

# Mother and Child

By Kang Kyung-ae

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Literature Translation Institute of Korea

Originally published in Korean as *Moja* in Gaebyeok, 1935

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**The National Library of Korea Cataloging-in-Publication Data**  
Kang, Kyung-ae

Mother and child [electronic resource] / by Kang Kyung-ae ;  
translated by Sora Kim-Russell. –  
[Seoul] : Literature Translation Institute of Korea, 2014  
p.

원표제: 모자

Translated from Korean  
ISBN 978-89-93360-31-8 95810 : Not for sale

813.61-KDC5  
895.733-DDC21 CIP2014028966

## About Kang Kyung-ae

Kang Kyung-ae (1906 – 1944) was a leading writer, feminist, and labor activist during the colonial era. After publishing her short story “Broken Strings” in the Chosun Ilbo newspaper in 1931, she migrated to Gando, a.k.a. Jiandao in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture of northern China. As a result, much of her writing dealt with the local communist movement and anti-Japanese resistance fighters. By depicting the poverty experienced by ethnic Koreans living in Gando, Kang’s works exposed the dark side of colonialism while giving voice to the resistance.

Kang’s work is important for its authentic, unembellished depictions of the era and the lives of the people: she neither whitewashes nor distorts. The tragic lives of the lowest rungs of society and the difficult lives of the impoverished are depicted vividly and realistically. *From Wonso Pond*, a novel that deals with conflicts between tenant farmers and pro-Japanese collaborators, conflicts between capitalists and workers, and the purposeful struggle of the laboring masses, captures the writer’s revolutionary ideology. Her other works, which include “Dismissal,” “The Underground Village,” and “Drugs,” all explore similar themes.

“Mother and Child,” which was published in 1935, explores the dual impact of patriarchy and colonialism on women’s lives: a young man joins the anti-Japanese resistance in northern China and is killed, leaving behind his young wife and son. Without the shelter of a living husband, the young mother finds herself homeless, penniless, and helpless to protect her ailing son. The story is a keen reflection of Kang’s feminist and revolutionary yearnings and an unflinching look at the social conditions of her time, including the way families came to be divided over politics. “Mother and Child” shifts the narrative lens away from the traditional heroism of death in battle and focuses instead on the tragic impact such deaths had on the wives and families of resistance fighters. She pushes us to ask whether the subjects of history are only those who publicly take up arms or whether they are also those who labor, and suffer, in the private sphere.

## Mother and Child

That morning, with the snow falling heavily, Seungho's mother stepped out the gate with little Seungho, still moaning from the whooping cough, strapped to her back. When she passed the Chinese grocer, she thought about how she had panicked and run to her parents' home after losing her job as a housemaid and being run off of the property a few days ago, and now that she'd fought with her mother and left their house today as well, she had nowhere to go. She'd thought her father, to say nothing of her mother, would take pity on his child and allow her and Seungho to stay until he had recovered from the whooping cough—she knew better than to assume they could stay a few months, let alone a few years—but she mournfully recalled how her father had proven to be no more generous to her than Aehui's family had been, and they weren't even related to her. Where should she go? She stopped in her tracks. People continued to brush past her. She gazed vacantly up at the sky and realized that now she could not return, even with bowed head, to the home of her husband's older brother, with whom she'd been as enemies. The thought of having to do that made her quiver like a cow entering a slaughterhouse, and she couldn't bring herself to pick up her feet and move. On the other hand, though her husband was dead, she still had Seungho, who would carry on his family's name! And wouldn't he be even more of an advantage to her at her brother-in-law's than at her parents'? Nephews are not so far from sons. 'Yes, let's go!' she thought, and forced herself to resume her steps. Besides, her brother-in-law had just opened an apothecary: the difficult part would be convincing them to let her stay. If she could manage that, then Seungho's cough was sure to get better. She summoned up her courage and made up her mind to swallow her pride no matter what manner of humiliation they presented her with, and she put force into her flagging stride. Nevertheless, the eyes of her brother-in-law, as narrow as pumpkin seeds, and those of his wife, so like the eyes of fishhooks, threatened to steer her away.

Right up until the Manchurian Incident of 1931, her brother-in-law had supported her husband like the sky itself, and so he hadn't complained about supporting wife and child as well. But ever since the Japanese had tried to blow up the South Manchuria Railway and things started to change in Longjing, where Korean freedom fighters had been living in exile in China, her brother-in-law's heart had shifted. He'd begun cursing his once-beloved younger brother night and day, and his behavior towards his sister-in-law and nephew was no different. When he stopped paying their living expenses, Seungho's mother had to find work as a maid. And then, a year ago, when the awful news came that her husband had died far from home, her brother-in-law had looked delighted by the news. The anger that Seungho's mother had been suppressing rose up in her, and she'd finally had it out with him. After that, she'd stopped visiting his family altogether. But today, she would have to bow her

head and return to him, though she knew all too well that he and her sister-in-law would not be happy about it, so she couldn't help but hesitate.

Seungho, who'd been quietly resting against her back, suddenly raised his head and let out another wracking cough. The cough overtook him, and he gasped for air. She hurriedly took him in her arms and pressed her cheek to his, trembling as she did so.

“Seungho! My child!”

With an aching heart, she placed her lips to Seungho's mouth and inhaled, as she did every time he started coughing. She thought that doing so would draw the whooping cough out of Seungho's body and into hers instead. Then, when some time had passed between his coughing fits, she would sigh with relief, believing that it had worked, only to be confronted by another fit. After his coughing had subsided somewhat, she resumed walking. Soon enough, she'd arrived at the corner of the wall that surrounded her brother-in-law's house. She stopped. How was she to answer when her brother-in-law asked why she had come? 'I'm here to stay...' Should she respond that way? Or remain quiet? No, she should at least explain that she was fired from her job as a housemaid. What would she do if he turned her away as well? Her head spun, as if she'd suddenly dropped through a hole in the ground, and she started to leave. If he and his wife were only going to turn her away, she'd prefer not even trying in the first place. And yet, she realized, that would still mean that she had nowhere to go. She could go to anyone's home to spend the night, but once the snow had stopped, what then? She relived the image of herself being kicked out of Aehui's home. Strangers are all alike, she thought. Why would anyone want to put up a mother and child for the night? Who but his own mother would want to deal with a child who has such a terrible cough? At least her brother-in-law would be more sympathetic, given that she had his nephew in tow. She should talk to them. Surely they wouldn't kick her out. She turned back toward the house. Her steps grew heavier and heavier, and she kept hanging back. What if Seungho started coughing when she was face to face with her brother-in-law? Her heart heavy in her chest, she drew closer to the gate, but then she hesitated again, worried what might happen if another coughing fit caught her off guard. Better to wait for one and go in right after. She stood and waited for Seungho to have another strong spell.

She knew it wasn't good for her son to be outside for long on a cold and windy day like today, but she couldn't help but fret.

“Seungho, you mustn't cough in front of your uncle! You have to hold it in!”

She patted him gently on the back and pleaded with him as he dozed against her. She stood there a moment more. Her brother-in-law's gate was right in front of her. The freshly painted gate seemed to say *long time no see*. The sight of it made her heart race, and she hesitated once again. Suddenly the gate opened, and her niece, who was a teacher at H Primary School, stepped out and looked around. She started when she saw her and took a step back.

“Oh! Aunt, it's been ages since I saw you....”

The soft collar of her overcoat brushed against her snow-white face.

Seungho's mother started to ask, "How have you been...?" but her throat closed up and her head drooped at the mere sight of her niece.

"Please come inside! Is Seungho asleep?"

Her niece started to walk over to her but then turned to leave. "I have to go to work," she said, "but please go in. I hope you're still here when I get back!"

Her niece's voice was so cheery. Seungho's mother had an urge to grab her niece and plead for help. But her niece smiled and walked away the moment she was done speaking. There was no choice but to enter the gate. Her sister-in-law must have heard the sound of shoes, because her fishhook eyes appeared through the glass window. Her sister-in-law's face turned red, as if she were suddenly faced with an enemy.

"As I live and breathe. What're you doing back here?"

Her sister-in-law slid open the door and greeted her with an angry look. Seungho's mother stepped inside and sat down without a word. The pungent smell of herbal medicine was overwhelming, and the warm air of the room blanketed her red cheeks. Fearful that Seungho might start coughing again, she pulled the tattered blanket all the way up over his face.

"You must've made a lot of money as a maid," her sister-in-law said. "You behaved badly. Do you still think you were in the right?"

Her sister-in-law pulled her long pipe closer and packed it with tobacco.

"Please forgive me," Seungho's mother said.

"If you have an argument with someone," her sister-in-law said, "it's good to beg for forgiveness as soon as your anger dies down. You haven't been here in over a year. You have no respect for your elders!"

Her sister-in-law sounded as if her anger had subsided, but only slightly. Seungho's mother barely managed to suppress the desire to start weeping and bawling, and she thought about how narrow-minded she really was. She was deeply moved. A Chinese customer must have come to the apothecary: from the other room came the voice of someone speaking Chinese, along with the deeper tones of her brother-in-law. She decided to tell her sister-in-law everything and plead for help now that her anger had subsided a little. She considered what to say, but her tears preceded her words and she could not speak. Just then, Seungho raised his head and began another coughing fit. Seungho's mother was flustered and didn't know what to do.

"Don't tell me that child has whooping cough," her sister-in-law said, her eyes drawing at once into a sulk. She seemed to have guessed why Seungho's mother had come. "There's no cure for it. How long has he been sick?"

Seungho's mother blanched to hear that there was no cure. Her face turned as white as a sheet. So Seungho was doomed! Her mind went blank with fear.

"You should have taken better care of him. Are others at home sick too?"

"N-no."

"They won't be happy about this."

"I left for good!"

With that, she burst into tears. Her sister-in-law turned her back.

“Whooping cough is highly contagious. Why would anyone want to be around that?”

At first, her sister-in-law had assumed she was only there to get medicine, but she soon realized that Seungho’s mother was looking for a place to stay. She felt a surge of scorn, and her anger returned in full force.

“Hmph! When times are good, you don’t bother to visit, but now that your runt is on death’s bed and you have no place to live, you come calling. We’ll have nothing to do with this. You created such a stir the last time we saw you, and now you’re back. We won’t put up with this. You’ve got parents. Why don’t you go to them? Or get married. You severed your ties with us the last time you were here, did you not?”

She tapped her pipe hard against the ashtray. Seungho’s mother’s face ached, every inch of it, as if it had taken a blow. She pressed her lips together tightly and prepared to plead for mercy.

“Please forgive me! I have nowhere else to turn!”

“Hmph! Forgive you? Forgiveness is not so easily acquired. Leave us out of it!”

Just then, the door to the other room slid open, and her brother-in-law stuck his head in.

“What’s all this racket?” he yelled, fixing them with a glare.

“Would you believe it? She acted like she would never see us again, but now that her child is sick and she has nowhere to live, she comes crawling back!”

“Both of you, just shut the hell up!” Her brother-in-law shouted and slammed the door shut behind him.

Now even her brother-in-law, whom she’d trusted in despite everything, had turned his back on her. She got up at once.

“Have a nice life, then.”

She ran out the door as if crazed and made it all the way to the street, paying no heed to where she was going. The snow was still falling heavily, silently. She stopped. She couldn’t help but blame her husband for everything. But she immediately regretted doing so. She was frustrated with herself for looking askance at the man who had marched through fields and over mountains, too honorable to sleep a proper wink or enjoy a meal, only to meet his death at the hands of their enemies.

What had he said to her before leaving home? When he told her that they would never be well off no matter how they tried, she had wondered what he meant. But the longer she lived, the more she thought he might have been right. No, he *was* right. ‘We have to instill the same beliefs in Seungho...’ What was she to do about her husband’s words, or indeed about her own bereaved self? No matter how hard their lives had been, she’d never lost hope as long as she had her husband. But now that he was gone, what hope did she have left? Her future was bleak.

She stopped walking. Maybe it was the thoughts she was having, but she kept picturing her husband’s eyes, his lips, and it made her want to weep and wail. She stared blankly at the falling snowflakes. Then she opened her mouth wide and caught one of them, thinking that maybe it might cure a cough. She thought about the

medicine she'd smelled at her brother-in-law's, and she felt the snowflake chill the tip of her tongue. Then she thought about how coldly her sister-in-law had spoken to her, and her eyes opened wide. Straightaway, she worried that Seungho's cough might grow worse in this terrible wind, and she pulled her kerchief from around her head and wrapped it around the baby's head instead. She kept walking. Where was she going? Anywhere. It didn't matter. She just had to get out of Longjing. Oh, this hardhearted town! If only she could get out of Longjing, then people who were in the same dire straits as this mother and child would not treat them so coldly! With that thought, she suddenly recalled the night her husband had told her he was leaving.

"Where are you going? Why won't you tell me?"

How pathetically she had asked him that. Her husband had sat there silently before answering.

"I'm going up into the mountain."

"Which mountain?"

"That's all you need to know..."

Since then, she'd taken to gazing wistfully at distant mountains, and whenever anyone said anything about mountains, her heart had raced.

The mountain! She wasn't certain which mountain it was, but she was certain that was where he had gone, and so she assumed that, up until his death, he had wandered from mountain to mountain before being captured. She looked up. That mountain barely visible through the snow. That distant mountain like something glimpsed in a dream. It seemed the only place left for mother and child to turn.

"Let's go, Seungho. After your father!"

She spoke excitedly. Maybe it was the thoughts she was having, but it seemed that if she went to that mountain, she would at least find her husband's skull, and she would hear his last words to his wife and child as he died. She felt a surge of energy. Snowflakes fell one after another and slid down her cheeks.

After a while, she took a look around. All she could see were endless fields buried in snow. There was no one else about. Only mother and child, and the mountain that, despite everything, gave mother and child hope. But for some strange reason, the more she walked, the further away the mountain looked. Snow kept blowing into her face and making it sting and ache more than she could bear. The passion that had inflamed her whole body vanished, and she looked back, regretting that she'd been chasing a useless fantasy. She'd already covered two or three *li*; Longjing was no longer in sight. She debated returning. But it seemed she would freeze to death before she made it back. She turned around again. She would see how far she could go. If she came upon a house, she would sleep there and decide what to do in the morning, but for now, she would press on. She started walking and looked around for any nearby houses. As she did so, she realized the sun was on the verge of setting, and she grew even more impatient. She began wandering in search of houses. Seungho had several more coughing fits. But she stopped paying attention and focused on finding a house.

It was not the first time she'd been on that road. She'd traveled it often, so she was certain that around the next bend there would be a village. And yet, to her

surprise, there were no houses when she rounded the bend, only more snow-covered fields. Having wandered for some time, she felt certain she'd gone the wrong way. She opened her eyes as wide as she could and looked all around. But she could not tell where anything was. All she could see was the white snow—snow rattling her head, snow so bright it made her dizzy in the fearsome wind. She stopped. Then she brought her hand up to her eyes. She'd meant to rub them, but her hand felt like it was made from wood and refused to obey her. She abruptly came to her senses. The notion that she might be dying struck her like lightning. She kept her hands and feet moving, and she called out Seungho's name. But at the same time, she told herself that this wasn't the time for dilly-dallying, and she started to move forward. Just then, she spotted something in the distance that looked like a house, and she broke into a run. But it wasn't a house after all, just a few posts coated in snow. She was shocked. She knew that a horse and carriage station had once stood in that spot. What had happened to it? She suddenly recalled hearing that most of the farmhouses had been torched when the Japanese military put down a rebellion, and she felt the energy drain from her body. She didn't know what to do. She looked around for any Chinese houses with their high earthen walls. But there were none to be seen. She walked further, continuing to look around, but still she saw nothing.

The wind seemed to quiet, but the snow only grew heavier. The snow on the ground now reached over her knees. She stared at the posts and wondered what she should do, and then she thought, 'If I die, I die. But as long as I'm still alive, I'll keep going!' She gritted her teeth and pushed onward. But the world seemed to grow darker, and she kept stumbling. At some point she'd lost her rubber shoes and had only her socks. They were caked with snow and as heavy as if made of iron. No matter how she tried to shake off the snow, more kept adhering to them, and she could do nothing to prevent it. Powdery flakes dusted her hair, the tips of her eyebrows, and even her lips. She decided to run. But she only ran in her mind; her feet refused to move.

Suddenly the ground seemed to open beneath her, and she slid. Snow filled her eyes and nose and mouth until she couldn't breathe. When she realized she must have stumbled into a pit or a stream, she thought, 'Now I truly am going to die!' She flailed about for something to grab onto. But the only thing to grab was more dry, crumbly snow. She tried to scream. At last, she seemed to have hit bottom, as her body was finally upright.

The first thing she did was to raise her hands above her head to try to clear a space so she could breathe. But the more she dug, the more snow kept spilling in from above. It hit her then that Seungho might die buried under all that snow, and so she clutched him tight and used her head instead to try to dig a wider hole in the snow. The snow crept inside her collar, melted into ice-cold water, and slithered down the nape of her neck. Worried that the snow might also reach Seungho, she turned her head left and right to make sure it all went under her collar. But the water trickled down any which way it pleased. She was losing strength. Again, she thought, 'My son and I are truly going to die.' She thought about her husband's death. What had killed him was not getting buried in snow, or lost at sea, or falling into a pit or a stream.

‘No matter how hard we try to live, we are doomed.’

His words! How right he had been! How hard had she tried to survive? As long as a person is alive, he or she will fight to stay that way. Surely no one dies that easily? In the midst of her reverie, she thought that, just as her husband had said, she might end up dying in the snow despite her efforts to survive. Was there any difference between his death and the death of this mother and child?

On impulse she called out her son’s name and vowed that she would raise him to be a better person than her. And the work her husband had been unable to finish would be completed through his son.

“Seungho!”

Her heart was so full that she couldn’t bear not to call out to him. She told herself that this measly bit of snow was not enough to stop her.