

## THE TRAGEDY OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN LEE MUNYOL'S SHORT STORY "A LUCKY DAY"

Nodir Karimov

Researcher, Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies, Uzbekistan

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### Abstract

In Lee Mun-Yeol's short story "Lucky Day", the theme of personal tragedy is revealed through a new creative approach. The 1980s and 1990s in Korean literature were characterized by the rise of human spirituality and inner crisis. Lee Mun-Yeol, one of the major writers of that time, created stories that dealt with social and spiritual issues. His unique characteristic is his ability to create new and unique artistic images that reflect the psychological states of contemporary people through in-depth research.

**Keywords:** Lucky day, luck and fortune, tragedy, merchant, spiritual, clothing, car hunter, new suit, market.

### INTRODUCTION

In the story, we see that the protagonist, Pak, marks the first steps of his lucky day with his new suit. The author introduces the new outfit as a significant element to symbolize luck and fate in Pak's life. The story highlights Pak's struggles between his family, women, and work life, as well as his association with old machines and his internal fight to adapt to the changing times.

Munyeol's work aims to deeply understand the human soul and reveal an individual's personality through moments of success and failure in life. The protagonist tries to find his place in a transformed ideological system while navigating his circumstances. The themes of a new suit and luck at a wedding in the story serve as metaphors that connect personal and external struggles to real-life tragedies.

Korean literature after the 1980s sharply differs from its earlier periods. From the last quarter of the 19th century until the 1980s, literature was subjected to political and ideological pressures. However, these controls eventually disappeared, allowing literature to break free. The emergence of free speech encouraged the creation of new literary

works, and the growing need for renewal was strongly reflected in artistic literature.

In classical Korean literature, perceptions of the universe, humanity, and life itself are fundamentally different from both Western literature and modern Korean literature. As the distinguished scholar Ibrohim Haqul states, "Classical Eastern literature is, in essence, a unique form of literature born from purity, divine beauty, spiritual joy, passion, and enlightenment" [1].

During a period when critical perspectives on life intensified, the analysis of human psychology took center stage. This shift led to the emergence of new principles in the artistic exploration of reality. Such characteristics became especially pronounced in the works of Lee Munyeol, a leading figure in Korean prose of the 1980s. The writer never succumbed to fleeting trends and remained truthful in addressing one of the timeless concerns of literature—the fate of humankind. In this respect, his stories stand out within the dominant themes of 1980s-1990s Korean literature, boldly addressing moral and ethical dilemmas.

Overall, in the final decade of the 20th century, the

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plots, compositional structures, and stylistic expressions of Korean short stories reached a new level of refinement and complexity.

Several of Lee Munyol's short stories were published during a time when military rule had slightly softened, repression had somewhat receded, democratic movements were gaining momentum, and society was slowly making space for free thought. One such work is the short story "A Lucky Day". In this story, the author masterfully depicts the deeply mysterious moments in the protagonist's psyche as he grapples with pressing social issues.

Entering the literary scene after the period of military rule, Lee Munyol introduced a fresh artistic style in his storytelling. The merchant character that he introduces stands out as a new type of figure in literature of that time. As Uzbek literary scholar A. Rasulov states: "Artistic literature is important and necessary because it creates the characters of real people. Each era and national literature differ in the way they portray human beings and their perspectives on life" [2]. The protagonist in Lee Munyol's story respects his wife and suffers from guilt for failing to fulfill the promises he made to her before marriage. From the very beginning of the story, the protagonist, dressed in his new outfit, gives the impression of someone walking toward his final destination.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Korean literature saw the emergence of numerous works centered around the tragedy of lost individuals. However, only a few of them reached the level of true artistry. Among these masterpieces, Lee Munyol's "A Lucky Day" secured a worthy place. The story sincerely portrays the moral and psychological crisis of a young man who had endured both spiritual and financial hardships, begun to stabilize his life with the help of his friend Yun, whom he befriended while fulfilling his duty to his country, but ultimately lost the opportunity for success due to his own selfishness.

The final scene of the story encapsulates the protagonist Pak's inner turmoil just before his death, resonating as the story's leitmotif:

"You scoundrels, you walk around spreading evil, poisoning everything around you. A girl tastes it just once, and her whole life becomes toxic. Once she understands the taste, she soon forgets who she is, forgets her plans... the heart and the body separate... vile, filthy creatures..."

But in the dim, flickering void, only one thought echoed in his mind:

"Ah, you fool... why did it have to be on such a lucky day..." [3]

The final lines of the story are filled with sorrow and regret. On the very day that luck seemed to

favor him, the protagonist's plans and dreams were shattered, just like the last desperate cry in a song about the fleeting nature of life.

At the beginning of the story, Lee Munyol introduces the protagonist through a simple, yet pivotal moment—his stroke of luck on an ordinary workday. He marks this moment by dressing the character in a well-tailored suit, using it as a symbolic representation of the lucky day:

"Today started differently from any other, thanks to a newly tailored suit. By chance, while sitting in Yun's shop, he bought fabric smuggled from a synthetic factory on the black market. He then asked tailor Chongu to make a suit for him and paid thirty thousand won for the job. The suit turned out beautifully—its cut and color were perfect" [4].

In the story, the first sentence holds great significance. The author's artistic intent, the essence of the work, its title, and the chain of events that form the story's poetics are all embedded within the opening line:

"A literary work's first sentence may be a single word or a combination of multiple phrases. This is closely linked to the writer's artistic style, and in most works, there is a tendency to construct the first sentence in a concise manner. The boundary point of the first sentence is understood through the semantic structure of the literary work. The poetic meaning assigned to it is revealed within the fabric of the literary text" [5].

Lee Munyol begins the first sentence by introducing the protagonist's new attire, reflecting his mood. The author starts the story from a focal point that serves as a central knot in the plot. Many of Lee Munyol's short stories are structured this way, including "The Island of Ambiguity", "Cold Summer", and "A Song for Two". This approach is a characteristic feature of the writer's unique style, artistic intent, and aesthetic vision.

In "A Lucky Day" when the protagonist Pak wears his new suit, his pregnant wife, without any malice, casually remarks:

"Just like a groom" [6]

Through these few words, the writer conveys the woman's restrained emotions regarding her fate. Once, this innocent and kind-hearted village girl, who had lived and worked in a fellow villager's home, had managed to capture Pak's heart just as he returned from his military service:

"For two months, she launched a persistent attack—using the language of young men, she planted her flag on the conquered territory" [7].

The protagonist, who had metaphorically "planted his flag" on his claimed land seven years ago, had failed to fulfill even a single promise he had made before the wedding. In all those years, he had not

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even bought his wife a new dress. These two simple words encapsulate a deep sense of unfulfilled promises. The affectionate and kind woman, who was ready to give him the happiness of fatherhood, inadvertently triggered his sense of guilt, causing him to rush out of the house like an arrow.

After the wedding, the household owners, whom the girl had helped with household chores, had offered them a small room at the back of their yard to live in. However, Pak had left both the house and the job with a sack full of empty promises. Instead of asking his pregnant wife what she desired, he flaunted his new suit in front of her. His streak of luck, however, continued:

"Trying to think about good things, he reached the bus stop and boarded the bus with the correct route number. Usually, at this time, the bus would be packed, and he was worried that someone in the crowd might accidentally pull off a button from his new suit. But, surprisingly, the bus was nearly empty—one could walk from one end of it to the other with large strides. His luck did not stop there. Two or three stops later, a seat right in front of him became vacant, and there were no elderly passengers around to take it. He spent the next thirty to forty minutes peacefully seated until he reached Changanpyeon Station" [8].

At first glance, this seems like a simple, everyday occurrence—an ordinary moment taken from real life, something that could happen to anyone. However, on a deeper level, the author raises a fundamental question about the fate of an individual: Where is this journey, marked by a new suit and a desire to keep it pristine, truly leading? In Lee Munyol's story, the protagonist deals in second-hand cars. A dealer, he is someone who carefully calculates the profit he can make from each vehicle—a true hunter of old cars (emphasis ours—K.N.). The protagonist is an active participant in the events of his time (1980s) and space (Korea).

The repeated emphasis on the new suit in Lee Munyol's story is no coincidence. From the very beginning, the reader is intrigued by how the protagonist, a dealer himself, acquires his new attire—purchasing it from another dealer. His wife's reaction to the new suit is encapsulated in the phrase: "Just like a groom." The writer assigns another function to the new outfit in the workplace: "Today, his new suit hit the mark—so much so that even dealer Kwon noticed:

'Hey, Mr. Pak, are you getting married again? What's the occasion?'

The whole market buzzed with energy" [9].

The inclusion of Kwon, a dealer known for his wealth and business acumen, and his comment on

the protagonist's new suit, helps clarify Pak's position at work. At this point in the story, it becomes evident where he works and what he does. The name of his workplace closely resembles the title of the story itself: "Lucky Star." His boss, Yun, also reacts to the new suit:

"Pak, what's going on? Are you planning to replace me as director today?" [10]

Through the detail of the new suit, the author thoroughly examines the protagonist, using it effectively to reveal his character more deeply. The excerpt above makes it clear that Yun, Pak's former senior during their military service, has now become the owner of a private company and holds a higher social status. However, Pak is forced to work under him. Although Pak does not explicitly express his feelings about this, his growing resentment becomes apparent when a car he had rented for work is wrecked in an accident, and Yun refuses to help him. This unspoken frustration turns into suppressed bitterness.

The recognition of the new suit by high-status figures like Kwon and Yun, along with their teasing remarks, lifts Pak's spirits. The contrast between their external reactions and Pak's inner delight creates a sense of harmony in the text:

"Apparently, thanks to his new suit, money began to flow his way that day. Around ten in the morning, he had completed a profitable (lucky) transaction the night before, so today he headed to the 'Longing' tea café near the company with peace of mind. On his way back, he noticed a slow-moving luxury sedan. At first glance, he realized the person at the wheel was not the owner but a driver. He was about to walk past when something made him stop" [11].

The depiction of male characters in the story reflects their societal roles during that period. The writer's skill in character development is evident in how well the personalities of the car dealers are crafted. Figures like Kwon, Yun, Lee, Pak, and unnamed chauffeurs and their bosses illustrate how men were not primarily engaged in manufacturing but rather in the resale of imported cars. This theme plays a distinctive role in the story's composition.

While the female characters in *A Lucky Day* are presented as static portraits, the male characters are portrayed dynamically, through their actions and business dealings. The author's goal is not to show their external appearances but rather to explore their psychological depth:

"A portrait in literature is the verbal depiction of a character's outward appearance, including their stature, face, clothing, body language, and mannerisms" [12].

The author paints the portrait of Pak's wife as

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follows:

"She held her swollen belly with one hand, taking deep breaths while washing the dishes"

"She straightened up, frowned for a moment, but then immediately softened and comforted him with a gentle smile"

"Behind her smile, for an instant, her former, youthful face could be seen"

"She was dressed with taste, and everyone in the household, young and old, called her 'auntie'"

"She was delicate, untouched by the filth of the big city" [13]

In contrast to Pak's wife, who has retained her maidenly grace and feminine elegance for seven years, the story introduces a second female character, a girl named Yan. Both women came to the city from villages in search of work. Pak's wife had worked as a servant in a fellow villager's home, where her kindness, sincerity, and diligence earned her the respect of everyone around her. Yan, however, had no acquaintances in the city, and the author introduces her as follows:

"Yan was just one of the many girls serving customers in the district's tea cafés, but for some reason, he remembered her specifically. Unlike the other waitresses, she wasn't overly familiar with clients. She had worked in one of those cafés for five months, yet unlike other girls, she left behind no dirty gossip or rumors" [14].

However, life in the big city eventually consumed her, stripping her of her purity and pride. The literary device of contrast—a key element in literature—is used to depict the struggle between good and evil, as reflected in Yan's past and present lives. Conflict has always existed in human society, emerging in various forms throughout history. Lee Munyol encapsulates the plight of young women being drawn into the streets of immorality in the figure of Yan:

"The girl who once worked in a café had lost her former innocence. Now, she talked only about beer, and even her voice had become thinner. If he had met this girl in an ordinary setting, in an ordinary situation, he might have been cautious and instinctively walked away. But today, luck had been with him since morning. He relaxed and, deep down, he was pleased by the changes in her" [15]. The author uses Pak's so-called luck as a backdrop to reveal his inner secrets and gradually introduce the reader to the real conflict in the story. The inclusion of Yan as a supporting character serves as an essential tool for highlighting the protagonist's nature and behavior. In portraying the realities of this period, the writer emphasizes that young women did not fall into immoral paths solely due to financial hardship but also due to their own desires or the pursuit of luck—as seen

through Pak's perspective.

At the beginning of the story, Yan's image as a pure and virtuous girl evokes joy in the reader. However, as the plot develops and her transformation unfolds, it elicits feelings of disgust. Yet, the author skillfully uncovers the inner turmoil within Yan, using it to expose Pak's vile nature:

"She felt anxious for no apparent reason, as if she were running from someone, yet she clung to him with the desperate trust of someone seeking protection. But he didn't notice this. Instead, he saw it as another stroke of luck—as if fate itself had placed an unattainable creature right into his arms" [16].

Thus, the protagonist's deceit and betrayal of women are unveiled. The unjust social system robbed women of their virtue and men of their loyalty. The author also touches upon a deeper societal wound—the absence of men willing to defend and care for women, the disappearance of those who once upheld the values of love and protection.

A person's moral qualities are shaped by life's experiences. In Lee Munyol's story, the protagonist's pursuit of material gain is paralleled by his descent into moral depravity. His thoughts are consumed by the desire to hold the young, naked body of Yan, while his pregnant wife is left unnoticed. Driven by lust, he searches for beautiful objects like Yan to satisfy his desires:

"Who knows—perhaps she had reappeared today just to fulfill his cravings. After all, today was his lucky day. Suddenly, he snapped out of his thoughts. Yan seemed to have sensed something and made a move to come even closer to him" [17]. The author masterfully conveys the complexities of human psychology. This is evident in the way he portrays a simple girl from a distant village, who came to the city for survival, desperately seeking protection from a dealer who ultimately sees her only as an object of pleasure.

While reading Lee Munyol's story, the reader eagerly anticipates its ending, which ultimately concludes in a tragic manner—the protagonist's death. The story stands out due to the writer's distinctive style and craftsmanship. In particular, the dealer character he creates is exceptionally original. As literary scholar A. Rasulov states:

"Artistic literature is significant and essential because it creates the characters of real people. Each era and national literature differ in how they depict human beings and their perspectives on life" [18].

The writer's skill in character creation is especially evident in how Pak, the protagonist, carries himself like a wealthy owner while inspecting a car

for sale, dressed in his new suit:

"The car gleamed, and he stood there in his new suit—perhaps this played a role too. As soon as he stepped out of the vehicle, the shop owners in the park district began treating him with the courtesy reserved for respected business owners. Of course, he knew that this was a period when trade had slowed to a halt".

Lee Munyol encapsulates the reality of the Korean people in the 1990s through the dealer character. The author reflects on society's imperfections, illustrating the widespread belief in luck and the relentless pursuit of success. In the story, there is a strong emphasis on the fact that the events unfold within an independent nation, highlighting the new social dynamics emerging in post-military rule Korea.

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