

Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea

Eunjung Kim

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In her path-breaking book, *Curative Violence*, Eunjung Kim interrogates the intersection of disability, gender, and sexuality in modern South Korea, locating multiple strands of violence in the central concept of cure. Orienting towards curing disability, Kim argues, folds or collapses time into a future-looking object, displacing the present experience of being and living as a disabled person. The cure favors returning the individual to a pre-disabled past—in a post-disabled future—often at the expense of present stigmatization and discrimination. Kim calls this “curative violence,” a kind of *pharmakon* that is simultaneously remedy and poison, whereby disability is the problem and the cure “ends up destroying the subject in the curative process” (14). Disabled women in particular are often those most affected by the quest for cure, as their path to curability is often found in traditional and problematic understandings of gender and sexuality.

Kim unravels this curative narrative within the history of the modern Korean nation, a former Japanese colony and U.S.-occupied country—U.S. military bases still adorn the South Korean landscape—that also endured decades of authoritarian rule until free democratic elections in 1987. As Kim demonstrates, rehabilitating or curing the body symbolizes “decolonized and sovereign statehood under capitalism” given that both the colonized state and communist state are imagined as “disabled and even nonhuman” (8). Yet this equation is ripe with complexity, for the emergence of eugenics discourse in the early twentieth century in colonial Korea, used by some Koreans to understand their colonial situation and how they became colonized, resurged under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung-hee (1960-1979) as a way to make the nation and its people both physically and economically strong.

Central to the text is Kim’s astute analysis of cultural representations—films, documentaries, literature, and artwork—of disability and cure alongside political and economic histories and documents. In analyzing a diversity of representations and texts, Kim not only provides a genealogy to current attitudes and stigmas attached to the disabled body rooted in an anticolonial national body, but also interrogates the treatment of disabled female bodies as non-human, “unwomen,” and “unmothers.” Kim also traces how other scholars either use or ignore the metaphors of disability to speak of colonial Korea. Taken a step further, if disability is tied to the popular (and

even scholarly) imagining of the modern Korean nation, then postcolonial (or anticolonial) Korea strives to make the nation *normal* and whole, to *cure* the national body. How, then, can we speak of a postcolonial Korea without invoking the language and violence of cure? Kim decolonizes disability in modern Korea by unstitching disability from the national form, critically tracing how disability and national form came to occupy the same space and time, thereby obfuscating actual violence against disabled bodies.

The heteronormative cure for many disabled women—to produce non-disabled offspring—is perhaps the most illustrative of Kim’s intertwined argument of a curative violence that folds time and displaces the present. Kim illustrates how if women can marry and mother non-disabled children, their non-human or “nonlife” status will transform; their present life as disabled is forfeited or replaced by the future non-disabled life of her child. This unequal trade of a present for a future is socially embedded in broader expectations of women and motherhood in South Korea, but Kim’s point is that the disabled woman might never register as human even after the supposed heterosexual cure. Furthermore, this heterosexual cure may not even be an option, for historically many disabled women were sterilized both out of convenience for the individual’s caregivers (usually the family) and to uphold a eugenic vision of the nation as healthy and strong. Women with intellectual disabilities were represented as hypersexual, and thus sexual violence and rape were often presented as cures for her disability. These contradictory representations and treatments of disabled women illustrate Kim’s point that, as the desire for cure travels through time, it adapts and engenders a set of social norms and beliefs that target the disabled body, but that the desire for the cure and the cure as a social and moral “good” is hardly questioned.

Cure and curative violence are generative concepts, as Kim suggests in her brief discussions of other non-normative bodies. Yet the nation’s *need* to cure all non-normative bodies also expands to gender and sexual minorities. Though Kim does briefly mention partnerships between disabled activists and queer activist organizations, the rhetoric of the disabled body “returning” to a non-disabled past indexes a familiar belief that conservative Christian organizations and protesters have regarding gender and sexual minorities: that they can and should “return” to the family. Both centralize the temporal act of returning and the curative properties of the family, fused together as one in the same. More telling is the continued use of conversion therapy in South Korea for sexual minorities, a method for “curing” the body of sexual non-normativity. Akin to Kim’s decolonization of disability, upending the centrality of cure in modern Korea more broadly—and the normative bodies that model both the need and content of the cure—unravels a tightly wound history of dispossession, oppression, and discrimination that scaffolds contemporary South Korea.

Kim organizes the book into five thematic chapters. Chapter One investigates how reproduction has become a way to cure disability.

Following the development of eugenics in colonial Korea and the 1960s and 1970s, Kim interrogates the advocacy of selective breeding by those with inherited disabilities. Kim compares the historical development of eugenics in Korea with contemporary preimplantation genetic screening and in vitro fertilization as methods of breaking the cycle of hereditary disabilities. In Chapter Two, Kim explores what she calls “cure as proxy,” where disability in the family obliges members to “do something” about the disability, as proxies make disabled persons’ cure “determined by the actions of their family” (83). The proxy thus represents not the needs of the disabled person but the compulsory heteronormativity necessary for both the cure and the family to return to normalcy. Chapter Three examines the direct link between violence and cure, focusing on the violence that emerges in the performance of traditional femininity and masculinity and the violence against disabled women for “failing to fulfill gender and sexual expectations” in producing the normative and capitalist nation (40). Chapter Four focuses specifically on the development of Hansen’s disease (leprosy) and how the contemporary emphasis on the disease’s curability upholds the stigma of the disease. In Chapter Five, Kim investigates the contemporary discourse of the sexuality of disabled people as a biological problem in need of a solution. Kim follows the emergence of “sex drive” discourse for disabled people that focuses primarily on men with physical disabilities and the commercial and humanitarian sex services and rhetoric surrounding it.

Taken together, *Curative Violence* makes a much-needed intervention into Korean studies, postcolonial studies, feminist studies, and disability studies, bringing these fields together with an insightful and robust archive of cultural texts alongside political and economic contexts. In short, Kim tells the story of modern Korea—both in its colonial history and postcolonial present—from the oft-forgotten borderlands of disability that are quintessential to both the production of the nation and the nation’s own narrative.