

# GENDER MATTERS?: THE EVOLUTION OF GENDERED VOICES IN THE CINEMA OF COLONIAL AND POSTWAR KOREA (1936–1961)

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The following chapter examines Korean film narratives of romance starting from the late colonial era until the Second Republic of Korea (1960–1961). The altered attributes of Korean womanhood under the control of men stress a shift in the voice of females, emphasizing their hardship and temporary victories in tandem with the crisis of competitive male counterparts. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the cinematic representation of gender roles in Korean film towards the end of the colonial rule and at the dawn of the newly founded Republic of Korea. Transformations in the aesthetic and formal depictions of feminism, coupled with the desperate effort of Korean women to rid themselves of social conventions, are strikingly encompassed. The goal is not merely to highlight the impossibility of Korean women's independence during these significant historical periods but also to address its roots in constant rebellion against the male-dominated social space.

**Keywords:** cinematic gender representation, colonial cinema, early South Korean melodrama, gender disparities, widowhood narratives

## 1. Introduction

This chapter investigates practices of male-female relations, focusing on womanhood in Korean cinema from the late years of the annexation of Korea by the Empire of Japan (1910–1945) through post-Liberation until the Second Republic of Korea (1960–1961). Colonial films, such as *Tuition* (*Suŏmnyo*, Pang Han-chun, Ch'oe In-gyu, 1940) or *Sweet Dream* a.k.a. *Lullaby of Death* (*Mimong/Chugŭm ūi chajangga*, Yamazaki Fujie and Yang Chu-nam, 1936), depict the gendered binary oppositions whereas the postcolonial stage shows women's desire to be free of these societal norms, with considerable limitations. Followed by the Liberation, the conversion of the

differing gender-specific approach was set in the spotlight through the rising tendency of female-centered representation in coinciding with the fall of male exhibition. The achievement of individual freedom in the characterization of women in the golden age of South Korean (hereafter, Korean) cinema (1955–1972) was temporary, as exemplified in the restrictive conclusions of these narratives that answer to rigid moral codes.

We can observe the clash between the Korean gender terminology of “wise mother, good wife” (*hyŏnmo yangch’ŏ*),<sup>1</sup> which was reinvigorated during colonial times, and the female ambition for progressivism and modernity, blended with Westernized influences, which occurred in the post-Liberation era. The conflict of public and private spaces has been part of the double burden of the Korean working mother for centuries (if not millennia). In the postwar years, Korean women craved to break their chains; they longed for equal (or at least, better) social treatment from their husbands and sons. The apparent indulgent lifestyle in works such as *Madame Freedom* (*Chayu puin*, Han Hyŏng-mo, 1956), *The Flower in Hell* (*Chiokhwa*, Shin Sang-ok, 1958) and *Three O’clock P.M. on a Rainy Day* (*Pionŭn nal ūi ohu 3shi*, Pak Chong-ho, 1959) confirms the cry for revival of the initial “national psyche and pride” (Jeong 2010, 2). At the same time, all end in tragedy, marking the unpreparedness of feminist ambitions in stringent Korean society. Films like *A College Woman’s Confession* (*Ŏnŭ yŏdaesaeng ūi kobaek*, Shin Sang-ok, 1958) and especially *The Female Boss* (*Yŏsajang*, Han Hyŏng-mo, 1959) along with *A Woman Judge* (*Yŏp’ansa*, Hong Ŭn-wŏn, 1962) investigate women who outperform their male partners engendering jealousy and animosity. Yet, most of these works (the ones not directed by women) also conclude with the capitulation of the strong female image by the acquiescence of male domination. The most vulnerable visual portrayals are addressed to widows. The heroines of *The Widow* (*Mimangin*, Pak Nam-ok, 1955), *A Hometown in the Heart* (*Maŭm ūi kohyang*, Yun Yong-gyu, 1949), *Tongshimch’o* (Shin Sang-ok, 1959) and *The Mother and a Guest* a.k.a. *The Houseguest and My Mother* (*Sarangbang sonnimgwa ōmŏni*, Shin Sang-ok, 1961) are not only the victims of peculiar male maltreatment but are also forced to endure the demeaning male gaze of the toxic mindset as a test of objectification.

The aim of the chapter is to demonstrate how the female presence changed in the Korean film trajectory from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s through the investigation of how heroines aspired to break away from Korean social canons, yearning for emancipation. We will also acknowledge that these determined battles in patriarchal society emerged too early to be possible; gender freedom was only temporarily attained before being completely rejected. In addition, under the pressure of societal rules, women renounced the opportunity to follow their own happiness.

<sup>1</sup> Meiji’s Japan gender notion is *ryōsai kenbo* (良妻賢母), which was transferred to Korea and China – where it was usually “good wife, wise mother” (賢母良妻 *xianmu liangqi*), sometimes also “wise wife, good mother” (賢妻良母 *xianqi liangmu*) – in the previous century (Choi 2020, 40).

## 2. Korean women in the hands of foreign colonizers and their male compatriots

Through the new trend of "civilization and enlightenment" (文明開化 *munmyōng kaehwa*)<sup>2</sup>, emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, new womanhood was conceived on the Korean Peninsula and conveyed by Westerners and Christian missionaries (Choi 2009, 31). The buffer zone of Confucian morals in accordance with Chosŏn codes, and Western-influenced modernism was an intellectual reaction to the expansion endeavors of Japan and the West. Although the prominent diplomat and enthusiastic enlightenment reformer, Pak Yōng-hyo, laid the basics of equal rights and gender ethics for the nation in his work, *Memorial on Domestic and Political Reforms* (1888) – via a mixture of Western elements and reformed Confucian practices – gender equal treatment of the social status between different sexes remained symbolic cliché by the mid-1920s (Choi 2009, 31, 44). Practical adjustments of this early new womanhood did not attempt to guarantee egalitarianism for every female. Instead, they used women as a nation-building process, "assisting male citizens as educated wives and mothers" (Choi 2009, 44). Both Korean nationalists and Christian promoters found their own interpretations of new womanhood.

The 1920s and 1930s delivered historical chances for Korean feminism. New socio-economic tendencies of urbanization, the colonial suppression of Imperial Japan, and the emerging jingoistic voices both from leftist (communists) and rightist (conservative nationalists) thinkers after the March 1 Movement (1919) triggered several changes. The reading of altering gender roles gained new ground in the shape of "New Woman" (*sin yōsŏng*), an emblem of the first female movement in modern Korean history (Choi 2009, 146). The progressive term did not simply imply the urbanized, enlightened modern girl who reads Western literature, goes to the cinema, follows Western fashion, and enjoys bars and cafes, like her male counterparts, but the phrase also had a rebellious tone against the outdated Confucian gender rules, "rejecting the sacred nature of motherhood" (Choi 2009, 147). It was also an idealized, and thereby, not real, image for most of the Korean women, very similar to Sato's description of the "modern girl" (*moga*) in interwar Japan (Sato 2003, 49). Although it was a "symbolic power," it increased the social unease and frustration among male intellectuals (Choi 2009, 146). As Jeong adds, the crisis of gender, brought about by the "nation's loss of sovereignty," is most easily discerned by the "New Woman's fall from grace" and "the colonial male intellectuals' experiences of emasculation and self-alienation" (Jeong 2010, 2).

<sup>2</sup> The terminology emanates from the Japanese political slogan with the same meaning, *bunmei-kaika*, signaling a shift from feudal social codes under the Meiji restoration period (1868–1912) through Westernization.

Due to the clash of Confucian precepts and Chosŏn regulations with this new gender identity, the liberal modern city girl, overshadowing the progressive image of "New Woman," challenged the ideal imagery of "wise mother, good wife" (Yoo 2008, 81). Yoo further comments, this transformation comes about by lessening the traditional family concept of "filiality" (more properly, filial piety *hyodo*) and subtending the importance of efficiency (*hyoyul*) in woman's domestic space, arriving at the term of wise, prudent, and professional housewife (*hyŏnmyŏng chŏnŏp chubu*) (Yoo 2008, 85). The Confucian gender ethics rigidly set of the socially accepted female presence, including *Thrice Following or Three Feminine Obediences* (三從之道 *samjongjido*) and the *Doctrine of Separate Spheres* (內外法 *naewoebŏp*) (Kim 2019, 384).<sup>3</sup> The model of *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* encompasses not only the maternal duties and ethics prescribed for women, such as loyalty and obedience to the husband, chastity, no premarital sexual acts, housework, and childbearing, but also the female subordinated state that is determined in the heavily hierarchical and male-ruled social structure. The Japanese occupation had a double effect on the already inauspicious female position. On the one hand, during the colonial era, Korean women were under constant dual pressure both by the Japanese colonizers (*hwanhyang nyŏ*, i.e., "comfort women" or "homecoming women") and Korean men. "Double colonization" refers to the concept that colonized women were colonized twice, first by the foreign colonizers, then by men of the same race (Shene 2019, 1). As Choi states, "colonized men and the colonizers unite against the colonized women" (Choi 1998, 14). I will investigate here this double burden shouldered by the colonized Korean women through the lenses of two films shot during the colonial period.

*Sweet Dream*, was made in the early sound era of Korean film history. The heroine Aesun, portrayed by the future North Korean film icon, Mun Ye-bong (1917–1999), does not conform to the politically correct female epitome of the period. Aesun is the selfish wife of a middle-class man (Yi Kŭm-nyong) who is struggling financially. She does not look after her young daughter, Chŏnghŭi (Yu Sŏn-ok) and is unfaithful to her husband. Her conceit and vanity are obvious from her first appearance in front of a mirror applying make-up, limning the female-male "moral corruption" by "their alienation from each other" (Workman 2014, 160). This is made more apparent by the first image of the film of the family's bird in a cage, a metaphor for Aesun's social cage and the heroine per se. Refusing to act like a good mother (Workman 2014, 163), her arrogance and carelessness are reflections of the woman's inner turmoil and imbalance, caused not only by the social pressure of the male

<sup>3</sup> The first refers to the woman's liability to unconditionally obey her father (before marriage), her husband (after marriage), and her son (after becoming widow). *Naewoebŏp*, briefly, fixed the spatial gender realms and duties by locating the men (*woe*) in outer (public) spaces, whereas the women (*nae*) in inner (private) spaces, furtherly confining inter-gender contacts in support of the male-oriented social format (Han 2004, 115; Kim 2019, 387).

dominion, but also the domestic identity crisis of her country-less home (Korea under Japanese rule). Nevertheless, Aesun's rebellion and objection to Chosŏn gender practices remain a solely wished and unrealistic portrayal of a sovereign womanhood. Nationalism for a liberated Korea brought about the emasculation of Korean males, and as compensation, they suppressed their wives even more. Aesun chooses an unusual form of social dissent against her gender code, to which the colonial times induced additional constraint and violence. Aesun is sent away from home by her husband as she has abandoned her family (top image, Figure 1). She moves to a hotel where she lives with her lover, Ch'anggŏn (Kim In-gyu), who has a pencil mustache, an iconic villain trait (middle image, Figure 1).

The instinctive reception of Aesun, the "lady of leisure" (Yecies 2019, 67), is female defiance against her inner cry against domestic male power, embodied in her husband, and the colonial rule of foreign male suppressors. During a quarrel with her husband, Aesun protests, "But I am not a caged bird, you know? [...] Are you saying that I am [as a woman] not even a human?" Her husband's degrading response denotes Aesun's social position, "You are a housewife but you know nothing about housekeeping." Initially, Aesun has intrinsic disbelief and distrust in men, "But a man's heart cannot be trusted." Her disenchantment with men is additionally enhanced by the recognition of the real identity of her lover. The man seduces the girl by pretending to be a wealthy entrepreneur, but we eventually learn he is a simple thief and swindler. Aesun breaks the Chosŏn-based *naewoebŏp* by being unfaithful and leaving the family. Her sexual fantasy is brought to life in the theater scene when Aesun admires a male dancer. The sight of his muscular body impresses the female protagonist who sends flowers to the dancer after the performance. She eventually leaves her lover to join the famous dancer. Her dissolute and lecherous temperament reminds us of Aesun's tormented state of mind, abandonment and pursuit of happiness in the trap of illusions controlled by men. The emotional climax appears in the scene when Aesun takes a taxi to meet the dancer. She urges the driver to go faster when the car suddenly hits her daughter, Chŏnghŭi. The accident awakens her maternal instinct. Both mother and daughter are injured and taken to the hospital. The bitter recognition comes with the self-admission that her irresponsible demeanor led to the risks to Chŏnghŭi's life. The mother is unable to face her actions and her conscience; the only solution she can find is suicide. Aesun is the epitome of the eternally fleeing woman, a human metaphor for a chased animal (bottom image, Figure 1). The flight must end as there is no escape from this strict system, at least for a woman. On the hospital bed, only the futile sobbing of Chŏnghŭi can be heard for the deceased Aesun, "Mother, mother [...]." The tragic end does not come with social resolution, leaving open the question of the husband's responsibility in the series of family tragedies, reading the film as "a critique of patriarchy" (Workman 2014, 162).



Figure 1: Fallen and enmeshed: the ignored wife and her cheater lover, bringing about the woman's tragic end;

Aesun (Mun Ye-bong) is positioned in the punitive gaze of her husband (Yi Küm-nyong) (top), the ignorance of her lover, Ch'anggön (Kim In-gyu) (middle), leading to her fatal end (bottom)

(Source: *The Korean Film Archive KOFA*)

Ch'oe In-gyu and Pang Han-chun's recently discovered classic (unexpectedly found in the China Film Archive in 2013), *Tuition*, is based on an 11-year-old student's, Wu Su-yǒng, memoirs from Pukjǒng Elementary School in Gwangju, set in the Suwon Maehyang Shimsang Elementary School Practicum. The boy protagonist, Wu Yǒng-tal (Chǒng Ch'an-cho) is a rival of the girl lead figure, An Chǒnghŭi (Kim Chong-il), whose ambition is to be the top student in the class. Yǒng-tal lives with his grandmother (Pok Hye-suk) while his parents sell brass spoons in a different city. He anxiously awaits his father's letter that they will return. Yǒng-tal is poor and cannot pay the school tuition for more than three months. The intelligence, adroitness, and beauty of the indigent Chǒnghŭi catch the boy's attention. The two children are first connected in the set where they catch minnows; they cooperate on a common mission and could ignore their mutual struggle, being able to work together as a team, and become allies. Concurrently, director Ch'oe's work cannot shirk the political message that Korea belonged to the Japanese Empire. In connection with the fact that it is about the education system where the Japanese are superior to the Koreans, exhibiting the "policies of imperial subjectification (*kōminka*)" (Workman 2014, 153, 155), the film also depicts the archetypal female-male correlations of the age.

The binary female-male framework is sketched in its customary forms. The girls and boys are separated (not segregated), they play only in separate gender groups. The school behavior follows the social expectations of what is expected from boys and what is tolerated from girls. At the beginning, Chǒnghŭi's effort to be the top student of the class does not simply frustrate Yǒng-tal because of Chǒnghŭi's ability but simply because a girl is so skilled ("But she is a girl."), threatening his masculinity. There is another scene, where the girl kicks the ball making the boys angry as they think they are the only ones with such a privilege. In the science class scene, Chǒnghŭi raises her hand and is ignored by the teacher just because she is a girl. The prototypical male-female rivalry is only broken by the unusual friendship and mutual sympathy between the two heroes. From then on, they commiserate over their mutual poverty and gender differences are gradually abandoned.

In *Spring in the Korean Peninsula* (*Pando ŭi pom; Hantō no haru*, Yi Pyǒng-il, 1941), "a transcolonial *mise en abyme*" (Kwon 2019, 81), one observes a feud between two women for the love of the male protagonist, the producer Yi Yǒng-il (Kim Il-hae). Kim Chǒnghŭi (Kim So-yǒng), "a young ingénue from the countryside" (Kwon 2019, 89), represents Korean pure values combined with modernized *hanbok* and a Westernized skirt. While the transformation of her appearance is visible, wavering between the stylish Seoul-girl and the modesty of the traditional Korean beauty, she remains in the shadow of objectification by the male gaze. She is a soft heroine who symbolizes chastity by lowering her head and passively listening to

what men say. Anna (Paek Ran) has, in contrast, ostentatious and active female traits, using a Western name, wearing Western dresses and quarreling with men. It becomes clear which woman model is more socially acceptable. Anna, with her masculine and intense attitude, arouses resentment from the men, imperiling their supremacy. Chŏnghŭi is the embodiment of the perfect wife with her humility and timidity. Female independence and extravagance were only appreciated from dancers and mistresses in night bars but not at home. The social esteem and recognition of the women stemmed from their physical attractiveness and young age, whereas the men were appreciated for their social prestige and financial resources. The two women could also not be more physically distinct. While Anna is virile and chubby, Chŏnghŭi is thin and delicate. As a result, Chŏnghŭi is the only one who can emerge victorious from this love triangle with the producer.

The work promotes female immaculacy in a confused time when Korean girls and women could be subjected to sexual slavery for Japanese soldiers and were also suppressed by Korean men. The women are only seen in supporting roles in the film while the main protagonists are men. There is, however, a plain distinction between physically weak Korean men and healthy Japanese men because the film, additionally, delineates the Korean male crisis under the Japanese aggression. The sickly body of Yŏng-il is testimony to Japanese colonizers' victory over colonized Korean men in the form of the suppressors' physical vitality. The film, therefore, proclaims the true face of colonial ideologies of "making into imperial subjects" (*kōminka*; *hwangminhwa*) and "Japan-Korea One-Body" (*naisen ittai*; *naesŏn ilch'e*) where mutual "cooperation" was only a political slogan. But was in fact "veiling the real violence of inequalities underlying imperial wartime mobilizations" (Kwon 2019, 85) to legitimize for utilizing Koreans as colonial subjects on their own national terrain. The film's resolution explicitly promotes the supportive imperial intervention and modernized film infrastructure to overcome the financial obstacles and build a collective national cinema of the peninsula (including colonizers and colonized ones), being capable of telling their traditional folk tales, in the embodiment of Ch'unhyang-film adaptation, framed in *mise en abyme* [film-within-a-film trope].

During colonial years, the gender roles tracked the decoded biased traditional male-female separation, classifying the women (girls) as the suppressed ones. And, whenever, the male felt threatened by his female rival, he attacked and blamed her. Female portrayals failed in being autonomous and equal to male counterparts apart from the example of *Tuition* where the main protagonists have common purpose and we see a chance for consensus where the ancient rivalry fades. The impartial presentation of male and female attributes in *Tuition* was also achievable as both characters are children, and therefore, they do not create a rift in the sacred male-female asymmetry of the adult space. The tragic fate of Aesun in *Sweet*

*Dream* also demands the heroine suffer the consequences of her irresponsible manner, her daughter's accident and the continual disappointments in men, that is, her life as her husband's caged bird and being betrayed by her lover who lies to her. Aesun's tragic destiny was triggered by male-governed society. The film is a commentary on the period's Korean woman who cannot escape male control. She is defenseless, both from the men and the law. In her late desperation, Aesun can only self-destruct, taking her own life and leaving her child abandoned and traumatized. Her final act and the film per se are a wail for pain for the period's subordinated social rank for women. Chŏnghŭi's figure in *Spring in the Korean Peninsula* is in complete contrast to Aesun. Chŏnghŭi could never dream of criticizing manhood. From the beginning, she accepts male dominance and completely surrenders to male rule, a symbol of Japanese control over Koreans. The film openly expresses politically-motivated imperial aesthetics for "the total war system" (Workman 2014, 157), along with the Korean *kōminka*-Japanese colonizer correlation.

### **3. Oppressed wives, liberated dancers and dismal concubines subject to male identity crisis**

The following films illustrate that despite progressive alterations in Korean female social positions, transformations took place slowly on the Korean Peninsula, and they were not able to achieve gender egalitarianism. The Republic of Korea (ROK) experienced drastic social, economic, political and cultural shifts after the Korean War at a "dizzying pace" (Abelmann and McHugh 2005, 5). The changes brought about both modernization, on the one hand, and threatened Korean values blended with foreign suppression and cultural hegemony, on the other. The perception of the traditional Korean family model began to fade, leading to the progress of women roles that distressed the male status. When Western ideas met Korean practices, the traditional East Asian social codes began to vanish and distort.

Prostitutes of American soldiers, sexual affairs, complicated relationships of married couples, love triangles, divorces, re-marriages, chasing hedonism (following the patterns of the American model and Western "decadence") appeared to dominate Korean film narratives caused by the permanent military presence of the United States in Korea. Foreigners never left after the Liberation, but only exchanged Japanese with American. The Western socio-political impact conveyed increasing feminist voices including representations of powerful business women or female defiance and disobedience. Cinemagoers were surprised to observe young women who smoke and drink whiskey, wear Western clothes, listen to jazz in nightclubs, and enjoy their free time just like their male colleagues, friends, or even their husbands. The rise of the public woman (a woman whose social space

was relocated to emblematic places of nightlife) became the antithesis of *hyŏnmo yangch'ŏ* whose public and private spaces were mostly in the kitchen and the house (and, in some cases, at the work place). The image of the Westernized “free” woman induced the fall of the Korean ideal, a male holding the exclusive right to exercise power as the head of the nuclear family in a strict hierarchical structure. Within the constant teasing of social taboos about the female-male correlations and the societal rise of urban feminism (conflicting the basic Confucian gender restrictions, including three following codes [*samjongjido*], the four feminine virtues [*sadŏk*, see later], and the rules on gender spaces [*naewoebŏp*]), the Modern Woman demanded fair treatment, provoking Korean manhood.

In Korean melodramas, enclosing Western social customs, the gender division (male vis-à-vis female) is interwoven with class division (low class–high class) and national division (North–South). Korean realist cinema during the 1950s and 1960s was influenced by Italian neo-realism (using archival, documentarist footage, images of devastation caused by war, and hopelessness of the characters and the nation). Hollywood narratives (film noirs, romance, historical epics, horrors, later Westerns, but especially melodramas) were additional important factors shaping the postwar Korean film trajectory. Among the popular genres, melodrama prevailed on the Korean silver screen of the era, the significant traits of which are exaggerated interpersonal conflicts (a focus on human relationships, centered around the family or male-female extramarital affairs), stereotypical characters (detailed characterization is less important), and sensationalized plots along with highly emotional tones. Considering the historical context, Korean postwar melodramas, “the most efficacious mode of realism” (Abelmann and McHugh 2005, 4), are unique. Without comprehension of the national context, a complete understanding of melodramatic narratives, “with its plot reversals, cataclysmic coincidences, and seismic narrative compassions” (Abelmann and McHugh 2005, 4), would be impossible. The dramatization of personal interactions in the individual and public spaces is illustrated through the whole nation’s pursuit of its lost identity after the long-term trauma of colonialism, but it also received a bitter legacy by the American presence and cultural dominance in the postcolonial era.

Among other works, *Madame Freedom* along with *The Tale of Ch’unhyang* (*Ch’unhyang chŏn*, Yi Kyu-hwan, 1955) flagged the launch of the golden age of Korean cinema, particularly introducing melodramas. While Yi’s work tells the classic love story of Sŏng Ch’unhyang and Yi Mongryong, *Madame Freedom* shocked audiences with its delineations of the freedom of love in accordance with its unorthodox extramarital affairs, creating a new form of entertainment in the postwar Seoul, while delivering critical notes on the post-Korean War identity confusion and the political-economic crisis. These works conveying daring

visual narrations were shot only two-three years after the *Armistice Agreement* of 1953. *Madame Freedom* is based on Chŏng Pi-sŏk's novel (1954) under the same title. The two different worlds of modernity and tradition cannot function simultaneously, hence, their confrontation is inevitable. As the title references, the film aims to depict the heroine's private and public positions, together with her family burden and individual desires. "Madame" refers to the Americanized Korean society, which first seduces and astonishes the protagonist, while "Freedom" hints at her commitment to gender equality through reaching her independence, but can only fail. "Freedom" (*chayu*) is therefore an intentional irony that ridicules altering Korean postwar urban dwellers just to chase Western trends in the form of pseudo freedom. The narratives follow the fading of "pure" East Asian gender codes of chastity and socio-familial responsibility. The apparent modernity and the glimmering images about Seoul's busy cultural and social nightlife, including lively cafés and restaurants, crowded parks, flashing boutiques with neon lights, and nightclubs with mambo music (standing in stark contrast to plain rural life) hide deep-rooted conflicts in all characters' societal routines. The work authentically features femininity according to its age in defenseless and exposed vulnerability. The film cannot therefore provide real resolution but stops open ended.

*Madame Freedom* opens with images of lively Seoul nightlife, strongly differing from the following setting of a quiet neighborhood in Seoul with a traditional Korean house, where we can see a Korean housewife obediently ironing, serving her Confucian domestic skills (*pugong*). The film is about a professor, Chang T'ae-yŏn (Pak Am), and his wife, O Sŏn-yŏng (Kim Chŏng-nim) who are living with their son, Kyŏng-su (Pang Su-man). The couple's relationship is cold and there is little to no hint of intimacy. Emotional conflicts erupt from multiple sides. O Sŏn-yŏng is surrounded by several men: the neighbor and the supervisor's husband. The professor feels, in contrast, emotionally attracted to a female student, and while he follows Confucian norms and opposes modern influence, he also violates the spousal duty of loyalty. The gender hierarchy does not change much when it comes to the final decision to end the relationship. As in the case of *Sweet Dream*, the husband is again the one to banish his wife, despite his own immoral actions. Also similar to *Sweet Dream*, Sŏn-yŏng rebels against the gender division and fights for equal opportunities both with her attractions for men<sup>4</sup> and the aspiration to be a financial equal to her husband.<sup>5</sup> We see once again that women

<sup>4</sup> In addition, McHugh notes that there is a very unusual female-to-female gaze in forms of glances, winks and staring at other female bodies or eyes, especially in the mambo performer scene. The depiction of "the homosociality of traditional Korean culture" (McHugh 2005, 36) is a daring unorthodox way to demonstrate Korean femininity.

<sup>5</sup> The linkage between economic self-sustainability and the disguised independence of wo-

are still the playthings of men as we find the dance teacher Madame O attracted to was just toying with her emotions. The man even admonishes her for accepting his advances, "You do not have the right to accept it [my appeal]. [...] You have a husband, which only means that you took advantage of me," this being a typical example of victim blaming.

Different female portrayals of *Madame Freedom* denote a distinct social class and familial status demonstrating fragmented Korean society, which began to depart from the traditional image of the Korean nuclear family. The main difference between *Sweet Dream* and *Madame Freedom* is that while primarily the female protagonist violates spousal ethics in the former work, Sŏn-yŏng and her husband *en masse* ignore traditional chastity morality, and still, only the female is punished. All the major female characters attempt to represent their social independence from their male partners and collective counterparts by neglecting their family responsibilities and marital fidelity but focusing on their personal wishes. The realistic narrative attacks women longing for egalitarianism. The married woman has limited room for maneuvering socially, as the professor reminds Madame O, "Driven by vanity, you abandoned your family. You gladly exchanged your duties as a mother." The open ending does not suggest an auspicious future for woman's autonomy, reaffirming the deep-seated gender inequality by informing the audience that what is socially accepted and tolerated for a man, is not the same for a woman. In the "patriarchal conclusion" (Klein 2019, 122), Professor Chang pushes his wife and stares her down with a domineering male gaze (top image, Figure 2). The kneeling female-standing male composition is another reminder of that a woman cannot win in a gender game with a predetermined conclusion. The wife embraces her son on a snowy evening, subordinated under the strict eyes of her husband (bottom image, Figure 2), showcasing his male supremacy (*namsŏn uwŏlchu ŭi*) and guiding Sŏn-yŏng back to the long-established man-controlled way. The film masterfully underlines the parities of separate-together, freedom-restraint, modernity-conventions, Korean customs-foreign influences and masculinity-femininity.

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manhood appears in a conversation between Mrs. O and her friend, "The important thing is money. Nothing is impossible with money. Especially, for us, women. We need to be economically independent, to avoid the tyranny of our husbands. What is the use of husbands? [...] In order to enjoy life, we must make money."



Figure 2: The dominating triumph of the man over the woman;  
The triangle of the husband-professor, Chang T'ae-yŏn (Pak Am), the wife, Madame  
Freedom (Kim Chŏng-nim), and their son, Kyŏng-su (Pang Su-man)  
(Source: *The Korean Film Archive KOFA*)

*Three O'clock P.M. on a Rainy Day* depicts a love triangle in the war years, where two men compete for An Su-mi (Kim Ji-mi). The title's rainy day foreshadows the film's melancholic mood and tragic content. The film does not follow the neo-realist-fashioned darkness and poverty. It is a pro-war and pro-American work celebrating social interactions at the time where the middle class goes to bars, drinks whiskey, listens to jazz, attends birthday parties with cake (no sign of a food shortage), or even travels abroad by plane. These social factors were irrational at that time and remained unreachable desires for the majority. The melodramatic romance, the exposition of patriotism, the gloomy closure, and the Western way of entertainment exhibit the influence of Hollywood war melodramas shot during the Second World War. The dimension of the film is in sharp contrast to most of the postwar Korean melodramas that are often grounded in reality. While holding its unusual bitterness, *Three O'clock P.M. on a Rainy Day* escorts the moviegoers to a world where they forget the horrors of war and postwar deprivation for at least two hours. By the end, Su-mi chooses not to go with the Korean-American military cleric Henry Jang (Yi Min) to the United States but is willing to stay with her fiancé, In-gyu (Ch'oe Mu-ryong), who is presumed to die in the war, however, he re-appears after the wedding of Su-mi and Henry. Following Su-mi's decision to return to her first love, she laments, "A person cannot avoid one's own fate. I have decided to be the wife of an unfortunate man in this country." By not prioritizing her completeness and choosing to be loyal to her fiancé, Su-mi follows social conventions. There is a more tragic end in this story; Su-mi dies due to a heart disease, or metaphorically, dies of a broken heart. She could say goodbye to In-gyu before passing on, declaring that she kept her chastity instead of satisfying her bliss. The film is about the moral hesitation of a woman pulled in two directions by her lovers, leading to Su-mi's tragic end.

*The Flower in Hell* plants neo-realist seeds by inviting cinemagoers to the shattered reality of Korean postwar conditions, unlike *Three O'clock P.M. on a Rainy Day*. Shin Sang-ok's picture is an authentic social narration of these chaotic times filled with murder, smuggling, personal and social conflicts in the U.S.-controlled country. Most of all, we see the honesty of the vulnerable condition of Sonya, played by Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi. Director Shin was one of the first Korean filmmakers to delineate raw realism by depicting blood, death, close-ups on corpses, and realistic action scenes. The documentarist camera movements, the on-location shooting with real guns, the portray of devastated postwar Korea are reminiscent of the milieu of *Aimless Bullet* (*Obaltan*, Yu Hyŏn-mok, 1961) shot three years later, which speaks about these dark years from the man's perspective, shining a spotlight on the fall of male identity. The two films introduce marginalized characters, in which the main female role of *The Flower in Hell*, Sonya, is the most defenseless. Her body is heavily sexualized and objectified, and although

she disguises herself as an overwhelmingly masculine heroine, she cries out for a stable life and male support. The model of Sonya commemorates Korean girls and women, derogated as “Western princesses” (*yanggongju*), who were victims of the sexual trade between the American military and Korean criminals in the dark years of the 1950s. Sonya’s presence upsets the relationship between the two brothers, Tong-shik (Cho Hae-wŏn) and Yŏng-shik (Kim Hak), thus, posing a threat to Korean manhood. Tong-shik represents the naïve, childish hero who longs to return to the calmness of the countryside. Yŏng-shik is a typical criminal figure, the older dominator and a masculine anti-hero. In many cases, the girl’s self-confidence and indifference to men endow her with virile power.

In the film noir-esque style, Sonya wisely maneuvers between the two brothers while demonstrating her own voice and intentions. The calamitous end, in which both Sonya and Yŏng-shik die, signifies, however, the impossibility of escaping from the new rules dictated by the transformed political environment. The title directly refers to the inner state of Sonya, she blossoms like a flower due to her youth and beauty but she was born under cruel conditions, “in a world of confusion” as a street merchant mentions. The comment is instantly followed by a scene exhibiting archival footage of American soldiers and military trucks. This flower (Sonya) can bloom but only in hell. Yŏng-shik’s note on possessing Sonya at the beginning, “You are mine,” juxtaposes the bad omen by the conclusion. Yŏng-shik’s chase after Sonya and, soon after, their mud-covered bodies in the final set, do not only mark Shin’s realistic filmmaking but the composition of the photographed frames through shaky cinematography also aims to increase the tension. The camera shows dirty, fuzzy and misty images for a closer look at harsh reality, amplifying suspense by the very end. After Yŏng-shik stabs Sonya, the two corpses lie dirty in the mud, epitomizing their corrupt and sordid pasts. Their death also opened a bright future for Tong-shik and another sex worker, the purer and more modest Julie (Kang Sŏn-hŭi), who is an orphan of war and is more dependable for a stable relationship than Sonya. As Julie has been yearning for Tong-shik’s interest for a longer time, she goes with the man to the countryside without any hesitation. Moving from the hellish and unstable city life to the utopian desire of Tong-shik was the man’s original dream with Yŏng-shik and their mother.

All heroines in these three works strain at the chains men have placed around them. *Madame Freedom* challenges the idea that a Korean woman, raised among rigid Confucian precepts but also influenced by colonial modernism, struggles to become a liberated self-rule with the curiosity of an “après girl” (Klein 2019, 124) for leisure in dance, fashion, attitude, enjoying the nighttime social life and even sexuality. Even if she relishes many liberal moments in her private realm, by the end of the film, it is clear that becoming a free woman was an impossible mission. Her character development, departing from the conventional

housewife and arriving at an emancipated "Modern Woman," securely locked her in the prison of her husband. There was no freedom of choice for Sŏn-yŏng, and her failed attempt for independence led her back to the start, embodying a "wise mother, good wife." Su-mi's fate in *Three O'clock P.M. on a Rainy Day* highlights the mad masculine competition for the favor of a woman. In other words, the two men chased Su-mi to her death with their selfishness and male egoism. Sonya's "dirty" trait and mud-covered corpse in *The Flower in Hell* are epitomes of the disdain the patriarchy has for women, subordinating them to only housewives or prostitutes.

#### 4. Successful women envied by men

In contrast to the previous formulas, the iron-willed eccentric protagonist of *The Female Boss*, Yoanna (Cho Mi-ryŏng), has already risen to social prominence, enjoying the privileges of American socio-cultural effects on Korea, such as wearing Western clothes, playing golf, and supervising a women's magazine. Yoanna is not looking to climb the social ladder, unlike prior examples, because she already belongs to the elite class and enjoys its benefits in postwar Korea. Yoanna has a Western name and her goal is to maintain and publicly exhibit her feminine power, even using it to her own ends, egoistically ignoring the less wealthy. This elitist realm is a developed model of the heroine seen in *Madame Freedom* and, thanks to the same director Han Hyŏng-mo, we can find a resemblance in both works as typified by the ironic portrayal of Western cultural impacts.

Yoanna runs her own company, a journal entitled *The Modern Woman*, marking an intentional departure from the traditional values and arriving at the postcolonial idealized image of an urban woman. Her progressivity is, however, jeopardized by the male protagonist, Kim Yong-ho (Yi Su-ryŏn). Yoanna's dignity is first attacked at a public phone as the young man is impatient for Yoanna's long conversation and snobbish attitude. The romantic interactions between the sassy Yong-ho and the conceited Yoanna are combined with comic elements. For Yong-ho, it is not simply the woman's arrogance that infuriates him but the fact that Yoanna uses her wealth to achieve her goals, highlighting her abuse of power. Yong-ho applies for work as a journalist at *The Modern Woman* without knowing that the paper is run by Yoanna. When they recognize each other at the interview, Yoanna accepts the man's application to get revenge on him for Yong-ho's crass behavior at the public phone. Yong-ho's masculine energy also attracts the woman who could even give up her lofty prominence and becomes a housewife after marrying Yong-ho. The film itself flips the standard dynamic because Yoanna first holds an atypical status for her gender; she is

more masculine and stronger than many of the male characters. Her demeanor involves resistance against the ruling gender norms. She can be seen manipulating men, like Mr. O (Chu Sŏn-t'ae) who is in love with her, or belittles others, like the assistant editor, Hŏ Il (Kim Hŭi-kap). Yoanna's ego comforts her in the presence of "weak" men, yet Yong-ho's masculinity and bitterness sparks a special chemistry between the two.

The film's narrative is based on the trope that most women feel attracted to the bad boy character while the heroine violates at least three of the four fundamental Confucian female qualities (四德 *sadŏk*), such as the female chastity or virtuousness (*pudŏk*), female speech (*puŏn*), the feminine traits or delicate features (*puyong*), and household chores (*pugong*) (Han 2004, 118). In the scene when Yong-ho merely enters the room, the women plainly perceives his masculine charisma, that is raw and attractive, and never mock the man, unlike with other male colleagues. The film additionally maneuvers smoothly from the modern Western woman back to the traditional Korean roots. Even if Yoanna represents a heretical Korean woman in the beginning, through sexual attraction and the masculine power of Yong-ho, she is relocated in her place in Korean society. The initial non-conformist gender dynamic reverts back to the male dominated-female subordinated emotional dependency. The film fulfills its mission to re-educate the imperious and controlling woman heretic and guide back to the gentle Korean housewife space.

By the end, Yong-ho becomes the new chairman of the magazine, creating financial profit due to his skills in finance, an apparent attribute of being a man. This social resolution is an outdated mentality of the male-female social roles and separate spaces (*naewoebŏp*), placing women in the kitchen and men at work as the sole breadwinner of the family. Yoanna eventually changes from her Western dress to the Korean *hanbok*, knitting at home and waiting for her husband with dinner on the table. This *pugong*-conclusion glorifies the traditional social power of the man and cautions the audience that a female-ruled world (as a sign above Yoanna's office proudly states, "Women are superior to men") cannot be tolerated (yet) in the late 1950s of Korea. Returning to the biased Chosŏn gender norms, the sign is changed to "Men are superior to women" (*namjonyŏbi*), consoling any insecure men in the audience by the end. For manhood, an exemplary woman is "simple and honest" as Madame O is described by her boss in *Madame Freedom*. This female epitome does not scare the Korean men, but gives them a secure place where they can exercise their male hegemony. Yoanna in *The Female Boss* is, however, the polar opposite of this; she is wild, ignores the men and even rules over them. Furthermore, she is as sexist as men are in a patriarchal society. Yet, her superiority is not accepted by society, as she is ridiculed for not running a profitable business and her employees laugh at her

unorthodox attitude behind her back. Although it is a romantic comedy, the film's social notes rush to protect weakened and fearful Korean males through harsh social commentary both on customary gender roles and the liberal ambitions of the "Modern Woman" prototype. By the end, the men are able to find their ways back to their societal comfort zones; the beginning inverted female-male relationship is restored to the classic active male-passive female framework.

The socio-family melodrama *A College Woman's Confession* contains less romance than the previous work and is another archetypal film that warns against female objectification, as in several other Shin Sang-ok pictures. Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi plays a poor law student, Ch'oe Soyŏng, who finds herself in a difficult situation after her grandmother, who supported her studies, passes away. Due to her friend's, Hŭi-suk (Kim Suk-il) suggestion, Soyŏng disguises herself as the lost daughter of a rich lawmaker, Ch'oe Rim (Kim Sŭng-ho). Here, the threatening leers of sexual predators are everywhere; it is difficult to escape the vulgarity and physical insult of male sexism. From the beginning, Soyŏng and Hŭi-suk are compelled to endure these derogating stares. Soyŏng is insulted by her first landlord, then by the owner of a company where she has a job interview. Hŭi-suk is surrounded by a man in a café, while she is waiting for her friend. As Soyŏng laments, "I did not know the world was so heartless and dirty," presenting her naivete about men and male domination. Even the landlord's wife is aware that "all men are dogs."<sup>6</sup> The most humiliating scene appears where the man from the café notices Soyŏng walking down the street alone in the evening and propositions her, "How much? Come on. Tell me how much?" She is scared and runs away, immediately being struck by a car. At the promising denouement of the film, Soyŏng becomes a respected lawyer and confesses her falsehood about her past to the wife of Ch'oe Rim. At the trial scene in the end, as a lawyer, she defines the most important social message of the story, non-discrimination, "Your Honor, they say that the law must apply 'equally' to all people, without any discrimination." The film is demanding attention for female dignity and humility, along with gender fairness in postwar Korea. It also addresses successful women who can ascend the social ladder through the lens of a marginalized female student without direct help or support from her male partner(s), giving hope to Korean females by proposing the ideal for gender justice.

<sup>6</sup> Kim Ki-young's cult thriller, *The Housemaid* (*Hanyŏ*, Kim Ki-yŏng, 1960), also reveals the sexist male notion of "all men are just beasts." The film's last note also draws attention to the danger of its impartial account, "It's man's greatest weakness. [...] And a beautiful girl stirs his most primitive desires. [...] Having a young girl in the house is like offering raw meat to a tiger. [...] As men get older, they spend more time thinking about young women. That's how they become attracted to women who could lead to their downfall. This is true for all men, even those of you who are shaking your heads!"

Hong Ŭn-wŏn's (a female director) film, *A Woman Judge* goes beyond the visionary dream of what we could realize in the former example. The heroine does not only achieve a highly-respected occupation as a judge, but she even surpasses the power and social standing of her male colleagues. This is the second Korean film, after the work *The Widow*, from a woman's perspective made by a female filmmaker. Hong's piece is about male jealousy caused by the protagonist's, Chin-suk (Mun Chŏng-suk) high social status, a judge, which is traditionally a male profession. The film was made in 1962, the year after Pak Chŏng-hŭi (Park Chung-hee) rose to power. Political notes sound in the form of social recommendations regarding gender inequalities for the sake of disguising social consolidation.<sup>7</sup>

In the previous film examples, we could follow how women with a high rank or stable financial condition collide with their forceful, and sometimes assailing, male partners with varying degrees of success. In *The Female Boss*, Yoanna could not maintain her superior social position over the men around her. Moreover, her transformation from an independent CEO to a housewife is a symbol of her failed feminine identity. Yoanna lost her power over men by falling in love with Yong-ho, sacrificing her elite status on the altar of her happiness. At the same time, the filmmakers suggest that this happy ending, guiding the heroine back to her "rightful" and socially safe place, is the exemplary womanhood for women in Seoul in the 1950s. The hopeful closing of *A College Woman's Confession* depicts a desirable future for women in Soyŏng's social esteem as a lawyer. In fact, the film is a fiction and does not reflect the reality of the period, as it was nearly impossible for a woman to rise from complete poverty without male assistance in postwar Korea. This bright finale stems from the director's, Shin Sang-ok (1926-2006), social sensitivity as he often delineated marginalized female characters, sometimes showing the failings of womanhood (Sonya in *The Flower in Hell*), but at times providing an encouraging future after suffering, as in the case of Soyŏng.

<sup>7</sup> Chin-suk openly reveals the actual political notes, "The women of this country must try to improve their own status. They must give everything they have for this cause. [...] Or, a woman involved in social activism, it is easy to neglect her household duties." As Chin-suk also mentions, "There is something more important than our personal pain and obstacles. We should work hard to improve the lives of the women of our country." The film is critiques of oppositions built in the Korean public sphere. It showcases manifold antipoles, such as poor family-rich family, young-old, male-female, progressivism-traditionalism, and career woman-housewife.

## 5. Widows compelled by classic conventions

The horrors of the Korean War resulted in orphans and widows in both the North and South.<sup>8</sup> The visual portrayals of these widows in the postwar era, however, show a divergence between the two Koreas. In North Korea, a war widow is illustrated in a respected light (a badge for the heroic act for the homeland and the leader), but in South Korea, it was viewed as a depressive state engendering further public stigmatization. A widow's chastity was also in the spotlight of South Korean pre- and postwar cinema, marking the endeavors of woman emancipation, demanding more rights for their individual contentment, as exemplified in *The Widow*, *A Hometown in the Heart*, or, *The Mother and a Guest*. Widowhood is exhibited as a mental condition, hindering personal satisfaction. These social difficulties were realistically portrayed by South Korean filmmakers, drawing attention to the retreating social phenomenon. Different from the southern practices, the role of the widow is typified more positively according to North Korean narratives. Along with widow representations, the depiction of love between physically disabled men (mostly veteran soldiers) and beautiful young women is a recurring element in North Korean cinema. Injured veterans, suffering from physical handicap or blindness, have always been treated with great respect.

*The Widow* was directed by South Korea's (hereafter, Korea) first female director, Pak Nam-ok.<sup>9</sup> The opening presents a stressed little girl, Chu (Yi Söng-chu), dressed in sunflower patterned clothing (top image, Figure 3) along with

<sup>8</sup> There is a three-year mourning period on the Korean Peninsula in which widows are expected to remain chaste.

<sup>9</sup> Pak Nam-ok (1923–2017) was the first Korean female director and made the feminist-picture, *The Widow*. She borrowed money from her sister, setting up their production enterprise *Sisters Film Company*. Pak's career path truly reflects the unequal position of Korean women in the film industry and, in general, society. Pak began to shoot her film in the winter of 1954, at the age of 32, with her infant child on her back (Yecies and Shim 2016, 185–6). She also cooked and served meals for the crew members. This became an icon symbolizing her own dual obstacles carried together in the private and public spaces (working mother).

In addition, she faced several technical and financial challenges, helped out by her female colleague, Hong Ün-wön (1922–1999), the director of *A Woman Judge* (*Yeopansa*, 1962), *A Single Mom* (*Horömöni*, 1964) and *What Misunderstanding Left Behind* (*Ohaega namgin köt*, 1966). Hong had a very similar fate in Korean cinema as both directors were victims of the male-monopolized film industry. The Korean studio system unfairly mishandled them due to being women. Hong would direct three films before being dismissed in the 1970s. Pak was only able to direct *The Widow* although she was planning further projects. During the post-production, Pak was not permitted to use spaces at film facilities, and only one theater screened *The Widow* nationwide. Despite its positive critical reception, the film failed at the box office (as there was only one theater that showed it) and was removed from the program after three days of screening, leading to the end of Pak's film career. The film was re-discovered in 1997 at the First Seoul International Women's Film Festival (Kim 2005, 186). In the 1990s, Pak emigrated to the United States where she passed away at the age of 94 in 2017.

a text narration about a Korean War widow, Yi Sin-ja (Yi Min-cha), who is living in exile, in a poor neighborhood. Despite her hardships, the widow seems optimistic; the sunflower is a metaphor for the charm of Sin-ja itself. As the desperate gestures of Chu predict, the girl becomes one of the burdens that Sin-ja takes on. From the beginning, it is obvious that the widow's pretty face, pure soul, and modest attitude do not match this filthy environment. Following Sin-ja's initial optimistic state, she makes ironic comments on the neighbor who is a drunk widower, "You think all widows are desperate?" Sin-ja's idyllic life with Chu is shattered by the arrival of the wife (Pak Yŏng-suk) of Yi Sŏng-chin (Shin Tong-hun) who is a friend of Sin-ja's late husband. The woman interrogates Sin-ja about her relationship with Sŏng-chin. Sin-ja rejects the accusation about an immoral affair even though she meets Sŏng-chin in secret. Sŏng-chin's wife also violates marital virtuousness as she dates a young man, T'aek (Yi T'aek-gyun). At one point, T'aek saves Chu's life on the beach, impressing Sin-ja. These factors cause both women, Sin-ja and Sŏng-chin's wife, to be influenced romantically by the two men, Sŏng-chin and T'aek, creating a complex four-way love triangle. Sin-ja becomes in the meantime more intimate with T'aek and distances herself from Sŏng-chin. The widow abandons conventional motherhood when she sends her daughter to live at a neighbor in order to avoid disturbing the young couple's privacy. From this point, she begins to disintegrate as a mother. Sŏng-chin focuses on her self-approval and ignores her lonely daughter, who misses her father but also yearns for her mother's love. Sŏng-chin begins to regard Chu as a financial burden. It seems that the widow cannot harmonize her motherhood with her womanhood and prioritizes the latter one at the cost of the former. Her maternal instinct avenges itself (middle image, Figure 3) and her fate catches up with her. At the end of the plot, T'aek's longtime love, Jin (Na Ae-sim) appears and T'aek leaves Shin-ja and returns to his former lover. The widow drowns her sorrows with alcohol and grabs a knife when T'aek declares leaving her. Involving herself in these complex intrigues, robs her of not only maternal authority but also her human morality. Furthermore, violating Confucian virtues, Shin-ja could not maintain her widow's chastity, which discourages the remarriage of widows, and she breaks this rule with two different men.



Figure 3: Widow with her daughter: favoring personal satisfaction over maternal responsibility;

The arduous way to the reunion of mother (Yi Min-cha) and daughter (Yi Söng-chu)  
(Source: *The Korean Film Archive KOFA*)

*The Mother and a Guest* is based on Chu Yo-söp's novel (1935) and is set in the 1920s. The main plot takes place at a home that houses three widows in which a middle class widow (Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi), her daughter, Ok-hŭi (Chŏn Yŏng-sŏn), the widow's mother-in-law (Han Ŭn-chin), and their widow maid (To Kŭm-pong) live together (Figure 4). It is akin to a chamber play narrated by the daughter, Ok-hŭi. The charisma and voice of Ok-hŭi, in accordance with the goofy character of the housemaid, deliver brightness in the otherwise melancholic narrative and form a bridge not merely between the mother and her male guest, Mr. Han (Kim Chin-gyu), but also between the rigid social codes and the pursuit of a widow's personal happiness. The film describes the fates of the protagonist, her mother-in-law, her daughter, and the male guest, a teacher and painter from Seoul, who rents a room in the "widow house."<sup>10</sup> The visitor is a friend of the protagonist widow's brother (Shin Yŏng-gyun). With childlike innocence, Ok-hŭi quickly finds common ground with the man and easily accepts him as her new father. Due to the rigid Confucian ethics, a single man moving into a "widow house" does not follow the social customs of the age.



Figure 4: Living together in the "widow house:" social stigmatization and private burdens of three widows and the widow's daughter;

From left to right: the maid (To Kŭm-pong), the protagonist's mother-in-law (Han Ŭn-chin), her granddaughter, Ok-hŭi (Chŏn Yŏng-sŏn), and the heroine mother (Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi)

(Source: *The Korean Film Archive KOFA*)

<sup>10</sup> The "widow house" in this context stems from the fact that three widows live in the same house.

There is an ever-present dilemma of whether the widow should remarry or not. If she were to follow her heart, she would remarry, as one of her friends encourages her, "It is not wrong for a widow to remarry these days. If you can, you should marry as many as you can to change your life."<sup>11</sup> But the thought of social stigma haunts her and controls her inner desires. Her mother-in-law represents routine norms in the form of willing to send Mr. Han away and not letting her daughter-in-law (the widow mother) go with her brother. The oldest widow, however, eventually changes her mind, "Maintaining our integrity is considered a stupid thing these days. And it is not right to ruin your youth owing to my own obstinacy." Regardless, the protagonist considers remarrying a sin, held in contempt of society, despite the maid's remarriage to a widower. In the cage of solitude, the film examines the taboo of the public objection to the widow receiving the emotive appeal of the visitor. The widow and Mr. Han share an illicit mutual attraction, yet, by the end of the film, the woman chooses to suppress her desires and follow the social codes of chastity (*pudŏk*) and the thrice rules (*samjongjido*), demonstrating the impossibility of new love within the rigid Korean public framework. The sad denouement, showing Mr. Han's departure to Seoul, increases the lugubrious and, at the same time, the wistful milieu. The *mise en scène* additionally justifies the arrangement of the existing social norms.

There are no devastated neighborhoods, no danger, no American soldiers using Korean prostitutes, no crime, no realist action scenes, no dynamic editing, and no corrupt figures, like in Shin's former work, *The Flower in Hell*. Yet, the hopelessness and the despair of the daily lives of war widows and war orphans are apparent. Here, the silence and the sound of Chopin's piano, which the widow uses to emotionally connect to Mr. Han, are oppressive, only broken by the naïve purity of Ok-hŭi. The film is a social critique and a warning about what is appropriate for a Korean widow in this deeply prejudicial society. Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi's performance echoes her previous role in *A Hometown in the Heart* in which the young widow (Ch'oe was only 23 years old at the time) embraces a Buddhist child monk, To-sŏng (Yu-min), with maternal love as the boy was abandoned by his biological mother.<sup>12</sup> The heroine widow is not interested in love in this work, unlike in *The Mother and a Guest*, but instead wants to replace her dead son with

<sup>11</sup> Her brother also encourages the widow heroine to pursue her own happiness, "Consider your remarriage before you get too old. If your late husband really loved you, he will understand. You have to look for your own happiness, no one cares."

<sup>12</sup> The children's point of views in both works, Ok-hŭi in *The Mother and a Guest* and To-sŏng in *The Hometown in the Heart*, deliver more realistic and emotional denotations. Yun's film depicts different motherhood aspects by highlighting the stark contrast between the socially acceptable and the immoral. As a monk mentions, "The damn world. One mother throws away her child like an old shoe. Another cannot forget her dead child."

To-sǒng: "To-sǒng, would you call me mother?" Fulfilling motherhood is therefore emphasized rather than satisfying womanhood.

In his widow-centered productions, Shin Sang-ok's intention was to illustrate the social confrontation of gender roles including the social standing of widows. In *Tongshimch'o*, Ch'oe Ŭn-hŭi plays a widow (Yi Suk-hŭi), whose husband died in the war. The woman's shop business is failing and she asks for a loan from Kim Sang-gyu (Kim Chin-gyu), and they fall in love. Sang-gyu's boss (Kim Tong-wŏn) and Sang-gyu's sister (Chu Chŭng-nyŏ), who is also a widow, prefer the daughter of the boss, Ok-chu (To Kŭm-pong), as Sang-gyu's future wife. Director Shin's goal was to break the rules that remarriage of widows was unethical in Korea. Although the heroine is exhausted by gender prejudices, she still cannot reform her life due to the social stigmas.<sup>13</sup> The widow prioritizes her womanhood instead of her motherhood. As Sang-gyu's friend, Han Ki-ch'ŏl (Kim Sŏk-hun) recounts, "we need to be understanding of her mother first as a woman, don't you think?" Among the habitual adults' prejudicial world ("there are morals and values in society"), Suk-hŭi's adult daughter, Kyŏng-hŭi (Ŏm Aeng-ran), is the most progressive, and her only wish is to see her mother happy with the man she truly loves, Sang-gyu. Kyŏng-hŭi confronts the mainstream social mindset on womanhood and widowhood,<sup>14</sup> and even encourages her mother to follow her desires and dreams, "Mom, do not worry about what others think. Just do what you want." The mother, as in the case of *The Mother and a Guest*, is not able to pursue, however, her personal pleasure and runs away, moving to the countryside to live the miserable life of a widow without a man. The prison of social moral wins again over individual satisfaction. This impossible love was predestined in the realm of fixed gender customs. In this account, love appears less important than social virtue. This is the juxtaposition which the director Shin Sang-ok experimented with by outlining in his films that follow the stories of widows.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the efforts of Korean women from different social backgrounds, statuses, and occupations to achieve equal rights from the colonial period until the early 1960s through selected classic Korean films. These sincere and often desperate attempts at feminism largely failed. These works were also litmus tests indicative of the boundaries of gender shifts in Korean society. The

<sup>13</sup> When Sang-gyu asks Suk-hŭi, "Are you willing to throw yourself away because of society's prejudice? [...] How absurd is it not to be able to marry the person you love?"

<sup>14</sup> As Kyŏng-hŭi reflects, "Who has any right to say anything about other people's private affairs? [...] My mother is a woman too. My mother has gone through so much alone and has lived virtuously. Is she not allowed to be happy or have dreams?"

man, feeling the threats to his dominance and prestige, crushed all feminist aspirations, preserving the male-ruled social status quo. Following the phrase of Judith Butler's work, "gender trouble," stemming from the false and simplistic binary scheme "that carves up genders into masculine and feminine" (Butler 2006, 90), all the heroines of the analyzed films struggle with the standard hierarchical gender restrictions. Instead of the one-track minded social labels (male-female, heterosexual-homosexual, normal-abnormal, masculine-feminine, etc.), gender differences are defined by gender and individual acts or performances. Compared to the binary male-female axis of colonial times, as in the film examples of *Sweet Dream*, *Tuition*, and *Spring in the Korean Peninsula*, a recognizable shift in the Korean cinematic female portrayal arose after 1945. While the late colonial works (after the Japanese film censors reached the maximum level of restrictions with the Korean Film Law enforced in 1940), like *Tuition* and *Spring in the Korean Peninsula*, show a strong commitment to the Japanese empire with a stark social and military mobilization propaganda in tandem with *kōminka*, the *naisen ittai* colonial catchphrase appears in *Sweet Dream* much more softly. The film avoids the overtones of *expressis verbis* 'sharing the same body and same fate' imperial encompassment but instead it rather conveys universal melodramatic voices inherited by components of Japanese "new school" (新派 *shinpa*), Korean traditional singing performance (*p'ansori*), and Western accounts. In this case, the genre (melodrama) per se imports the actual politico-historical gender fragments, such as the male superior-female inferior *namjonyōbi*-perception, "to explore the limits of certain social norms" (Workman 2014, 162), quasi providing limited space for social criticism. The postcolonial era and the Korean War brought about the collapse of the previously existing gender class framework, overwriting the classic male supervisor-female assistant roles. These historical times were not only the fight for national liberation, and later the physical-ideological battles between the North and the South, but were mainly about gender struggles within the homogeneous Korean nation. Women's suffrage in 1948 (in North Korea, in 1946) was the first symbolic political step that women were to be treated similarly to men. The male crisis-female limited rise approach became a returning portion in the Korean postwar melodrama trajectory.

The depiction of female independence was largely impacted by Americanization, bringing woman-centered stories from Hollywood and European melodramas and film noirs, promoting an individualistic outlook on life and gender division. The call for Korean national consciousness was blended with the voices of suppressed women demanding more rights for girls, wives, widows, war orphans, mothers and prostitutes in the newly-built altered society. The search for gender status was also part of Korea's public effort to redefine its lost collective identity. The expulsion of the Japanese occupiers (1945) could not solve the problem of

national sovereignty, moreover, the division of the peninsula and the American influence delivered further dilemmas in this context. In the golden age of Korean cinema (1955-1972), the representation of womanhood departed from the conventional values of the "wise mother, good wife" frame and was combined with Americanized liberal practices. On the Korean silver screen of the post-Liberation and postwar years, unrestricted autonomous females sang and danced in bars and nightclubs, boldly exiting their forced public position they endured over the centuries. The American presence, however, could not lead to a radical liberation and emancipation. Equal participation was impossible in the earlier decades and is still a problematic social impediment in contemporary Korean society. Moreover, the apparent sovereignty involved more pressure on some of the marginalized female groups, while also noting the dreary and unrelieved abuses of the long-standing male domination. Even in contemporary Korean cinema, the social taboo of the male-female parity is exemplified by gender pay gap and gender leadership gap. *Take Care of My Cat* (*Koyangi rül put'ak'hae*, Chöng Chae-ün, 2001) amounts to a poignant commentary on the social prestige of women following an "intersectional approach to gender and class inequities" (Cho 2019, 358). *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982* (82 *nyönsaeng Kim Jiyöng*, Kim To-yöng, 2019) boldly and honestly takes it one step further in the realm of discrimination against women when the heroine is sent to a psychiatry ward after expressing how her feelings clash with her husband's demands, making it obvious that Korean sexism has not changed so much.

Certain films showcase progressive and Westernized heroines that have captured the illusive and artificial self-rule (as in the cases of *Madame Freedom* and *The Female Boss*) but there could only be a brief contemplation on the desire of short-lived autonomy. All of these films conclude with the rearrangement of female roles, navigating them back to the accustomed Korean path. As follows, the gender positions are reassigned to their "correct" functions and social dimensions (women as housewives, men as masculine breadwinners) and relieve any social confusion in male minds about the opposite sex. Sin-ja's prostitute friend in *The Widow* links financial stability to womanhood and the self-indulgence of women (similar to the personal ambition of the heroine in *Madame Freedom*), as Sin-ja's friend comments, "A woman has to be single to get rich. You cannot stay single all your life." As for powerful women, who hold temporary social- or economic independence, and as for the oppressed, who rebel against the male dominion, they either become objects of ridicule (*The Female Boss*) or their lives end in tragedy (*Sweet Dream*, *The Flower in Hell*, *Three O'clock P.M. on a Rainy Day*). The self-sufficient heroines, just like the characters of widows and prostitutes (who suffer from victim blaming), are accused of both creating their own pandemonium and the chaos of the country.

The women who appear in the roles of widows – such as *The Widow*, *The Mother and a Guest*, *A Hometown in the Heart*, and *Tongshimch'o* –, waver between convention and happiness. As an example, in the ending of *The Mother and a Guest*, the heroine rejects the man's appeal and follows Korean tradition, sacrificing love for the sake of social customs. The chances of these women to break away from their social confines are even more bleak than the opportunities of the more "liberated" and advancing women. The widow's fate leads to the resolution of rejecting private bliss due to the framework of habitual values. She lives on, but with no hope for restoration. The objectification of the female body appears in the films where the heroines are prostitutes (or, concubines are portrayed in supporting roles). The protagonist of *The Flower in Hell*, Sonya, cannot follow her dreams and desires. This group is likely the most defenseless in postwar Korea as these girls and women carry a double burden stemming first from foreigner soldiers and second from the Korean men, just like Korean women during colonial times. Most of the cases investigated in the current work are pessimistic about gender issues during the relevant historical period. Women can be strong and independent, but concurrently, the stories also demonstrate the boundaries of the "free" woman, primarily because the trend was disliked by men. First, Korean girls and housewives transcending their routine space (the kitchen and home) and the endeavoring to become the progressive "New Woman" (conveyed by colonial modernism and rapid urbanism), second, attempting to live up to the image of Modern Woman (influenced by Westernized liberal virtues), were both considered unethical and selfish, opposing the sanctity of men's public space.

Most of the analyzed films envisaged alternative ways of imagining female subjectivity in non-conformist arrangements without the intention of finding actual resolution suggestions. Despite the preparatory feminist narratives with the aim of promoting gender egalitarianism and opening new spaces for critical voices, these readings were mainly enjoyed by female audiences, remaining in the sphere of cinema, which was reinforced by plain disregard for Korean female directors in the male-dominated film industry. Over the longer term, neither politics nor the patriarchal society had an interest in changing the male-centered power relations by allowing feminist voices to be free. Those members of society who wished for a radical shift and fought for change in gender concepts did not have the political and economic capacity to fight these significant social battles for long decades.

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