

Elderly suicide in Korean literature: A reflection on short- and medium-length novels

**Author:**Yeong Sik Mun^{1,2}**Affiliations:**¹Department of Theology, Chongshin University, Korea²Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Research Project Registration:****Project Leader:** J.C. Müller**Project Number:** 02380595**Description:**

Prof. Dr Mun Yoeng Sik is participating in the research project, 'Narrative Pastoral Counseling', directed by Prof. Dr Julian Müller, Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria.

Corresponding author:

Yeong Mun, ysmoon@chongshin.ac.kr

Dates:

Received: 08 Feb. 2017

Accepted: 01 May 2017

Published: 26 June 2017

How to cite this article:

Mun, Y.S., 2017, 'Elderly suicide in Korean literature: A reflection on short- and medium-length novels', *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), 4522. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4522>

Copyright:

© 2017. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article attempts to examine how elderly suicide is viewed in Korean novels, against the background that suicide rates are higher among older people in Korean society. Firstly, elderly suicide is caused by loneliness and alienation in some novels. Writers foreground some problems that people, especially elderly people, need to address. For example, not only people with negative personality traits but also people with positive personality traits can commit suicide when they cannot overcome disappointing words from their children; suicide is a greedy act if it is committed because of loneliness and alienation; elderly people need to humbly accept their lives, even though loneliness and alienation are unavoidable. Secondly, Korean novels make it clear that elderly suicide is closely related to Korean modern history. Old people experienced psychological trauma as they underwent the Korean War in the 1950s, the military dictatorship in the 1980s and the IMF crisis in the 1990s. When obsessed with a sense of guilt, older people sometimes commit suicide in order to atone for their wrongdoings. Thirdly, elderly suicide is depicted in positive terms in a novel, while suicide is usually considered to be a negative act. An elderly couple with physical illness commits suicide out of love for each other in hopes of reincarnation. This suicide is viewed as resolving the conflict between their daughter and her husband. In examining perspectives on elderly suicide as depicted in Korean novels, this article sheds light on reasons why some elderly people live unsound lives and suggests some solutions.

Introduction

According to the statistics on causes of death (Statistics of Korea 2012), the number of suicides per 100 000 population among those aged 65 or above is 69. This suicide rate is more than three times that among those in their teens (15.1%) and that among those in their 20s (19.6%) (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2011). This is basically because of the fact that Korean society has become an aging society.

In particular, people aged 65 years and above attempt suicide because of physical illness, financial problems and conflicts with spouses or children. According to a research on the causes of attempted suicide among emergency room patients 61 years old and over, physical illness (37.8%) is a more serious cause than interpersonal relations (23.2%). And yet, physical illness means not only physical pain but also diverse stressful problems, including the fear of death and financial burden. Elderly suicide in Korean society is found to be closely related to rapid social change and poor social support systems (MHW 2011; Korea Suicide Prevention Center 2012).

Korean writers deal with elderly suicide, which has become a social issue, as a social phenomenon. In depicting elderly suicide as it happens, they sometimes suggest alternative discourses that may help elderly suicide attempters to form good interpersonal relations and overcome crises. While elderly suicide has become a serious social problem, there have been few studies on how elderly suicide is handled in Korean literature. This has led me to perform an analysis of perspectives on elderly suicide as they appear in short- and medium-length novels that deal with elderly suicide in the 1990s and beyond.

In this article, I will examine the ways in which elderly suicide is depicted in the novels. The following questions arise: According to the writers, what are the causes of elderly suicide? What are the lethal suicide methods? What are people's reactions to elderly suicide? It is expected that this study will draw attention to the issue of elderly suicide in a positive way and help people to better

Note: This article emanates from the current and ongoing doctoral research of Prof. Dr Sik, conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr Julian Müller, Emeritus professor of Practical Theology and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria.

understand the situations of elderly people who feel a suicidal urge. I will look at six novels written in the 1990s and beyond.

Perspectives on elderly suicide in short and medium-length novels that deal with elderly suicide in the 1990s and beyond

Suicide that brings about reconciliation

Let us look at *Inheritance* of Table 1 (number 1). It has four major characters. I am the narrator of this novel. During the Kwangju Democratisation Movement, I was caught by soldiers who were killing civilians, but I was saved by a restaurant owner. I married his daughter, but I am currently living separately from her. She is in a state of dejection after two miscarriages. She was shocked at her father being tortured, and she became disillusioned about human beings. His father-in-law was born in North Korea but moved to South Korea during the Korean War. He was a teacher at a dancing school when he met his present wife, who was his third wife. After marriage, he began to run a Chinese restaurant. He is not faithful to his wife, which always makes her very nervous. Still, she tries to show that she loves him by going wherever he goes.

Inheritance depicts a double suicide committed by people who were suffering from nostalgia for their hometown and who were sacrificed by political authorities. My father-in-law moved from the North to the South. He was in despair because he could not visit his hometown for more than 40 years. In addition, he has lived for 10 years with back pain which he contracted after he helped one of the hostages to escape the restaurant during the Kwangju Democratisation Movement. The man he helped at that time was his son-in-law. One day he complains about his situation to his son-in-law. 'If I cannot die a natural death, I had better go as close as possible to my hometown and kill myself. Maybe my body will be drifted on the waves to the North' (p. 237). It is said that people act differently before they die. He says that the surgery fee is too expensive and that he cannot go to his

hometown as he is. On the day when he complained about his fate, he shaved himself and combed his hair beautifully, as if he were about to leave the hospital (Jung Chan-Joo 1990):

It has been exactly 40 years since I left the North. It's over. It is no more possible for me to see my parents or relatives. Even if I can go there, I am in such an unseemly condition. I know the condition of my body better than anyone else. It couldn't be worse. I don't need any operations. At the best, I will be able to walk. It is obvious that I will spend money from hospital to hospital. (p. 248)

One day, my parents-in-law jumped off a steep cliff in the K. Island, with their wrists tied by a scarf. Their daughter and son-in-law, who are separated, heard of the news and went to the place. When they identified the dead bodies, they were first frightened and shocked. But when they saw the scarf, they were deeply moved.

The meaning of *Inheritance* is unique in the sense that the main characters do not commit suicide because of familial conflicts, economic pressure, or disappointment at children, but because they can overcome neither their strong nostalgia for their hometown, as a result of the division of Korean, nor their political sufferings because of the Kwangju Democratisation Movement in 1980. Both factors are historical rather than personal.

My father-in-law in *Inheritance* has a positive view of suicide, because he believes in reincarnation (Jung Chan-Joo 1990):

The other day, I talked with my wife. I said, 'Let's believe in the next life'. Then she said, 'Why not?' explaining to me the concept of reincarnation. Her point was that death is not the end. The body decays, but the soul is transferred to the body of a newborn person, according to his or her karma. While I was listening to her, I felt better. Actually, I had been afraid that I would simply suffer, die, and disappear. Finally, I came to have the courage to kill myself. (p. 248)

As the above excerpt shows, my father-in-law courageously decides to commit suicide because he has come to believe in reincarnation after death. I become emotionally stable after I see the scarf that tied the arms of my parents-in-law and their peaceful faces (Jung Chan-Joo 1990):

TABLE 1: Short and medium-length novels that deal with elderly suicide in the 1990s and beyond.

Number	Title	Year	Writer	Characters who commit suicide /age	Motive for suicide	Suicide method	Meaning of the novel	Reactions of acquaintances
1	Inheritance	1990	Jung Chan-Joo	Parents-in-law	Crippled husband and wife commit suicide in hopes of rebirth	Jumping	Parents' suicide enable their daughter and son-in-law to solve conflicts	Daughter is reconciled with her husband after the suicide of her parents.
2	Music Sound	1992	Lee Cheong-Hae	An old man (Han Soon-Boon/73)	Loneliness and alienation of a senior citizen who lives Alone	Jumping	Trauma of war and loneliness of a senior citizen who lives alone	Nobody cares.
3	A Lotus-persimmon Tree in Jangkok-Ri	1992	Lee Moon-Goo	Ghi-Chool/72	Dispute over inheritance and the government's failed agricultural policies	Hanging	Grief over stagnant conditions in rural areas and a sense of betrayal toward the children who dispute over inheritance	Bong-Chool understands Ghi-Chool who hanged himself from a lotus-persimmon tree and cuts the tree down.
4	A Few Episodes concerning Death	2011	Hyun Ghil-Eon	An old woman living in the adjacent apartment complex	Loneliness	Jumping	One needs courage to live out one's natural lifespan	Someone says that one should not shorten one's natural lifespan.
5	Sam Island	1998	Lee Seung-Woo	Uncle (Kim Il-Joong)	Elderly suicide because of guilt	Fasting	He lives in guilt for the rest of his life after succumbing to a fleeting temptation.	They understand the mentality of the suicide and mourns over his death.
6	Winter Cactus	2005	Kwon Chae-Woon	Old woman	Ignored by her children	Fasting	Even positive people can commit suicide instantaneously.	Those old people who went to the senior citizens' center with her are perplexed.

I didn't think that they had done well to commit suicide. But I could feel how much they had loved each other. (p. 249)

. . . Their wrists were tied together with the scarf which I had given to my wife as a present . . . Now my wife, who had been just weeping, fell down to the ground. Her shoulders began to tremble. I was no more scared. Instead, I realised something deep in my heart. It seemed that the scarf was telling us the way in which we were supposed to live. I put the scarf into my bag and moved a few steps toward the sea. (p. 251)

As the excerpt shows, 'I do not think that they did well to kill themselves but think that their love was touching. The scarf that tied their hands makes us, who were frightened, realise something. The eyes of my wife are shining with deep emotion, and I determine not to be selfish any more. I had been thinking of divorce, but the moment I saw the scarf around their wrists, I realised something and gave her a reconciling hug. My wife and I hug each other for a long time in front of the ancestral rites table.

The meaning of *Inheritance* lies in depicting suicide as helping to solve the problem of the children. Whereas most elderly suicides in novels are because of frustrations in life, the suicide depicted in *Inheritance* is based on the concept of reincarnation, in hopes that life can be transferred, as if from one room to another, to another blissful life. As the title itself reveals, the death of their parents enables their daughter and son-in-law to understand and love each other. Ironically, the former's death becomes an inheritance for the latter in the sense that it helps the latter to solve marital problems and be reconciled.

Suicide because of war trauma

Let us consider *Music Sound* of Table 1 (number 2). Two major characters appear in this novel. A 73-year-old woman, named Han Soon-Boon, lost her husband during the Korean War and raised her son alone. She is being supported by her son, Hyoung-Joon, who has to read her wife's face.

Han Soon-Boon commits suicide because she is living alone, is lonely, and because of the trauma of the war. She lives independently of her daughter-in-law because of conflicts with her. Her son asked her to go to a nursing home, but she refused. According to her, a nursing home is a place for those who, like beggars, have no children or supporters (p. 124). Instead, she decides to live alone in a small apartment.

Except for weekends, Han Soon-Boon spends most of her time living alone, waiting for the phonecall from her son. She always feels forlorn and lonely except when she imagines herself talking to her visiting son or when she looks up into the sky toward where her son lives. On a certain Saturday one week after she moved in, she happens to hear the sound of traditional Korean musical instruments from a nearby playground, which reminds her of her forgotten memories, that is, the undeserved death of her husband. As a result, she suffers from severe pain on weekends. During the Korean War, her 39-year-old husband, Young-Bok, was severely

tortured and killed by the North Korean Army 'on a certain sultry, uncomfortable, and regrettable day' (p. 130), under the false charge that he had played a leading role in assisting the South Korean Army. As she hears the sound of Korean traditional instruments on Saturdays, she recalls what happened to her husband on the day when she heard the same music.

On a certain Saturday, the old woman receives a phone call from a marketing agent of a department store and visits the store to meet her. But she is treated as a weird old woman by other employees and comes back home absent-minded. At home, she hears the same sound of Korean traditional instruments, which reminds her again of her dead husband and causes her to have a paralyzing nightmare (p. 135). Next Sunday, she jumps out of the apartment window when it is about time for the same music to be heard.

Suicide means freedom and liberation to Han Soon-Boon. Let us look at the description of her psychological state at the moment of suicide (Lee Cheong-Hae 1992):

A gong musical instrument was about to sound. The cheerful sound of a taepyeongso reached her ears. She jumped off the window lightly. At that moment, she felt refreshed as if she were playing on the swings. She felt as if something like the net that had wrapped around her during her whole life were embracing and tightening around her body. Finally, she could feel a sense of liberation. She felt light as if she could fly. It gave her such a cozy feeling. It felt as if everything were accomplished. She saw the weedy grave of her husband underneath. She was warmly greeted by the beautiful flower garden of her parents' home of the past. (p. 136)

As the above excerpt shows, the old woman who has lived alone feels dejection at the store, and finally commits suicide after dreaming of seeing her dead husband. The writer depicts this suicide by jumping as liberation.

In *Music Sound*, people react to her suicide in three ways. Firstly, two days after the suicide, a story appears in the newspaper about the suicide of an old woman who could not overcome alienation and loneliness, along with the title of her son, the president of a trading company. The newspaper report criticises the absence of filial piety, the selfish system of a nuclear family that neglects old parents and unethical rich people. Secondly, her neighbours sympathise with her and say that she looked somewhat insane when she moved in and she often cried looking toward where her son was living. Thirdly, the narrator says that nobody knew why the old woman jumped out of the window. This statement reflects the social reality that is not concerned about the death of a lonely old person.

The meaning of *Music Sound* lies in portraying the way in which the ideological conflicts because of the Korean War have an influence on the life of an old person even after 40 years. This novel shows how the enormous power of a historic event influences the fate of a woman, and depicts the lonely, desolate life of a lonely old woman. In so doing,

this novel asks a question as to how we can take care of old people like her.

Suicide caused by conflicts between generations

Let us look at *A Lotus-Persimmon Tree in Jangkok-Ri* of Table 1 (number 3). Two main characters appear in this novel. Lee Ghi-Chool is a 72-year-old farmer who has lived as a farmer during his whole life. His first son runs a business and pesters him for funds. Lee Ghi-Chool commits suicide, because he has lost any interest in life after he saw his children fight over their inheritance and witnessed the failure of the government's agricultural policies. He is a stingy person who has never wasted a penny. Then, his 50-year-old son asks him to sell his cropland and support his business. But, he refuses to do so and says that farming is all about effort and business is just a means (p. 307) and that he cannot succeed in life without effort. He is sorry that his children fight over inheritance whenever they meet together.

Moreover, as the government allegedly aims to benefit farmers by executing such policies as the Uruguay Round and the Comprehensive Plans for the Development of the Farming and Fishing Villages, it becomes legal to buy and sell agricultural land freely, as a result of which the price of land becomes cheaper. He put some trust in the plans for farming and fishing villages adduced as elections pledges for the local self-government election. But he was disappointed to find out that they have nothing to do with ordinary farmers (p. 317). He says that he has lost any interest in his life and hangs himself on a lotus-persimmon tree in the backyard, which is considered useless.

A lotus-persimmon tree, which is also the title of the novel, has a symbolic meaning. It is a 'useless tree', symbolising the old man, Lee Ghi-Chool (1992):

It is not a fruit tree. Then what is it? . . . If it is a young tree, it could be grafted onto a persimmon tree. Since it is good for nothing, it is covered with noisy magpies. It will be good for firewood only. (p. 307)

Lee Ghi-Chool thinks that he is a useless old man at age 72 and hangs himself on the useless tree. The author highlights the meaning of the novel by likening the life of Ghi-Chool to the value of the tree.

Let us look at how the protagonist acts differently immediately before he kills himself and how people react to his suicide in the novel. His behaviour is dramatically changed on his birthday, after his children are gone after fighting over their inheritance. He used to smoke domestic cigarettes sparingly but now he begins to smoke expensive imported cigarettes as much as he likes. He drinks beer instead of soju. He takes a taxi when he goes downtown. He spends a lot of money which he has borrowed from a bank, while his land is not yet sold. He is no longer thrifty (p. 306). He has realised that his thrifty life is no longer meaningful in view of his greedy children.

Finally, his children fight over their inheritance during his funeral days. Nobody mourns for the father. Nobody cares about the feelings of the mother. While looking at what is happening at the funeral, Bong-Chool hears villagers say that Ghi-Chool killed himself because he had lost any interest in life. Shocked at this saying, he sympathises with Ghi-Chool and cuts down the useless lotus-persimmon tree.

The meaning of *A Lotus-Persimmon Tree in Jangkok-Ri* is closely related to the motive for suicide. The protagonist commits suicide because he grieves over the difficult lives of farmers because of the government's agricultural policies and over the fact that his children always fight over their inheritance. The author asks a question, 'What meanings can we find in our lives in which we have lost any interest?'

Suicide caused by loneliness

We consider *A Few Episodes concerning Death* in Table 1 (number 4). Three major characters appear in this novel. An old man fainted because of high blood pressure three months ago. He is receiving rehabilitation treatment, but he refuses to be assisted by anyone around him. He used to be a general in the army and the president of a company, but he is now nothing but an old man with a disability. He lives in apartment 903 and criticises the death of an old woman in apartment building 16. 'I sympathise with him and want to help him. The old woman living in apartment building 16 was a friend of his and visited him frequently. She was in a state of dejection after her husband died. She committed suicide by jumping from her friend's apartment building.

The motive for suicide and the suicide method are as follows. The old woman frequently visited the old man and his wife in apartment 903. She has two sons with doctorate degrees living in America. She has a rich daughter and son-in-law living in Seoul. She has lived alone since her husband died. Then she jumps off the apartment building with a note of her son's phone number and address in her hand. She kills herself because she cannot overcome loneliness.

Let us consider how people react to the suicide of the old woman in *A Few Episodes concerning Death*. 'I think that her small bent body is like a sparrow shot down by a hunter; she does not bleed a lot, lying on her side (p. 165). The old man criticises her saying, 'She should not have committed suicide. Her life is not her own. She is a conceited old woman' (p. 166) (Hyun Ghil-Eon 2011):

Every old person is tempted to commit suicide, because it is frustrating to look at one's body becoming ugly and to feel lonely and alienated in society. In fact, what is most frustrating is the fact that he or she is approaching the dead end in the sense that death is inevitable in the near future. People may be tempted to commit suicide because it may make them feel a sense of control over their life. But it is vain greed. Humans should live as long as they can until they die. That is our fate, just as we were not born in this world according to our will. (p. 167)

As the above excerpt shows, the narrator thinks that suicide is vain greed, although old people may well be tempted to

commit suicide because of frustration over loneliness and alienation, and that it is one's responsibility to live as long as fate allows.

The meaning of *A Few Episodes concerning Death* lies in highlighting that one's attitude toward life is more important than anything else as one grows older. Old people can lose a sense of identity or self-respect, although they may have been rich and powerful enough when young. This novel says that suicide is an option that may be chosen by such people. After all, the most dreadful thing for old people is loneliness and alienation, which are more dreadful than death itself. The author tries to say that one should look back on one's life honestly and find a true life (Hyun Ghil-Eon 2011):

I hope that people accept, rather than fear, alienation and deficiency by believing that alienation may bring about freedom and deficiency may be more valuable than sufficiency. (p. 167)

As the excerpt shows, old people cannot help living a season of alienation and deficiency. The point is that it is important to accept that reality and try to feel freedom amidst alienation and to be content with deficiency.

Suicide out of guilt

Let us look at *Sam Island* of Table 1 (number 5). The local background of the novel is Walsan-Ri village south of the Korean Peninsula and the small island, Sam Island, in the offing. Six main characters appear in this novel. Kim Il-Joon is closely related to the Sam Island incident. He lives in pain for the rest of his life after he loved the mother of Yoon-Doo and committed an irrevocable sin. 'I' am an editing reporter of a magazine and visit Walsan-Ri, which is the hometown of Yoon-Doo, a painter, to cover Sam Island and interview Kim Il-Joong. Hwang Jung-Yeon is a photographer for the same magazine. The head of the village tells the reporter about the past history of Walsan-Ri and Sam Island, and a mart owner, who is a nephew of Kim Il-Joon, provides lodging for him and cares about his safety.

The motive for suicide in *Sam Island* is hope for reconciliation in order to become free from guilt. 'I', the narrator, and Hwang Jung-Yeon go to Walsan-Ri, hometown of my friend Yoon-Doo, to cover the village. We decide to stay longer because we have heard from the head of the village of some incident relating to the village and Sam Island. We happened to hear of Kim Il-Joon there. He left this village 40 years ago and has recently returned. He acts weirdly. For example, he is seriously ill but he has been to Sam Island by rowing a boat himself.

Kim Il-Joon was responsible for the killing of 30 young people in the village during the Korean War 40 years ago. He loved the mother of Yoon-Doo so much that he informed the North Korean People's Army of a cave in Sam Island where young people, including the father of Yoon-Doo, were hiding. As a result, they were all killed. He has been obsessed with a sense of guilt ever since. He did not marry but just spent time making money. Forty years later, he returns to his hometown

and attempts to reconstruct the desolate Sam Island in many ways. But the island is not restored. Then he confesses his wrongdoings, which he committed when young, to Yoon-Doo and goes to the cave in Sam Island to burn incense for the deceased and worship them. He offers his life as a sacrifice.

Let us consider the psychological state of Kim Il-Joong as he commits suicide. He has been obsessed with a sense of guilt throughout his life because he was responsible for the death of young people and the mother of Yoon-Doo. This is depicted as follows (Lee Seung-Woo 1998):

He is never interested in matchmaking . . . I once asked him why. He sighed, saying 'How can a sinner like me get married?' (p. 289)

My uncle used to say that he must die in Sam Island. He said he must die in the cave of the island. It bothers me. (p. 286)

After his attempts to restore Sam Island turned out to be failures, old Kim Il-Joong decides to offer his life as the last sacrifice to the island, because he was responsible for the death of young people of the village. He stops taking medicine and goes into the cave on the island and commits suicide for atonement (Lee Seung-Woo 1998):

I did not know that he was so ill. I did not have the slightest idea . . . They say that the heart of an old person will burst if he or she stops taking medicine that the body requires . . . I suspected that he had intentionally left his medicine behind. But I could not utter any words. (p. 291)

The old man died so. In front of several sticks of incense, he died while smelling incense. He might have burned incense to himself. (p. 292)

What about the reactions to his death on the part of his acquaintances? At first, Yoon-Doo did not forgive Kim Il-Joong, because of whom his parents had died, when he confessed his wrongdoings to him. But he finally forgives him as he hears of his death. 'I' say that it was the best way for him to go to Sam Island and sacrifice his life as an atoning offering (Lee Seung-Woo 1998):

Probably he identified Sam Island with his soul, as Yoon-Doo guesses. The restoration of the island would have meant the restoration of his soul, and the forgiveness of his wrongdoing by the spirits hovering around the island . . . The old man has thought of the last thing he could do for the restoration of the island. It was to sacrifice his life as an offering. It was to worship the spirits using his body as an offering. By doing so, he wanted to be forgiven by the spirits and make the wells in Sam Island filled with water again . . . There was no other way for him. He has simply chosen that way. (p. 300)

As the above excerpt shows, 'I', the narrator, construe the attempt of the old man to restore Sam Island as a way of restoring his soul. The head of the village and his nephew are very sorry for the death of the old man. Thus, those around him are not critical or cynical about his suicide. On the contrary, they view his suicide as an act of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The meaning of *Sam Island* lies in dealing with the ontological feelings of an old man who has lived with a strong sense of guilt (Lee Seung-Woo 1998):

What was the memory which did not vanish but became more obvious and manifest with time, and which made his wound more vulnerable? How could such a memory control the life of a man? (p. 293)

As the excerpt shows, the old man tries to restore Sam Island, confesses his wrongdoings to Yoon-Doo, and asks for forgiveness from the spirits, in order to overcome an unforgettable memory that controlled his whole life. But he commits suicide as he finds out that he cannot overcome that memory, no matter what he may do to make up for his wrongdoings.

Suicide of a positive person

Let us consider *Winter Cactus* of Table 1 (number 6). Four main characters appear in this novel. An old woman (narrator) living in room 101 raised her son alone since her husband defected to North Korea 50 years ago. Her son was killed in a car accident 20 years ago and she is living with her daughter-in-law and granddaughters. She most deeply mourns over the death of the old woman living in room 307, because they were close friends. The old woman living in room 307 was a very energetic and positive person and was very popular among old people. But she has been blamed by her son for buying some false medicine at an expensive price. She has become despondent and stops eating anything and dies. The rich old landlady has bought the false medicine more than anyone else. She was deceived by the seller just like other old people, but she says that it was a pleasant experience. The director of the headquarters of CheilAstra attracted people in streets or marketplaces by means of music and acrobatics and sold medicine to them. He is so eloquent that many old people are deceived by him.

The motive for suicide in *Winter Cactus* is failure of an old parent to swallow her children's criticism. The old woman living in room 307 is very popular with her friends. She is good at cooking, speaking and singing, which moves the hearts of her friends. She is good at gathering information and provides her friends with some opportune information. Wherever she goes, she makes her friends refreshed and pleasant. In order not to become a burden to her daughter-in-law, who is suffering hardship, she packs lunch and takes care of household chores. While she is such a positive woman, she stops eating anything and dies in ten days. Her friends do not understand why. The narrator explains the reason why she commits suicide as follows (Kwon Chae-Woon 2005):

The old woman living in room 307 may have felt embarrassed because she did not buy anything others were buying, while behaving in a playful manner. Above all, other old people must have bought 'chitosan' carelessly because they could not resist the temptation to dance on the broad back of the director of the headquarters. There were no sons or daughters who would like their parents who bought unproved medicine for their bodies. The old woman of room 307 was extremely disappointed when her son said a few words to her about the medicine. At other times, she would not have bothered and have just said, 'You will know when you are old enough. You will soon know that.' But somehow she could not distract her mind for a long time. That might have been her destiny. She just stopped eating. (p. 45)

As the above excerpt shows, she could not get over her son's scolding words and stopped eating and died. She died by fasting.

Let us look at how people react to her suicide. An old woman living in room 101, who is as old as she, is most sorry for her death and her close friends miss her most (Kwon Chae-Woon 2005):

Having heard that she was lying in her sickbed, some friends of her visited her with some beverages; she was lying in bed in a very decent appearance. She just smiled faintly saying, 'Probably it is time that I should die, for I cannot swallow rice.' Ten days after she started fasting, she passed away. That may have been her fate. She used to say that she was afraid to die alone and so she needed company. But she dared to take a long trip alone without saying goodbye to me. (p. 40)

I did not even imagine that it would be my last present for her. Since we are of the same age, I have been more attracted to her than anyone else. But she is gone like this. (p. 39)

As the above excerpt shows, the friends of the woman who committed suicide, including the old woman living in room 101, realise the vanity of life as she passes away after fasting for 10 days. The meaning of *Winter Cactus* is implied in the title itself (Kwon Chae-Woon 2005):

Although this does not look beautiful, it contains very beautiful blossoms. Beautiful red blossoms appear on each leaf, as long as it is watered once in a while and exposed to sunshine. When blossoms appear around the cactus, it looks like a candle . . . My sons and daughters tell me to throw it away because it occupies some space. It has no thorns, though it looks like a cactus. What is wrong with it? (p. 39)

A *Winter Cactus* bears beautiful red blossoms, which look like a candle, only if it is watered once in a while and exposed to sunshine. The old woman of room 307 was like a *Winter Cactus* that blooms on barren land. But she was despised by her daughter-in-law because she occupied some space. Finally, she withdraws. Thus, *Winter Cactus* represents the lives of old people who are still useful yet alienated within the family.

In particular, the death of the old woman living in room 307, who was like a *Winter Cactus*, significantly implies that old people who have sound mentality can commit suicide. The point is that even positive old people who cheer other people up can give up their lives easily, if they are hurt by what their sons or daughters say to them. The plot of this novel may be somewhat loose in that a positive old person commits suicide so easily. Still, the author tries to represent the kind of alienation and loneliness old people experience by depicting their psychology, as it is revealed by their attempt to buy false medicine even at an unreasonable price. The purchase of medicine symbolises the desire of old people to escape from the manifestations of alienation' (Kwon Chae-Woon 2005):

Won't CheilAstra come back again? That was the most pleasant moments, though I used my money up . . . Isn't it strange? I felt completely healthy at that time. I was so excited. I couldn't wait

to go there. I could not even eat food. Just the thought of it made my heart flutter. I must have been bewitched. I never regret using up money, though my sons and daughters think that it was a waste of money. (p. 52)

As the above excerpt shows, the young director of the headquarters of CheilAstra is like a god to the old people. It was none other than happiness that he gave them. The reason why they wanted to enjoy that kind of happiness is . . . (Kwon Chae-Woon 2005):

When I ask something out of curiosity, everybody answers inattentively. Old people must eat what is given and keep silent. (p. 58)

As this excerpt shows, old people must face the reality that they are despised by others. Therefore, old people feel happy when they are accepted by someone else.

To summarise, there are novels that deal with elderly suicide caused by traumas because of Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, or the division of Korea into north and south. In the 1990s, the world saw the Cold War end and postmodernist discourse, which emphasises insignificant daily lives suppressed under such meta-narratives as ideologies, became popular. At the same time, they could speak more freely about experiences relating to Japanese colonial rule, the Korean War, and the division of Korea into north and south. *Inheritance* of Table 1 (number 1) depicts the life of an old man who left North Korea because of the Korean War, who became physically handicapped under the military dictatorship, and who committed suicide as he could not afford the expensive surgery fees. Likewise, *Music Sound* of Table 1 (number 2) depicts an old woman who lived alone and committed suicide as she could not overcome the trauma she gained when her husband died during the Korean War. *Sam Island* of Table 1 (number 6) gives a detailed depiction of an old man who had to live with a sense of guilt for what he had done during the Korean War.

Secondly, there are novels that handle elderly suicide because of loneliness, alienation and lack of self-identity, all of which are caused by familial conflicts. In the case of *A Few Episodes concerning Death*, the old man who commits suicide is a rich person and his children are all successful people. But he kills himself because of loneliness and solitariness. *A Lotus-Persimmon Tree in Jangkok-Ri* depicts an old farmer who commits suicide because of the failure of the government's agricultural policies and his children disputing over inheritance. He kills himself as he cannot find any value or meaning in his life.

Thirdly, there are novels that deal with elderly suicide in light of the ills of consumption culture. In the mid-2000s and hereafter, Korea faced social polarisation, the collapse of the middle class, and unequal relations between classes. The weak had to be driven by adverse circumstances. Instead of actively resisting against marginalisation, however, they passively accepted those circumstances as a given in lethargic self-defence and self-consolation. *Winter Cactus* of

Table 1 (number 6) depicts how the heroine is despised by her sons and daughters, is drawn to the culture of consumption that provides self-consolation, and makes up her mind to die by refusing to eat anything after she grasps their thoughts, which she cannot overcome.

Conclusion

According to my analysis, three novels, that is, *Music Sound*, *Winter Cactus* and *A Few Episodes concerning Death*, deal with the alienation and loneliness of elderly people. In *Music Sound*, a lonely old woman who has been suffering war trauma commits suicide because she misses her dead husband so much. Noteworthy is the way in which elderly suicide is viewed in *Winter Cactus*. The writer foregrounds the fact that not only people with negative personality traits but also people with positive personality traits can commit suicide when they cannot overcome disappointing words from their children. The writer of *A Few Episodes concerning Death* takes a critical view of the suicide committed by an old person who used to enjoy power and wealth but who cannot overcome loneliness and alienation. According to the writer, old people may feel a suicidal urge because of frustration and loneliness, but suicide is a greedy act. Instead, they must live until they die a natural death. Besides, an old person may commit suicide, seeing no reason why he or she must live, no matter how rich and powerful she or he may have been when young. Old people, therefore, must look back on their lives honestly, find a true life and humbly accept their destitute lives as they are.

In *Sam Island*, old people are depicted to feel pangs of guilt and finally commit suicide in order to atone for their wrongdoings. *Sam Island* deals with a trauma of the Korean War. In the novel, the protagonist commits suicide in order to atone for their wrongdoings after they have come to have a new set of values. In *A Lotus-Persimmon Tree in Jangkok-Ri*, the hero commits suicide because he does not see any reason why he must live after he has undergone conflicts with his children; they belong to different generations and have different values. The writer of *Inheritance* shows a unique perspective on elderly suicide. In this novel, a crippled old man commits suicide with his wife by jumping off a cliff, with their hands tied together by a scarf, which symbolises their deep love; he believes in reincarnation. Their suicide is intentional in the sense that they want to perfect their love by death. This suicide leads their daughter and son-in-law to be reconciled to each other. Their suicide turns out to be a great inheritance.

Old people are depicted as committing suicide by leaping, fasting and hanging. People's reactions to suicide include frustration, embarrassment, mourning or indifference, giving meaning to suicide.

In view of the fact that suicide rates are higher among older people in Korean society, we may need to pay attention to the ways in which elderly suicide is handled in Korean literature, for literature not only depicts such a social phenomenon as it is, but it also inflects and refracts it, thereby suggesting a way in which it can be solved or overcome. In reading some

novels which deal with elderly suicide, I have found out that attempted suicide may be caused by an unsound life for specific reasons and that we need to help elderly people to live a sound and healthy life. In this regard, this article will enable elderly people to construct their own life stories in such a way as to reduce the risk of suicide. The contribution of this article lies in foregrounding the need to understand not only elderly suicide but also the ways in which it is handled in literature with a view to finding solutions.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

- Hyun, Ghil-Eon., 2011, 'A few episodes concerning death', in *Glass wall*, pp. 131–168, Literacy and Intelligence, Seoul.
- Jung, Chan-Joo., 1990, 'Inheritance', in *Literacy thought*, pp. 236–253, Literacy Thought, Seoul.
- Kwon, Chae-Woon., 2005, 'Winter cactus', in *Winter Cactus*, pp. 35–62, Mooniedang, Seoul.
- Lee, Cheong-Hae., 1992, 'Music sound', in *Literacy thought*, pp. 113–137, Literacy Thought, Seoul.
- Lee, Moon-Goo., 1992, 'A Lotus-persimmon tree in Jangkok-Ri', in *20th Century Korean Novel 26*, pp. 284–317, Creation and Criticism, Seoul.
- Lee, Seung-Woo., 1998, 'Sam island', in *98 Excellent Medium Novels*, pp. 241–300, Sam-Moon, Seoul.
- Ministry of Health and Welfare 2011, *Research on the Actual Conditions of Elderly People*, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Sejong, Republic of Korea.
- Korea Suicide Prevention Center 2012, *Research on the Actual Conditions of Suicide*, Korea Suicide Prevention Center, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
- Statistics Korea 2012, *Statistics on the Causes of Death*, Statistics Korea, Daejeon, Republic of Korea.