

A Study on the Evolution of Korean Female Film Roles Based on Text Analysis

Shimiao Wang *

School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China, 999077

* Corresponding Author Email: wangshimiao020702@163.com

Abstract. By comparing the portrayal of female roles in films from different eras, how Korean women's films reflect and promote the evolution of women's status in parallel with social changes can be studied. It seeks to explore how these narratives have captured the shifting dynamics of gender and society. From the restrictive depictions in the 1970s to the narratives of self-realization in the 1990s and the emotionally complex portrayals of the 21st century, Korean cinema serves as a powerful lens through which the journey of women's empowerment and societal transformation can be understood. These films not only reflect the changing status of women but also play a role in challenging traditional norms and inspiring broader societal discourse about gender equality and personal agency.

Keywords: South Korean Cinema, Female Representation, Social Change.

1. Introduction

In modern times, Korea has experienced rapid changes across various aspects of society and politics, and Korean films serve as a vivid reflection of these transformations during the process of modernization. Following the trauma of war and regime change, South Korea achieved remarkable modernization and industrialization, emerging as one of the "Four Asian Tigers" with a thriving economy. However, such rapid economic development came at a cost, bringing with it not only prosperity but also profound social contradictions, psychological conflicts, and shifts in traditional values. The collision between rapid modernization and deep-seated cultural norms created a complex societal landscape, where traditional roles and expectations were continually challenged. Among the most affected were women, whose status and roles evolved alongside these seismic societal changes [1]. Women, particularly from vulnerable groups, bore the brunt of these contradictions, navigating between entrenched patriarchal norms and the opportunities offered by modernization.

As Confucian and patriarchal traditions in South Korean society began to loosen, the role of women gained increasing attention. Women transitioned from being confined to domestic and family roles to participating in public and professional spheres, marking a shift in their social status and influence. This transformation was accompanied by a gradual evolution in the depiction of women in Korean cinema. Films began to mirror the shifting dynamics of gender roles, offering insights into the struggles and triumphs of women as they sought to redefine themselves in a changing society. In the 1970s, *Journey by Night* became a representative film, reflecting the societal discipline and restrictions imposed on women at the time. The film portrayed women as subjugated figures, navigating a world defined by strict societal norms and patriarchal authority.

By the 1990s, the narrative surrounding women in Korean films began to shift, reflecting broader societal changes. *Seopyeonje* exemplifies this shift, presenting a story of female growth and self-realization. Unlike earlier films, which often relegated women to supporting roles or confined them to familial responsibilities, *Seopyeonje* offered a more even perspective. The heroine's journey centered on her personal development and pursuit of value, symbolizing the growing recognition of women's autonomy and agency. The film explored the nuances of female resilience and individuality, highlighting the struggles and triumphs of women seeking to break free from traditional molds. This reflected the broader cultural awakening in Korean society, where women were beginning to claim their voices and assert their presence in both public and private domains.

In the 21st century, the portrayal of women in Korean films became even more diverse and complex, reflecting the intricate challenges of modern life. Films such as *Secret Sunshine* delved deeply into the emotional struggles and psychological pain of women, presenting characters who grappled with loss, faith, and the search for personal meaning. These films moved beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood or passive endurance, portraying women as multifaceted individuals navigating profound internal and external conflicts. In *Secret Sunshine*, for example, the protagonist's journey of grief, faith, and eventual rebellion against societal and religious expectations underscores a narrative of self-reinvention and resilience. This evolution in female-centric storytelling mirrors the broader changes in women's roles within Korean society, where traditional norms have been increasingly questioned, and women's voices have become more prominent.

2. Korean Films in Social Changes

2.1. The Rapid Modernization and Emerging Social Contradictions in Post-War Korea

In modern Korea, after decades of war and turmoil and regime change, it ushered in a rapid development of modernization. With the demarcation of the 38th parallel between South Korea and North Korea, South Korean society gradually began to recover from the turmoil, and people began to establish their own life order from the haze of war. After the regime changes of Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee, South Korea implemented a tough industrialization policy, and the "Miracle on the Han River" promoted South Korea's rapid rise from an agricultural country to a new industrial country. This transformation did not occur overnight but was the result of a combination of governmental planning, private entrepreneurship, and the collective efforts of a population eager to rebuild their nation. South Korea used more than ten years of rapid development to create a modernization miracle as one of the "Four Asian Tigers". Its achievements in technology, industry, and culture established South Korea as a prominent player on the global stage, symbolizing resilience and innovation.

However, the good times did not last long. After the period of vigorously opening up the economy and cultural import and export in the 1960s and 1970s, the people turned from extravagance to frugality and once again fell into the dilemma of the authoritarian government from the expectation of a good life. The rapid economic growth masked deep-seated social and political issues, including income inequality, labor exploitation, and restrictions on individual freedoms. However, for Koreans who had been gradually accustomed to modernization and Western life, this change caused a huge psychological gap, which also produced serious social problems. The authoritarian regime's suppressive policies led to waves of protests and unrest, symbolizing the people's growing dissatisfaction and desire for democracy.

2.2. The Deep Impact of Patriarchal Culture on Women's Lives During the Era of Authoritarianism

Social changes in South Korea have also had a negative impact on women's living conditions. From the comfort women issue during the Japanese colonial rule to the tremendous suffering of women's lives and families during the division of the Korean Peninsula, women have faced continuous challenges across generations. During the period of rapid development, women were often required to take on high-intensity labor to balance family and work [2], while their opportunities for additional income and career advancement remained limited. Gender roles entrenched by Confucian culture further reinforced societal expectations that prioritized women's domestic responsibilities over personal ambitions. Although during the democratic transition, the signing of *the Equal Employment Law between Men and Women* and the reform of *the Family Law* promoted women to have basic life security [3], these legislative measures were not sufficient to dismantle the deeply ingrained Confucian and patriarchal norms. These cultural remnants acted as both physical and psychological constraints [4], limiting women's agency and perpetuating systemic inequalities.

2.3. Globalization and the Rise of Women's Status in the Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries

With the advent of globalization, South Korea's culture and economy became more closely connected with the world [5], leading to a deeper spread of Western ideas and values. This connection gradually improved the status of women in society. The rise of feminism and the increased representation of women in leadership positions in politics, business, and the arts helped to drive societal change. From the late 1990s to the 21st century, feminist discourse gained significant traction in Korean society [6]. This growing awareness was reflected in the diversification of cultural narratives, including literature, films, and media, which began to openly address gender issues and promote female empowerment.

From the narrative angle to the direction of the story, and then to the characterization, the portrayal of women in Korean films evolved in tandem with these societal changes. In the 1970s and 1980s, most women's films depicted themes of suppressed emotional needs and the burdens of family labor, stopping short of exploring women's real thoughts and instead reinforcing traditional stereotypes of female responsibilities. However, in the 1990s, shifting cultural attitudes brought the pursuit of female self-worth into focus. Films began to explore women's awakening and their struggles against societal injustices, pushing female characters beyond traditional roles. In the 21st century, the rise of female directors and managers brought new perspectives to the film industry, resulting in narratives that showcased women as complex, multidimensional individuals [7].

Films such as *Secret Sunshine* delve into the emotional struggles of a mother facing the loss of her son, while *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982* portrays the workplace discrimination and psychological pressures experienced by women trying to navigate their professional and personal lives. These narratives marked a significant departure from traditional depictions of women as mere extensions of family roles, instead celebrating their individuality and resilience [8]. As modernization continued to reshape South Korean society, women's stories became more diverse and open, reflecting the growing empowerment of women and their ability to transcend patriarchal expectations. The evolving narratives symbolize a broader societal transformation, where women are increasingly seen as equal participants in shaping modern Korea.

3. Different Role-shaping in Different Eras

3.1. 1970s: The Struggle in bound

3.1.1. The Dual Constraints of Family and Work

In the 1970s, the roles of women in Korean society were not limited to family and work. However, their value was largely judged within these two stereotypical dimensions. Women's deep emotions and personal desires were often neglected, as they were viewed as the second sex in a patriarchal society, serving as attachments to male power and societal norms. Most of the movies of that time reinforced such stereotypes by portraying female characters who, even if they expressed their own emotions, were often depicted as confused and torn by family responsibilities. Ultimately, these characters would conform to societal expectations, abandoning personal desires to fit the roles assigned to them. The movie *Journey by Night* is a quintessential example of such narratives, vividly illustrating the struggles of women during this era.

3.1.2. The Conflict Between Female Virtue and Social Prejudices

In the film, a woman's virginity is presented as a significant measure of her worth, reflecting broader societal attitudes of the time. The director uses the contrasting statuses of the heroine and another unmarried woman, referred to as an "old maid", to highlight societal prejudices. Spinsters were often ridiculed, as their single status was deemed unacceptable in a male-dominated society. The film critiques this notion but simultaneously exposes another constraint: the societal taboo surrounding premarital sex. Women who engaged in sexual relationships before marriage were stigmatized, and their actions often became an excuse for men to justify their own infidelity or

immoral behavior. The film's dual critique sheds light on the oppressive, contradictory expectations placed on women-expected to remain virtuous yet blamed if they sought independence or expressed personal desires.

These conflicting standards reflect the deep-seated gender inequality of the time. If a woman remained unmarried beyond a certain age, she was mocked and ostracized, often considered unromantic or undesirable, as symbolized by the heroine's glasses-a visual metaphor for a lack of femininity or romantic appeal. At the same time, women were treated as objects, their sexual value defined by and for men. If they acted on their own sexual desires, they were deemed unfaithful or immoral. This societal double standard is further reinforced by the patriarchal Korean culture of the 1970s, where, as scholars have noted, an unmarried woman's sexual experience was considered a dangerous liability, and women were conditioned to reject or suppress their sexuality. In Korean culture, where an unmarried woman's sexual experience implies a big, dangerous burden, and every woman is educated to respond negatively to sex [9].

3.1.3. Male Privilege Against Female Conformity

In contrast, men in the film are not bound by the same societal constraints. The two male characters exemplify this disparity. The heroine's partner resists marriage, seeing no need for a wedding ceremony because, in his view, he already benefits from a life where the heroine serves his needs and allows him access to her body. Another male character, despite being married, feels unbound by marital obligations, freely pursuing extramarital affairs while blaming his wife for his own infidelity. This dichotomy starkly contrasts with the burdens placed on women, for whom marriage represents not just a social contract but an essential marker of identity and legitimacy. Without marriage, women face social ridicule, marginalization, and a lack of defined roles in a patriarchal society.

Through symbolic acts like drinking alone in a male-dominated restaurant or revisiting her childhood home, the heroine attempts to escape the constraints of her unsatisfactory reality. However, the film's conclusion brings her back to conformity. She chooses to wear her glasses again, resigning herself to the dual responsibilities of work and family dictated by societal norms. For the heroine, the entire film represents a fleeting attempt to break free from her circumstances and pursue a dream of emotional fulfillment. Yet, it ultimately becomes a tragic tale of resignation, as she finds no alternative but to return to the reality she sought to escape.

The tragedy of *Journey by Night* lies in its depiction of a woman's unfulfilled yearning for freedom and self-identity in a society that allows her neither. The heroine's story highlights the broader systemic oppression faced by women in 1970s Korea, where societal norms and patriarchal structures left little room for individuality or emotional liberation. Her journey is emblematic of the struggles of an entire generation of women, who, despite their desires for change, were continually forced to conform to societal expectations.

3.2. The Awakening of Self-growth

3.2.1. From Family Attachments to Independent Individuals

In the 1990s, the positioning of female characters in Korean films gradually shifted from being attachments to the family or patriarchal structures to having their own growth arcs. This change marked a significant turning point in the portrayal of women in Korean cinema, as female characters began to evolve into independent individuals with their own desires, goals, and personal journeys. Women's personal desires and growth processes became the central focus of female film narratives, breaking free from the conventional bonds of male dominance, patriarchal authority, and rigid family roles. This shift not only broadened the scope of storytelling but also redefined the role of women in Korean films. The film *Seopyeonje* accurately reflects the changes in the social status of Korean women during this period.

In *Seopyeonje*, the story revolves around the gradual transformation of the daughter into a mature singer, with the narrative centered entirely on her growth and personal journey. This film stands out as it refrains from incorporating romantic or family-centric subplots that traditionally define female

characters, instead portraying the protagonist's story as one of self-discovery and resilience. Such a plot structure was a departure from the conventions of traditional Korean cinema, where women's narratives were often secondary to those of male characters or entangled in family dramas.

3.2.2. *Seopyeonje*: A Symbol of Female Growth and Resilience

Throughout the film, most of the heroine's growth is depicted indirectly, with her relationship with her father serving as a backdrop rather than the central focus. The father and daughter form two sides of the narrative, creating a dynamic that emphasizes the daughter's growth as an independent individual. The father, who imposes strict discipline and forces his children to learn singing, serves as both a catalyst and an antagonist. The differing responses of the daughter and her brother to their father's rigid teaching methods highlight the heroine's inner strength and resilience. While the brother, unable to endure the harshness, chooses to escape. The daughter endures, even when her father blinds her in a fit of authoritarian control. This act, which could have shattered her spirit, instead becomes the turning point in her life. From singing out of obligation and love for her father, the daughter transforms her singing into a source of personal strength and purpose, using it as a means of survival and self-expression.

This narrative arc is significant in that it refrains from degrading the heroine or confining her to traditional roles. Instead, it celebrates her agency and praises the individual growth brought about by her subjective consciousness. The film crafts a complete female narrative, where the heroine's challenges and triumphs are central to the story, showcasing her evolution into a confident, self-reliant artist.

3.2.3. Women's Independent Consciousness in Narrative Rhythms

The narrative pace of *Seopyeonje* is slower than that of earlier films like *Journey by Night*, reflecting the deliberate and introspective nature of the heroine's journey. The film mirrors her mood and growth through its slow, meditative development. The frequent changes in the characters' residences, symbolizing their nomadic lifestyle, are depicted through long shots and scenic sequences. These visually striking scenes, while minimal in narrative content, are essential in portraying the subtle progression of the characters' lives. From the initial scenes of the three family members singing joyously together, to the silent walks shared by the daughter and father, and finally to the poignant image of the blind daughter walking alone in the snow, the film captures the gradual but profound transformation of the heroine. These moments act as emotional markers for the audience, delineating the stages of the heroine's growth.

A particularly symbolic scene occurs when the brother runs away. The director frames the heroine standing quietly under a tree, a powerful metaphor for her steadfastness and inner strength. The tree becomes a recurring symbol in the film, representing the heroine's quiet but steady growth amidst adversity. Unlike earlier portrayals of women as passive figures, the heroine in *Seopyeonje* is depicted as an independent individual whose strength lies in her ability to endure and grow. The tree also serves as a contrast to the traditional "father" figure, often seen as the central pillar of the family, suggesting that women, too, can embody stability and resilience.

What's more, the film avoids emphasizing the negative traits of its characters, including the father, whose harshness, though criticized, is portrayed as part of a complex relationship that shapes the heroine's journey. This balanced depiction underscores the film's focus on growth and transformation rather than assigning blame or perpetuating stereotypes.

As a result, *Seopyeonje* became a landmark in the evolution of female-centered narratives in Korean cinema. It represents the broader trend in 1990s Korean films of portraying women as fully realized individuals rather than as mere extensions of their families or romantic partners. By exploring themes of personal growth, resilience, and independence, the film paved the way for a more nuanced and empowering representation of women in Korean cinema.

3.3. The Fight of World Outlook

3.3.1. Emotional Transformation in *Secret Sunshine*

By the 21st century, the portrayal of women in Korean films has evolved to align with the complexities of modern life. Female characters now embody a wide spectrum of emotions and actions, often represented through “hysterical” yet deeply autonomous figures. These women possess a strong ability to act independently, and their personal growth is no longer merely a response to external stimuli. Instead, their transformative journeys stem from their inner emotional needs and self-driven choices, showcasing their agency in reshaping their lives.

In *Secret Sunshine*, the heroine’s quest for a new life serves as the central thread of the narrative. The story unfolds through her personal tragedies and emotional struggles, beginning with her husband’s death and her decision to start over in Miryang, followed by the devastating loss of her son, her conversion to Christianity, and ultimately, her rebellion against religion. Each of these pivotal moments is driven not by societal expectations or external influences but by her loyalty to her own emotional needs. The film places the heroine at its core, with other characters serving as secondary elements to advance the plot. This approach allows the narrative to focus intensely on the heroine’s internal transformation and emotional evolution.

Notably, the heroine’s son is not the reason for her initial move to Miryang, underscoring that her choices are not tied to familial obligations but stem from a desire to create a new chapter in her life. After her son’s death, her subsequent actions—embracing Christianity, seeking emotional solace, and eventually rejecting the religion—are rooted in her own emotional requirements rather than a reliance on a new family or male figure for support. This establishes her as a “floating individual”, unanchored by traditional societal structures. While a male character offers her help, it does not act as a turning point in the story. The fluctuations in the heroine’s emotions and decisions are entirely self-motivated, further emphasizing her autonomy.

3.3.2. Rebuilding Faith and Rebellious Against Authority

The film devotes significant time to the heroine’s conversion to and rejection of religion, a central theme that highlights her active agency and emotional depth. Her choice to convert after her son’s death demonstrates her attempt to seek solace and forgiveness through faith. Initially, this choice showcases a resilient character willing to adapt and find hope in the face of immense grief. Her sincere embrace of religion portrays her as emotionally strong and proactive, eager to find meaning and forgiveness in her suffering. However, this new worldview collapses when she learns that her son’s murderer believes himself forgiven by God. This revelation shakes her to the core, as it undermines her understanding of justice and redemption.

3.3.3. Reconstructing Identity Through Extreme Acts

What follows is a series of extreme actions by the heroine, symbolizing the destruction and eventual rebuilding of her worldview. She destroys a religious gathering in an act of defiance [10], attempts to seduce a priest under the open sky as a rejection of authority, and even slits her wrists in a harrowing betrayal of life itself. These actions are not random but deeply symbolic. Destroying the gathering represents her rebellion against those who imposed religious solace upon her; attempting to seduce the priest challenges the sanctity of religious authority and the restrictions it places on human desire; and her attempted suicide marks the ultimate rejection of a life dictated by societal or religious norms. Each act reflects the heroine’s struggle to redefine herself in a world that has repeatedly betrayed her trust and emotional stability.

In the second half of the film, the heroine undergoes a complete breakdown and reconstruction of her worldview. This transformation creates a character with a deeply rebellious spirit and intense emotional depth. Her rejection of religion, authority, and even life itself is not portrayed as weakness but as a form of defiance and empowerment. Through her extreme actions, the film captures the process of emotional catharsis and the redefinition of identity. Her final state is one of emotional

resilience, as she emerges not as a broken figure but as a woman who has faced and conquered her inner turmoil on her own terms.

Secret Sunshine stands out as a powerful narrative of a woman's journey toward self-reinvention. Unlike earlier portrayals of women whose growth was contingent upon external factors such as family or male influence, this film celebrates the heroine's emotional and spiritual autonomy. Her actions, no matter how extreme, highlight her refusal to conform to societal expectations or remain bound by traditional roles. The film's exploration of grief, rebellion, and personal transformation establishes a new standard for female narratives in Korean cinema, portraying women as multifaceted, independent individuals who define their own paths.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the portrayal of female characters in Korean films has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from appendages of male-dominated narratives to independent individuals with their own agency. This transformation aligns closely with South Korea's social development and reflects broader changes in cultural attitudes towards gender roles. Over time, these films have increasingly depicted women striving to break free from the constraints of a patriarchal society, presenting a diverse array of independent and multifaceted female characters.

In the 1970s, Korean female films were deeply influenced by societal expectations and traditional roles prescribed for women. Female characters were often confined to the framework of family responsibilities, with their narratives revolving around themes of sacrifice and subservience. These films reflected the rigid social presuppositions of the time, portraying women as secondary figures whose identities were largely defined in relation to male characters.

After entering the 1990s, Korean female films began to explore women's stories from more diverse and complex perspectives. The focus shifted toward the personal growth and self-realization of women, placing their individual journeys at the center of the narrative. Films from this period moved beyond the limitations of traditional gender roles, offering a reimagined portrayal of female resilience, ambition, and autonomy. The realization of personal value and the pursuit of individuality became central themes, marking a turning point in how female characters were depicted.

In the 21st century, Korean female films have created numerous strong and complex female characters who dare to resist societal norms and regenerate their lives in the face of adversity. These characters are portrayed as empowered individuals with the courage to challenge authority, confront societal expectations, and redefine their identities. Films such as *Secret Sunshine* and *Kim Ji-young: Born 1982* exemplify this trend, showcasing women who navigate deep emotional struggles, confront systemic inequalities, and ultimately emerge stronger and more self-aware. These narratives highlight the diverse and multifaceted nature of female power, presenting women as agents of change in both personal and societal contexts.

This evolution in female representation not only reflects a profound reexamination of the status of women in South Korean society but also serves as a powerful source of inspiration. By depicting women as individuals capable of resistance, transformation, and growth, these films encourage viewers—especially women—to continue striving for equality and self-determination. Korean female films have thus become a mirror of societal progress, as well as a medium that amplifies women's voices and advocates for their rights in a constantly changing world.

References

- [1] Gender Matters?: The Evolution of Gendered Voices in the Cinema of Colonial and Postwar Korea (1936-1961) [C]//Continuity and Change in Asia. Olomouc: Olomouc Asian Studies, 2024: 513-543.
- [2] Lee H S I. Aging, femininity and class: reimagining the 'halmeoni' in contemporary South Korean cinema [J]. Feminist Media Studies, 2024, 24 (1): 1-16.
- [3] Lee C. The Shift of Women's Image in South Korea After the 2016 Gangnam Station Incident [D]. Seoul: Seoul National University, 2024.

- [4] Hong S. Women Breaking into the South Korean Film World: A Study of Female Filmmakers in the 1990s [DB/OL]. (2024-09-10) [2024-12-24]. <https://journals.openedition.org/map/7154>.
- [5] Viikki J. Social change and female desirability in contemporary South Korea: the case of Hallyu Drama [D]. Jyväskylä: The University of Jyväskylä, 2023.
- [6] Seon P H. South Korean Cine-Feminism on the Move [J]. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema*, 2020, 12 (2): 91-97.
- [7] Ushanthan P. The Significance of Themes in the Renaissance of South Korean Cinema [D]. Seoul: Seoul National University, 2023.
- [8] Yang F. Possession by Devil: Women's Alternative Language; A Feminist Reading of Kim Ji-young, Born 1982 [J]. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2021, 22 (6), 1558-1563.
- [9] Lee S H. Under Construction: The Gendering of Modernity, Class, and Consumption in the Republic of Korea [M]. Laurel K ed. Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002: 141-164.
- [10] Lee B W. Psychoanalytic Comment on Lee Chang-Dong's Film <Secret Sunshine>[J]. *Psychoanalysis*, 2017, 28 (1), 1-11.