

# **Adoption Loss and (Birth)[M]otherhood: Disenfranchised Grief and Enfranchised Reunion in *Resilience*\***

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## **I. Introduction**

In "Disenfranchised Grief," Kenneth J. Doka presents the concept of disenfranchised grief, which is formulated as "the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported" (4). Doka argues that the disenfranchised grief occurs when the relationship is not recognized, the loss is not recognized, or the griever is not recognized ("Disenfranchised" 5-6) and elucidates that the "emotions associated with grief are intensified and complicated when grief is disenfranchised" ("Introduction" 17).

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Doka's conceptualization of disenfranchised grief elucidates the experiences of bereavement, grief, and mourning that emerge within a particular social or cultural context. Bereavement takes place when a person experiences a significant loss and is "aware of that loss" (Corr 45), yet the grief is "prohibited, restrained, unsanctioned, and unsupported by society" (Corr 57). Grief is a "natural and healthy reaction to loss" (Corr 48); nevertheless, if the person is robbed of a chance to grieve, it becomes "unnatural and unhealthy" or "disenfranchised." Disenfranchised grief encompasses the principles that the society views as meaningless or negligible, or it determines to exclude; also, it indicates that the bereaved person is disempowered to express loss. Mourning encompasses the element of coping with the loss and of finding the new challenges associated with the bereavement, through which the bereaved can "endeavor to incorporate their losses and their grief into healthy, ongoing living" (Corr 49).

Disenfranchised grief embodies the sociological, psychological, social-psychological, spiritual, and political implications, and Sarah Brabant who elaborated Doka's concept argues that disenfranchised grief is interconnected with some "grieving rules," which are part of the "normative order," in each society (31). Norms engender "the discrepancy between individual and collective meanings of the loss" (Kammerman 413) and set a limit on human behaviors and delimit the rights of the members; the rules "specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve" (Doka, "Disenfranchised" 4). If the grief derived from a personal loss is incompatible with the grieving rules of the society, it is unrecognized by others and the bereaved

person receives neither consolation nor accorded right to mourn that loss, which subsequently engenders disenfranchised grief.

Doka's concept of disenfranchised grief comes out of a tradition that social as well as cultural factors influence the nature of the bereavement experience. Within a certain cultural context, disenfranchisement represents human interactions that reside outside of the norms—that are taken as meaningless or that defy the fixed social values—or human behaviors that stem from the peripheralized principles that a society has driven from the center. In this sense, disenfranchisement exudes a sense of exclusivity.

The disenfranchised grief of a birthmother is one of the most significant themes in Tammy Chu's *Resilience* (2009)<sup>1</sup>—a documentary film about a Korean birthmother, Myung-ja Noh, and her son, Sung-wook Hyun/Brent Beesley, a Korean TRA (transracial adoptee) who was adopted to America when he was a baby. While most films utilize adoption as a part of the plot rather than the main theme, *Resilience* not only tells about the loss, separation, and reunion between the Korean birthmother and her long-lost son, but also, by juxtaposing Myung-ja's story along with Sung-wook's, invites the audience to become a witness of the site where the peripheralized aspect of the history of Korean

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1) Directed by the Korean transnational adoptee, Chu, this movie premiered at the 2009 Pusan International Film Festival and won The Asian Network Documentary Award (Pusan International Film Festival). Also, it won the Best Documentary (Asian Film Festival of Dallas, 2010), Best Documentary Feature (DC APA Film Festival, 2010), Grand Jury Award Nominee, Best Documentary (Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, 2011), and Best Documentary Finalist (Palm Beach Women's International Film Festival, 2011).

transnational adoption is exposed.

As Margaret Homans argues, “birthmothers may be desired, disavowed, or reviled, but their own stories are seldom heard” (250); birthmothers in Korea have been confined by the principles of the patriarchal order and misrepresented as emblematic of maternal absence or female deviance within the discourse of adoption as well as in adoption narratives. Since the “birthmother cannot represent herself, and she is representable by others only as an absence” (Homans 252) in the cultural logic of adoption, to speak or write about their loss was insurmountably difficult. “[P]erceived rejection, outright discrimination, and painful alienation” (E. Kim 192) peripherized them; and rather than being the subjects who lead and control the narrative, they have been the objects of adoptees’ origins searches or the silent figures who only exist in adoptees’ fantasies.

Disrupting the narrative tradition, *Resilience*, unconventionally and most compellingly, centers on a birthmother, Myung-ja, and endows her with narrative mobility—“to speak the unspeakable truth” (Homans 263) about her experience of adoption loss and the unresolved grief resulted from that loss. By grafting Doka’s concept of disenfranchised grief with adoption/trauma theory, which would provide a valuable framework for analyzing *Resilience* in terms of adoption loss and birthmother trauma, this study attempts to explore the following issues. First of all, it will scrutinize and deconstruct the commonly misconceived myths about birthmothers, which are, for the most part, generated and contextualized by Korean patriarchal norms. Also, this article attempts to reconstruct the story of the birthmother with the

truths derived from the voices of Myung-ja, her mother, and her aunt. Last but not least, this paper will examine the trajectory of the birthmother's transformation from a disempowered victim to an empowered subjectivity.

## II. Myths and Truths

Birthmothers represent "the most subordinated groups in an entrenched patriarchy and misogynistic state welfare system" (E. Kim 199), and their relinquishment is a part of Korea's cultural, social, and political history of abusive systems of power.<sup>2)</sup> In the history and the narratives of Korean transnational adoption,

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2) The history of transnational adoption in Korea can be divided into these three stages: from the early 1950s to the 1960s, from the 1970s to late 1980s, and from 1988 to the present. After the Korean War, the South Korean government set up the Child Placement Service (1954) and sent the war orphans and mixed-race children (born to Korean women and U.S. soldiers during and after the war) to foreign countries. In the second stage, the children born of young unmarried female factory workers occupied the majority of overseas adoptions. Influenced by the Western media highlighting the large number of children sent out of Korea for adoption during the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics, the number from 1988 to the present has decreased. Reasons for relinquishment/losing children to adoption in Korea have mostly been a result of social stigmatization of single motherhood, giving birth to mixed-raced children, domestic abuse, and/or economic hardship. Starting from 1950s, after the Korean War, sending children for foreign adoption has been carried out: after the introduction of the domestic adoption priority system in 2007, the number of children placed in domestic adoption has gradually exceeded that of those placed in foreign adoption; however, overseas adoption continues to exist in the present.

birthmothers have been the most neglected party in the adoption triad: they have been little acknowledged and/or generally misinterpreted as being promiscuous or irresponsible, whose mythical image is paralleled to that of cuckoo birds which lay eggs in other birds' nests and neglect them, rather than being acknowledged as the victims of the Korean patriarchal system. The marginalization of birthmothers is shown in multiple forms of adoption narratives, such as memoirs, films, television soap operas, and more, and the complicated and contested ideologies of gender, domesticity, and motherhood are commingled around the issue of transnational adoption, a locus in which birthmothers are doubly peripheralized due to their gender, material situation, and marital status.

Critics argue that "the grief of a woman who has relinquished a child for adoption is unique, and, therefore, does not and can not follow the traditional prescription for grief and mourning" (Aloi 28). Lamentably, however, birthmothers have been deprived of their rights to grieve because they violated and transgressed Korean traditional norms of femininity and sexual chastity; from the canonical standpoint, birthmothers are deemed unfit to be mothers—since they exist on the peripheralized territory, outside of the patrifocal family—and who thus deserve to be denied mothering. The denial of their status as mothers lies in the fact that Korea is a patriarchal society that yearns for "good" mothers who abide by the male order/obligations or the norms that the dominant, or the male, have set up. Consequently, the primacy of the mother-child bond is severed by the family, institution, and nation, all of which operate based on the

male-dominant rules.

Distressingly enough, there are a lot of myths surrounding birthmothers, which are not rooted in realities but are, more often than not, produced and reproduced by the dominant hegemony. Undoubtedly, and not surprisingly, the myths about birthmothers reflect cultural perspectives on birthmothers as well as the coded representation of them generated by the male-centered society. *Resilience* lashes out against the negative images of the birthmother stereotypes; it interrogates and dismantles the fabricated images of birthmothers. The following are the myths and truths about birthmothers and their adoption loss.

One of the commonly misconceived assumptions about birthmothers and their relinquishment is that all the surrendered babies are unwanted ones—*Resilience* challenges this belief by providing Sung-wook's pre-adoption history. Myung-ja had her son, Sung-wook, when she was eighteen. When Sung-wook's birthfather gambled all their money away and refused to work, Myung-ja left Sung-wook with his birthfather and her in-laws to find work. When she returned, however, the baby was gone—her mother, aunt, and cousin had put Sung-wook up for adoption while Myung-ja was away. As Myung-ja's mother confesses, "She (Myung-ja) had no idea. She would never have given him up if she'd known" (Chu). Sung-wook was sent away to be adopted overseas without Myung-ja's consent. Obviously, Myung-ja is nonetheless an abandoning mother; despite the fact that she is a victim of poverty, manipulation, and the Korean patriarchal system, she was treated as a social nonbeing by her family who complied with patriarchal norms that regard single motherhood as

a social disgrace.

Another misconception about birthmothers is that after relinquishment, they will somehow manage to move on and forget about their children. *Resilience* contradicts the view and constantly reminds the audience that Myung-ja's grief after her loss was substantial—the birthmother claims, “I lost everything when I lost my child” and reminisces about the period when she sought the missing baby like a “madwoman” (Chu). Her grief of losing a child reverberates through the voice of Myung-ja's aunt, who asserts that the birthmother “went nuts looking for her lost-son” (Chu), Sung-wook. Moreover, Myung-ja's narrative implies that she was afflicted by the birthmother syndrome<sup>3</sup>) in the aftermath

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3) The term “birthmother syndrome” was coined by Merry Bloch Jones in her book *Birthmothers* (1993). According to Jones, the birthmother syndrome is defined as follows. It is unresolved grief including delayed denial, anger, or depression and manifest symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, avoidance, or phobic reactions. Diminished self-esteem, passivity, abandonment of goals, feelings of powerlessness, worthlessness, or victimization are entailed as well as dual identities—division into an outer pretense of perfection or normalcy—and secret feelings of shame, self-condemnation, and isolation on the inside reside within the minds of birthmothers. Slowed emotional development that is sometimes described as being stuck in the time of relinquishment emerges and self-punishment or self-destructive behaviors, abusive relationships, substance abuse, and/or eating disorders emerge as indications of the syndrome. Myung-ja's narrative denotes that she had suffered from birthmother syndrome: the birthmother confesses that after the loss, she lost her goals and lived recklessly until she had Hyo-jung—whose surname is not given in the film—years later. Also, the birthmother mentions that after the loss, she began to smoke cigarettes: “I started smoking and wandered around like a madwoman” (Chu)—smoking, or engaging in other “substance abuse,” can be diagnosed as symptomatic of her unresolved grief. See Jones 269-88 for more information on the birthmother syndrome.

of the loss, which is manifested in her confession, "I lived recklessly because I had no reason to live. What's the use of living when I've lost my child? I've lived with that thought every day" (Chu). Her voice parallels with and is supported by the adoption theorists who argue that "mothers care *forever*" and have tremendous difficulty going on with their lives due to "guilt, worry, and grief" (Soll & Buterbaugh 23) and confirm that the birthmothers and the adoptees will "always suffer, regardless of what attempts are made to make the experience less traumatic" (Robinson 124).

Equally striking is that people are haunted by the false belief that the subsequent birth(s) will substitute for the child the birthmother has relinquished. Partially, it is true, as Myung-ja testifies herself that she decided to have Hyo-jung, when she found out she was pregnant with her second child, because she wanted to have a child of her own; and the subsequent child somewhat eased the pain of Myung-ja's loss. However, the wound from the bereavement of her first child had become a scar that could not be healed completely. The birthmother ponders, "But all the while, he (Sung-wook) was always in my heart. Always" (Chu). *Resilience* focuses on how painful the cutting of the "most sacred bond" (Soll & Buterbaugh 29) is, and a comment such as the "pain will go away and you will get over it" (Soll & Buterbaugh 23) is just as irresponsible and empty as the mythical conventions about the birthmothers are. The "forgetting" of the pain from adoption loss is more often than not encouraged, but "[m]others who lose babies to adoption *never* forget and their loss is unresolvable" (Soll & Buterbaugh 85).

“Your birthmother and Korea did the same thing: they rejected you” (Yngvesson 155)—this is one of the most prevalent social and cultural dictates that misrepresents the truth. Archetypally, birthmothers are misjudged as rejecting mothers and as being abusive, violent, licentious, and/or negligent; however, the negative images of birthmothers are contested by Myung-ja’s definition of a mother—“A mother will give up her life for her child” (Chu)—and also by her maternal performance and responsibility shown to Hyo-jung. The film delineates how good a mother Myung-ja is, or how she is not unlike an ordinary mother, by featuring her caring and loving attitudes towards Hyo-jung: the mother spends much time with her daughter, takes interest in her school work as well as her extracurricular activities. For instance, a scene where Myung-ja sits next to Hyo-jung, who is practicing the melodeon/portable electric keyboard, and attends to every note the daughter plays underlines how deeply the mother loves and cares for her daughter.

Furthermore, contrary to the conventional belief, *Resilience* elucidates that it was not Myung-ja, the birthmother, but Sung-wook’s birthfather who abandoned the baby—the birthfather left Sung-wook, who had just had his first birthday, in front of Myung-ja’s parents’ house “on the cold concrete ground in the dead winter” (Chu). This brutal act by Sung-wook’s birthfather and his abrupt absence is constantly testified to by Myung-ja’s mother, whose testimony exerts the power to subvert the false image of Myung-ja as a relinquishing mother and to gird her with the truth, once again, that she is in fact a victim, not a perpetrator, of manipulation and abandonment.

Until only recently, birthmothers have not been allowed to voice their presence or to claim their loss. The patriarchal Korean society deprived them of their status as mothers, robbed them of their children, and silenced them; moreover, it urged birthmothers to “hold private their grief reactions to avoid troubling or disturbing others by bringing the reactions out into the open or expressing them in certain ways” (Corr 47). Wielding power for its own benefit, the deeply rooted patriarchal ideology of South Korea and the gender hierarchy between men and women greatly favored men, who reveled in their authority to direct and dominate female sexuality. The influence of Confucianism, which rejects non-agnate adoption, combined with a traditional adherence to bloodlines and the atmosphere of discriminating against single motherhood, consequently engendered the disenfranchised grief of birthmothers.

Dislodged from the center to peripheralized territory, birthmothers have been taken as nonbeings and relegated to the darkened lairs of muteness. The requirement of their nonexistence bred disenfranchisement—they were denied as mothers, and the denial of their status as mothers deprived them of their right to mourn the loss. They were not offered the “grieving roles” that would lay claim to social sympathy and support. Instead, society locked the birthmothers in a prison of shame, put them behind the bars of silence, and welcomed as well as supported that voicelessness.

To the bereaved, nothing but the return of the lost person can bring true comfort (Verrier 68). Reunion can, indeed, be a “vital part of the healing process” (Verrier 179) and Myung-ja

confronts and fights the societal denial of the maternal self by stepping out of the dark into the light, which is symbolized by her appearance on a national television show, where the truth about Sung-wook's pre-adoption story is aired nationwide. In public, she asserts that after his disappearance, she—as birthmother—tried to find Sung-wook but could not; all she could hear from the people around her was that her son had been sent away, and she assumed that he was living with a wealthy family in Korea; only recently did she find out he was adopted overseas.

The concealed history of adoption has to be discussed and narrated in order to reconstitute the past, through which process “what has been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon xvi). Myung-ja's aunt certifies the birthmother's testimony in confessing for herself and for Myung-ja's mother and cousin, “We didn't tell her that we sent her son away . . . . We didn't tell her what happened. She didn't know where he was sent. She had no idea” (Chu). The hidden secrets, the skeleton in the closet, or the “blind spot” in the history of Korean transnational adoption is exposed, and the disenfranchised grief of the birthmothers gains public recognition and acknowledgement.

Two years passed after Myung-ja's first reunion with her son and Sung-wook revisits his birthmother, this time with his family, his wife and two daughters. Myung-ja takes Sung-wook to her extended family and to Korean traditional markets; she clothes him in *hanbok*, the Korean traditional dress, and teaches him the Korean language. These lists of maternal performance equate with Myung-ja's desire for maternal nurturance towards her long-lost son, which is reassured through her voice, “I didn't get to see

him grow up and that breaks my heart. At least now, I want to take good care of him" (Chu). Along with her maternal behavior, her motherly overbearing side is also apparent, such as when she lavishes money on buying excessive gifts for Sung-wook and for his daughters and when she force-feeds him with *kimchi* and *japchae*, Korean noodles with vegetables. For some degrees, it can be deciphered as manipulating maternity to assert herself openly and publicly as Sung-wook's mother. However, these gestures of maternal power and dominance are nonetheless dominant since they stem from her motherly love.

*Resilience*, despite all the excitement and glamour that entails reunion, throws a skeptical light on the possibility of the long-term bondship between Myung-ja and Sung-wook. Nancy Newton Verrier conceives the birthmother-adoptee relationship as a "broken plate" – even if "the same pieces are used, there is now glue separating the two parts" and "the plate can again be broken, that separation can reoccur" (30). In Myung-ja and Sung-wook's case, on the one hand, the metaphoric glue parallels reunion between the birthmother and her lost-son after the original separation. On the other hand, the glue, in its complexity, exemplifies a language barrier, culture differences, and geographical distance, and more in their relationship – even after the birthmother and the adoptee reunite, the bonding "can again be broken, that separation can reoccur" because "there is now glue separating the two."

Verrier's "broken plate" metaphor evokes Homan's argument that the past is "irretrievable" (118), which is also implied in Myung-ja's confession that it breaks her heart that

Sung-wook is not completely her child. At the end of the film, Sung-wook returns to Korea for a short time to look for a job—his adoptive mother's dementia has been putting strain on their relationship, and he wants to live with his birthmother. Nevertheless, Myung-ja's wish of retrieving her son and living with him cannot be accomplished: suddenly, plans change and he is called back to South Dakota to care for his adoptive mother and two daughters. The last scene of Sung-wook's story is devoted to the issue of "irretrievability" of the original separation—the film portrays him in South Dakota, the place where he was adopted as a baby, he is not with his birthmother but with his adoptive mother and daughters; the film ends with Sung-wook's wish—"He hopes to return to Korea someday" (Chu)—which is employed as a metonym for his longing to retrieve his place of origin or his "original" mother.

Adoption inevitably engenders loss. And rather than denying the fact nor evading the truth, *Resilience* confronts the reality and acknowledges that the past is "irretrievable," which view is depicted in the following: when Myung-ja's aunt urges her to "live happily with Sung-wook now that you have reunited with him," the niece responds, "It would be difficult to live with Sung-wook (after all these years)," and laments that "I shouldn't say this but . . . he's not completely my child and it breaks my heart" (Chu). The birthmother senses the "glue" between the two of them; however, instead of musing on the void of the "broken plate," she reconstructs the past and moves forward to the future—the following section focuses on Myung-ja's transformed selfhood and on her empowered social mobility.

### III. Transformation and Empowerment

Charles A. Corr, who revisited and extended Doka's concept of disenfranchised grief, claims that "constructive mourning" is essential for those who are striving to live in "productive and meaningful ways in the aftermath of loss" (58). In *Resilience*, the mourning process of Myung-ja's disenfranchised grief is epitomized in the form of *gut*, the Korean shamanistic ritual, which is symbolized as the female discourse that has a power to disrupt the male discourse. Generally, the ritual fulfills the following needs: to exorcise the evil spirit, to pray that one's wish would come true, to drive away the bad luck, and/or to comfort the *han*—unrecognized resentment that signifies the unrequited as well as disenfranchised grief—of the dead/ghost. Avery F. Gordon defines the ghost as "not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure" that represents a "loss" (8). In this perspective, Gordon's ghost metaphorically refers to the identity of adoptees, the lost social figures within the Korean society, with whom their double, birthmothers, "bear the mark of a repressed national trauma" (H. Kim 132).

Birthmothers and Korean TRAs exist in a limbo wherein they do not belong to anywhere nor to anyone, which creates "in-between-ness." They possess a common frame of reference, a sense of collectivity, of adoption loss. In other words, the birthmothers and adoptees share the "collective counter-memories"—composed of "individual memories (and lack of memories) of Korea," which are "important articulations of personal and national history" (E. Kim 199). The liminality of their identity and

status in Korean society engendered rejection, discrimination and alienation and they are framed as “reminders and remainders” (E. Kim 197) of the concealed past in the history of foreign adoption and, at the same time, the remnants of the patriarchal systems that control and regulate female sexuality. In the film, the ritual accommodates the purpose of consoling the unacknowledged grief of the ghost, adoptees, and their double, birthmothers. After the scene that shows Myung-ja’s participation in the ceremony of the mourning ritual, *Resilience* focuses on the social as well as narrative mobility of the birthmother.

“To articulate the experience of becoming a non-person is already to have reconstituted some degree of personhood” (Homans 262). Through the course of “re-membering, of recollecting and reconnecting the fragments and splinters that history has torn asunder” (Sorenson 153), the mask of the rhetoric of transnational adoption, or the hidden truth behind the history of the overseas adoption, is doffed and Myung-ja discards her old self, as a marginalized, absent mother, and transforms into a new self, one that owns a voice and an empowered entity. *Resilience* offers a site where Myung-ja speaks the unspeakable tale of her adoption loss—and where her disenfranchised grief is openly acknowledged, socially validated, and publicly mourned—and it traces the process of the birthmother’s rebirth throughout the reunion process.

The reunion process is prerequisite for the reformulation of Myung-ja’s personhood and for her narrative mobility in *Resilience*. The following argument between Myung-ja and her aunt occurs when the birthmother takes Sung-wook to her aunt’s house on his

second visit to Korea. It is focused on the subject of losing Sung-wook for transnational adoption and litanies of contradiction and consensus accentuate not only Myung-ja's grief after her adoption loss but also the birthmother's enhanced identity after her reunion with her long-lost son.

Myung-ja's Aunt: We did the right thing sending him.  
Your mom, your cousin, and I took him. I cried  
so much when we sent him away.

Myung-ja: Then you shouldn't have sent him away.

Myung-ja's Aunt: Why not?

Myung-ja: Then my life wouldn't have turned out this way.

Myung-ja's Aunt: Bullshit!

Myung-ja: Shut up!

Myung-ja's Aunt: You shut up! You would have had a  
more difficult life if you'd had him with you.

Myung-ja: If I'd had him with me, I would've done better.  
I wouldn't have been so lost.

Myung-ja's Aunt: Why the hell didn't you? For his sake,  
you should've worked your ass off.

Myung-ja: I was so lost, I couldn't do anything. . . . If . . .  
if he hadn't been sent away, I'm sure I'd have  
done better.

Myung-ja's Aunt: I don't know . . .

Myung-ja: I would've only thought about him.

Myung-ja's Aunt: That would've been good. (Chu)

As the dialogue progresses, it turns into a public hearing where the audience becomes a witness, through which the issues of child

relinquishment and the disenfranchised grief of a birthmother are probed and contested. Initially, Myung-ja's aunt tried to defend her decision by saying it was "the right thing" to do and refused to recognize her niece's unresolved grief. Then, the aunt impersonates the male voice and attempts to dismiss her niece's accusation. However, Myung-ja is not intimidated by the threat; instead, she fights back and subverts her aunt's argument with her empowered voice.

This scene is vital in that it pinpoints the locus where the shattering of patriarchal norms takes place and, more importantly, it exemplifies and signals the enfranchisement of the disenfranchised grief of the birthmother. The "fragmented components of the trauma reassemble and become an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context" (Herman 177) as the dispute continues, which is, in fact, in a broader sense, the debate on the legitimacy of Korean transnational adoption. Myung-ja's articulation, which was neglected as meaningless in the past, as well as at the beginning of the discourse, is finally acknowledged and her grief is enfranchised by her aunt, one of the perpetrators who caused the pain of separation and loss between Myung-ja and Sung-wook.

Ostensibly, the acknowledgment of the perpetrator's guilt and of the birthmother's grief appears to be personal or familial apology and recognition. Nevertheless, in essence, it should be noted that the apology and recognition, in a larger sense, represent those of the Korean society; they connote and embody the latent power to subvert the principles of Korean patriarchy and its grieving rules. The disenfranchised grief of birthmothers

signifies the conspiracy of silence around Korean transnational adoption that the government has tried to hide. The scene epitomizes that Myung-ja is no longer confined within the male discourse that controls and regulates her autonomy; the dispute between the birthmother and her aunt is significant in that it dismantles the patriarchal norms and that it connotes the transformation in Myung-ja's selfhood—from a silent body to a speaking subject.

“[D]ehistoricizing the past” (Sorenson 186) or to “fight for an oppressed past is to make this past come alive as the lever for the work of the present” (Gordon 66). After the second reunion of Myung-ja and Sung-wook, the birthmother's inactive, static past as a passive victim of adoption loss is reincarnated into a dynamic, palpating living present as an empowered identity. When Myung-ja and Sung-wook unite for the second time, the birthmother promises her son—“From now on, for the rest of my life . . . as long as I live . . . I will do everything I can for you” (Chu)—and she keeps her promise by doing “everything” she can for “adoptees” like Sung-wook to “prevent others from suffering like us” (Chu), like Myung-ja and Sung-wook. And her promise does not fall to the ground but it is put into practice and reincarnated into a solidarity movement that opposes overseas adoption.

Myung-ja participates in the demonstrations by birthmothers and adoptees against Korean transnational adoption, the social justice activities carried out by empowered adoptees and birthmothers, collecting signatures to end the atrocity of severing the inseparable bond of a mother and a child. The pivotal

moment is manifested in the scene—"Please show your support for adoptees! Please sign the petition!" (Chu)—that encapsulates the amalgamation of Myung-ja's empowered voice with social mobility, where the birthmother propagates the truths about the malicious and grievous aftermath of transnational adoption to the passersby at the subway station and asks them to be a part of the movement that strives to eradicate the evil practice. The performativity transcends the frame of the social construction: the solidarity movement destabilizes the deep-embedded conventional perspectives upon transnational adoption and reflects the current social climate change regarding birthmothers and adoptees.

*Resilience* highlights Myung-ja's shift of focus from trying to recapture the lost referential past to performing self-reflexive activities in the present, such as starting a support group for birthmothers and volunteering for *Aeranwon*, the Unwed Mothers' Home—doing the laundry, feeding and caring for the newborn babies, giving advice and counseling to the unmarried mothers—so that "they don't have to send their babies away" (Chu). Birthmothers have been disregarded as lesser authoritative figures, so their needs have been rejected and their losses have been dismissed, neglected, or disregarded; Myung-ja says that she started working there to help the unwed mothers to raise their own kids so that "they don't suffer in the same way" (Chu) as she did.

Simultaneously, the film proceeds and presents the reborn Myung-ja who owns a powerful voice that castigates the exploitative system of Korean government—"Our country should provide more social welfare services. It's a harsh world for a

single mother and her child" (Chu). The birthmother is no longer fettered or repressed by the male-centered discourses; on the contrary, she transcends it with her empowered selfhood. Myung-ja, who was once dehumanized, deserted by Sung-wook's birthfather and defrauded by her own family, the one who could not own a voice, transforms into an autonomous subjectivity, an activist with social mobility; she is empowered to fight for the justice of the disempowered—the birthmothers and adoptees. Myung-ja not only gains recognition upon her loss and bereavement but she also becomes an empowered voice who strives to raise public awareness upon the negative effects of transnational adoption and to speak on behalf of birthmothers. *Resilience* ends with good news that Myung-ja has started a support group for birthmothers and with her wish—"She hopes that one day, all the separated families will reunite" (Chu)—to "write the history of the present" (Gordon 195) for the better future.

#### IV. Conclusion

"The horrors of war pale beside the loss of a child" (Soll & Buterbaugh xii): often compared to prenatal death and/or "losing an infant through death" (Askren & Bloom 395), adoption loss is "more pervasive, less socially recognized, and more profound" than other losses people expect in a lifetime (Brodzinsky et al. 9). Bereavement of child loss is taken as atrocious as to be depicted as "an emotional amputation" (Carlini 5); however, very little

attention has been paid to the grief of the birthmothers who lost their children to adoption, and they have been a relatively silent voice in the discourse of adoption. Contrary to the mythical beliefs that label them as abandoning mothers, birthmothers in Korea are, more often than not, the victims of the poor social welfare system, lingering poverty, remnants of Confucianism, and the social stigma of single motherhood. Yet, due to the new wave of documentaries and NGOs, as well as cooperation with Korean TRAs, birthmothers are discovering their voices and moving from the periphery to the forefront. By fleshing out the disenfranchised grief of a birthmother through presenting Myung-ja's story, *Resilience* raises public consciousness upon the issue of adoption loss and the hidden sorrow of birthmothers.

Birthmothers' disenfranchised grief is emblematic of the gendered hierarchy that reflects the dominant social and cultural hegemony. Likewise, silence has been the imperative that patriarchal culture imposed on women: when birthmothers lose their babies, they lose their voices. Muted by the male-centered discourse, birthmothers' narratives have been peripheralized. The uninscribed, uninscribing, and/or uninscribable story of birthmothers' loss is textualized and gains verbal inscription within the loci of *Resilience*, through which medium, the power to subvert patriarchal cultures that confine the voices of the disempowered is summoned and brought into convergence.

An important frame of reference for *Resilience* is the reevaluation of birthmothers, which lays ground for the truths about the veiled history of the Korean transnational adoption. As Judith Herman asserts, when the story is told, "the traumatic

experience truly belongs to the past" (195); by articulating her story not only to Sung-wook but also to the public, Myung-ja's bereavement of adoption loss becomes enfranchised and her past is rewritten based on the facts articulated by Myung-ja, her mother, and her aunt. The film presents the counter-history of social conventions that marginalized the grief of the birthmother. Moreover, through the process of reunion, the conspiracy of silence around adoption is exposed, and Myung-ja's traumatic memory, which is both a personal and a national history—"a different sort of knowledge, a knowledge of 'the things behind the things'" (Gordon ix)—converts into women's empowerment.

*Resilience* reveals the sites of conflict and contradiction as well as reconciliation and recovery within the multifarious issues of Korean transnational adoption. As Myung-ja's story gains narrative mobility, her personhood gains social mobility and becomes a "wellspring for social activism, a commitment to helping others overcome their adversities" (Walsh 7). She not only transforms from a passive nonbeing into an autonomous subject but also becomes an active agent who participates in the solidarity movement that challenges and strives to break the vicious cycle of transnational adoption.

*Resilience* is significant in that it has created a narrative paradigm for birthmothers' stories. Whereas the adoptees' stories are characterized as plots that involve personal or cultural dislocation, uprootedness, identity crises and origins searching, the birthmothers' stories could only be identified as the "lack of usable narrative paradigms" (Homans 276). Not only have birthmothers been the silent and peripheralized figures within the

history of adoption, they have also been silenced and marginalized within the adoption narratives. Inarguably, birthmothers have been objects, not subjects, within the adoption narratives; also, for the most part, due to the trauma caused by adoption loss, their actions and emotions dwelled in the past, which made their plots stagnant and regressive rather than progressive and goal-oriented. The fact that there is no specific narrative template to deliver their stories, blended with the reality that their grief is unacknowledged within society, has dislocated the birthmothers' plots from the center and made them doubly marginalized.

Subverting the convention of literary narrative that allows no space for birthmothers' stories, *Resilience* presents a birthmother's plot that is paradigmatic: rather than denying the past or wishing to reverse the time, and far from being passive nor moving backward, the birthmother in the film makes "an active, effortful attempt to manage what bereavement has brought into her life." As Myung-ja transforms from a victimized silent body to an active agent with a voice, the birthmother's story of victimization metamorphoses into that of women's empowerment. Not only has her life changed but she also endeavors to make changes in other people's lives with her enhanced subjectivity; as the title of the film encapsulates, *Resilience*, the "ability to rebound from crisis and overcome life challenges" (Walsh ix), creates a narrative form for birthmothers—one that does not lodge in the realm of grief but possesses a constructive power to deconstruct the past and create the future for the protagonist herself and, at the same time, for others like her—a new narrative paradigm that

exemplifies “retrieved” selfhood and autonomy of a birthmother after adoption loss, which deserves to be employed as an archetypal literary format as well as cultural narrative that epitomizes the story of a birthmother who has been “tested” and comes forth as “gold” (Job 23:10).

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**Adoption Loss and (Birth)[M]otherhood:****Disenfranchised Grief and Enfranchised Reunion in *Resilience*****Abstract****Yoo Jin Choi**

The disenfranchised grief of a birthmother is one of the most significant themes in Tammy Chu's *Resilience* (2009). Disrupting the narrative tradition, this film, unconventionally and most compellingly, centers on a birthmother, Myung-ja Noh, and endows her with narrative mobility to speak about her experience of adoption loss and the unresolved grief resulting from the bereavement. By grafting Kenneth J. Doka's concept of disenfranchised grief with adoption/trauma theory, which provides a valuable framework for analyzing *Resilience* in terms of loss and birthmother trauma, this study explores the following issues. First of all, it scrutinizes and deconstructs the commonly misconceived myths about birthmothers, which are, for the most part, generated and contextualized by patriarchal norms. Also, this article reconstructs the story of the birthmother with the truths derived from the voices of Myung-ja, her mother, and her aunt. Last but not least, this paper examines the trajectory of the birthmother's transformation from a disempowered victim to an empowered subjectivity.

**Key Words:** *Resilience*, Korean Transnational Adoption, Adoption Loss, Birthmother, Disenfranchised Grief, Reunion, Empowerment

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