a well-known novel within Lee's story, thus bringing palpable reality into her fictional work. On the other hand, the author clearly gives new life to Eliot's vision. The Victorian author's intricate web of relationships, the carefully wrought plot, the interlacing of destinies, and the

very careful structuring of the book are masterfully replicated by Min Jin Lee in "Free Food for Millionaires".

The chapter titled 'Hospitality' opens with Casey Han's visit to a rare-book shop on the corner of Seventieth Street. The owner of the shop is Joseph McReed, a pale old man with fluffy white hair, wearing a pea green–colored golf shirt and lapis blue eyeglasses frames. He confesses having noticed Casey at the bus stop where they are usually waiting for the same bus. Joseph is not only impressed by her exotic hats – which she designs and sews herself - and her colorful, glamorous clothes but mainly by her habit of reading ceaselessly the same books. He surprises her by disclosing: *This year, you read Thackeray, Hardy, and Eliot. Either you are a slow reader or you read the same books over and over…But you often return to "Middlemarch". (Lee 2017, 390)* Significantly, other famous books like "Anna Karenina", "Madame Bovary", "Cousin Bette" or "The Great Gatsby" are mentioned in this subchapter.

Casey ends up buying a first edition of "Jane Eyre", her favorite book in high school, for a large sum of money which she can't really afford: *She opened the cover, and in it was a three-by-five index card: "1st American Ed., Excellent Condition, sm. Ink stain on the back cover…(Lee 2017, 388)* It is not by chance that Casey Han is associated with the two legendary heroines: Dorothea Brooke and Jane Eyre.

Interestingly, the Korean word 'han' means resentment, sorrow, sense of loss and hardship, stifled passion and love or even the frustration of the oppressed. Koreans say that a woman who manages to overcome these barriers has resolved her 'han'. Casey, like Dorothea and Jane too, has to change course and fight with adverse situations, but she prevails, again like her Victorian counterparts. A proud and rebellious young woman, she finally sorts out her life with the support of a few friends like Ella, Sabine or Unu. She finally understands that business school is not what she needs and that all she wants to do in life is design extraordinary hats, thus following her old passion even though *in America only eccentrics and religious women (Lee 2017, 243)* wear hats. Her rebellion against conformism and Korean strict morality reminds the readers of Jane Eyre and her stubborn fight with social and moral taboos. Casey herself had loved the character who grew up to be a governess and who fell in love with Rochester. She also resonated with Jane's decision to leave Rochester only to return when he was maimed and blinded. Casey is not an orphan like Jane, but she is treated badly by her taciturn father who beats and kicks her out of the house when she dares confront him. Her mother, Leah, is too meek and dominated by her husband to stand by her. Like her Victorian counterpart, she has to fend for herself, she is disappointed in love and leaves her boyfriend, she is hesitant in choosing her career and friends and, like Jane, she makes mistakes. Casey does not end up with a modern version of Edward Rochester, but she is definitely changed, more mature and self-confident.

When discussing "Middlemarch" with Joseph McReed, Casey calls Dorothea, *whom she loved and disliked at the same time (Lee 2017, 392)* a fool for having married the much older pseudo-scholar Casaubon. Nevertheless, it is obvious that, like Dorothea, Casey chooses wrongly when it comes to Jay or when she has an affair with Hugh. Both of them finally grow up: Dorothea marries a man she really loves and understands what her mission in life is, while Casey, although she does not marry (twentieth century women are not eager to marry), gives up business school in favor of her artistic and creative impulse. Moreover, Casey and Ella remind us of Dorothea and Celia, in "Middlemarch" or Lizzy and Jane Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice": idealistic, kind and sensitive on the one hand, headstrong, foolish and impulsive on the other.

In the vein of Victorian fiction, Min Jin Lee creates flesh and blood characters who live and act in a vivid, colorful world. At the same time, this is the usual background the readers recognize and resonate with. The plot unfolds in the 1990s in New York. Casey and Ella are modern women who believe that happiness includes building their careers and also

following personal satisfaction. Although marriage is not the primary aim of these girls – as it was for Victorian heroines - love and passion are crucial in their lives. They are the ingredients anyone can't live without.

"Free Food for Millionaires" is a novel which keeps you alert and eager to find out more. In the tradition of realist prose, it is crammed with events, tales of family issues, friendship relationships, rivalries, career ambitions, losses, romantic liaisons, true to life characters, and suspense. What makes Lee's novel stand out, though, is the special Korean-American setting populated by two generations of immigrants who struggle to blend into the American way of living without clashing with Korean traditions and culture.

Lee's end of "How I Learned to Write" sounds like this: *When I sold the manuscript in the summer of 2006, I counted eleven years as my apprenticeship. I was thirty-seven years old. (Lee 2017, xv)* Certainly Lee's apprenticeship was a long one in the true tradition of a realist researcher, and "Free Food for Millionaires" was worthwhile waiting for!

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