

The Representation of the Family in Korean Cinema

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In Korean society, the family system and the ideology of familism have a dominant influence over the social structure and policy, as well as individual psychology and daily life. This is because, in Korean society where Confucian patriarchy has been traditionally dominant, the individual ego is the “familial ego” and one’s identity is determined strictly within the family and family relationships. Furthermore, the rapid modernization that marks Korea’s modern history was possible because families reproduced and provided a steady supply of labor for society. Therefore, families functioned as the main conduit for national and social control and suppression.

Furthermore, in social crises, family values were strengthened and emphasized, making the ideological struggle over the representation of the family in movies fiercer. On the other hand, Korea’s tragic modern history, marked by the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, territorial division, and a fascist political system made family values and the family’s control over individuals unstable and incomplete.

Women's Melodrama in the 1950s and Men's Melodrama in the 1960s

The Korean War might be considered the defining event for Korean society during the last century. Lasting over three years, the war not only caused tremendous physical damage but also inflicted deep psychological wounds on society and the people. The war also brought about dramatic changes in gender relationships and gender roles. Women increasingly participated in social activities because there were no family heads or men were incapacitated due to the war. As a result, women no longer had to play the traditional gender role of undertaking household chores and childcare and became a driving force for sexual desire and consumerism, inviting both social attention and criticism.

Therefore, women's melodramas, which accounted for more than half of all the movies made in the 1950s, vividly portrayed social trends, relationships between men and women, and family relationships from a new ethical perspective. Movies like *Madame Freedom* (Han Hyung-mo, 1956) and *The Flower in Hell* (Shin Sang-ok, 1958) beautifully portrayed female icons known as "liberal wives" and "prostitutes for the Yankees" who also found themselves caught up with desire and fighting traditional values. At the same time, these movies hurried to reestablish the taboos and limits the women had broken through.

However, the 1950s era of compromised national authority faded with the unsuccessful April 19 Revolution in 1960. The 1960s started with the May 16 Military Coup in 1961. As a result, Korean society faced modernization forced from the top in the pursuit of absolute power and uniform social integration. Against this backdrop, a lot of men's melodramas were made in the early 1960s, with a new start for single families led by male patriarchs struggling to overcome crisis. These were clearly also national allegories.

Family melodramas like *A Romantic Papa* (Shin Sang-ok, 1960), *Uncle Park* (Kang Dae-jin, 1960), *A Coachman* (Kang Dae-jin, 1961), and *A*

Petty Middle Manager (Lee Bong-rae, 1961) starred Kim Seung-ho, a Korean everyman. The narratives were about impotent patriarchs who could not keep up with modernization, causing family crisis, and the competent men from the next generation like sons, sons-in-law, and other family members, who worked together to overcome the crisis. These stories dealt with individual conflicts over liberalism and democratic values, which appeared in the early modernization process, and the arrival of a new generation that pioneered modernization, as well as the family values that still played an important role during the process. These stories also clearly signaled that modernization would continue to be carried out on the basis of male principles and solidarity.

Regression and Stagnation in the 1970s and “New Korean Cinema” in the late 1980s

In a nutshell, Korean movies in the 1970s experienced regression and stagnation. Filmmakers felt powerless as audiences turned away from Korean movies in the face of social oppression and harsh censorship. Unable to voice public opinion or raise consciousness about history, movies focused on bar hostesses, portraying dissolute women’s sexuality and bodies from a standpoint that combined voyeurism with the tragic tone. In these movies, the women are dissolute because they are separated from their traditional roots in their families. But, at the same time, the women are also held responsible for not being able to control themselves.

Most popular movies like *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (Lee Jang-ho, 1974), *Yeong-ja’s Heyday* (Kim Ho-sun, 1975), and *Winter Woman* (Kim Ho-sun, 1977), portrayed the lives of alienated lower class women, patriarchal control and exploitation of women’s sexuality, and the sensitivity of youth culture. They displayed the popular sentiments and imaginative power of movies in the 1970s. On the other hand, there were also movies that portrayed impotent men, scarred and castrated in the course of modernization, and families that didn’t serve any more



The Flower in Hell (Shin Sang-ok, 1958)



A Coachman (Kang Dae-jin, 1961)



The Pollen of Flowers (Ha Kilchong, 1972)

as sites of purification and rest. While the morally collapsed bourgeois family in *The Pollen of Flowers* (Ha Kilchong, 1972) represents “devilish modernity,” *A Road to Sampo* (Lee Man-hee, 1975) metaphorically expresses the fates of people who have lost the sanctuary of home through the journey of two men and one woman.

The “Korean New Wave” that heralded a new era of Korean movies in the early 1980s attempted pointed social criticism and alternative historiography with a new cinema style and sensitivity. However, women were still portrayed as helpless victims. Heroines like Young-hee in *Berlin Report* (Park Kwang-su, 1991), Song-hwa in *Sopyonje* (Im Kwon-taek, 1993) and the young girl in *A Petal* (Jang Sun-woo, 1995) are victims of violence committed in the name of the nation, the people, and the individual. They are without the benefit of any protection from their families and are allegories of an impotent people and nation. Un-rye in *The Silver Stallion Will Never Come* (Jang Gil-soo, 1991) and Chang-hee’s mother in *Spring in My Hometown* (Lee Kwang-mo, 1998) are female symbols of a people physically and spiritually impaired and insulted by foreign powers, represented by the USA.

The Second Renaissance of Korean Cinema after the late 1990s

The 1997 economic crisis accelerated reform through neo-liberal ideology. In this process, the Korean middle class collapsed and the gap between the rich and the poor widened. On the other hand, this harsh and destructive economic crisis that swept through society also led to the idealization of the private, particularly the family, and made all human values focus on the family. As a result, Korean movies after the 1990s showed rapidly disintegrating families and breaking down of all the ideologies that maintained the family and the family system. They were also ironic in their portrayal of desperate attempts by men to re-establish both the form and the value of the family.

Movies like *An Affair* (E J-yong, 1998), *Marriage is a Crazy Thing*



Spring in My Hometown (Lee Kwang-mo, 1998)



Marriage is a Crazy Thing (Yoo Ha, 2002)



Ode to My Family (Lee Jung-chul, 2004)

(Yoo Ha, 2002) and *A Good Lawyer's Wife* (Im Sang-soo, 2003) focus on women's desire and sexuality. They portray heroines questioning, challenging, and experimenting with marriage and the family system. On the other hand, men's melodramas like *The Letter* (Lee Jung-gook, 1997) and family melodramas like *Ode to My Family* (Lee Jung-chul, 2004), *The President's Barber* (Lim Charnsang, 2004), and *Crying Fist* (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2005) are tragic stories of men who overcome catastrophic crises of their families with their pure love, sacrifice, or masculinity.