

## Images of Women in Korean movies

Gina Yu

Women have always been part of the Korean cinema. However, for the most part, they were marginalized. Woman characters in black and white silent films made during the Japanese occupation were played by men, who were as pretty as women. As in Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) or John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), women could not appear on screen or stage because of gender discrimination. Then, after Lee Wol-hwa debuted as the first actress playing a woman's role in *The Vow Made below the Moon* (1923, Yoon Baek-nam), it became possible for women to appear on screen. Of course, it was possible only on the condition that women would play fictional images.

### **The Divided Image of Women in Their Cruel History**

There are two major images of women in Korean movies, mainly found in the melodrama and horror genres. One is the "good wife and wise mother" who conforms to traditional Confucianism and is locked into the ideology of chastity. The other is the wicked woman who is either a femme fatale or a seductress.

With the first kind of image, women were victims or the embodiment of endurance in the cruel history of women. As many movies of this type were screened at international film festivals in the 1980s, the im-



*Spinning the Tales of Cruelty towards Women* (Lee Doo-yong, 1983)

---



*Hanging Tree* (Jung Jin-woo, 1984)

---



*A Good Lawyer's Wife* (Im Sang-soo, 2003)

---

age of tragic and fettered women was thought to be characteristic of Korean cinema. As the title *Spinning the Tales of Cruelty towards Women* (Lee Doo-yong, 1983) indicates, this movie portrayed the folk history of merciless treatment of women in the rigidly patriarchal structures of the Chosun era before Japan colonized Korea. Similarly, women's mission to give birth to a son and their tragic fate of being an object to comfort men are illustrated in *Hanging Tree* (Jung Jin-woo, 1984) and *The Surrogate Woman* (Im Kwon-taek, 1986). The tragic lives of women sacrificed due to cruel gender discrimination in the Chosun era are typical of period films.

Chaste women who are "good wives and wise mothers" are portrayed very lyrically in *Mother and a Guest* (1961, Shin Sang-ok) with Choi Eun-hee's elegant acting. A direct descendent is *Love Me Once Again* (Jung So-young, 1968), dubbed the original Korean melodrama and the greatest hit of its time. In this movie, chaste love only on the part of women justifies men's flirtation with other women, and the unmarried mother faces all the challenges stemming from such relationships.

On the opposite side of from the "good wife and wise mother" who serves as the chaste servant of the family are women in movies like *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956) who want to liberate themselves. *Madame Freedom* is about the wife of a professor who indulges in dancing, which was all the rage with the arrival of the American-style liberal view on women. Its success made it the prototype for movies like *The Aema Woman* (Jeong In-yeob, 1982). *The Aema Woman* had three sequels and created the erotic film boom of the 1980s. She became the symbol of another image: married upper class women who seek financial independence and escape from their loveless marriages to authoritarian but sexually impotent husbands, as well as the responsibilities of motherhood. However, like Ibsen's Nora, these women are punished in the end.

Nevertheless, after the 1980s, the issue of women who flee marriage and home is portrayed more realistically in melodramas. *A Pillar of*

*Mist* (Park Chul-soo, 1986), *A Woman on the Verge* (Chung Ji-young, 1987), *Only Because You are a Woman* (Kim Yu-jin, 1990), *An Affair* (E J-yong, 1998), *Ardor* (Byun Young-joo, 2002), *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (Im Sang-soo, 2003) and *Green Chair* (Park Chul-soo, 2004) overturn the traditional image of women stuck in marriage and at home, breaking down the practice of portraying women from a patriarchal ethical perspective. In other words, the birth of the Korean Nora only happened after the 1980s.

At the same time, extremely strong and evil women were the theme of director Kim Ki-young (*The Housemaid*, *The Insect Woman*, *The Woman of Fire '82*, and *Carnivorous Animal*). This type, like the female lead in *The Housemaid* who sexually exploits men, seducing them and destroying their orderly families, is obviously the inverse of the typical image.

## **The Spectacle of the Woman's Body as an Object of Sexual Love**

During the era when the military government's censorship was harsh, women often took the lead in so-called "hostess films." Rapid industrialization and the subsequent growth of the urban entertainment industry led many lower class women into factory labor and prostitution. As film censorship was strengthened while the entertainment industry grew, hostess films such as *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (Lee Jang-ho, 1974), *Yeong-ja's Heyday* (Kim Ho-sun, 1975), *Winter Woman* (Kim Ho-sun, 1977), and *Miss O's Apartment* (Byun Jang-ho, 1978) followed. These movies portray innocent rural women who come to Seoul to make money, do menial jobs, and finally become prostitutes or voluntarily become the voyeuristic objects of men's desire. After the hostess genre, more realistic images of prostitutes appeared in 1980s movies, when more freedom of expression was allowed. In *Ticket* (Im Kwon-taek, 1986), *Prostitution* (You Jin-sun, 1988) and *Downfall* (Im Kwon-taek, 1997), prostitution was portrayed as the dark side of rapid modernization, and the depiction of the lives of women who fell into

prostitution was portrayed from a humanistic perspective. However, these films failed to depict the women's own ideas and reflections on prostitution.

In the 1990s, serious films were about the real issues facing women living in Korean society. *Only Because You are a Woman*, which is based on a true story, is about sexual discrimination against women. In the movie, a victim of sexual assault is victimized again in the patriarchal court. *Blue in You* (Lee Hyeon-seung, 1992) is similar to *A Pillar of Mist*. It deals with the superwoman syndrome, which dictates that women with professional jobs cannot have both work and marriage in Korean society. *A Hot Roof* (Lee Min-yong, 1995), a story about a beaten wife and solidarity among women, is a social satire describing the oppression of women.

### **The Changing Image of Women**

A romantic comedy, *Marriage Story* (Kim Eui-suk, 1992), opened the era of concept movies in the 1990s. This was also a time when women were increasingly entering the public sphere, and the film depicted a female character whose career is equal to that of men. Romantic comedies contributed to transforming the tragic image of women into cheerful, confident, and proactive characters who have their own jobs. Female characters with different jobs appeared, such as the lyric writer in *Doctor Bong* (Lee Kwang-hoon, 1995), the office worker in *The Man with Breasts* (Shin Seung-soo, 1993), and the film producer in *How to Top My Wife* (Kang Woo-Suk, 1994). However, the fact that all women with professional jobs ultimately focus on marriage in these films shows the limitations of the genre and character type. Among them, *Art Museum by the Zoo* (Lee Jeong-hyang, 1998) is most remarkable in terms of a realistic depiction of a female character and perspective.

Movies on female characters who live more independent lives and the specific realities of women's lives appear from the late 1990s. *Girls' Night Out* (Im Sang-soo) and *An Affair* (E J-yong) in 1998 dealt with



*Downfall* (Im Kwon-taek, 1997)

---



*Blue in You* (Lee Hyeon-seung, 1992)

---



*Mayonnaise* (Yun In-ho, 1999)

---

women's sexuality free from the obsession about chastity. In *Ardor* and *A Good Lawyer's Wife*, there is no longer an obsession with the idea that women who have left their families should be punished and returned. Instead, these movies portray female characters with independent lives. *Happy End* (Jung Ji-woo, 1999) portrays a married woman with a professional job and financial power, showing changes in Korean society and the possibility of changes in gender roles.

After *Mayonnaise* (Yun In-ho, 1999), which breaks down the traditional motherhood myth of endurance and sacrifice, movies appeared that raised issues about motherhood mythology and established women's image as strong subjects in horror movies. Vibrant and popular horror movies like the *Whispering Corridors* series (1998~2005) uphold the horror image of women but also portray teenagers' lives realistically. *A Tale of Two Sisters* (Kim Jee-woon, 2003) and *The Uninvited* (Lee Sooyeon, 2003) also represent complex and realistic women.

The Korean movie renaissance that started from the late 1990s places a strong emphasis on brotherly love. In Korean blockbuster movies like *Swiri* (Kang Je-kyu, 1999), *Joint Security Area / JSA* (Park Chan-wook, 2000), *Friend* (Kwak Kyung-taek, 2001), *Silmido* (Kang Woo-suk, 2003), *Tae-guk-gi* (Kang Je-Kyu, 2004), women play only minor roles. In art movies by directors who represent Korean cinema in international film festivals like Hong Sangsoo's *Virgin Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (2000), *Woman is the Future of Man* (2004), and *A Tale of Cinema* (2005), or Kim Ki-duk's *Bad Guy* (2002) and *3-Iron* (2004), women are also weak or victims, showing women simply as objects of fantasy and exposing the desires of the men behind the camera and the story in these movies. Perhaps women's traditional roles as victims of the patriarchal order and comfort objects for men are too powerful to fully accommodate women as strong subjects.

In today's golden era of Korean cinema, female characters and their lives are still on the periphery in terms of both quantity and quality. In that regard, realistic depiction of women's lives in Korean movies de-

pendes upon constructing images more grounded in the specificity of women's existence.