Woman to be seen but not to be heard: Representation of woman
in the contemporary Korean Movie “My Wife is a Gangster”

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I. Introduction

In recent years, Korean film industry has flourished. It is a significant change compared to Korean film industry in the early 1990s when it confronted a major crisis. In those days, the box office record was far less than satisfactory. Hollywood movies were sweeping the Korean movie market. But since 1999, when the Korean movie ‘Shiri’ became a mega hit, the trend was turning favorably toward Korean movies. After ‘Shi-ri’, there was a series of mega hit movies such as “Joint Security Area” (2000), “Memory Island” (2001), “My Sassy Girl (2001),” and “My wife is a gangster” (2001). Many people welcome this phenomenon as a Renaissance of Korean film industry. But in terms of quality, there is a serious concern about the predominance of “gangster movies.” Apart from the woe about quality, there is another concern that Korean movies should be aware of. It is the concern about gender representations.

The growth of Korean film industry has not much improved the images of women represented in the movies. It seems that representations of women has changed when “My Sassy Girl” and “My Wife is Gangster” were shown. But when those films are scrutinized, the representations of women are still hiding patriarchal conventions under the disguise of tough women’s images. It is perhaps not the phenomenon that exclusively appears in Korea. At this very moment, women are still being represented from a male perspective in most countries. It is also true that the misrepresentations of women are not easily detectable with sophisticated filmic production mechanisms for ordinary spectators. Seamless editing, eye-line match and point-of-view shots and symbolic manipulations are common devices that conceal misrepresentations of women. Many spectators do not notice the ideological representations of women while watching movies. In film theory, spectators are often said to be sutured to screen and they are stripped of reflective thinking in that process. Thus, spectators are unconsciously imbued with hidden meanings of movies, and their ideological underpinnings.

The goal of this research is not only to reveal the sophisticated mechanisms which represent women from a male perspective but also to look at those representations from a post-colonial perspective. By looking at the contemporary movies that feature strong female characters, this research tries to show that even these movies are not the exceptions from traditional conventions of gender representations. Illuminating movies from gender perspectives does not fully capture the unconsciousness of Korean
culture. Korean society, at a glance, seems to be a modern and westernized society. It has rapidly been westernized after the Korean War. Rapid adaptation of American system, from education to mass media, from personal lifestyle to social structure, made Korea a cultural colony of western culture in general and American culture in particular. Women, in Korean movies, show both patriarchal and colonized representations. No matter how tough women are depicted in the movies, women still tend to be reduced to a mere spectacle. Spectacles do not communicate with voices. They only generate images that do not have voices, i.e., subjectivity. Being reduced to mere images, women become ‘the other’ to men. The result of this Othering process is that women tend to see themselves through the eyes of men and the west. They are putting themselves as objects of male desire and they internalize western values of what desirable characters women should have. Women are colonized in the sense that they are brought up and educated to long for what the male and western colonizers want. In this process, women are always to be seen but not to be heard. Male colonizers do not want to hear female colonized speak, because speaking is a very dangerous act to the colonizers. It requires voice and subjectivity. Devoid of voices, women are reduced to images, without having a chance to be a subject. Korean women are becoming ‘the other’ twice, once by men twice by the western imperial gaze. My purpose of this research is to reveal the unconsciousness of Korean women in films, which is torn in many different directions, by examining one of the latest movies that present hard-headed woman, i.e. “My Wife is a Gangster.” By doing so, I want to reveal Koreans’ unconscious and fragmented colonized desire that is hidden behind such powerful characters.

II. Research Method

A box office hit movie, “My Wife is a Gangster” is being selected for a close analysis. The rationale for the selection is that this movie, although it has a strong female character, is not an exception from the fragmented and colonized unconsciousness of Koreans, especially in terms of gender. The above movie is taken as a cultural text with hidden meanings of gender and intercultural relations. The selected film does not show racial relationships, but invisible cultural imperialism is operating beneath the production process. For analyzing gender relationships within the film, a textual analysis will be adopted. This study will examine the film text by looking at the overall narrative structures and particular representational mechanisms such as character selections and camera work. For understanding of invisible underpinnings of colonization, a contextual analysis will be taken. The contextual analysis will be focused on the mode of production and the relationship between Hollywood movies and
recent Korean movies such as “My wife is a gangster.” By doing so, this study will be able to show unconscious state of Koreans’ mind that aspire to be like male and western colonizers.

III. Textual/Contextual readings of “My Wife is a Gangster”

1. Textual Analysis

1.1. Narrative structure

Despite its postmodern pastiche of genres and previous films, “My wife is a Gangster” has a coherent narrative structure. Eun-jin is the second boss of The LA mafia. Her bravado has become a legend and this lets her control her men with charisma. She acts, speaks and dresses like not just a man, but a professional gang. She is even called “Big Brother” by her men. She seems to have only one wish that is to find her sister who was separated when they grew up in an orphanage. Her men find her sister, but she is a terminally ill with cancer. Her sister asks Eun-jin to get marry and have children. Eun-jin tries to follow what her sister says so she is searching for a husband who would just become a nominal spouse. Suil is a timid and unpopular public servant who happens to marry Eun-Jin. However, their marriage is not normal since it has been set up to show to her sister. Her sister asks Eun-jin to have children so Eun-jin tries to get pregnant. Eun-jin get some tips from a hostess of a bar how to sexually arouse men. But her clumsy actions shun Suil away. Eun-jin becomes anxious to get pregnant, so she almost rapes Suil. Eun-jin finally gets pregnant and tells her dying sister that she wants to have a daughter who will look like her sister. Eun-jin, for a moment, tries to be good, docile housewife. She even cooks for her husband. Later on, Suil gets to know that Eun-jin is a gangster but he stands by her. Meanwhile her business confronts fierce competition and her rival gang tries to take over her turf. She fights with the rival gang and in the process she has a miscarriage.

The movie betrays the spectators’ expectation that the female character will be tamed and become a loving housewife. Instead, her legend as a gang goes on when she fights against famous gangster figure at the end of the movie. As a comedy, it still presents a happy-ending when her nominal husband quits his job and decides to become one of her men.

1.2. Gender reversals

The director of this movie twists and turns common gender roles in order to induce
laughter from the spectators. Actually, this movie has been successful in that respect since it has gathered over 5 million movie-goers. While Eun-jin signifies the strong character who happens to be a woman in the movie, her counterpart Suil is the man who lacks masculinity. Suil is a guy who indulges himself in romantic novels, movies and myth. He prepares lines from the movie “The Bridge of Madison County” when he proposes Eun-jin. He even runs and buys some flowers to make his proposal more romantic. When they get married he reads “marriage vow” to his nonchalant bride. Wine and candle light, flowers are important to Suil to make proper mood for love. To the contrary Eun-jin acts like a violent professional gang. She does not know how to take care of her look, how to cook and how to manage domestic chores. She throws away her clothes and shoes anywhere she wants. All she has in her refrigerator and cupboard are bottled water and instant cup noodles. She talks curt and tough.

Eun-jin and Suil’s sexual relationship also subverts the conventional gender roles. Although Suil tries to be active in sexual relationship, he is rejected harshly by Eun-jin. But when Eun-Jin thinks that intercourse is necessary for pregnancy, she almost rapes Suil. After that he does not have initiative in sexual conduct. Eun-Jin gets right onto sexual intercourse, disregarding the romantic foreplay. Suil is the one who cares for the mood for love. In the movie, rape scene is a parody of rape myth that women feel orgasm even when she is being raped. The facial expression of Suil during intercourse is a parody of conventional romance movies in which actresses moan for sexual excitement.

Since guns are illegal to possess in Korea, most gangsters use sword and the like. Eun-Jin uses scissors as a weapon which reminds her male counterparts of castration. Actually she castrates a gang from the rival faction, not with scissors but with her strong kicks. But in return, the very gang makes Eun-jin abort her baby in a later fight. With this accident, the movie avoids the risk of making its strong female protagonist domesticated and feminized. The maternity could have changed everything. If this happens, the movie will lose its punch line coming from gender reversals.

“My wife is a gangster” could be classified as “Medusa” movie which is one of many feminist movies that Ruby Rich identifies. Medusa movies are comedies which utilize the power of laughter to challenge the law and to shatter the “truth.” But this claim is too hasty when we scrutinize the gaze in the movie.

1.3. Gaze and subjectivity
Although the movie presents a strong female protagonist, she is not fully endowed with her independent human agency. She is still the second boss who follows orders from her
boss. Although Eun-jin tries to save her men, she is captured and endangered by the rival gang. Then her boss comes in and deals with the rival boss with a new business plan. It is ironical her boss never shows violence.

Apart from her rank in her pack, the camera work leaves much doubt about the film’s position toward feminism. This combination of a powerful female character and the betraying camera work creates confused and controversial readings from the viewers. This movie was chosen for the worst movie of the year by women’s movement groups. But some female critics applauded this movie for its representation of a powerful woman. In this section, the issue of gaze and subjectivity will be focused. As Laura Mulvey (1975) pointed out the problems of gaze in classic narrative movies and spectatorship long time ago, “My wife is a gangster” reveals the same problem. Eun-jin, no matter how fiercely she fights against men, is still reduced to a mere spectacle. Even though she wears a male suit, she is not allowed to have her own gaze. This time, she is a non-threatening spectacle at least in terms of gender since she dresses and acts like man. She is one of men, since she is called “Big brother” by her men. Her femininity is not introduced until she decides to get married according to her dying sister’s wish. But throughout the movie, Eun-jin is not allowed to have a gaze of her own. Camera never allows her to have her own gaze. Rather, Eun-jin is the one who is constantly being looked at. Her role as a spectacle becomes maximized when she is dressed in clingy short red dress for match-making. Camera glances over her breast, legs, and backside. When she fights with men on the street, she tears off the side of the dress so that she can move her legs freely. But as a result, she shows her legs more to the audience. Eun-jin is the one who is being looked at by her men and her husband, Suil. Eun-jin’s men discovers her feminine body when she wears a short dress. Suil accidentally sees Eun-jin’s backside that is tattooed all over. Ussher (1997) identifies three levels of gaze operation in film production and reception. One level is the male who controls the camera; the second is the men within the narrative of the film; and the third is the male spectator who enjoys his position as a voyeur. In this operation, man is positioned as active while woman is passive. Although Eun-jin seems far from being passive in the narrative structure, she is still passive in terms of controlling gaze. Lacking her own gaze, Eun-jin is not a full subject. She is a spectacle and the object of the other’s gaze. In this respect, Kaplan asserts that “I can only speak or look if I am a subject, not an object.” (1997, p. 155)

Her passivity can be identified when we think of the fact that she does not have desire of her own. She just follows orders from her boss. Her only desire is to look for her blood sister who was separated in an orphanage. Her sister’s feminine desire to get
married and have children has been projected onto Eun-jin. In this process, Eun-jin tries to learn how to become a woman. But she is really clumsy since she lacks proper gender identity formation process while she was growing up. She takes advice from a hostess of bar. But her lessons of becoming a woman are less than proper for ordinary people. This process of becoming feminine character makes the audience laugh since the femininity is depicted as having nasal sound, shaking breast, putting on a make-up, and wearing revealing dresses.

From the above, we could learn that female characters are not yet described as full-fledged human agency, even though they appear to be very strong and decisive. They are still mere spectacles without their own desire, gaze and speaking voice, and subjectivity. Eun-jin’s sister projects very traditional feminine wish for Eun-jin to find a right husband and have many children. Eun-jin tries to fulfill her promise with her sister. She gets married to a guy whom she never loves or even is interested in, and decides to become pregnant. Of course, this part could be attributed to the movie’s weak narrative structure and motives.

We come to a question at this juncture, why the movie presents the strong female protagonist instead of male? Is it just for fun coming from gender reversals? I think there is an unconscious desire of mimicry of the powerful. The question of mimicry needs to be further investigated in the following section.

2. Contextual Analysis

2.1. The Mode of Production: Pastiche

I should say that the movie “My wife is a gangster” is a postmodern production, not because of its narrative structure but because of its nature of pastiche. It not only mixes various genres but also previous movies. It looks like a typical gangster movie but it also shows various genres, such as melodrama, comedy, and film noir. It is pastiche since it does not have intentions of posing a question or challenge to previous movies or genres or social conditions. It just appropriates whatever seems useful to make the movie more popular. In that sense, the reason for taking a female actress for its major title role is not from feminist intentions. The producer of the film does not have intentions of conveying feminist message at all. If it does, it is by a sheer chance. He tried to induce laughter and with that goal, he twists and turns conventional norms and behaviors, especially in terms of gender. So taking a female protagonist is only a means to twist common-sensical notions that people have. With that twist, however, the film text creates confusions in reading. It creates polysemic reading since it combines
various conventional and at the same time twisted symbolic codes in the movie.

2.2. Colonial Desire

In the movie, the female protagonist, Eun-jin appears to be like a man. She seems to be a transvestite who wears men’s clothes and shoes, has her hair cut short, and smokes like a man. She seems to follow exact footsteps of macho man. Perhaps this is because she has grown up in an orphanage where a proper gender role model seems to be absent. There are three positions that women can take for their gender identity. The first is to maximize femininity so that women use men to protect them. The second is to deny femininity and act like men. The third is torn in between femininity and masculinity. Many women take the third position so they sometimes try to compete against men but they do not totally reject their femininity. They have the ambivalent desire to succeed like men by playing by men's rules but at the same time keep their femininity. In a patriarchal society, women are internal colony. Women have colonial ambivalence of envy and hatred. However, Eun-jin takes the second position. She knows by her instinct, she has to be strong in this jungle. Otherwise she cannot survive. She mimics the stronger gender. Femininity cannot be found in her appearance and mentality in the beginning of the film. At this point, we might wonder why she mimics even becomes a man. There is a sign of internal colonialism, when the weaker envy and imitate the powerful, and hate and deny themselves in order to be “the other” who seems more powerful. Thus the self is replaced with the other. The self is denied and lost, but at the same time becoming one of the colonizers is a different matter. Becoming the colonizer requires the acceptance of the colonizers, but there is always resistance and denial from the colonizers. This is also happening in the movie. In “My wife is a gangster”, the boss denounces Eun-jin when she was reported to take some time off to get married. He says “Women are hopeless” although Eun-jin earns respects from her men she still appears to be a “woman” to her boss. Bhabha claims that mimicry is the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as ‘almost the same but not quite.’ (1994, 86)

Eun-jin, even though with feisty and charismatic characteristics, is an unstable and fragmented character. “My wife is a gangster” is not a feminist text at all since it fails to represent women on their own. It only reifies the notion that strong women should be like men “My Wife is a Gangster” fails to find ways to express new femininity without borrowing images of masculinity and patriarchy.

Then what is the strong woman’s image that we see in the movie “My wife is a gangster”? It is not so different from the image that mainstream Hollywood movies
have projected onto us. ‘My wife is a gangster’ seems to imitate Hollywood blockbuster movies. Eun-jin’s image is a mirror image of Bruce Willis in “Die Hard” series or some other action movie stars only in a smaller scale. Although “My wife is a gangster” does not have multi-racial or multi-cultural relationships, Hollywood movies serve as invisible Other. The object of mimicry and identification is western male in “My wife is a Gangster.” However, mimicry always has a danger of falling into mockery since the imitator does not have the same qualities that the object of imitation has. Exact imitation across cultures is not always possible since each culture has different make-ups of material and cultural conditions. It is inevitable that hybridity comes into play. “My wife is a gangster” is also a hybridized version of Hollywood action movies. In the movie, there are very typical Korean sentiments and limitations. For one thing, the absence of guns and the melodramatic obsession with marriage and child bearing set for the Korean version of action movies. Strict hierarchy within the gang is another aspect of Korean culture.

2.3. Post-colonial turn or Neo-Globalization?

Although there is much criticism about “My wife is a gangster” for its crude film quality, incoherent narrative structure, and low-brow comedy, it has been successful to attract over 5 million people. It is more amazing that Hollywood film makers purchased the right to remake the movie. Hollywood film industries have attracted foreign directors, actors and actresses and purchase scenarios from many other counties since early 20th century. But Korea was not on their borrowing list up until now. It has been always the other way around.

Korean film industries had maintained their nationalistic tendency until the late 1980s. Then Korean film market had to open up to the foreign, especially Hollywood, film industries. From 1993, Korean film industries try to benchmark Hollywood, inspired by the global success of “Jurassic Park”. The concepts such as blockbuster movies, massive promotion and advertising, and special effects are introduced only recently. It is amazing that Korean films that used to imitate Hollywood film conventions get noticed by Hollywood. It is a mimesis of mimesis. Is it a sign of post-colonial phenomenon or a new turn of globalization? Globalization has been criticized for its cultural imperialism and economic exploitation especially when the first world nations invade the third world countries with their cultural and commercial commodities. Of course, the flow of cultural products is still from the first to the third world and the economic flow is the other way around. But these days, unusual flows are being sensed.
Now the flow is not one directional. It becomes multi-directional. The flow becomes a full circle from Hollywood to Korean film industries and then again to Hollywood. Tae (2001) argues that the crisis of colonization/re-colonization is not only witnessed in the third world but also in the first world. No one is safe from unexpected movements of globalization.

Although “My wife is a gangster” shows the cultural movement coming into a full circle on a global scale, the gender representation is still unsatisfactory. Women are still the object of gaze and masculine desire. They do not have their own speaking voice, and their desires are formed through the patriarchal need to make women domesticated. In the era of the second phase of globalization, women are still unable to find their own language and voice, and remain as internal colony of male patriarchy. Ashcroft et al. (1995) assert that women, like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of the “other” by men. Women are still colonized by various forms of patriarchal and capitalists’ dominations.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, I try to read a popular Korean film “My wife is a gangster” textually and contextually. By doing so, it is found that although the movie features a strong female character, the camera work does not allow her own gaze and subjectivity. It is noticed that the very strong female protagonist mimics Hollywood style male hero. This fact reveals Korean's unconscious desire to mimic the symbolic colonizer and yet the mimicry becomes mockery since there is an unbridgeable gap between Hollywood film industries and Korean film industries. More interestingly, Hollywood recently purchased the right to remake the movie. It is a sign of colonial ambivalence where the colonizer does not remain intact from hybridization. This can be read as a specific moment of post colonialism or neo globalization.

Circulation of popular cultural products beyond geographical boundaries will be more frequent from now on but women’s status in reality and cultural arena is not yet satisfactory. They are still the object of male desire and gaze. Women still remain internal colonies who do not secure their own gaze, voice, subjectivity and the mode of representation. As Spivak points out, women are doubly oppressed and caught between the domination of a native patriarchy and a foreign masculinist-imperialist ideology. Women should find ways to secure their own gaze, voice, and language and representation. We need to ponder continuously upon ways in which women do get proper modes of representation and subjectivity.
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