

Characteristics of Female Representations in Korean Crime Films

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Abstract. Korean crime films have established a distinctive position in Asian cinema through their austere aesthetics of violence and complex explorations of human nature. For a long time, however, academic discussion has remained centered on male narratives, leaving female characters seriously marginalized in genre studies. Addressing this gap, this paper focuses on the characteristics of female representations in Korean crime films and seeks to systematically identify their patterns of screen representation and underlying logic. Using textual analysis, the study examines representative Korean crime films from the past two decades and discusses four core characteristics of female representation: the passive Other, differentiated identities, the dilemma of subjectivity, and reconciliatory resistance. The study finds that female representations in Korean crime films are not immutable stereotypes but have gradually evolved from passive objects into limited subjects. Yet the acquisition of such subjectivity often comes at the cost of compromise and reconciliation, reflecting the deep constraints imposed on female expression by South Korea's gender order.

Keywords: Korean crime films, Characteristics of female representations, Genre film, Sociocultural representation

1. Introduction

Korean crime films rose rapidly from the 1990s onwards. Their flourishing benefited from a series of film-promotion policies introduced by the governments from Kim Young-sam to Roh Moo-hyun, while South Korea's turbulent social environment and accumulated public tensions provided fertile ground for their creation. Yet in a society where patriarchy and Confucian norms remain deeply rooted, women have long occupied obscured and marginal positions, and female figures in crime films have often been fixed as victims or objects of male rescue. From the self-reflection of Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, to the subversion of the traditional maternal image in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and then to the awakening of female self-consciousness in *The Handmaiden*, female representations have undergone a transformation from narrative objects to narrative subjects [1]. Existing research has largely focused on male narratives and genre conventions, while systematic analysis of the characteristics of female representations in Korean crime films remains insufficient. Focusing on this research gap, this paper adopts textual analysis and genre film theory to conduct close readings and inductive examinations of representative Korean crime films produced from the

past two decades [2]. This study helps clarify the importance of constructing female representations within the crime-film genre.

2. The passive other: rigid female representations in Korean crime films

Existing research on female characters in Korean crime films has clearly demonstrated that the historical transformation of female representation results both from changes in cinematic narrative aesthetics. Overall, female representations have undergone a progressive transformation from the passive "Other" and differentiated identities to subjective awakening and active self-determination [3].

Taking the "good wife and wise mother" as a typical example, its conventional familial attributes are evident: gentleness, kindness, and selflessness. In *Man of Vengeance* (2010), the wife who persistently searches for her missing daughter has an explicit family-centered motivation, yet the film's narrative deliberately weakens her agency and subjectivity: distributing flyers and joining organizations for families of missing persons lead nowhere, her efforts are presented as futile, and her body ultimately becomes a sacrifice when her husband removes her oxygen mask in exchange for the ransom money. Her death is therefore neither the result of her own will nor an active choice, rather, she functions as a narrative hinge linking the kidnapper and her husband, becoming a purely "destroyed" object. The so-called "good wife and wise mother" image thus effectively deprives her of the agency she should possess and of the complex, authentic responses she might have in a moment of crisis [4].

The female "sex symbol" has an explicit supporting narrative function, being strictly confined to arousing male desire, advancing the plot, and enduring violence. Ms. Jeong in Choi Dong-hoon's *Tazza: The High Rollers* is a case in point: "Neat short hair paired with high heels and a long dress, together with a low-cut, figure-hugging design, fully reveals her attractive curves." She uses her sexuality as a weapon, deliberately displaying her body at the gambling table and naturally drawing the male protagonist Goni into the game she has devised, while also serving as the operative in her own scheme. Mr. Pyeong calls her "a beautiful knife." The fundamental motive behind all her actions is an insatiable desire for money, and she also serves as the most dangerous symbol leading Goni toward moral decline. Her apparent agency is therefore subordinate to her function as an object of desire and becomes a dark temptation the male protagonist must overcome on his path of growth. Anycall in *The Thieves* functions similarly: flamboyantly sexual, she uses her charm to attract Zampano and make him willingly take risks for her. Her feelings for Zampano are premised on exploitation, with the ultimate aims of monopolizing the diamonds and sacrificing others. Anycall can thus be described as both a "femme fatale" and a "sex symbol." Her sexuality and intelligence do not serve self-realization, instead, they become weapons of betrayal and plunder. The narrative function of her body and emotions is to highlight male characters' blindness or to make her an uncontrollable variable within the male alliance. In other words, her subjectivity is reduced to a flattened pursuit of material desire.

"Fallen women" and "villainous women" form a particularly tense and tragic branch of narratives of "passive Othering." They are not wholly innocent victims, rather, under the pressure and erosion of structural violence, they enter the criminal world actively or passively and are ultimately consumed or alienated by it. The defining feature of such characters is the profound contradiction between their agency in action and the passivity of their fate: although they appear to wield violence or commit crimes, they remain firmly confined within a system composed of social prejudice and institutional violence. Their "evil" and "fall" are often distorted forms of resistance to an unjust fate,

the tragedy lies precisely in the fact that this resistance ultimately confines them even more deeply within their original shackles [5].

Given their overlapping textual and thematic characteristics, the archetypes of the "fallen woman" and the "villainous woman" are well suited to representing women's survival in the criminal world. First, their "fall" or "turn to evil" is rooted in trauma [6]. Their various forms of "falling" or "doing evil" stem from sexual assault, domestic abuse, and systemic abandonment (such as becoming an orphan). Crime is never an innate choice. Rather, it is a distorted adaptation of the survival instinct to extreme circumstances and a costly means of surviving desperation. Second, their violence is instrumentalized: the violent skills they employ are not the result of an awakening of autonomous will but of discipline and appropriation by powerful systems such as gangs, assassin organizations, and corrupt institutions [7]. Their bodies and abilities thus become tools through which others achieve their goals, and their "evil" conduct is essentially the consequence of subjectivity being deprived and reshaped. Third, they display an almost pathological longing for a "normal" life. Although immersed in the criminal world, they harbor intense and genuine desires for family, love, and ordinary life. This longing sharply conflicts with their current identities and actions, becoming the fundamental source of their inner pain and behavioral contradictions. The pursuit of "normality" may itself become a vulnerability through which they are further manipulated and may also trigger their eventual destruction. Fourth, they are trapped in an inescapable tragic loop: regardless of how they resist or struggle, their narratives ultimately lead to tragic endings—death, total madness, or deeper emptiness and loneliness after revenge. Their "fall" is effectively a one-way path, both society and narrative logic rarely offer genuine opportunities for redemption or a viable route back to "normality." Their fate can therefore be aptly described as that of a sacrificial Other.

3. Differentiated identities: diverse forms of self-expression

Female representations in Korean crime films occupy differentiated social identities—from marginalized groups to professional elites, and from family roles to outlaws. In traditional crime films, marginalized women are often reduced to violated objects or symbols used to propel male action, contemporary Korean crime films, by contrast, construct these characters in more differentiated ways. In *Bedevilled* (2010), Kim Bok-nam, the "island peasant woman," can be seen as one of the most direct and brutal products of patriarchy under the dual oppression of patriarchal power and geographical isolation. The film does not treat her as a mere victim. Instead, it gives her transformation from endurance to eruption a complete and forceful narrative logic. She turns an everyday farming hoe into a weapon of revenge, and her eruption after prolonged silence becomes the most radical rebellion against—and declaration of self in opposition to—the male rules of the island [8].

In addition, many female characters with professional skills, including police officers, assassins, and forensic specialists, have gained unprecedented agency within crime narratives. Yet their self-expression is often accompanied by intense conflict between professional and female identities, and between institutional rules and personal morality. In *Miss & Mrs. Cops* (2019), the two related female detectives played by Ra Mi-ran and Lee Sung-kyung are able, by virtue of their professional identities, to intervene in the investigation of a cyber-sex crime case. Their investigation, however, remains overshadowed by deeply rooted sexism and bureaucratic indifference within the police station. The film shows how they turn qualities associated with female sensitivity and empathy—such as heightened vigilance toward hidden-camera crimes—into investigative advantages. Their "professionalism" lies not only in their case-solving skills but also in challenging and subverting

male-dominated criminal investigation from a female perspective. Their self-realization is achieved through resistance to an unjust system. In *Kill Boksoon* (2023), Gil Bok-soon simultaneously occupies the roles of "elite assassin" and "single mother," constantly shifting between cold-blooded professional rules and the warmth of maternal instinct. By juxtaposing scenes of selecting lethal weapons with shopping for groceries in a supermarket, the film sharply exposes the fragmentation and exhaustion contemporary women experience across multiple social roles. Bok-soon's "professionalism" empowers her but also imprisons her. She attempts to draw a clear boundary between the world of killing and ordinary life, only to discover that the two cannot coexist. Her struggle is the failed attempt of a woman to stitch together a complete self between the thoroughly alienated professional identity of assassin and the traditional social role of mother, therein lies its tragedy.

4. The dilemma of subjectivity: awakening self-consciousness

In Korean crime films, female self-consciousness undergoes a complex trajectory from discipline and deprivation to difficult awakening, and ultimately even to collapse or alienation.

The awakening of subjectivity is directly triggered by extreme trauma. Women who have long been numbed and suppressed can resort only to extreme violence as a final means of reconstructing the boundaries of the self. In *Bedevelled*, Kim Bok-nam endures years of sexual assault and everyday violence from her husband and brother-in-law, while the other women on the island respond to her suffering with cold indifference. Her self-consciousness therefore remains in an almost animal-like state of survival until her daughter is sexually assaulted by her husband and dies accidentally. The daughter's death completely destroys the spiritual support that has enabled Bok-nam to endure everything—her hope that "her daughter will leave the island"—and simultaneously awakens, in a destructive form, her long-suppressed humiliation, anger, and maternal protective instinct. Her indiscriminate killing with a sickle is therefore a bloody declaration of dispossessed subjectivity through absolute negation. Her violent rebellion does not seek to construct a new self or a new social order, it seeks to eliminate everything that has consumed her and to exact total revenge. This is a typically tragic awakening: it points not toward liberation but toward the mutual destruction of self and oppressor. Within an oppressive structure offering no exit, individual awakening inevitably releases terrifying energy and ultimately reaches absolute emptiness [9].

Another type of female awakening can be summarized in three dimensions. First is an internally driven transformation, in which the motive for action shifts from "sacrificing for others" to "fighting for self-knowledge and justice." Second is cognitive subversion: the character moves from accepting existing rules to recognizing their injustice and hypocrisy, and then constructs an ethic of survival based on her own experience. Third is quiet agency: resistance rarely takes the form of spectacular violence, but is more often expressed through careful planning, patient endurance, or decisions made in desperate circumstances that overturn the character's previous disposition. In Bong Joon-ho's *Mother*, the mother played by Kim Hye-ja ties her entire world and identity to her intellectually disabled son, Do-joon. Before he is falsely accused of murder, her sense of self is indistinct, completely absorbed by the role of "caregiver." The incompetence of the judicial system, the indifference of the lawyer, and the hypocrisy of the townspeople form the external pressures that drive her into desperation. Her awakening unfolds as a natural, painful, yet extraordinarily powerful process. The first stage is the germination of awakening: she utterly rejects the official narrative that her son is the murderer. This distrust is not based solely on rational evidence but arises from a mother's most instinctive understanding of her son's nature, becoming the original fulcrum from which she resists the entire world. The second stage is the expansion of consciousness: during her

independent investigation, she gradually changes from a supplicant into a calm and rational detective. Using powers of observation, memory, and resilience that had previously been ignored, she exposes the crimes and lies beneath the town's apparently peaceful surface, this is also the revival of her suppressed intelligence and agency. The third stage is the collapse and reconstruction of ethics: when the real culprit is revealed to be an even more vulnerable elderly scavenger and the judicial system still cannot deliver justice, her awakening reaches its tragic peak. She kills the old man herself and shifts the blame onto the already-dead Jin-tae, creating a meaningful, interlocking "scapegoat" cycle. She changes from the traditionally "selfless Madonna" into a "sinner" who voluntarily bears guilt for what she recognizes as "justice"—protecting her son. Her awakening is completed through an embrace of darkness and deliberate self-exile [10].

5. Reconciliatory resistance: active self-choice

The construction of female representations in Korean crime films goes beyond simple binary opposition, and can be summarized as "reconciliatory resistance: active self-choice."

Under this model, the logic of female characters' actions is not to unleash total and frenzied violence against external oppressors. Instead, through more strategic, introspective, and negotiated means, they seek viable paths toward survival and self-redemption within the cracks of existing social structures, often after trauma or crime. In other words, their "resistance" is not intended to overturn the entire system. Rather, after recognizing the system's injustice and their own limitations, they consciously choose a survival strategy that preserves their subjectivity and dignity to the greatest possible extent while enabling internal reconciliation.

The "reconciliation" in "reconciliatory resistance" does not mean compromising with perpetrators or oppressive systems. Rather, it refers to the character reaching a difficult but self-aware balance with her own traumatic experiences and with an external environment that cannot be changed. Her "resistance" is therefore a refusal of a predetermined fate and an active effort to plan a new life of her own through a highly subjective mode of action. Four major characteristics follow. First, clear awareness and acceptance of limitations: the character recognizes the persistence of systemic injustice and the boundaries of her own power, and therefore does not pursue an absolute victory in the manner of a "prince's revenge." Second, strategic action replaces destructive eruption: resistance shifts from open, bloody violence to more concealed and intelligent strategies, including the use of the system's own rules. Third, "survival" and "self-definition" emerge as the ultimate narrative goals. Female characters shift their motivational focus from destroying the Other to reconstructing the self: namely, striving to sustain life after traumatic experiences and, in turn, redefining their personal values and existential identities. Fourth, the ending is open rather than closed: it is neither "victory" nor "destruction" in the traditional sense, but a state in which the character moves forward with scars and unresolved possibilities while actively controlling the direction of her own life.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines female representation in Korean crime films across four progressive developmental levels: the passive Other, differentiated identities, subjective dilemmas, and reconciliatory resistance. The study finds that female representations in Korean crime films have followed a complete trajectory from object to subject. In the first stage, women appear as good wives and wise mothers or as sex symbols, becoming signs that are gazed upon and sacrificed within patriarchal narratives. In the second stage, the singular stereotypes of traditional femininity are broken, giving way to diverse and complex forms of self-expression. In the third stage, female

characters begin to develop self-consciousness and move from inner awakening toward active resistance. In the fourth stage, they complete a subjective choice concerning their own fate. This transformation in the spectrum of female representation both projects the intense collision between Confucian ethics and modern feminism in South Korean society and exposes the contradiction within commercial genre films, where progress in female expression coexists with spectacularization. The limitations of this paper lie in its insufficient analysis of the intersections and transitional forms between different types of female representation. Its methodology relies primarily on textual interpretation and lacks empirical investigation of audience reception and directors' creative intentions. Future work could deepen the analysis through audience interviews or comparative research. Further studies may focus on the diachronic evolution of a particular type of female representation or place screen representations in intertextual dialogue with real social movements in South Korea, thereby revealing more deeply the resonance between cinematic narrative and changes in gender consciousness.

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