

## **GENRE CONVENTIONS OF SOUTH KOREAN HOSTESS FILMS (1974–1982): PROSTITUTES AND THE DISCOURSE OF FEMALE SACRIFICE**

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The traditional theme of the prostitute in popular texts has been ubiquitously employed in different times and cultures. In the South Korean context, the cultural representation of prostitutes was most prominent in ‘hostess (a Korean euphemism for prostitute) films’ during the 1970s. This was an ironic turn of events, given that state censorship was at its peak during the military regime (1960–1979). During the 1970s, South Korean cinema was often referred to as having hit a low point due to state regulation of films. However, hostess films became box office hits and contributed to the rejuvenation of the declining Korean movie industry.

Hostess films are characterized by the dichotomy of realism and the hyper-stylistic representation of their heroines. They dealt with realistic issues related to the migration of peasant women during the industrialization of South Korea and involve the contradictory presentations of highly unrealistic, idealized heroines. While conventional Hollywood films portray sexually fallen women as immoral and eroticized, hostess films instead, focus on their extremely selfless and inherently good natures. The sacrificial qualities of hostess women often involve films with tragic endings that generically conclude with a heroine sacrificing herself for the sake of a man, a family and/or a nation. This article traces the cultural construction of the prostitute in popular texts and scrutinizes the major conventions of South Korean hostess films. In doing so, this work unspools how wider discourses concerning female sexuality, gender, and cultural politics were waged over the films’ deployment of the bodies of women and sex during a key formative period of Korean history.

Keywords: gender and popular culture, prostitutes in popular texts, film censorship, female representation and film, film history

*A young woman finally arrives in a city from a rural area which now seems too far away for her to return there. She gets a job as a housemaid in a rich man's house and is relieved that she can afford to buy herself a nice little dress and also send some money on her family. Soon afterwards however, her dream falls apart when she is raped by the man who owns the house. The girl is despised and kicked out by the wife of the man and goes to a brothel where she must endure on an everyday basis what first happened to her at the house.*

The brief synopsis above may appear to be a story of a particular film but is actually a common archetypal narrative for many South Korean hostess (*bosūt'esū*: a euphemism for prostitutes or bar girls in the Korean context of the 1970s and 1980s) films. Dozens of films from the mid 1970s to the late 70s utilized the aforementioned tropes of young girl's migration from a rural area, a social downfall instigated by rape or a similar type of sexual trauma and finally ending up at a brothel. The record-breaking box office success of two films, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (*Pyōl tūl ūi kohyang*, Yi Chang-ho, 1974) and *Young-ja's Heydays* (*Yōng-ja ūi chōnsōng sidae*, Kim Ho-sōn, 1975), in consecutive years led to a hail of the films featuring the theme of "a-peasant-girl-becomes-a-prostitute" being released. The major works in this cycle include: *Women's Street* (*Yōja tūl man sanūn kōri*, Kim Ho-sōn, 1976), *I am a Number 77 girl* (*Na nūn 77 pōn agassi*, Pak Ho-t'ae, 1978), *Winter Woman* (*Kyōul yōja*, Kim Ho-sōn, 1977), *26x365 = 0* (No Se-han, 1979), *Ms. O's Apartment* (*O yang ūi ap'at'ū*, Pyōn Chang-ho, 1978) and *Do You Know, Kkotsuni?* (*Kkotsuni rŭl asinayo?*, Chōng In-yōp, 1979).<sup>1</sup>

Korean newspapers during that time period severely criticized hostess films, pointing out that such films were just an expedient commercial resort that sought to overcome the recent decline of the film market. For example, a newspaper article, "Desperate Korean Films" addresses the problem that hostess films are a reflection of the fact that Korean cinema was losing its quality. It states that "hostess films only focus on stripping off actresses' clothing to gain audiences."<sup>2</sup> Film critics also mentioned that the presence of such obscene materials might lure young Korean girls into prostitution. *Kyōnghyang ilbo's* article, "Urge to clean up the *kisaeng* (female courtesan) tour for the feminist movement" records that the recent rise of sex tourism may be related to the growing popularity of hostess films.<sup>3</sup>

These negative views of hostess films have changed little since the 1970s: contemporary Korean film scholars continue to criticize hostess films for their

<sup>1</sup> These hostess films were ranked within the top five at the box office in that year. The Korean Film Year Book (Seoul: KOFIC).

<sup>2</sup> *Kyōnghyang ilbo*, December 8, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> *Kyōnghyang ilbo*, August 3, 1983.

sexual explicitness and lack of socially realistic representation. For instance, hostess films display “exploitive objectification of hostess bodies while dramatizing the decadence of their sexual adventures” (Pak, 123); “they did not exhibit any real analysis or criticisms of society, nor did they expose the irony of a society that put the heroines in such situations” (Min et al., 55); “hostess melodramas utilize explicit sexism by using women’s sexual and physical repression as a dominant strategy” (Yu, 143); “hostess melodramas exploit young working-class women’s bodies and sexuality by depicting them as ‘docile bodies’” (Kwōn, 417).

Other film scholars nevertheless attempt to view the thematic employment of prostitutes in hostess films in relation to the rise of female labor in urban areas and subsequent problems during the rapid industrialization period of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup> And these films dealt with actual social problems, such as sexual harassment and rape in the workplace, which frequently led to women winding up in brothels.<sup>5</sup> Kim So-young (Kim So-yōng), a Korean film scholar, sees the rise of hostess films as a symptom of state-initiated industrialization which “involved exploitation of cheap female labor by controlling their sexuality” (185). Indeed, the late 1960s and the 1970s witnessed large-scale migrations of young women and men from peasant households to factories in cities. The number of female laborers who were over the age of sixteen during this period skyrocketed to 45.7% in 1976 from 26.8% in 1960. Kim asserts that the primary reason for the increase in the number of female laborers was because in Korean rural households, a filial daughter’s sacrifice for the sake of her male siblings or her parents was a “familiar and sacralized Confucian custom” (26). Thus a young woman’s sexualized service labor was mobilized “initially at the level of family and the domestic sphere through intersecting ideologies of familism and patriarchy” (ibid.).

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<sup>4</sup> Korea went through dynamic economic reforms and rapid industrialization during the 1960s and 1970s under the military regime led by President Park Chung-Hee. According to Kim’s report on Korea’s economic progress from 1961 to 1981, the GNP tripled from \$471 to \$1,549. The primary fields of exports—agriculture, fishery, and mining shifted to labor intensive, light manufacturing fields including textiles and garments industry. Kim Kwan S. “Industrial Policy and Industrialization in Korea, 1961–1982” <http://kellogg.nd.edu/publications/workingpapers/WPS/039.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Barraclough states that working class women and girls were central to the industrialization of South Korea. During this period, “over one million women worked in the light manufacturing sector, an industry with factories all over the peninsula.” A significant number of these female factory girls were drawn to sex work, with “no available vents for their ambition, or possibilities for making money.” Ruth Barraclough, *Factory Girl Literature Sexuality, Violence, and Representation in Industrializing Korea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 72.

In a similar social context, Lee Jin-kyung connects the issue of labor and sexual exploitation of female rural migrants to the emergence of the literary “hostess genre” on which the majority of hostess films were based.<sup>6</sup> Lee describes that the prevalence of the sexual harassment and sexual offenses against young female laborers often made sensual stories for a mass culture industry in the form of films, TV and tabloid magazines.<sup>7</sup> She points out that hostess novels such as *Hometown of Stars* and *Winter Woman* involve “hostess sexuality” and commercialized female bodies as aspects of rapid urbanization and modernization (101).

These scholarly viewings are useful insofar as they at least assess hostess films as socially relevant texts that deal with the real problems and hardships of the working class and prostitutes. They however do not raise the issue of how specifically these ‘dangerous’ subjects could be rendered on screen given the notorious state censorship in operation during this time, as the state was particularly wary of the representation of lower class life and poverty.<sup>8</sup> As Park illustrates in her study of state censorship practices during the 1970s, the Park regime removed all scenes and characters or prohibited the exhibition of a film if a film was too indicative of poverty or anything against the national-development campaign during the Park regime (Park, 66–68).

In hostess films nevertheless, such ‘dangerously’ realistic portraits of lower class life and poverty survived censorship without severe amendments or revisions when compared with other genre films.<sup>9</sup> Many hostess films take place in urban areas and feature real life brothels and back alleys where prostitution was carried on. If the same measure of censorship had been applied to hostess films, portrayals of streets full of whore houses in *Women’s Street*, illegitimate motel districts in *Young-ja’s Heydays* and bars around a military base camp in *Do you Know Kkotsuni?* could not have been depicted. These films show existing sites of prostitution and sex services extensively using techniques usually associated with

<sup>6</sup> Lee Jin-kyung describes these problems as being related to female factory labor. The media of that era frequently showed anecdotal evidence along the lines of “young women’s desperate pleas seeking advice in the newspaper columns.” The increasing exposure of the occurrences and offenses might have instigated the engenderment of hostess literature. *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work and Migrant Labor in South Korea*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> See Park Yu-hee’s “The Study of Film Censorship System During Park Chung Hee Regime” in *Yöksa pip’yöngsa, yöksa pip’yöng* 99 (2012).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the scenes that contain the explicit depiction of police and lower class residents in *Young-Ja’s Heydays*, brothels in *Women’s Street* and implied student demonstrations occurring on a university campus in *Winter Woman* remain intact whereas these kinds of cases were heavily regulated in Park’s examples of films.

documentaries or realist films such as on-location shooting, long takes, long establishing shots and hand-held cameras.

I suspect that this realism could be secured mostly for two reasons. First, the films' protagonists are eroticized females who tend to be idealized and fantasized. Hostess heroines are constructed in remarkably fantasized and emblematic ways to either exaggerate or negate a woman's existence through extreme close-ups, fragmented body shots and super impositions which work to dissipate the level of realism the films featured.

The second element that safeguards the filmic realism is the thematic employment of the woman's sacrifice. Hostess films predominantly thematize a woman's sacrificing for the sake of her man, family and/or society. In early hostess films such as *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* and later films as *Ms. O's Apartment* and *I Am a No. 77 Girl*, the heroines of hostess films continuously and increasingly makes greater sacrifices: leaving home to go to the city as a breadwinner → becoming a prostitute to better support their families → leaving her man to allow him to seek a better future (because she is no longer 'clean enough') → finally ending up dead, sick or missing. This discourse of female sacrifice conforms to both the ideological norms of the sexually fallen woman and the politics of state censorship that films must campaign 'giving back' for the nation.

Therefore in-depth, textual analysis of hostess films is inevitable. This article scrutinizes the formal elements of hostess films particularly focusing on the films' strategic juxtaposition of realism and idealization of the heroine. It simultaneously relates such cinematic constructions of hostess' bodies and narratives to the discourse on female sacrifice which work to dilute the socially acerbic subjects of films controlled by state censorship. Doing this will extend previous scholarly views of hostess films beyond simply seeing them as mere sexualized texts that seek to draw the decreasing number of film goers back to the theaters. In order to better understand the distinctive mode of representation of prostitute women in hostess films, this article offers comparative analyses to other cultural texts that centralize prostitutes and female sexuality in terms of characterization, narrative construction and stylization. Finally, two canonical hostess films, Lee Jang-ho's *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (1974) and Kim Ho-sun's *Young-Ja's Heydays* (1975) will be case-studied to highlight how they construct the prostitute heroine utilizing a range of visual/auditory elements from camera movements, framing and sound muting to narrative devices such as characterization and voice over/flashback.

## THEME OF THE PROSTITUTE AND FALLEN WOMAN IN POPULAR TEXTS: NARRATIVE AND CHARACTERIZATION

The popular rendition of prostitutes or sexually fallen women is not unique to South Korean hostess films. It is prevalent in various time periods and cultures. It is found in places as varied as Victorian literature, early Hollywood films (e.g. fallen women films) and other national cinemas (Weimar street films), all of which employ prostitutes as a form of social satire or cultural text that subsumes the basic human values of desire, vanity and survival. Overall, popular representations of prostitutes have been ambivalent (Roos, 2006; Pullen, 2005; Pattnaik, 2009). As Patrice Petro notes, the idea of a prostitute developed into “an emblem for the cinema as a whole, typifying literary intellectuals’ simultaneous contempt for and fascination with an openly commercial (and hence “venal”) form” (8).

Petro mentions that the ambivalent social identities of prostitutes invited both hostility and defensiveness and that the prostitute became a primary icon that harbored multi-faceted meanings of life and society in various arts and cultural texts. In Weimar culture, Expressionist artists used the icon of the prostitute in various forms that reflect “facets of modern life as expressionists experienced... as the artistic personification that transgresses the social, moral and legal boundaries” (114). The socially transgressive nature of the prostitute is both celebrated and despised by the expressionists. On the one hand, the prostitute is a holy public figure. She is selfless and indiscriminating to humans and can liberate people from sexual and moral constraints. On the other hand, she is a quintessential symbol of money and power in modern capitalist society. She commoditizes herself all night just as “the shelves in supermarket are constantly refilled.”<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, even as a symbol of capitalism, the prostitute is occasionally charged with positive values such as social activism and determination. These values allowed writers, including Bertolt Brecht, to deploy prostitutes to voice social criticism. Brecht’s prostitute characters such as Frau Hogge in *Lux in Tenebris* (1919) and Leokadja Begbick in *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1927) who are the owners of the brothel, represent “resourceful entrepreneurs and savvy business women” who learn to modify outdated and rigid middle class values of “cleanliness, thriftiness and hospitality” (Hanssen, 159–162). The prostitutes’ social activities are intermingled with the notion of the increasing visibility of women in the work place and the attainment of social power during

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<sup>10</sup> The poem by Oscar Kanehl. “Nachtcafe” (1913). Quoted from Christiane Shonfeld’s “Prostitutes in Expressionism,” *Commodities of Desire* (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), 119.

the Weimar period. White collar women and prostitutes are sometimes similarly conceptualized as being representative of the “New Woman” in literature, both representing a dissenting voice that challenges the pre-existing discourse on sexuality and gender (Smith, 2008).

Positive portraits of prostitutes also appear in early Korean literature such as the New Novels (*sinsosŏl*), the novels that emerged during the Japanese occupation (1910–1945). For instance, Yŏng-ch’ae in Yi Kwang-su’s *No Love* (*Mujŏng*, 1917) is featured as a strong-willed woman who sacrifices herself by becoming a *kisaeng* to save her imprisoned father and eventually becomes a musician. Although she descended to become a sex worker, she is depicted in a positive light because she did not give up on her dream of becoming a musician. These kinds of positive views regarding the *kisaeng* character are also accentuated by the male protagonist. He blames himself for having been a ‘hypocrite’ concerning her ‘background’ as a *kisaeng* and regrets that he left Yŏng-ch’ae and did not marry her.

Perhaps these literary and artistic works on prostitutes were relatively more progressive and ‘generous’ compared to the representation of prostitutes in the cinematic context, because presumably literary and artistic products were less constrained by censorship than was the case for films over which censors had more direct and immediate control. In films, prostitutes tend to appear predominantly in a negative light, typically being accused of overt sexuality, immorality and greed. Largely infused with the Victorian epitome of ‘fallen woman,’ prostitute narratives are prevalent in early cinematic texts such as fallen woman films (1920s), White slavery films (1930s) and Weimar street films (*Strassenfilms*, 1918–1933). If not prostitutes as in these texts, some variations of the sexually fallen women are ubiquitously present in films as a generic form of, for instance, ‘femme fatales,’ ‘vamps’ and ‘gold diggers’.

Some scholars see the roots of such negatively charged characterizations of prostitutes or sexually fallen women in early American cinema in Victorian models of characterizations of prostitutes (Campbell, 1999; Fishbein, 1986). In Victorian literature, the definition of a prostitute is often character-based and not simply sexually-based (Attwood, 2011). Ralph Wardlaw, an early Victorian writer, claimed that the term, prostitute was a “designation of character.” Prostitutes were characterized as women with weak will power and fatal moral flaws who “chose to select ‘the strength of the sexual propensity, and the comparative weakness of the moral principle’” (Attwood, 3). Accordingly, these Victorian prostitutes are often portrayed with common expressions such as ‘inherently immoral,’ ‘shameless,’ and

‘impulsive’ in their actions, because their choices were based on their innate nature of moral weakness.<sup>11</sup>

This idea of the Victorian prostitute transferred to the silver screen in early fallen woman films the 1930s. The quality of the heroine in fallen woman films is typically defined as sexually aggressive, materially driven, exploitative (especially in their relationships with men) and unashamed (Jacobs, 1997; Vieira, 1999). Jacob’s analysis implies that such negative qualities are not causally related to a woman’s sexual activeness. In other words, she is bad not because she is sexually active, but she is ‘innately’ bad and sexual activeness is simply one of the innately negative qualities that come with being bad. Such characterizations inevitably locate the sexual woman in an immoral position. Jean Hollow in *Red Headed Woman* (Conway, 1932) is one of the most salient examples of such women: Lil (Jean Hollow) confidently ‘intrudes’ into her boss’ house when his wife is away and seduces him. She persuasively convinces him when he tries to return to his wife. Other similar examples include, Barbara Stanwyck in *Baby Face* (Green, 1933), Mae West in *I’m No Angel* (Ruggles, 1933) and *She Done Him Wrong* (Sherman, 1933),

The characterization of the sexually fallen woman in early American cinema developed further and conventionalized into the more popular icon of the ‘femme fatale’ in noir films and later genres of action films or thrillers: numerous examples include Rita Heyworth in *Gilda* (Vidor, 1946), Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947), and numerous look-alikes, who remain as popular icons of the sexualized, evil woman. These women are characterized by their rejection of traditional womanhood, and therefore are a threat to the male. The *femme fatale* “threatens the *status quo* and the hero...uses sex as a weapon to control men, not merely in the culturally acceptable capacity of procreation within marriage” (Blaser, 1995)<sup>12</sup>. Her sexual emancipation and breaking of the traditional norm of womanhood normally result in inevitable punishment in the end.

These inherently negative qualities attached to a prostitute/fallen woman in popular media usually call for the woman dooming herself at the end. As some scholars point out, the industry’s self censorship canonized the narrative in which the fallen women is eventually destroyed in the service of the “moral standard of audiences” (Jacobs, p. 76; Fishbein, 1987; Staiger, 1995). Simply speaking, the fallen woman film could not have a happy ending, and if it did have a happy ending, it was “designed to fulfill a didactic function” (Jacobs, 76). The patriarchal

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<sup>11</sup> Emma Liggins. “Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s.” *Critical Survey*. Vol. 15 No. 3. (2003).

<sup>12</sup> John Blaser, “No Place for a Woman: The Family in Film Noir,” 2008, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/noir/np05ff.html>.



discourse of the sexual woman ‘getting what she deserves’ became an axiom of early classical narrative films, whereby the narrative punishment of “downward progress” involves the fallen woman commonly ending up tragically with disease, destitution and early death (mostly suicide) (Attwood, 2010; Auerbach, 1982).

Indeed, the narrative device of the ‘downward progress’ of a fallen woman or a prostitute character works efficiently, fleshing out ideological norms of female sexuality. Also, applied to their social status, it solidifies representational stereotypes of lower class women. As Liggins exemplifies in her discussion of early Victorian prostitute literature, the working class status of the prostitute woman is often used to indicate her sexual openness.<sup>13</sup> Liggins argues that working class women tend to be attacked on the grounds of “their sexual knowledge and consequent impurity ... given that they have a ‘familiarity’ with and ‘completer knowledge’ of sexual matters than middle-class girls, therefore often considered very close to the shameless prostitute, even if they do not sell their bodies on the street” (41–42). Such stereotypes imposed on working class prostitute women function to justify the ‘prostitute narrative’ of a downward path, rationalizing the tragic ending of the prostitute.

As these examples demonstrate, the prostitute’s downward path is predominantly caused by her innate immorality and class background which is likely to be related to her sexual inclinations. The South Korean hostess films conform to this popular tendency of a downward narrative of a ‘fallen woman getting what she deserves,’ by giving the heroine either a pessimistic fate—by committing suicide (*Heavenly Homecoming Stars I*, 26X365=0), having an accident (*Young-ja’s Heydays*), or going missing (*Ms. O’s Apartment, Do you Know Kkotsuni?*), or an ambiguous ‘happy ending’ which gives the heroine an unpromising marriage or makes her work for others. However, I would like to highlight the fact that hostess films remarkably reverse the typical characters of prostitute women. Hostess women are seldom characterized as having inordinate sexual desires or material greed but instead are depicted as being inherently good and selfless in nature. As the female protagonists of the hostess films *Young-ja’s Heydays* and *Ms. O’s Apartment* exemplify, the hostess woman is exceedingly sacrificial for her family in the countryside; Young-ja sends all her money, which she has received as compensation from the insurance company for her arm that was mutilated in the factory, to her family. Ms. O prostitutes herself to pay medical bills for her sick father and college tuition for her brother.

However, as mentioned above, these virtuous traits of hostess women do not necessarily lead to happy endings, and the unhappy endings in turn dramatize and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

emphasize the sacrificial theme of the hostess woman's life even more. Unlike the typical triumphant happy endings that involve innocent, wholesome female characters in classic Hollywood films such as *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954) and *Meet me in St. Louis* (Minnelli, 1944), hostess women are repeatedly degraded despite their underlying good natures and the sacrifices that they make that sufficiently justify their decisions to engage in prostitution.

The episode concerning the ending sequence of *Young-ja's Heydays* (hereafter, *Young-ja*) well portrays the persistence of the theme of sacrifice found within the context of the downward narratives of hostess films. The film originally presented Young-ja as dying in an accidental fire—the same ending as in the original novel. However, Kim Ho-sun, the director, changed this to having Young-ja marry a poor, disabled man that she does not love, while leaving her true love for the sake of his future.<sup>14</sup> Kim mentions that he wanted Young-ja to achieve “redemption” by at least giving her a chance to marry (a disabled man), and the director presumably regards this ‘redemptive’ act as being a ‘happy ending.’ The reason why Kim changed the ending inevitably begs the question of whether such a transformed ending constitutes ‘redemption’ or just another downhill turn in her life.

This ambiguous ‘happy’ ending can also be found in another hostess film, *Winter Woman*. *Winter Woman* traces the life of a woman who ‘philanthropically’ sacrifices her sexuality to redeem the death of an admirer who killed himself as the result of her denial of him. The shock of his death induces her to make her body available to whoever wants her. After a series of sexual encounters, she meets a devastated high school teacher to whom she imparts peace of mind, after which she begins a new life with him as a teacher for children with intellectual disabilities. These heroines are similar in their characterizations and the closure they are given. Both Ihwa and Young-ja are prototypical examples of a ‘good woman’ with their selfless natures and naïveté implied by their lack of previous sexual experiences and desire. Nevertheless, they fail to become or achieve what they want but rather are put into positions where they have to live for the well-being of others.

In terms of technical aspects, the sacrificial and selfless heroines in hostess films are visualized in an abusive and exploitative manner. Some Korean film scholars have pointed out that the exploitative use of close-ups and fragmented body shots involving female protagonists is one of the dominant features of hostess films (Yu, 2000; Kim, S., 2012). Drawing on Laura Mulvey's notion of

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<sup>14</sup> During his interview with the author, Kim stated that this version was designed in order for the film to pass the censorship which would not have passed such a tragic and pessimistic ending because it could be seen as being more “socially critical.”

woman as a visual spectacle in narrative cinema, Kim Sun-ah points out that Young-ja's face in *Young-ja* is repeatedly shown using extreme close-ups. The moment of the heroine's facial close-up brings the narrative to a halt and establishes the woman as a fetish (138). Yu Ji-na extends Kim's argument that such employment of women in hostess films entitles the films to be classified as belonging to the 'female body' genre. The female body genre was originally termed by Linda Williams and elaborated by dozens of scholars including Carol Clover (1992) and Yvonne Tasker (1993). Williams states that such films are often marked by "bodily excess" generated through the "presence of the sexually ecstatic woman, the tortured woman, the weeping woman," all of which provokes audiences' active engagement (Williams, 5).

Nevertheless, I would argue that the representation of women found in hostess films is often shown in a way that de-eroticizes or actually obscures women's presence. More particularly, the facial close-ups of hostess women in sex scenes tend to be predominantly de-eroticized. Instead of exaggerating women's sexual engagement, hostess films rather focus on their 'unnaturally' emotionless facial expressions and static bodily movements. The woman is displayed as being somewhat 'machine-like' and lacking in human emotions even when she is with the man with whom she is romantically involved. One of the hostess woman's defining characteristics is her 'selflessness,' which is visually rendered throughout these sexual scenes. As two stills from the hostess films, *Winter Woman* and *I am a No. 77 Girl* (Figure 3-1) below exemplify, many sex scenes involving the female protagonist and male counterpart contain facial close-ups of the woman concentrating on her emotionless static face. This distinguishes them from the typical construction of sex scenes that exploits the romanticized and exaggerated facial expressions of women who are engaging in sex: e.g. the famous "orgasm scene" from *When Harry met Sally* (Nora Ephron, 1989).



Fig. 1: Gona in *I am a No. 77 girl* and Ihwa in *Winter Woman*

In addition, these female expressions are occasionally shot from the camera eye from the male point of view, using a high angle from which the male looks down on the heroine (Figure 3-2). Throughout *Winter Woman* and *Young-ja* including the sex scenes and other scenes where the heroine encounters men, the scenes tend to begin with a camera showing the woman looking upwards at the man relayed by camera shots showing the man looking down at the woman. For example, in *Winter Woman* Ihwa rarely owns a point-of-view shot. During the scene where Ewha encounters Yo-sub, her first man at the cathedral, the camera shot predominantly employs the male point of view, looking down on Ihwa. When she engages in sex with her second love, Sök-ki, this type of 'looking down' male POV shot returns and captures her during the entire sequence.



Fig. 2: The rape scene shot from a male perspective in *Young-ja's Heydays*

Accordingly, the hostess woman tends to be ‘captured’ within the male perspective, which in turn hinders access to the woman’s presence. The camera technique is often accompanied and empowered by the thematic convention of a male voice over, flash backs and dream and fantasy sequences led by male characters. Two canonical hostess films, Lee’s *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars* (hereafter, *Heavenly*) and Kim’s *Young-ja* are germane examples of how these films orchestrate such visual and thematic elements.

### **AN EROTIC TALE OF A SACRIFICIAL PROSTITUTE: YOUNG-JA’S HEYDAYS (KIM, 1975) AND HEAVENLY HOMECOMING TO STARS (LEE, 1974)**

*Young-ja* is one of the most popular and foundational hostess films that led to the canonization of the genre. It was released in 1975 by Kim Ho-sun. The film gathered an audience of 361,213 people, the highest number of tickets sold for any film that year. This occurred only a year after that another successful hostess film, *Heavenly* broke the annual box office record in 1974.<sup>15</sup>

To explain the enormous financial success of *Young-ja*, critics and scholars have pointed to this film’s social relevance. Apart from this film’s seemingly erotic tone that explicates the story of a prostitute, scholars argue that the film deals with the social reality of lower class life which accorded with the public’s desire to see something that related to their own realities (An, 1989; Kwon, 1999; Park, 1997).<sup>16</sup> Roh’s analysis of *Young-ja* indicates that the original book and the film were both consumed by large numbers of female factory workers and sexual workers. Roh emphasizes that the film studios and directors may have reflected this particular consumer demographic which was gradually increasing among movie goers.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> During the 105 days after its premiere, *Heavenly* attracted around 465,000 filmgoers and also recorded the largest film audiences for 1974.

<sup>16</sup> Pak Mi-suk (Park Mi-Sook), “Yŏnghwa rŭl t’onghae pon maech’un pogosŏ – Yŏngja ūi chŏnsŏng sidae esŏ” (Report on prostitution through the film, *Young-Ja’s Heydays*), *Mal* (Words), December 1972), Kwŏn Ūn-sŏn (Kwon Eun-sun), “Kŭ sijŏl, Yŏng-ja rŭl asinayo?” (Do you know Yŏng-ja from that period?) in *CINE21*, December 28, 1999. An Pyŏng-sŏp (An Byung-Sup), “Ūmji ūi insaeng ūl t’onghae pon minjung ūi sam kwa kŏn’gangsŏng—Yŏngja ūi chŏnsŏng sidae” (Looking at the life and health of the Minjung through a dark life, *Young-ja’s Heydays*) in *Cine-Reality, Imaginative Reality*, Chŏngŭmsa, 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Roh Ji-Seung, “The Pleasure of a Lower Class Woman in the Movie *Young-Ja’s Heydays* (Yŏng-ja ūi chŏnsŏng sidae)” —An Essay on the Cultural History of Class and Gender” in *The Study of Korean Literature* (2008).

*Young-ja* is a type of melodrama in which a ‘girl with a heart of gold’ moves to a city and progressively degrades as she strives to earn money to send to her family in her rural home. The film begins with a scene of prostitutes being interrogated by police in a motel district located in a dimly lit area of Seoul. Young-ja, one of the prostitutes, is arrested by the police and runs into her old love, Chang-su, at the police station. In her flashback, the film goes back to the time when Young-ja first encountered Chang-su who worked for the owner of the house where she had begun to work as a housemaid. Chang-su immediately fell in love with her and wanted to marry Young-ja. However, he postponed his plan because he enlisted in the military to go to Vietnam. Meanwhile, Young-ja is raped by the scoundrel son of the homeowner and is repeatedly abused by him.

Soon afterwards, Young-ja is kicked out of the house by the son’s mother who blames and denounces her as an “ungrateful bitch.” From this point onwards, Young-ja’s life gradually goes downhill; after wondering about a series of meagerly paying jobs, she finally works as a bus conductor. She is happy in this job but loses her arm in an auto accident. She has nowhere else to go, so she goes to a brothel where she works under the name of Venus, the nickname she acquires because she only has one arm. The film returns to its beginning, where Young-ja reunites with Chang-su at the police station. Chang-su hopes to start a new life with her but their romance does not last very long. Young-ja thinks that she has been tainted by her experiences and will never be good enough for Chang-su. She decides to leave him and marry a man who is disabled just as she is.

As the narrative demonstrates, Young-ja, despite her inherently good, selfless nature, undergoes events throughout the film—leaving home → amputation of her arm → prostitution → sacrificial marriage—that are progressively worse and impose bigger costs on Young-ja. Symbolically, these incidents that Young-ja experiences throughout this film, such as rape, injury at work and moving into the sex industry, etc. are all similar to the type of issues frequently experienced by working class women particularly during the rapid industrialization period.<sup>18</sup>

This thematization of working class hardships could be read in conjunction with the state concept that Park Chung-hee designed and campaigned for in order to expedite the industrialization process. The Park administration emphasized the spirit of “giving back” to the nation for the prosperity of the state. Participating in the national project of modernization was not optional but rather “the Korean people’s duty” (Park, 80). With the enactment of this campaign, the Korean people, particularly women were subjected as a public offering for the “greater

<sup>18</sup> Cho Oe-Suk, “Han’guk yŏnghwa e nat’anan hach’ŭng kyegŭp yŏsongsang yŏn’gu—1970 nyŏndaeyŏnghwa rŭl chungsim ŭro” (Analysis of lower class women and female laborers in 1970s Korean films) (2002).

good.” This vigorous national project that imposed sacrifices people was doubly worse for women. Lee Jin-kyung explains that states played a significant role in “mobilizing and legislating working-class women’s sexuality, that is, in industrializing sex.”

The Park government established a series of laws, regulations and legal mechanisms during the 1960s and 1970s that were intended to indirectly facilitate the enlistment of working class women in the profitable sex tourism industry (22). During this time, women were not only utilized as cheap labor in sweatshops but also manipulated to meet the need for the sex workers. Park simultaneously promoted tourism as a source of foreign exchange “to replace that previously acquired through participation of Korean troops in Vietnam...the number of Japanese tourists to South Korea jumped from 96,531 in 1972 to 217,287 in 1973 in just one year promoting sex tours...”<sup>19</sup> The Park administration issued work permits that legitimized prostitution at hotels that catered to foreign travelers in 1973 in order to boost the tourism industry.<sup>20</sup>

*Young-ja* configures the social ills that prevailed under the Park regime’s tyrannical rule and controls by depicting a young rural woman who suffers from the same kind of tragedy. The story of repression and poverty is realistically set in the existing lower class residence and red light districts. On the other hand, the female protagonist, Young-ja is seen in a highly non-realistic, hyperbolic manner which must have been used to protect the film’s vivid representation of lower class life from the intervention of censorship. The opening sequence in *Young-ja* epitomizes how the film strategically uses both figurative and realistic representation to execute its premise.

The opening sequence begins with the camera back-tracking a little boy who is slowly walking around back alleys. It is a dark night. The only thing that the audience can see is the dimly lit sign of a humble motel located in a presumably recognizable area in Seoul where small lodges and motels are crammed together in order to lure male clients. The subjective camera is hand held and aimlessly wanders every corner of the street showing drunken men passing by. Finally the camera stops to focus on some unknown woman’s face using an extreme frontal close up. She is waving her hand in strong denial. The viewers soon find out that she is a prostitute and the camera ‘eye’ was a police man. She is arrested and the man who was hiding behind her is seen running away. In the following scene, the heroine Young-ja appears in a similar extreme close up shot and is also arrested indicating that she is one of these prostitutes too.

<sup>19</sup> Yoon, “Agenda Building in South Korea,” in *Handbook of Global Social Policy*. Ed. Stuart Nagel (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2000), 172.

<sup>20</sup> Cho Oe-suk, “An Analysis of Lower Class Women,” 32.

The sequence conjures a documentary-like effect by offering a vulgar and yet sincere portrait of tenement life by displaying poor streets. The film invasively tracks the back of an anonymous by-passer on a small dark street. The extreme low key lighting obscures the faces of bystanders but only spotlights the dilapidation of the street: torn-off posters, blinking street lights and run down houses. However, these markers of lower-class poverty and desperation are conspicuously shown by the streetwalkers' shabby outfits and slouched postures. In addition, their status is metaphorized through degrees of visibility. The main characters do not appear until after the camera completes such a lengthy, meaning-laden sketch of the dark street in a city that is teeming with people and objects all of which are indicative of lower class reality.

This quasi-documentary introduction breaks its mood with representations of female characters, particularly through the use of close-up shots of the prostitute heroine accompanied by sound muting. Such a lack of sound is accompanied with the heroine's exceedingly visible, frontal close up that emphasizes her facial expressions either in pain, fear or arbitrarily emotionlessness. In the opening sequence, for instance, the first prostitute who is caught by the police and Young-ja are shown in their huge wigs while holding their artificially red lips wide open, supposedly screaming and denying that they are prostitutes. Because these visual indications are off-sound, the viewers are prompted to focus more on the visual elements.

What is striking in this sequence is the prominent contrast between the mode of representation which realistically renders the street by using hand-held cameras and location shooting. It simultaneously presents elaborate visuals of women using close-ups paired with muted sound which invokes her presence as an 'image' rather than an actual presence. This contrast establishes the woman as being 'incorporeal' in that she is simultaneously existent and non-existent. It resonates with feminist accounts of filmic representation of women: how women and women's bodies are both visible and invisible in popular cinema. She must be 'corporeally' visible for male pleasure but at the same time she is invisible because her existence is imagined to reach such goal.

In numerous instances, a woman's body becomes a crucial means of accomplishing these ends. Williams has noted that because a woman's body invokes powerful sensations with her sexuality, women on screen have been inserted into various levels of cultural discourses and are subjected to various cultural functions that a given society needs to reinforce. This mode of address visualizes woman's labor (body) as amorphous and transitory and directly relates to the question of women's agency. Janet Staiger notes that woman's agency, or as she puts it, "the essence of woman" in movies is often seen as the "transitory



object (here woman)” which works as “an ideological maneuver attempting to stabilize an eternal subject (here man)” (12).<sup>21</sup>

The opening sequence of *Young-ja* is a prelude that shows how a woman is muted, victimized or sacrificed throughout the film. The muted voices of these two prostitute women are followed by the hands of the police man who captures them, and this symbolically represents the power dynamics between the dominated and the dominant. Throughout the film, this type of technique is used to present Young-ja in terms of a man’s visual captivation. It is frequently shown especially when she is abused and sacrificed. For example, during the entire scene where Young-ja is raped by the son of the house-owner where she works as a housemaid, the camera presents a male POV. Young-ja is shown from the perspective of a male penetrator from a high angle (from top to bottom). The camera aggressively moves forward (and then moves to bottom) and puts her into a corner. Her frightened, tearful face is seen in increasingly larger facial close-ups.

The elaborated visualization of the woman presented above is reiterated and simultaneously contrasted with the realist sets of the *p’anjajip* (lower class residence) districts. After extensive panning which shows irregularly arranged *p’anjajip* on a vast land featuring a half-built apartment complex in the background, Chang-su, miraculously finds Young-ja in one of the tin houses, after she had suddenly left him. She is married to a man who is also a disabled amputee. Chang-su is embittered by the fact that the woman he loves is now married to somebody else. He can do nothing more than wish her happiness. Young-ja and Chang-su chat briefly, and then the film’s final scene shows Chang-su and Young-ja’s husband, whom she has just introduced to Chang-Su, cheerfully going for a drink behind a super imposition of Young-ja’s face.

This somewhat abrupt ending maximizes the bridge between realism and the stylization of the heroine in the opening sequence. Unlike the candid sketches of the *p’anjajip* district which includes the detailed backdrop of apartment construction sites, she is shown in an elaborate close-up and super-imposition over the images of two men riding bicycles and talking about going for a drink. Here, the last sequence ends with the formation of the homo-social couple while Young-ja amorphously floats above. This nonsensical ending inevitably raises three questions: first, if it was meant to be a happy ending as the director claimed, why did this last scene fail to show either Young-ja and Chang-su or Young-ja and her husband together instead of two abruptly bonded males? Second, how does

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<sup>21</sup> Staiger particularly talks about movies in their teens, how the construction of women’s representation was practiced even in the primitive cinema. *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

Young-ja's super-imposition function in this sequence? And finally what does Young-ja's "heyday" eventually symbolize?

A meaning-laden copy line of another hostess film, *Winter Woman* directed by the same director seems to be deeply relevant to these questions. The movie poster positions brightly smiling Ihwa, next to the copy line that says, "Ihwa belongs to everyone but at the same time to no one." This tag line conceptualizes her as 'public property' but also excludes her existence from "everyone." To the same extent, Young-ja, the hostess woman, cannot be a central figure because she merely exists for the sake of these two men as a super imposed "belonging." In this sense, the film seems to have a happy ending less for Young-ja than for her men. Young-ja's "heyday" makes sense because her men are happy.



Fig. 3: *Winter Woman*. "Ihwa belongs to everyone but at the same time to no one"

Throughout the film, Young-ja is continuously excluded and subordinated to male characters through various techniques of fragmentation (facial and bodily close-ups), super-imposition and sound mutation. These techniques function to accentuate and idealize the female sacrifice for the sake of her family and men—Chang-su and her disabled husband.

Similar visual techniques and thematic elements are employed in an equally successful hostess film, *Heavenly* which was released a year before. The film features the tragic story of Kyōng-a, a woman who migrated to the city and proceeded to fall into prostitution after unsuccessful romances with four different men. Kyōng-a encounters her first man, Yōng-sōk, in the company where she works as a typist. She believes he may eventually marry her, so reluctantly accepts

his imposition of pre-marital sex on her. Yǒng-sǒk soon leaves her for a woman he believes will be better bride-material than Kyǒng-a. Abandoned, Kyǒng-a meets the second man, Man-jun. He constantly accuses Kyǒng-a of infidelity which she did not commit. Kyǒng-a descends into prostitution. The third man whom Kyǒng-a meets on a new job is Tong-hyǒk. He considers Kyǒng-a to be his personal possession. He treats her as a sexual object and even brands his name on her body. The last man, Mun-ho seems to be her true love. Mun-ho takes her under his wing by providing her with a home and care. Kyǒng-a soon falls in love and wants to build a new life with him but the man does not ask for her hand in marriage and will never do so. One snowy day, intoxicated with alcohol, she goes out to a deserted mountain and consumes a handful of sleeping pills with a handful of snow.

The film was a record breaking hit in 1974. It attracted an audience of 464,308 which led to the production of two sequels (1979, 1981). The film also won numerous awards, including the Best New Director Award at the Grand Bell Awards (1974) and the Baeksang Art Awards for Best Cinematography (1975), which demonstrated that the film was critically valued as well. Some critics attributed the success of the film to its candid depiction of the changes in women's life in an industrializing society: "Indeed, at the time, numerous women who came to the city during the course of Korea's industrialization and modernization worked as hostesses in bars, and the movie reflects this state of affairs,"<sup>22</sup> Cho mentions that hostess films such as *Heavenly* are critical texts through which one can observe the "situations of lower class women during the period of industrialization" (4).<sup>23</sup>

These accounts convincingly suggest that *Heavenly* deals with the 'real' issue of young peasant women during the migration period of the 1970s. However, the heroine, Kyǒng-a is highly staged and dramatized with respect to her actions and emotional state which distances her from realism. Furthermore, the manner of female depiction is often empowered by flashbacks or dream sequences led by male characters accompanied with elaborate visual techniques including slow motion/pacing, tableau shots and zooming.

The film begins with Mun-ho holding a white box which appears to be a funeral urn. The narration states that it belongs to Kyǒng-a. The film flashes back to where Mun-ho first encountered Kyǒng-a. The camera shows Mun-ho in a bar drawing someone in his sketch book. Then Mun-ho looks at the subject of his

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted from the notes on the film, The Korean Film Archive. [http://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100\\_52.asp](http://www.koreafilm.org/feature/100_52.asp).

<sup>23</sup> See Cho's "The Analysis of Lower Class Women and Female Labor in the 1970s and 80s Korean films," MA Thesis (2002).

sketches, Kyōng-a, who appears in heavy make-up and wearing a flamboyant wig, which signal her current profession. The camera in a tableau exhibits her actions—sipping her drinks and smoking, slowly paced. The camera then returns to Mun-ho’s drawing and his gaze towards Kyōng-a. She is shown again in another tableau with more dramatization: her repetitive drinking and smoking are again slowly paced using intense lighting, making her look somewhat ‘staged.’ The scene is exclusively framed for her. The presence of the bartender is indicated off-screen, only showing the hands of the bartender pouring drinks and lighting her cigarettes.

The ‘staging’ of Kyōng-a is maximized in the final sequence. The scene starts with a landscape view of a vast plain that is completely covered in snow. Kyōng-a appears out of nowhere and slowly walks in a zigzag manner towards the camera positioned in front of her. She stumbles and takes out the sleeping pills wrapped in her handkerchief. In an extreme close-up, she hallucinates and smiles at her very first love, Yōng-sōk whom she imagines running towards her. She soon recognizes that it is a hallucination. She frowns and slowly consumes a larger quantity of sleeping pills followed by a handful of snow. Her persistent dialogue with herself, “I should not fall asleep here,” emerges as an internal sound which contradicts her consumption of sleeping pills.



Fig. 4: Kyōng-a’s suicide in the snow, *Heavenly Homecoming to Stars*

In a manner similar to the opening sequence of *Young-ja*, the voice of woman is ‘internalized’ as a non-diegetic sound, if not muted. Furthermore, her actions—walking and taking pills and snow are slowly-paced and sometimes shown in slow motion which dramatize and emphasize her visuality. At the end of the sequence, the camera zooms onto her motionless body and then fades out. Her out-of-focus presence dissolves to the previously shown white box (urn) in the arms of Mun-ho who looks down on it. The film ends showing him mourning and the intertitle

follows, “Farewell, Kyōng-a...” This unexpected intertitle is significant because it seems to represent the collective voice of the four men with whom Kyōng-a was involved. This collective voice sentimentalizes and implicitly establishes the woman as a victimized rural woman who moved to the city to support her family but was abused by the men who used her and then left her in pursuit of money and better lives.

The two films, *Yōng-ja* and *Heavenly* are very similar with respect to their employment of cinematic techniques that involve the heroine. Both films exhibit a high degree of aestheticization which operates in a manner that excludes the prostitute heroines from aspects of the films that explicitly represent the ‘real world.’ The endings of these films represent the exclusion of the female protagonists from the territory of the real world, and these films implicitly position them as a ‘collective entity,’ namely, women who have sacrificed themselves for the sake of male characters.

In this article, I have demonstrated how South Korean hostess films endorsed and nurtured the cinematic construction of female sexuality, idealized in a way that complies with the patriarchal discourse of women’s sacrifice. Although I have dealt with a particular film genre from a particular period, the re-presentational mode of femininity in hostess films resonates with women in other popular Korean film texts. As mentioned previously, I am particularly concerned about the persistently recurring notion of female sacrifice which imposes woman’s labor and sex as a form of compensation (both thematically and visually). This generic tendency was not limited to the genre of ‘hostess films’ but was widely employed in subsequent films of the 1980s, such as the erotic historical films (*ero-sagūk*), in which women were positioned as bodily and sexually exploitable as female servants, courtesans and surrogate mothers. I hope my work offers a base for more scrutinizing, forthcoming assessments of these films, which have been so meager despite these films’ conspicuous cultural supremacy for over a half decade. In this way, hostess women, and their distinctive journey will not remain as mere examples of cultural salvation during a ‘dark period of history’ but an invitation to all other cultural texts that are predicated upon women.

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