

# *When I See You as Mother/Daughter: Korean Women's Visibility in When Life Gives You Tangerine*

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**Abstract.** This article takes the Korean TV drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* as an example to explore the relationship among three generations of mothers and daughters in Korean society. This study selected two scenes from the film as examples for visual text analysis. By focusing on the research of the film's lighting design, I demonstrated the different value systems and emotional connections between women of different generations in terms of family and work. This study combines film theory with feminist theory to explore the hidden needs and desires of women within the family. Based on the experiences of three women from different eras, Gwang-rye Jeon, Ae-sun Oh, and Geum-myeong Yang, combined with the 30 years of changes of the women's movement in South Korea, I reflect on the visibility of mother-daughter relationships and the subjectivity of women in the family. This essay also provides new visual and textual interpretations of the mother-daughter relationship in feminism in cinema studies.

**Keywords:** Mother-daughter Relationship, Feminism, Korean Drama, Film Theory, East Asian Studies

## **1. Introduction**

When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. This is a common English saying and the story behind the English translation of the TV drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* (2025). The Chinese translation of the show's title, *After Hardship, I Meet You*, also has the same meaning. Throughout the life of the protagonist Ae-sun Oh, after enduring hardships, what she gained was not only her loved ones and family members, but also the touching mother-daughter relationship with her mother Gwang-rye Jeon and daughter Geum-myeong Yang. This article is an elaboration on this mother-daughter relationship in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. My research focuses on the unseen contributions of mothers in family relationships and how their needs as women are concealed within the family, and how the film presents this relationship through different visual means. The two segments analyzed here start in 1960, spanning three generations up until 1994. This study explores Korean mother-daughter relationships across different historical contexts, examining connections that endure through changing eras as well as dynamics that vary between generations. By comparison, identify the commonalities and differences in the mother-daughter relationships in relation to women's changing social status in Korean society. I will select two segments to conduct a textual analysis of the TV drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

To achieve this, this article draws inspiration from film and media studies and conducts analysis from the perspectives of lighting design, camera angle, and character blocking. This article focuses on two different mother-daughter moments in the TV series and analyzes the characters' motivations driving the plot forward, and explores the underlying values of women's roles in society. Through audio-visual language analysis, I will delve deep into the first episode of the TV show, where Gwang-rye picks up her daughter Ae-sun, and the camera changes in reaction to the changes in the mother-daughter relationship. Then I will analyze a parallel scene from episode four, where Ae-sun tidies up the shoes for her daughter Geum-myeong, and the camera angle as well as character blocking reflect the relationships among the mother and daughter. What's more, this essay also connects visual analysis with feminist theory, especially the description of "feminist destroyers" proposed by Sara Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*.

Ultimately, this article delves deep into the changing roles of women in Korean society by studying the mother-daughter relationship in contemporary TV drama. What's more, this article focuses on describing the different choices that mothers and daughters make in their respective identities, but also thinks about the generational social problems from different angles. It is also intended that by revealing the hidden, normative expectations surrounding domesticity and motherhood, more women can be seen in environments other than family relationships. This study takes the question of whether "women's needs" and "desires are seen" as its central concern, and proposes a new analytical framework for understanding the emotional structure of mother-daughter relationships in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. This framework not only reveals how moving-image form shapes female subjectivity, but also fills a theoretical gap in mother-daughter studies regarding the politics of visibility.

## 2. Cultural background

The TV drama, *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, premiered on the day before Women's Day in 2025, presenting the life of an ordinary woman in Korean society in a slow-flowing dramatic television style. The show follows the protagonist Ae-sun's life story from being a daughter to being a mother, and her experiences have been constantly changing because of the society and her family. The three generations of the family represented in the show are as follows: the grandmother is called Gwang-rye Jeong, the heroine is called Ae-sun Oh, and the daughter is called Geum-myeong Yang.

The grandmother, Gwang-rye, is a haenyeo (female sea diver) and lives a life of hardship on the margin of the Korean society in 1960. The haenyeo culture presented at the beginning of the TV show runs through the entire series and influences several generations. Haenyeo culture dates back to the 17th century and were inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016 [1]. In such a historical context, the harsh haenyeo working condition and generational gap have created a rift in the mother-daughter relationship between Gwang-rye and Ae-sun in the show. Ae-sun feels that her mother's haenyeo job left Gwang-rye no time to accompany her and made Gwang-rye's health worse. However, Gwang-rye, despite her poor lung and respiratory tract conditions, insisted on being the last one to come out of the sea in order to support Ae-sun in living a better life with her foster uncle. This harsh island life serves as the historical background for the entire series and builds the foundation for the conflicts and resolutions in the mother-daughter relationships. By extension, the discussion of haenyeo as a profession takes the center stage of the first example analyzed in this essay, which is the conflict between Gwang-rye and Ae-sun.

The second example about Ae-sun and her daughter Geum-myeong in this article is taken from the fourth episode, which is set during the 1990s. The three generations of women that this article analyzes span more than 30 years during the rapid modernization of South Korea [2], during which

women's movement was also constantly developing. In the article, "Framing Dynamics of South Korean Women's Movements, 1970s-90s", Doowon Suh and Inn Hea Park tackle three factors of the evolution of women's organizations in the three periods of 1970, 1980, and 1990 [2]. The mother-daughter relationship between Ae-sun and Geum-myeong can be analyzed situated in this historical context. Furthermore, the mother-daughter conflict between Ae-sun and her daughter Geum-myeong in the second example in this essay reflects the conflicts faced by Ae-sun's generation during the 1980s. Under the legal regulations and policies such as "Gender equality" in 1980, the originally deeply rooted traditional family and social gender roles were shifting and that had a great impact on Ae-sun's generation [2]. Unlike Ae-sun, who grew up in the turbulent 1960s, her daughter, Geum-myeong, experienced uninterrupted education with rich institutional supports, which itself is a reflection of the development of the Korean society. These factors then became the second set of intergenerational conflicts that arise between the mother and the daughter, in this case, the grown-up Ae-sun and her daughter Geum-myeong. Overall, from the analysis of these two segments from the show, it can be interpreted that the changing mother-daughter relationship also reflects the development of the Korean society.

### 3. Socio-theoretical background

This study further interprets the visual effects of the TV series in combination with theoretical works. I will conduct a visual analysis of two segments based on the theory and the description of "feminist destroyers" proposed by Sara Ahmed in her books *The Promise of Happiness* [3] and *Living a Feminist Life* [4]. Feminism refers to women's pursuit of equal rights with men. However, some people misunderstand its definition, believing that those who pursue feminism hope that women's rights are greater than men's. According to Ahmed, these people who oppose feminism in this way refer to feminists who pursue equal rights as "feminist destroyers". Ahmed points out in *The Promise of Happiness* that "feminist destroyers" refer to those women who reject the "script of happiness" [3]. The happiness script here refers to the so-called blueprint to success guided by a certain cultural background, such as getting married, and pursuing wealth. These "feminist destroyers" point out the injustice, discrimination and oppression hidden behind the mainstream narrative of happiness, but are often accused by others of "destroying" the harmonious and happy atmosphere [3]. In some traditional concepts, certain things are established by convention and taken for granted, but by bringing up overlooked matters and disrupting the original harmony, "feminist destroyers" are accused of undermining the established system. For instance, in a family, a mother's hard work is taken for granted as dedication to her family. However, this kind of "dedication" is in fact, a personal decision. Not all mothers take it for granted to do so in a family. They can choose to do different things, not just those stipulated by the rules.

Ahmed also mentions the standardized recognition of gender in *Living a Feminist Life* by saying that women is a social category, if you do not conform to this standard, you will be excluded [4]. And when a woman becomes a mother, she has another responsibility called "motherhood". This "motherhood" concept is also mentioned by scholar Sharon Hays in the *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, which compares the responsibilities of women in the family with those in the society [5]. Hays mentions the idea of "intensive motherhood", which refers to the women, who perform intensive labors not unlike a job, who sacrifice themselves and devote themselves wholeheartedly to the family. This role is different yet similar to the labor responsibilities of women working in the society. However, when situated in the family, women's labor follows the principle of selfless dedication and is overlooked and misunderstood.

Based on these feminist theories in conjunction with the women's movement in South Korea from 1970 to 1990 as historicized by Suh and Park . Since the 1970s, when democracy was at the center, gender issues had not yet become prominent, and women were merely regarded as part of "the public" [2]. In the 1980s, South Korea was influenced by the second wave of the global women's movement, and gender discourses began to emerge within the South Korean women's movement [2]. In the 1990s, the South Korean government formulated laws and policies related to gender equality between men and women, which have been continuously developed since then [2]. Combining the time corresponding to the two segments of the TV drama in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, it can be understood that the protagonist Ae-sun was in this transitional period of the women's movement, and her personal identity in the family also changed from daughter to mother. The experiences of the female lead, Ae-sun, in dealing with these family and social issues also show the audience the personal choices and emotional needs of women in different time periods.

#### 4. Lighting design and a daughter's paradox

In the TV drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, the director used lighting techniques to narrate the relationships between characters. One of the most prominent scenes establishing these mother-daughter characters was when Gwang-rye picks up Ae-sun and they go from misunderstanding to making up. This scene utilizes lighting design to highlight the different images of the mother, Gwang-rye, and the daughter, Ae-sun, constructing their personalities and characters. The director ingeniously employed a hand-held lamp as an auxiliary light, utilizing the differences and movements of two different types of light to profoundly depict the transformation of the relationship between the mother and daughter from estrangement to closeness. This scene appears in the first episode of the TV series. Mother Gwang-rye hopes that Ae-sun can receive a better education, so she places Ae-sun in the care of her brother-in-law. However, after reading Ae-sun's poems which shows how much Ae-sun wants to live with her mother, Gwang-rye realizes that her brother-in-law's family treats Ae-sun differently. In a fit of pique, Gwang-rye takes Ae-sun away, and thus this scene begins.



Figure 1. Episode 1, Gwang-rye picks up Ae-sun

At the beginning of the scene (figure 1), an extreme long shot was used to capture Gwang-rye and Ae-sun walking along the boundless seaside, illustrating the relationship between the characters and the environment. The contrast between the cool tone of the sea as well as the moonlight and the warm tones of the lamp held by Gwang-rye indicates that in Ae-sun's heart, the sea is cold and heartless. Ae-sun feels that her mother, as a *haenyeo*, spends more time in the sea than with her, and the sea constantly puts her mother in danger. Therefore, in Ae-sun's heart, the sea is cold and heartless. The light reveals the inner feelings of the characters.

In the next scene, the camera directly transitions from extreme long shot to medium long shot. A long shot captures an entire large environment, showing the bright moonlight. Mother Gwang-rye is walking by the seaside with her daughter Ae-sun, carrying a lamp. The medium and long shots directly capture Gwang-rye's back, viewing the mother from Ae-sun's perspective. As can be seen from figure 2, the cold light of the moonlight is the key light, while the warm light in Gwang-rye's hand is the supplementary light, but it is brighter. The director uses the difference between these two kinds of lighting to show the difference in Ae-sun's attitudes towards her mother and towards the sea. As mentioned above, the cold blue color caused by the reflection of the moonlight on the sea water contrasts sharply with the warm color temperature of the lamp in mother Gwang-rye's hand. These two kinds of lighting divide the figure in two. It not only presents the background of the story but also shows Ae-sun's wavering emotions and attitudes towards her mother.



Figure 2. Episode 1, Gwang-rye and Ae-sun walk along the ocean

This kind of lighting effect employs two contrasting tones of light and is often used to create conflicts and inner contradictions between a character. The silhouette of Gwang-rye, in the eyes of her daughter Ae-sun, was split in two by two kinds of light, also hinting at Ae-sun's confusion about her mother's chosen profession haenyeo. The warm lamp held by Gwang-rye sways back and forth, and the warm light shines on Ae-sun's face. In Ae-sun's heart, her mother represents warmth and home. The director shines the warm light wobbly on Ae-sun's face, reflecting the wavering state of her mind. This was the first time Ae-sun had an in-depth chat with her mother, and the lighting technique here complements Ae-sun's inner thoughts and change of attitude towards her mother. Just as described above, the light is warm in tone, but from Ae-sun's perspective, the sea is cool in tone. Through the contrast of tones, the estrangement in the mother-daughter relationship is revealed.

At the end of the first scene, through the dialogue between Gwang-rye and Ae-sun, using the prop of a hand-held lamp for lighting, Gwang-rye's face gradually turns warm in tone. Throughout this conversation, Gwang-rye understood Ae-sun's wish to stay by her side. Ae-sun gradually understands Gwang-rye's love for her and also realizes that her mother works as a haenyeo to gain a better life for the both of them. Then, with a panning shot, from Gwang-rye's face to her hand movements, Ae-sun runs towards her mother. From this moment, the two start to understand each other and their relationship draws closer as it is reflected in the lighting choices. The director ingeniously employed the fill light of the "hand-held lantern" to showcase the transformation from estrangement to a closer relationship between the mother and daughter. From this, this scene reveals an important paradox in the mother-daughter relationship: the daughter longs for her mother to belong to the family, but the mother's desires and identity are always caught between family responsibilities and social labor. Through the changes in lighting, the director makes this complex situation of female subjectivity visually available.

## 5. Lighting design and a mother's paradox



Figure 3. Episode 4, Ae-sun is at her daughter Geum-myeong's home

Time fasts forward to Ae-sun's middle age. Ae-sun has become a mother herself and is also facing conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship with her own daughter Geum-myeong. In this segment (figure 3), the director combines the use of lighting with the changes in the characters' emotions to show how Ae-sun, as a mother, interprets the confusion of her daughter Geum-myeong's choice between work and family. This scene takes place indoors, but the director ingeniously uses the outdoor light from the semi-basement as the main source of light for her daughter Geum-myeong and the warm-colored lights inside as the main light for Ae-sun, reflecting the different emotions between the two. Geum-myeong is in a state of emotional depression and does not understand her mother's excessive investment in the family, so the director uses cold light to express the character's emotions. Ae-sun, on the contrary, remains in a stable mood, so the director uses warm light to depict her.

This scene appears in Episode 4. After having an argument with her boyfriend, Geum-myeong, the daughter of Ae-sun, hangs up the phone and comes out of the cold-toned room. Ae-sun sits at the warm-toned door, tidying up Geum-myeong's shoes. Geum-myeong is standing in front of the cold-toned window, trying to close it in the semi-basement but unable to do so. Ae-sun and Geum-myeong, standing on different sides of the screen, form a contrast of warmth and coldness, highlighting the estrangement between them. This scene is similar to the former example in this essay. The director is good at using changes in lighting to convey the emotional relationships between characters. The director divides the screen into two parts by adding a wall lamp in the middle of the picture as an supplemental light source. The director deliberately designs to visually create a distance between the mother and daughter to show the different life choices of the two generations who do not understand each other. Ae-sun chooses her family and gives up her studies because of the hardship of her time. However, Geum-myeong believes that one should not have to choose between work and family, but if they have to, they should still choose work; thus, creating a generational difference while shifting the show's focus onto the daughter's role.

Even though the mother and daughter are in the same space, their moods were very different, and the light on these characters is also different. In order to represent the still powerful mother-daughter relationship even when there is generational disagreement, the director uses camera angles and character blocking to show the increasing understanding between the mother and daughter, and also employs variations in the color temperature of the light to demonstrate Geum-myeong's emotions from cold to warm. At the beginning, from the simple and ordinary daily conversations and actions, it could be seen that the estrangement between Geum-myeong and her mother is obvious. The director frames both Ae-sun organizing the shoe cabinet and Geum-myeong opening the window with a high angle, while the two were in the same space but far apart. This top-down perspective, on

top of the significant difference between the warm light at the door and the cold light at the window, allows Ae-sun to play the dominant motherly role in the visual relationship.

Since the plot of this section is based on Geum-myeong's reflection on the balance between work and family, the director in turn uses Geum-myeong's perspective to present Ae-sun's interpretation as a mother facing this issue. When Ae-sun expresses her understanding of marriage to her daughter, Geum-myeong walks to the place where Ae-sun is tidying up the shoe cabinet and sits down, but she is still cast in shadow, indicating that Geum-myeong still does not understand her mother's choice of family over work (figure 4). After Geum-myeong walks over, Ae-sun is trying on shoes by the door. As the main character of the show, Ae-sun is still cast in warm-toned light because she feels that her choice in family is right for her and she has gained happiness. The mother is simply trying to impart this wisdom onto her daughter, who disagrees because of the generational differences.



Figure 4. Episode 4, Ae-sun tries on Geum-myeong's shoes

Finally, at the end of the scene (figure 5), Geum-myeong's father comes home from outside the door, carrying Geum-myeong's favorite peas, breaking the deadlock in the mother-daughter conversation. In the intimate interaction between her father and mother, Geum-myeong begins to understand why her mother had married him, and chose family. With that, Geum-myeong's attitude also changes from a cold tone to a warm one, creating a harmonious blend of light and shadow.



Figure 5. Episode 4, Geum-myeong's father comes home

The two scenes analyzed in this essay demonstrate a contrast between the two generations of Korean women. During her childhood, Ae-sun couldn't understand her mother's choice of being away from home for a long time as a haenyeo. In her middle age, she faces her daughter Geum-myeong's similar confusion about choosing between work and family as a mother. Through the contrast of warm and cool lighting and the changes in characters' spatial relationships, the director transforms this generational difference into visual language, gradually bringing to light the situations of women in different historical contexts. For Gwang-rye, becoming a haenyeo is not only a family responsibility but also a labor identity that she has to undertake under the pressure of social structure and economical constraints. For Ae-sun, she once made a choice of sacrifice between family and

personal ideals, and she chose family over work. By the time of Geum-myeong's generation, women begin to pursue career development and self-actualization more explicitly. From this, it can be seen that the conflicts between mother and daughter shown in this hallway scene reflect the predicaments that women in different eras face when it comes to their social roles and personal desires. Through these two scenarios, not only do the emotions in the mother-daughter relationship become visible, but it also reveals how female desires are constantly being reinterpreted among family responsibilities, social expectations and historical changes.

## 6. Conclusion

When Gwang-rye (Ae-sun's mother) picked up Ae-sun and brought her home, it was a gesture of "going against the stream" to protect her daughter from being bullied. Later in the show, Ae-sun's act of "going against the stream" towards her husband's family is also a form of protection for Geum-myeong (Ae-sun's daughter). These two segments demonstrate the most appropriate and socially available things that the two mothers could do in their era. As this article analyzes through two key scenarios, the show, *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, utilizes lighting design, spatial composition, and character positioning to reveal how the mother-daughter relationship has evolved over several generations. In the first scene, the contrast between the cold moonlight and the warm hand-cranked lamp visualizes Ae-sun's contradictory emotions towards her mother Gwang-rye and the sea. Similarly, in the second scene, the contrast between the cold light from the semi-basement window and the warm indoor light also demonstrates the emotional connection and mutual respect between Ae-sun and her daughter Geum-myeong.

When viewed together, these scenes highlight the predicaments that Korean women face in different social contexts. For Gwang-rye, becoming a haenyeo not only provides necessary financial support for her family, but it is also the only available choice for social responsibility as a woman in the then still unequal society. Later in the show, after Ae-sun grows up, choosing family over personal ideals reflects the still limited possibilities for women of her generation. However, in the 1990s that, Ae-sun's daughter, Geum-myeong, experienced, a new generation of Korean women began to consider whether such sacrifices of their careers were still necessary. The tension among these viewpoints reveals that the conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship are not merely personal misunderstandings within a family unit, but are closely related to the shift in society's expectations of women. *When Life Gives You Tangerines* presents these emotional and structural tensions through the form of film art, demonstrating how images clarify the visible politics surrounding female desires, labor, and social identity.

Referring back to "the script of family happiness" by Sara Ahmed, these three women each fought their own battle to the fullest within their respective societal constraints [3]. For Ae-sun's mother Gwang-rye, in the face of her husband's family's slander (believing that her husband's death was her fault), she did not endure it in silence. She confronted the truth and raised Ae-sun alone. In the era when Ae-sun was young, women still attributed more responsibilities to the family. But in the face of her in-laws' expectations for her daughter Geum-myeong to cut short her education and enter the workforce, Ae-sun rebelled against her in-laws' family for the first time and left their home with her daughter. Influenced by her mother Ae-sun and having received a higher level of education, Geum-myeong, the daughter, is more mentally independent. Faced with her boyfriend's mother's difficulty (hoping she would return to the family and not work), she refuses and decides to pursue her own success. The intricacy of the TV series lies in the fact that, under the influence of the course of historical development, the mother and daughter of these three generations have also influenced each other. The relationship between a mother and daughter is like the sweetness of oranges added

to lemonade, bitter yet sweet. The show tells us that, all family scripts are different, a woman can be a mother, a daughter, and more importantly, herself.

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