

Portraits of Young Women in Korean Movies

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For the Stipendiatenseminar 2011 at Japanisch-Deutsche Zentrum Berlin(JDZB), a video of the lecture was made. Since the lecture was an analysis of young women characters in Korean movies, it was important to bring the original movie scenes and also include my portrait in the video, as I am a subject (a young Korean woman) of the lecture as well. The original voice was taken in Korean and it was dubbed in German by a colleague artist, Beatrice Steimer.¹

Following is the text of the video in English:

Hello, my name is Young Joo Lee. I will talk about “Portraits of young women in Korean movies.”

Cinema can be seen as another reality, a mirror of the reality. Movies are often made considering the response of the general public, thus tend to show the current trends and interests of the society. The director’s experience and interests are reflected in the movie, which affects the society to change or to define itself, which will again become sources for movies to be made. This circulation of the cause and the effect makes it interesting to analyze stereotypes of young women portrayed in the movies.

I divided this analysis into two parts, the first half is from late 1990’s to early 2000’s and the second part is from middle of 2000’s till 2010. The movies chosen for the first part are *Green Fish*, *Memento Mori*, *Ghost in Love*, *Bad Guy*, *Secret Love*, and *The Uninvited*.

In these movies, I have seen some stereotypes of women, such as the misfortunate woman, victim of patriarchal society, and women as second-class citizens. I call this recurring of stereotypes as “Misfortunate Women Syndrome.” Misfortune creates some kind of aura around the woman who is often mystical, emotionally

¹ Das Video finden Sie am Ende dieses Bandes als CD-Rom.

complicated and dangerous and becomes the object of curious eyes of men. Also a beautiful appearance of these misfortunate women makes them more attractive. However, in the movies, the misfortunes are initially caused by lack of power in the patriarchal society or mistreatment by a man in the woman's life. The man can be her brother, father, boyfriend, husband, son, teacher, or just a random guy on the street. The concept of a good daughter, wife, girlfriend and woman in general restrict women to find a positive solution for the problems they have to go through, thus leading them to self-destructive endings. Suicide, obsessive revenge, or passive, pain-stricken life are often shown in the endings.

In *Green Fish*, Mi-Ae is one of these misfortunate types. She works as a singer in a nightclub owned by a gangster group. She's the girlfriend (or rather like a property) of the boss of this gangster group. She's not happy with her lover, and she is often mistreated, but she never runs away nor does she rebel strongly against her situation. She is bitter about her life but in the epilogue, she appears as a pregnant woman with the gangster boss, looking rather like a melancholic, innocent housewife.

The second example is Hyo-Shin from *Memento Mori*. Although the main story of the movie is about homosexuality and its hardship in women's high-school, the reason of Hyo-Shin's suicide is suspected as the result of her pregnancy, caused by her relationship with the literature teacher. The high value of innocence and virginity of young women make people to assume that Hyo-Shin committed suicide because of her pregnancy although she had a much more complicated relationship and emotional attachment with Si-Eun, her platonic love.

The Uninvited is a more recently movie and was – unlike the previous two movies – directed by a woman director. Yet, it also shows a misfortunate woman, Ye-On, who had a shaman mother. In the middle of the movie she talks about the tragedy of having a shamanic ability and about the loneliness of her mother, which she identifies herself with. Ye-On's close friend who is a housewife turns hysterical because of her husband's indifference and frustration towards her restricted life as a mother of a baby. She kills her own baby and also Yeon's baby, goes to the court and kills herself as well in front of Yeon. In the end, Yeon commits suicide out of desperation to be understood.

The next example is a movie by the renowned Korean director

Park Chan-Wook *Old Boy*. The whole movie is initiated by the revenge of Lee Woo-Jin to his high school colleague, Park Dae-Soo, who witnessed the incest between Woo-Jin and his sister. Because of the rumor of the improper relationship, the sister gets imaginary pregnancy and commits suicide out of fear to be discovered by the people in the village. When she commits suicide, she says to her brother Woojin, "I don't regret at all" to comfort her brother. She, again, represents the misfortunate but innocent and self-giving woman character.

Bad Guy from Kim Ki-Duk, who also directed *The Island*, *Samaritan Girls*, and many more movies in his unique style shows his concrete view on women, which is like a twin existing in one body of the innocent and the evil. The characters of young women in his movies are often emotionally driven, hysterical, and lacking one's own power inside the structure of the society.

Other movies like *Secret Love* and *Ghost in Love* also show the tragic life of women who were deceived and mistreated by men and lead themselves to suicide or to long-term depression. The passive and the self-destructive, or a manic revenge seem to be the only way to forget or to recover from their past. Why does only the commitment of suicide give power to women to take revenge on the assailant? This is because the real world doesn't allow women to be violent or revengeful to what they have suffered. The reason why many women ghosts and revengeful spirits are much more violent and cruel is because they are finally free from the repression of reality and from the burden to be a kind, sacrificial woman.

The second part is from mid 2000's till 2010. The movies that I've selected are *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, *The Host*, *Hello, School Girl*, *200 Pound Beauty*, *Like you know it all*, *Hababa* and *Sunday Seoul*. There are new characters of women shown in these movies, although some have the traces of the previous characters of misfortunate women. Intelligent, powerful and career based, lively, fun-loving and reckless, sexy but clever, self-loving, life-loving, straightforward and courageous in pursuing love, and open in sexual relationships are the new characters that are added on top of the traditional characters.

My first example is Lee Keum-Ja in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. Although she has a tragic past caused by a man who charged her in child murder, the mood of her revenge is rather too excessive that

it is comical. The movie focuses on the closely knitted revenge of Keum-Ja and her mercilessness, thus bringing a different atmosphere compared to previous “woman in revenge” movies.

Hello, School Girl shows young women who are self confident, lively, creative, and reckless, while men are portrayed more considerate, soft and forgiving. I think women in director Hong Sang-Su’s movies are very different from other Korean movies. In *Like you know it all* and *Hababa*, women are playing an equal power in love relationships and they are realistic about life and love. Some are very strong in expressing their opinions, some are noble and caring. They are independent from men and they pursue their own interest. I think in his movies he can show more various characters of women, because he doesn’t make judgments on what is right or wrong.

I did cry a lot in *200 Pound Beauty*, because of the inescapable truth that women have to be beautiful in order to be treated as a human being. The fat and ugly Hanna gets plastic surgery on her whole body to be able to love the man she loves so much. The fact is that her talent as a singer cannot be revealed because of her appearance. After the surgery, she becomes a new singer star but realizes that she lost her true self and her father. In addition, she couldn’t win her loved man’s heart. The movie has a happy ending (her past life gets accepted to the public) but at the same time it is bitter, because it reminds me of the trendy saying in Korea, “A beautiful woman is a nice woman”, which shows an absurd connection between morality and the look of a person.

I met a Chinese woman on a trip in Germany, and when she knew that I was Korean, she said, “I envy Korean women, because they dress so well and most of them have pretty faces.” She wouldn’t have known that it is not a choice, but an obligation to be pretty to survive in Korea!

But what is actually important is, where we go from now on. Movies are not ment to provide moral standards or politically correct measures of women. However, when movies show certain stereotypes over and over again to adjust to preexisting societie’s views, viewers have to have the critical eyes to realize what the movie is trying to communicate on the screen, thus come to an alternative point of view to bring a change to the society.