

How is Female Awakening Expressed in Different Cultural Contexts? A Comparative Study of *Dubliners* and *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*

Haoran Sun¹

¹ Guizhou University, Guangxi, China

Correspondence: Haoran Sun, Guizhou University, Guangxi, China.

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of female awakening in different cultural contexts through a comparative study of *Dubliners* by James Joyce and *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* by Cho Nam-joo. By examining how female consciousness is portrayed in early 20th-century Ireland and contemporary South Korea, this study highlights the evolution of gender discourse in literature. In *Dubliners*, female awakening is depicted as a tragic realization of oppression that leads to paralysis rather than rebellion, reflecting the rigid societal constraints imposed by Catholicism, colonial rule, and patriarchal traditions. Conversely, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* presents a protagonist whose gradual realization of gender inequality manifests as psychological distress, ultimately serving as a broader critique of systemic oppression in modern South Korea. While Joyce's women remain trapped within societal expectations, Cho Nam-joo's protagonist represents a shift toward vocalized feminist critique. This contrast underscores how female awakening is shaped by historical and cultural contexts, revealing the transition from silent suffering to active resistance. The study highlights the role of literature in reflecting and challenging gender inequality and offers insights into the broader evolution of feminist thought in different societies.

Keywords: female awakening, gender oppression, gender roles

1. Introduction

The concept of female awakening—the realization and assertion of women's identities, desires, and social positions—has been a recurring theme in global literature, reflecting the struggles and transformations women undergo within their respective societies. This awakening is deeply influenced by cultural, historical, and socio-political contexts, shaping how women recognize, articulate, and respond to their oppression. While feminist discourse has gained prominence worldwide, the degree and form of female awakening differ significantly across societies, depending on factors such as religious doctrine, economic structures, family dynamics, and political movements.

This paper explores how female awakening is depicted in two vastly different yet thematically connected works: James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Cho Nam-joo's *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* (2016). *Dubliners* presents early 20th-century Irish women whose awakening is often stifled by the rigid constraints of Catholicism, colonial subjugation, and deeply entrenched patriarchy. In contrast, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* portrays contemporary South Korean women confronting systemic gender inequality within a highly modernized yet traditionally patriarchal society.

By situating this discussion within a Chinese context, we can examine how these narratives resonate with modern Chinese gender discourse, particularly in light of China's rapid socio-economic development and the evolving roles of women in family, career, and society. While China's feminist movement has gained momentum, traditional Confucian values continue to exert influence, creating a complex interplay between progress and

restriction. Through this comparative study, we can better understand how literature not only reflects but also challenges and reshapes female consciousness across different cultures and historical periods.

2. Female Awakening in *Dubliners*: Paralysis and Stifled Aspirations

James Joyce's *Dubliners* is a collection deeply embedded in the socio-political realities of early 20th-century Ireland, a nation struggling under British colonial rule while simultaneously being governed by rigid Catholic morality. In this environment, gender roles were strictly defined, with women expected to conform to ideals of purity, obedience, and familial duty. Joyce's female characters experience moments of awakening—often realizing their dissatisfaction with societal constraints—but their awareness rarely leads to action. Instead, they are rendered immobile by external pressures and internalized fears, reinforcing a cycle of paralysis that defines much of *Dubliners*. One of the most emblematic examples of this theme is Eveline in the short story "Eveline." She stands at the threshold of change, contemplating eloping with her lover Frank to Argentina in pursuit of freedom and happiness. Her awakening is evident in her recognition of the burdens placed upon her—caring for her abusive father, sacrificing her personal dreams, and adhering to societal expectations of dutiful womanhood. However, as she faces the decisive moment of departure, fear and guilt overwhelm her. She ultimately succumbs to the weight of ingrained duty, frozen at the dock "like a helpless animal." Her inability to board the ship reflects not only her personal fear of the unknown but also the broader societal conditioning that prevents women from breaking free of oppressive structures. Another poignant example of stifled female awakening occurs in "A Painful Case," where Mrs. Sinico experiences an emotional and intellectual connection with Mr. Duffy, a rare moment of companionship in her isolated life. However, Mr. Duffy, embodying rigid societal values, recoils from this intimacy, deeming it inappropriate for a married woman to express emotional desire. Mrs. Sinico's rejection results in her deep despair, leading to alcoholism and eventual death. Her fate symbolizes the tragic consequences of female self-expression in a culture that deems women's emotions and desires unacceptable beyond the confines of their prescribed roles as wives and mothers.

Beyond individual stories, Joyce's broader portrayal of female characters in *Dubliners* reflects a society where women are systematically denied agency. Maria in "Clay" is a middle-aged woman who remains trapped in a life of servitude, passively moving through her existence without questioning her lack of fulfillment. Similarly, the unnamed young girl in "An Encounter" briefly dreams of adventure but is quickly confronted by the dangers of stepping beyond societal boundaries. In each case, Joyce masterfully illustrates how the structures of family, religion, and colonial rule conspire to keep women in a state of inertia. From a comparative perspective, Joyce's depiction of female paralysis resonates with traditional Confucian gender roles in China, where women have historically been expected to prioritize familial duty over personal aspirations. Just as Eveline feels the pull of filial responsibility over her own happiness, many Chinese women, particularly in pre-modern and even contemporary contexts, experience similar struggles in balancing personal desires with societal expectations of marriage, caregiving, and subservience. The fear of being labeled as unfilial or selfish continues to shape female behavior in many patriarchal societies, making Joyce's exploration of gender constraints a cross-cultural reflection on women's struggles for self-liberation. While *Dubliners* does not provide an explicit feminist critique, it subtly exposes the suffocating effects of patriarchy by presenting female characters whose awakening leads not to liberation but to stagnation or tragedy. Joyce's portrayal suggests that the problem is not the lack of awareness among women but rather the structural forces that render them powerless to act upon their realizations. This theme of entrapment continues to be relevant in discussions of gender equality today, making *Dubliners* a timeless and globally resonant work on the challenges of female awakening.

3. Female Awakening in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*: Resistance and Social Critique

In contrast to the subdued and tragic female awakening in *Dubliners*, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* presents a more direct and structured critique of gender inequality, portraying a woman whose realization of systemic discrimination leads to psychological breakdown rather than passive resignation. Cho Nam-joo's novel provides a deeply personal yet broadly applicable narrative that resonates with many women's lived experiences, particularly in societies where rapid modernization coexists with deeply entrenched patriarchal values. The novel follows the life of Kim Ji-young, an ordinary South Korean woman born in 1982, a generation that benefited from educational and economic advancements yet continued to face gendered limitations. Ji-young's female awakening is gradual and shaped by a lifetime of microaggressions, structural barriers, and societal double standards. Unlike Joyce's female characters, who remain largely confined to individual struggles, Ji-young's awakening extends into a broader critique of South Korean gender politics. This is particularly evident in the way the novel incorporates real-world statistical data and historical references, emphasizing that Ji-young's experiences are not isolated but part of a collective reality for women in contemporary South Korea. One of the most striking aspects of Ji-young's awakening is how it manifests through her psychological breakdown. Rather than directly rebelling against her circumstances, Ji-young subconsciously adopts the voices of other oppressed women, including her mother, grandmother, and a deceased friend. This symbolic possession reflects the

cumulative burden of generational female suffering—Ji-young’s struggles are not hers alone but are inherited from previous generations who faced similar injustices. This aspect of the novel highlights how female awakening in patriarchal societies often comes at great psychological cost, a theme that resonates with many women worldwide, including in China.

3.1 *From Awareness to Disillusionment: The Gradual Realization of Oppression*

Ji-young’s awakening unfolds through key life stages, each marked by moments of realization about the inequalities embedded in her society. As a child, she notices that boys are given preferential treatment, both in her household and at school. Her brother receives better food, more encouragement, and greater expectations for future success. This early experience mirrors the patriarchal family structures still prevalent in many East Asian cultures, where sons are often prioritized over daughters. As Ji-young enters the workforce, she faces blatant discrimination despite her qualifications. She encounters the so-called “glass ceiling,” wherein women are routinely passed over for promotions in favor of male colleagues. Workplace harassment and sexist office culture reinforce the idea that women are less valuable employees due to their assumed future roles as wives and mothers. Once she becomes a mother, Ji-young’s career is entirely derailed, as she is expected to sacrifice her job to take on full-time caregiving duties while her husband’s life and career remain unaffected. This moment is perhaps the most profound in her awakening, as she realizes that despite her education, ambitions, and efforts, she is ultimately reduced to a traditional role that society had predetermined for her. This forced resignation from the workforce is particularly relevant in China, where many women face similar pressures upon marriage and childbirth. Although Chinese women have historically played a crucial role in the country’s workforce—especially during the Maoist era, when gender equality was officially promoted—recent years have seen a resurgence of traditional expectations, especially as China grapples with demographic challenges and declining birth rates. The pressure for women to marry early, have multiple children, and prioritize family over career echoes Ji-young’s predicament, making her awakening highly relatable for modern Chinese readers.

3.2 *Structural Critique and Feminist Awakening*

Unlike the women in *Dubliners*, whose awakenings are largely personal and tragic, Ji-young’s realization is not merely an individual struggle but a structural critique. By embedding statistical evidence within the narrative, Cho Nam-joo underscores that Ji-young’s experiences are systemic rather than anecdotal. For example, the novel references South Korea’s deeply ingrained workplace discrimination, its alarming gender wage gap, and its oppressive expectations surrounding motherhood. These elements reinforce the idea that Ji-young’s suffering is not due to personal misfortune but is an inevitable result of a patriarchal system designed to disadvantage women. One of the most powerful aspects of Ji-young’s story is its depiction of society’s response to female awakening. When Ji-young begins to express frustration and exhaustion with her circumstances, she is met with dismissive attitudes from those around her. Her husband, while seemingly supportive, fails to fully grasp the depth of her struggles. Society brands her as “hysterical” or mentally unstable rather than acknowledging the legitimacy of her grievances. This reaction mirrors how feminist discourse is often received in patriarchal cultures, where women who voice their dissatisfaction are labeled as troublemakers or emotionally unstable rather than being taken seriously. This aspect of *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* is particularly relevant to contemporary feminist discourse in China. In recent years, feminist movements in China have gained traction, with increasing discussions on workplace discrimination, domestic violence, and reproductive rights. However, these movements have also faced significant backlash, with many feminists being labeled as “extremists” or “anti-family.” Ji-young’s experiences reflect the difficulties of advocating for gender equality in societies where traditional values remain deeply entrenched, reinforcing the idea that female awakening is often met with resistance rather than support.

3.3 *A Call to Awareness: The Difference from Dubliners*

While Joyce’s *Dubliners* presents female awakening as a moment of realization that leads to paralysis, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* suggests that awakening, though painful, has the potential to catalyze change. The novel ends not with Ji-young overcoming her struggles but with her male psychiatrist—who dismisses her condition—revealing his own subconscious biases. This conclusion underscores the deeply ingrained nature of gender inequality and highlights the need for broader societal change rather than placing the burden of awakening solely on individual women. This difference is crucial in understanding how female awakening is expressed in different cultural contexts. Joyce, writing in a deeply restrictive Catholic and colonial society, presents women whose self-awareness is stifled by fear and institutional constraints. Cho Nam-joo, writing in a modern yet patriarchal South Korea, presents a woman whose awakening is not just personal but political, framing it as part of a larger feminist movement that calls for systemic change.

The portrayal of female awakening in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* represents a shift from individual frustration to collective consciousness. Unlike the passive and tragic awakening seen in *Dubliners*, Ji-young’s realization of gender inequality is framed as part of a broader social issue, highlighting the systemic oppression faced by

women rather than treating it as an isolated personal tragedy. For Chinese readers, Ji-young's struggles resonate deeply, as they reflect the ongoing challenges faced by women balancing traditional expectations with modern aspirations. While China has made significant strides in gender equality, issues such as workplace discrimination, the pressure to marry and bear children, and the undervaluation of women's labor persist. By comparing *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* with *Dubliners*, we see how female awakening is shaped by historical and cultural contexts. Joyce's Irish women recognize their oppression but remain trapped, whereas Cho Nam-joo's protagonist becomes a symbol of wider feminist struggles. This contrast not only highlights the different trajectories of female awakening but also invites readers, particularly in China, to reflect on their own societal structures and the ongoing fight for gender equality.

4. A Comparative Perspective: Stagnation vs. Protest

While both *Dubliners* and *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* depict the struggles of women in patriarchal societies, their portrayals of female awakening differ significantly. Joyce's narratives emphasize paralysis—women recognize their oppression but remain unable to act, trapped by the weight of familial, religious, and societal expectations. Their realizations do not lead to rebellion or systemic change but rather reinforce their entrapment in cycles of suffering and resignation. In contrast, Cho Nam-joo's novel presents an evolution from realization to social critique, highlighting the systemic nature of gender oppression and paving the way for protest and feminist discourse. This contrast reflects broader historical and cultural differences in how female awakening is conceptualized and responded to within different societies.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Influences on Female Awakening

The fundamental difference in these portrayals can be attributed to the distinct historical and cultural backgrounds of early 20th-century Ireland and contemporary South Korea.

4.1.1 Ireland (Early 20th Century): The Grip of Catholicism and Colonialism

During the time Joyce was writing *Dubliners*, Ireland was under British colonial rule and was deeply influenced by Catholic conservatism, both of which imposed severe restrictions on women's independence. The rigid moral codes of Catholicism dictated that women were to be chaste, obedient, and primarily confined to domestic roles. Divorce was illegal, women had limited access to education and employment, and their primary social function was to serve as daughters, wives, and mothers.

The female characters in *Dubliners* are often caught in moments of realization but lack any viable means of escaping their oppressive conditions. Eveline recognizes the possibility of a freer life abroad but cannot bring herself to leave her abusive home due to an ingrained sense of duty and fear of the unknown. Maria in "Clay" remains forever stuck in a cycle of servitude, never questioning the expectations placed upon her. Even Mrs. Sinico in "A Painful Case", who dares to express emotional and romantic desires, is ultimately punished for her deviation from societal norms. The lack of a feminist movement or any significant advocacy for women's rights in Joyce's time meant that his female characters, even when aware of their suffering, had little recourse for change.

4.1.2 South Korea (21st Century): Modernization and Feminist Discontent

By contrast, the South Korea depicted in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* is a highly modernized, economically prosperous nation that has undergone significant social and political transformation, including the rise of feminist discourse. However, traditional Confucian values, deeply rooted in the country's history, continue to exert significant influence, particularly regarding gender roles. South Korea's rapid economic growth and highly competitive workforce have led to increased educational and employment opportunities for women, but systemic discrimination remains deeply entrenched. Workplace sexism, the expectation that women must leave their jobs after childbirth, and the glorification of motherhood as a woman's ultimate purpose create a paradox where women are encouraged to be ambitious but ultimately face severe obstacles when pursuing independence. Unlike Joyce's female characters, who are resigned to their fate, Ji-young undergoes a gradual awakening as she begins to recognize the injustices she has faced at every stage of her life—from childhood favoritism toward male siblings to workplace discrimination and the burden of unpaid domestic labor. Her awakening, however, does not lead to immediate rebellion or empowerment but instead manifests as psychological distress, culminating in her speaking in the voices of other women who have suffered similar fates. This symbolic breakdown serves as both an individual crisis and a broader critique of South Korean society, demonstrating how women's struggles are not isolated personal experiences but systemic issues affecting generations of women.

4.2 Stagnation vs. Protest: The Possibility of Change

One of the starkest differences between these two works is how they portray the aftermath of female awakening. In *Dubliners*, awareness does not translate into action. The women who recognize their oppression do not rebel or challenge the system but instead remain in a state of paralysis, their suffering continuing without resolution.

This reflects the lack of social mobility and feminist consciousness available to women in Joyce's Ireland. Even if women were aware of their subjugation, there was no viable path to change their circumstances. The Catholic Church, British rule, and deeply entrenched social norms ensured that any form of rebellion was nearly impossible. In *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, on the other hand, while Ji-young herself does not engage in overt activism, her struggles contribute to a larger conversation about gender inequality. The novel itself became a cultural phenomenon, igniting feminist discussions and sparking debates about workplace discrimination, gender roles, and motherhood expectations in South Korea. Despite facing backlash from conservative groups, the novel played a role in increasing awareness and inspiring activism. In this way, Ji-young's personal awakening is not an isolated event but part of a larger movement advocating for systemic change.

4.3 A Call to Awareness: The Difference from *Dubliners*

While Joyce's *Dubliners* presents female awakening as a moment of realization that leads to paralysis, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* suggests that awakening, though painful, has the potential to catalyze change. The novel ends not with Ji-young overcoming her struggles but with her male psychiatrist—who dismisses her condition—revealing his own subconscious biases. This conclusion underscores the deeply ingrained nature of gender inequality and highlights the need for broader societal change rather than placing the burden of awakening solely on individual women. This difference is crucial in understanding how female awakening is expressed in different cultural contexts. Joyce, writing in a deeply restrictive Catholic and colonial society, presents women whose self-awareness is stifled by fear and institutional constraints. Cho Nam-joo, writing in a modern yet patriarchal South Korea, presents a woman whose awakening is not just personal but political, framing it as part of a larger feminist movement that calls for systemic change.

The contrast between stagnation in *Dubliners* and protest in *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* highlights how female awakening is not just a personal journey but a product of the socio-political environment in which it occurs. Joyce's female characters, bound by Catholic conservatism and colonial oppression, experience moments of realization but remain trapped, unable to translate awareness into action. Cho Nam-joo's protagonist, while also constrained by societal expectations, becomes part of a larger feminist awakening, reflecting South Korea's evolving gender discourse. By examining these two texts, we gain a deeper understanding of how literature not only reflects but also shapes female consciousness, offering both cautionary tales and calls to action for women across cultures and historical periods.

5. Conclusion

The expression of female awakening in *Dubliners* and *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* highlights how gender oppression manifests differently across time and cultural contexts. Joyce's portrayal of women in early 20th-century Ireland reflects a society where religious conservatism, colonial rule, and deeply ingrained patriarchal values left little room for female autonomy. His female characters, despite moments of realization, remain trapped in an unchanging cycle of duty and submission, unable to break free from the social structures that define their existence. Their awakening, rather than leading to rebellion or transformation, becomes a painful reminder of their entrapment. This sense of paralysis is central to Joyce's commentary on the stagnation of Irish society, where both men and women remain bound by tradition, fear, and societal expectations.

In contrast, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* presents an awakening that extends beyond the personal and into a broader social critique. Ji-young's experiences reflect the systemic nature of gender inequality in contemporary South Korea, a country that has achieved economic modernization yet still retains patriarchal structures that restrict women's freedoms. Unlike Joyce's women, who suffer in silence, Ji-young's awakening is articulated through her psychological distress, manifesting in her subconscious adoption of other women's voices. This symbolic breakdown not only illustrates her internalized frustration but also serves as a commentary on the collective oppression of women in a society that continues to undervalue their contributions. Her story, though deeply personal, ignites discussions on workplace discrimination, motherhood expectations, and the limitations placed on women's ambitions, demonstrating that female awakening is no longer an isolated experience but part of a growing feminist consciousness. The contrast between these two works highlights the broader evolution of feminist discourse in literature. *Dubliners* portrays a world where women's realizations of their oppression do not lead to change, reinforcing the idea that systemic barriers are insurmountable. The women in Joyce's stories remain static, not because they lack awareness, but because they lack any means of escaping their prescribed roles. *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, on the other hand, reflects a contemporary society where female awakening has shifted from silent resignation to vocalized critique. Ji-young's struggles do not conclude with a definitive resolution, but they serve as an impetus for broader feminist discussions, demonstrating that while oppression persists, it is now being challenged in ways that were not possible in Joyce's time.

Both works underscore the importance of literature in shaping and reflecting gender consciousness. While *Dubliners* exposes the quiet tragedies of women constrained by historical and religious limitations, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* illustrates the slow but persistent fight for gender equality in a modernized yet patriarchal society.

Literature, as seen in both texts, functions not only as a mirror of societal conditions but also as a tool for critical reflection, challenging readers to confront the structures that maintain gender inequality. Joyce's depiction of stagnation and Cho Nam-joo's portrayal of resistance serve as two points in the ongoing narrative of female awakening, illustrating how women's roles, struggles, and consciousness continue to evolve across cultures and historical periods. Through the comparative study of these two works, it becomes evident that female awakening is not a singular experience but a process shaped by social, historical, and political forces. Joyce's women, confined by their era, embody the silence and inaction imposed by a rigidly patriarchal society, whereas Ji-young's story reflects a transition from realization to systemic critique. The shift from *Dubliners* to *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* signals the broader progression of feminist thought, from the quiet suffering of women in early 20th-century literature to the outspoken challenges of contemporary feminist narratives. While both works ultimately depict women struggling against entrenched societal expectations, their differing trajectories highlight the ways in which gender discourse has evolved, offering insight into both the endurance of patriarchal oppression and the growing momentum of feminist resistance. The study of female awakening in these works is not just an analysis of literary themes, but also a reflection on how societies grapple with gender inequality. Joyce's Ireland and Cho Nam-joo's South Korea, though separated by a century, both depict cultures where women's lives are shaped by forces beyond their control. Yet, while *Dubliners* presents a world where change is impossible, *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982* suggests that awareness, even when met with resistance, is a crucial step toward transformation. This contrast serves as both a reminder of the endurance of gender oppression and a testament to the power of feminist discourse in challenging and reshaping societal norms. The trajectory from stagnation to protest, as reflected in these texts, underscores the slow but inevitable progress of gender equality, demonstrating that while female awakening may be painful and met with opposition, it remains an essential force in the ongoing struggle for women's rights.

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