

Poverty

By Baek Sin-ae

Translated by Janet Hong

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About Baek Sin-ae

Along with such writers as Park Hwa-seong and Gang Gyeong-ae, Baek Sin-ae (1908-1939) is one of the leading female writers of the 1930s. She appeared on the literary scene in 1929 with the pen name Park Gae-hwa when her short story “My Mother” was published in the *Chosun Ilbo*. Although she published a small volume of works in her lifetime, such as “Bokseon,” “Poverty,” “The Wicked Wealthy,” and “Needy”—20 in all—they cover a wide range of subjects, from the portrayal of the impoverished lives of people all the way to a critique of society that suppresses women’s activism. She was involved in groups like Chosun Women’s Association, as well as Women’s Youth Union, and she even traveled to Siberia in 1928. Her experience from this period is depicted in her tragic story “Caray,” which deals with a Korean who goes back and forth across the borders of Russia. The main character in this story, Suni, looks upon the east with affection and is inclusive of even the immigrant “Coolie,” whom she embraces with compassion. What is particularly striking about Baek’s work is that she approaches the problem of poverty, not from a distance as a national problem, but from the point of view of a member of the lower class; in other words, she comes alongside those who are poor and destitute in solidarity and portrays their suffering and issues.

Baek Sin-ae’s works primarily deal with poverty and women. These matters are represented most excellently in her representative work “Poverty” (1934). In this story, the Old Woman from Maechon Place is responsible for the livelihood of her family members who, in a state of absolute poverty, have lost the ability to manage their basic lives. Baek goes further and shows the dual nature of the repression of women. The Old Woman from Maechon Place, who is the main character of this story, represents the maternal instinct, and the story shows how she manages to fight poverty through strength and patience. She engages in all kinds of manual labor in order to support her incompetent sons and their wives, while earning the scorn of those around her. But in this situation, her grandchild is born, and consequently, she cannot escape this role of supporting her family. Through these things, Baek criticizes the patriarchal constraints that exploit destitute women. But this critique is twofold. The poor woman desires to escape these confines, but as seen with the Old Woman from Maechon Place, she often internalizes this ideal and is unable to find escape because she simply chooses to endure the struggles. Through “Poverty,” Baek realistically portrays the double suppression that has been exerted on destitute women.

Poverty

After her second son married and moved to a small village in the mountains called Maechon, everyone called her the Old Woman from Maechon Place. The reason “Maechon Place”—especially “Place”—was added to “Old Woman” was because she was a descendent of Master Goro Song Wu-am of the Song family of Eunjin. The family had enjoyed high aristocratic status, but when his wife’s family opposed the government and consequently lost their prestige, people felt obligated to use “Place” as a kind of title. However nobody meant it as a title now, because when one said “the Old Woman from Maechon Place,” it was a contemptuous byword for a filthy, pitiful old woman, poorer than a wandering tramp that did other people’s dirty work. However, as of late, there were even those who left out the word “Place” when addressing her. But because the old woman’s attachment to aristocracy was so threadbare, she didn’t get upset; she hardly even noticed.

A few years before, the son of the village chief, for whom she did odd jobs on a regular basis, had jeered at her and asked, “So what’s your name anyway?”

“Hee hee, what would an old thing like me do with a name?”

“But you must have one. Is it Doo-doo or Turd Face?” he had said, mocking her.

Feeling a burst of anger at that fact that a young fellow dared to ask the name of an old woman, she cried, “I was a cherished daughter once, you know. Don’t you know my grandfather was the son of Master Goro Song Wu-am? He was a learned man, good at writing. He thought me so precious he named me Gui-nam!”

She was suggesting that a long time ago, none of them commoners would have been able to step foot in her home. But now it was ridiculous to think she had boasted about her aristocratic line at one point.

“The world thinks you’re nothing if you’re poor and haven’t got any money.” This was the one truth that became clearer with each passing day.

No one was poorer than the old woman. Her eldest son who was called “Piggy” was a fool, just as her dead husband had been. He was like a pig in every way—stupid, greedy, and childish, with no mind of his own. But when it came to drinking and smoking, he scored a perfect hundred. If he hired himself out to work at someone’s house for the day, as soon as he got his hands on some money, he rushed to the tavern in such a hurry that he came close to exposing his private part.

His younger brother, at the age of twenty-eight, got married to a woman from Maechon with the money he had saved from working for someone. With whatever was left over, he intended to help his older brother “Piggy” get married, but what kind of man

would give his daughter away to someone like Piggy? But there was someone who was willing to have even the foolish Piggy as his son-in-law. It was the father of a mute girl who was still single at the age of twenty. Piggy gave no thought to the fact that she was a “mute.” All he could think about was the fact that he was getting himself a girl. So smiling from ear to ear, with his wide nostrils flaring, he got married.

The old woman thought all her troubles were over, now that she had married off both her sons, but they only grew instead. “Piggy” chased after drink every chance he got and the mute would show up, weeping from hunger, on the doorstep of the old woman, who lived with her younger son and his wife.

Her younger son continued to work at his job after he got married. And every day, his wife and the old woman went to other people’s houses to do odd jobs and were fed in return, so the three were able to save all the money the son made. The amount, though, worked out to be barely ten *won* a year, but to the old woman, it might as well have been a million *won*. She so cherished the money that it did not even occur to her that she had not a single article of clothing, except the ones on her back. When there was practically nothing left of her clothes, she roamed about the mountain village and hired herself out to a place that made cotton cloth. There in the mountain, the people still made their own cloth like in the old days. She would then receive several feet of cloth from a roll of cotton as pay, and with that, she would make an outfit for herself and one for her daughter-in-law. Sometimes she took the mute along with her to work at other people’s houses and got her fed as well. As though it were a great deal to earn simply one meal, the three women wandered about, toiling until their bones ached. But all in all, life wasn’t too bad.

“When we’ve saved up several hundred *nyang*, let’s rent a small field or rice paddy and do our own farming.”

This was the one dream of the old woman, her son, and his wife.

When the second son had been married four years, the money they had crushed their bones to save was just two *won* short of an even sixty *won*. The son took fifteen *won* and bought a collapsing mud hut and for the first time in his life, he finally had a place he could call his own. The old woman was happy, too. But before they could rent a plot of land for farming, he lost the remaining forty-three *won*, all in one go. For the most part, the younger son was thought to be dependable with a good head on his shoulders, but carrying such a large amount of money at once had put him in a daze. Shameless gamblers from another town, having caught a whiff of money, ended up swindling the son; he lost all the money overnight. He saw stars and felt as though his bones were melting away. He beat and smashed his innocent tobacco pipe to pieces. Their dream of farming, which they had all believed was in their hands, became mere soap bubbles, and the old woman plagued her son all night long, wailing at the top of her lungs.

“Those bastards, they stole my money, my forty-three *won*! They’re not going to enjoy my money, oh, they can’t!”

Her son sat still and ground his teeth. However, the money, once lost, could never be reclaimed. But still the younger son went to the gambling den every day in search of his money. And before he knew it, he too became known as a reckless gambler from a certain town. Just as he had been a simple man, his transformation was swift and easy.

After the transformation of the younger son—the one his wife and the old woman had placed great hope in—and after their dream of farming had ended up being just that—a dream, they struggled to survive, doing odd jobs for other people as usual and living from hand to mouth. Even though they worked for their meals, people looked down on them as though they were freeloaders, since they ate from other's people's rice pots 365 days a year. It was around this period that "Place" was sometimes dropped when addressing the old woman and she started being called "the Old Woman from Maechon."

It was about time her eldest son Piggy grew up and finally gained some sense, but he was one who would slit his own throat for a drink, so after working himself to death, he got paid in drinks. As for the mute, she slaved away all day and simply got a meal in return. But even in the midst of their hardships, misfortune struck; Piggy was chased out of town. Piggy, who could not survive without drink for a few days, had the bright idea of going to the tavern and promising a load of wood in return for a single drink. This way, he was able to get his drink first. But because he couldn't find any wood to give the tavern owner, he went to where trees were being protected for erosion control work. There, he cut down a full load and was on his way down the mountain when the crew boss caught him. All his wood was taken away, he was beaten to a pulp, and even the tavern owner's wife got an earful. Because of this incident, he was forced out of the village. He came to his younger brother for help, but since the brother was a good-for-nothing gambler himself, there was nothing he could do. Left without a choice, Piggy moved into a rented room in a village located 2.5 kilometers away. Although he didn't have to pay the rent, he was responsible for doing odd jobs around the house. But since there was nothing to eat at the moment, he beat his wife and told her to go find food, but she wept and only pointed at her enormous belly, for she was in her last month of pregnancy. When he grew tired of harassing his wife, instead of coming up with a way to get some food, he just lay around all day, hoping that his old mother would bring something to eat. At times when he wanted to smoke, he went out to the field and would pick the flowers off a "ssilangi" herb. He would put it in his pipe and smoke it, making a squeaking noise like that of a mouse.

When the fetus squirmed inside her belly, the mute shuddered in fear.

"Stupid bitch, why the hell are you scared? What did you think a baby would do anyway?" he would shout in a voice like thunder.

But unable to understand, she would simply moan and weep, mashing her belly with her fist. Because they couldn't scrounge up even one meal per day, the mute's large eyes looked as menacing as knife blades.

One night, two large tigers appeared in the old woman's dream. She told her younger daughter-in-law about the dream the next morning and said, "Both of you will probably have sons either today or tomorrow ..." She looked at her daughter-in-law as though she were amazed. Like the mute, the younger daughter-in-law was also in her last month of pregnancy.

"What if both of them had the baby at the same time? The younger one—at least she's got something to eat after delivery, but that mute ..."

The old woman thought hard, turning things over in her mind. In the end, she took what was left of her hair—a mix of yellow, white, and black—and twisted the strands up in a knot, put on her threadbare top and ragged skirt, and hurried out of the house. She went to all her regulars, from one house to the next, explaining her situation and pleading with them that if they lent her some money now, she would pay them back by working it off later, but no one gave her a straight answer.

"Why do you even bother worrying about your good-for-nothing children? If there's nothing to eat, why did they go ahead and make babies in the first place?"

All they did was jeer and scold.

"Hee, hee—" She grinned like a cat, showing the stumps of her few crumbling teeth. When she smiled, fine, deep wrinkles crisscrossed like the pattern of a quilt on her face, which itself was like the worn and twisted root of a burdock weed. The wrinkles flattened again, as though being wiped away clean, and the skin buried deep inside the folds that never saw any sunlight appeared all over her face.

"I know, those worthless idiots. I just feel so sorry for the mute girl, that's all," she said. "Hee, hee—" she would laugh again, and with that, she would leave the house.

She headed into the last house with no expectation. Because the old woman had received scorn and abuse for such a long time, she was not resentful or hurt by people's cold treatment. Neither was she easily disappointed. But this last house sympathized with her situation much too easily.

"Oh, how sad! After all her troubles, too. Here, take this ... children come so easily to people who can't afford it, don't they?"

With these words, the old woman was given a quart of rice, two quarts of barley, a bowl of soybean paste, a piece of seaweed, and a dried pollack. Her entire body tended to melt from thankfulness over one bowl of rice, but in the face of such generosity, she also didn't know how thankful she should be. The nerve that was responsible for letting her feel grateful had a small limit and that nerve had reached its maximum capacity; she simply did not possess enough nerves to be grateful for each thing that was given to her. So the old woman could only shake her head and lick at her runny nose with the tip of her tongue, finally wiping her nose in the end. Without a word of thanks, she put everything in her basket and placed the bundle on top of her head.

She came out of the house and was in the middle of walking toward the village where Piggy lived when she stole a glance behind her. She quickly took out the fish from the basket and stuffed it into her bosom.

“This is for the second daughter-in-law after she has the baby.”

She felt bad for worrying only about the mute, so she wanted to hide the fish and give it to her second daughter-in-law.

When she shoved open the door to Piggy’s room, the stench of something hot and musty assaulted her nose. Piggy was lying in the room by himself. He hastily sat up.

“What’s that? Oh, I’m so hungry!”

His eyes swept over his old mother from her feet up to her side. At that moment, he so resembled a pig that she smiled bitterly to herself. Even the room was like a pigsty and his sluggish movements and small, beady eyes that glanced up at her looked exactly like those of a sick pig. The only difference was that he wasn’t fat.

Tired of resenting and hating her two imbecile sons, the old woman stepped into the room without saying a word.

“What’s that?” he asked again, wiping the pasty, dried-up saliva at the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand, as though he were unbearably hungry.

The old woman mumbled to herself, shaking her head the entire time. At least her younger daughter-in-law had five quarts of rice and eighteen quarts of barely to eat after she gave birth, but the mute was starving this very moment. It was a hopeless situation.

“What? It’s nothing. What are you doing, just lying around all day? Aren’t you worried about what your wife is going to eat after she has the baby?”

The old woman spoke in a small, mild voice without getting angry, as though her voice were stuck to her throat.

“I’m too hungry to go work ...”

“You think the food is going to drop from the sky if you lie there? Where is she anyway?”

“She went to the mountain out back to find some herbs ...”

The old woman scratched the back of her head with her fingers and jumped to her feet, as though she couldn’t stand it any longer.

“This is her medicine for when she has the baby, so don’t you dare touch it!”

She pushed the basket toward the warmest part of the floor. She grabbed a fistful of straw from outside and covered the top of the basket.

“You better not lay a finger on this. It’s medicine she needs to take after she has the baby.”

“Fine, I got it, just stop your nagging ...”

This is what Piggy said, but all of him, all his attention, was fixed on the basket, and her words might as well have been the wind. The old woman could read Piggy’s mind. No matter how much she pleaded with him, she knew he wouldn’t listen. The truth is, she had told him not to touch the food, repeatedly, so that he would ration it as much

as possible. But despite how much this Piggy resembled a slow and dull pig, it made her sad that she had to tell a man who was nearly forty years old that the food was medicine. But after all, what was food, which was their lifeline, if not the most precious, important medicine?

She didn't forget to add that they had to treat the food like medicine, that they needed to eat it like they were taking medicine. With that, she stepped out of the room. Even on her way home, she was afraid that she would run into the mute, so she walked quickly, keeping the fish hidden in the folds of her top and holding it in place with her left hand. The younger daughter-in-law was out working, so the old woman lifted the lid of the rice crock, which sat in the corner of the kitchen, and buried the fish deep in the rice. And thinking that she, too, would go do a bit of work somewhere and get a meal, she made her way out of the house.

She headed for the village chief's house.

"Old woman, hurry and come in. What's wrong with the child?" the chief's wife said, holding her three-year-old daughter in her arms, pacing the living room at a complete loss.

"Why? Is she sick?"

The old woman stepped up onto the wooden floor and touched the little girl's forehead and chest with experienced hands.

"She was playing in the yard until now and she's suddenly like this!"

The child had a fever and was crying in earnest.

"It's probably nothing. Let's see."

The old woman took the child in her arms and pursed her wrinkled lips and gently felt the child's stomach and chest. Because she had been in and out of people's houses all her life, she had also witnessed many people get sick, as well as how they were cured. So by now, she was able to prescribe the remedy as she saw fit for most illnesses. She also asked about the spiritual state of the things and was able to bring down indigestion, to the extent that she was trusted more than a rookie village doctor. That's why the chief's wife had placed her daughter in the old woman's hands.

At last, the child started to vomit the food that hadn't been digested properly, and after some time, she fell asleep.

The old woman breathed a sigh of relief and came out and sat on the ledge of the living room. "Boil some millet until it's mushy and feed it to her when she wakes up. Don't give her any dinner and just let her sleep. She'll be fine."

The relieved mother prepared some food for the old woman. The old woman, who had also gotten some rice and scraps of side dish, started to swallow the food without chewing.

"Slow down and eat! What if you choke and die?" The wife cautioned the old woman, because she saw the amount that she was consuming.

"Hee, hee..."

The old woman laughed rather charmingly and put the whole soused herring, bones and all, into her mouth and chewed with her mouth closed for some time. In the end, she swallowed the whole thing with a loud gulp.

“Oh, you just ate all the bones, too!”

“Hee, hee, don’t worry. Dying in the middle of eating is the best way to go. Hee, hee,” she laughed again in her habitual catlike way. Her spoon that was heaped full of rice the size of a fist rose and fell, and rose and fell.

“Your insides must be made of steel!”

The wife kept swallowing while watching and brought down the leftover kimchi stew from the cupboard and gave some to the old woman. The old woman had never refused anything that was offered to her, and so she gobbled up the kimchi stew as well, gulping down every drop of the soup. Even though her body was worn and twisted, her insides were solid, dependable, and tough like steel. She had never in her life had a bellyache. That day, she stayed longer, giving a hand with various things and even earned some dinner. When she was heading out, the chief’s wife poured two quarts of barley into the old woman’s skirt.

“Why, what’s this for?” she asked, but didn’t refuse. She brought it home, wrapped it in a piece of rag, and hid it under the firewood in the kitchen so that her daughter-in-law wouldn’t see it. She planned to give it to the mute when the food ran out....

A few days later, she heard the news that the mute had gone into labor and ran over. It was well past noon. When she threw open the door, the mute was moaning in agony, with her head stuffed in the corner of the room and hands tearing at the wall, and Piggy was sitting anxiously, sucking on his pipe that wasn’t even lit, making that squeaking mouselike noise.

“How long has she been like this?” the old woman asked her son, as she stepped into the room and sat down.

“I don’t know. She hasn’t even taken a sip of water from last night to now!”

The old woman knew that pain all too well. The mute wasn’t able to have the baby, because she had no energy to push.

She asked her son, “Where’s the food I brought?”

“What? I ate it all.”

“What? When?”

The old woman was stunned. She knew that one quart of rice and two quarts of barley weren’t much, but when she heard that he had polished off the seaweed as well, she felt a wave of anger sweep over her.

“You crazy bastard, how could you eat all that?”

Standing before the mute who moaned in pain, yet had no strength to have the baby, the old woman didn’t know what to do. In the end, she boiled a large bowl of water in a pot and mixed it with the bit of the soybean paste that was left. When she fed two

spoonfuls of the soup to the mute, she screamed and a red lump of flesh dropped to the floor. Then came the first vigorous, spirited cry.

The old woman tried to cut the umbilical cord, but they didn't own scissors or anything similar. While she was thinking of what to do, Piggy ran over and bit off the cord with his teeth. In front of the door, the tattered mat the size of a hand was all there was left of the floor, and so the baby lay on the dirt floor, its red arms and legs wriggling and the lips moving. Piggy and the old woman hurriedly looked between the two legs. Something small dangled there, giving proof to the fact that it was a boy. The old woman's arms shook all of a sudden. She anxiously scanned the room and left without a choice, she quickly took off her own skirt and wrapped the young thing in it and laid him down again. The mute was splayed out, as though dead. Piggy kept mumbling some nonsense; he clenched and unclenched his pipe and touched the mute. The old woman sat still. Perhaps it was because she was seeing her first grandchild at sixty-three, but she was so overcome with emotion that tears ran down her face. When the mute delivered the placenta shortly after, the heavy, blood-filled sack fell to the floor. The old woman grabbed the umbilical cord and put it inside the sack and got Piggy to go burn it in the corner of the yard.

“What am I going to feed her?”

The old woman thought about the two quarts of barely hidden under the firewood back home, but she couldn't very well leave to get it and neither could she ask Piggy to fetch it, since he might get intercepted by the younger daughter-in-law; she wished she could sell her own limbs to feed the daughter-in-law. Right then, the landlord's wife, who had sized up the situation, brought out a bowl of raw rice. The old woman cooked it and gave the mute a big bowl and scraped the rest into a pot.

“That bitch just had a baby, but she doesn't even look like she's in pain! Look at the way she's eating. I'm so hungry I could die!” Piggy yelled in a burst of anger, as he burned the placenta in the yard.

“You good-for-nothing bastard!” the old woman said. “You lazy pig!”

She gave him some rice from the pot and for herself, she ate the grains that were stuck on her fingers. The day grew dark, while she held the baby and took care of the mute. She fed the rest of the rice to her. She couldn't possibly take back her skirt that covered the little one, so she waited for night to fall. Then she slipped back home in her tattered underclothes to get the barley.

She went into the house quietly, afraid that the younger daughter-in-law would be upset if she found out and say, “Whose barley is that? Why did you hide it here in the first place and why are you taking it now?”

Her second son was probably out at the gambling den again, because only her daughter-in-law was home. With the light of the kerosene lamp blinking, she had the strings of her clothes pulled loose and was rustling about, catching fleas. The old woman went into the kitchen without a sound and stuck her hand under the firewood and

carefully pulled out the bundle of barley. She was about to leave right away, but she stopped and hesitated for a second, and with a deft gesture, she stuck her hand in the rice crock. The fish she had buried at the bottom of the crock the day before was now sticking out from the rice.

“Oh, she already saw it,” she thought. She quickly removed her hand from the crock and slipped out of the house. She clasped the bundle of barley to her side, ran like lightning, and gave it to Piggy, saying, “Make gruel with this. You eat only a little and give the rest to your wife!” She repeated herself several times and headed back home. Her empty stomach felt as though it were stuck to her spine. Her mouth and throat burned every time she smacked her lips, as though they were stuck together with sap.

“How long is that barley going to last them, I wonder?”

With that thought, the strength left her legs and she felt a fresh wave of hatred toward Piggy and her younger son. But the baby who was born that day, along with the mark that clearly signified the fact that he was a boy, wavered before her eyes. As she was walking, she felt the urge to go to the bathroom. She stopped, looked around, and was about to pull aside her underclothes when she straightened and started to walk quickly again, as though something had startled her.

She had happened to remember that sometimes the only way you go on is by holding it all in with everything you’ve got.

When she went home, she knew there wouldn’t be a single spoon of rice left. She would then have to go to bed on an empty stomach and starve until the next day, so if she went to the bathroom now, she felt as though she would keel over right then and there.

She kept pulling up her underclothes that were falling down, and forced her body that was tough like the bark of an elephant to go on, trying to ignore the way her rear-end seethed and flared. She pursed her lips together and dashed down the glimmering dark road.