

WHERE IS MY PLACE? ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN THE DOMESTIC SPACE AND BEYOND IN SOUTH KOREAN COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

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UDK 791.43(519.5)-053.2:141-053.2=111
Preliminary communication

Abstract

The 21st century is a period of extreme global success of South Korean cinematography. These achievements stem, among other things, from the emergence of author-directors such as Kim Bora, Yoon Ga-eun, or Yoon Dan-bi, who are showing the fate of adolescent girls and young women in their films, offering a new perspective in South Korean dramas. The above-mentioned artists grew up in the times of the South Korean political transformation, after which the country became a democratic state. The observed social changes accompanied these women's upbringing. In their work, these directors place heavy emphasis on the role of women in the process of metamorphosis. In South Korean coming-of-age cinema, adolescent girls negotiate the notion of their femininity, moving between various images of women around them: busy middle-class mothers, elegant women from the so-called good homes, pretty friends, or older sisters, who are more entitled to make their own decisions. The female protagonists of these films are trying to imagine themselves in one of them, but they are also learning to understand that the development of human character is a continuous, highly individual process. This experience often ends in disappointment and abandonment of the search for an ideal pattern that can be implemented in one's life in order to recognize self-worth.

This paper aims to show that hierarchy, social status, and interpersonal relationships depicted in those films are crucial in finding answers as to how the space in which the protagonists live affects them.

KEYWORDS: *South Korean cinematography, political transformation, coming-of-age film, adolescent girls, identity*

The most recent decade of the 21st century has abounded in debuts of female film directors in South Korean cinema. Their efforts have resulted in films being shown at many film festivals in various parts of the world, bringing their authors appreciation of the audiences as well as awards. This phenomenon is even more interesting as it

comprises film productions covered by the term coming-of-age films¹. Analyzing it, it is necessary to answer the question concerning the origin of the *coming-of-age* convention, its characteristic features, and properties. The origins of the *coming-of-age* term can typically be traced back to the 18th-century literary genre of Bildungsroman. Franco Moretti² (1987) describes it as a story of a young protagonist's coming of age. The protagonist usually wants to find answers to their frequently existential questions, e.g., concerning the character of the world around them. Herd and Obermayer (1983: 31) describe the Bildungsroman as a novel focused not on the protagonist's adventures, but on the effects of their experience that are crucial for their coming-of-age and understanding of their life choices. This means that a coming-of-age novel shows the protagonist as a person who becomes an adult because they are faced with numerous adversities.

Even though the Bildungsroman impact on the development of the *coming-of-age* film convention, in particular the one followed by Western authors, is clearly visible, this relationship does not seem sufficient in the case of South Korean cinema, which I am interested in. Sung-ae Lee³ (2022) believes that there is a variation of South Korean cinema. In particular, she focuses on the films with female protagonists which criticize social and sex-based hierarchy. So, what are characteristic features of these film protagonists? Observing the national South Korean cinema, Lee (2022: 545) claims that they are often gifted outsiders who are not accepted by the community. Other factors characteristic of such productions include the antagonism between an individual and the institutions which create their subjectivity (e.g., a family, school); increasing sense of alienation in contact with their families; or experience of unrequited feelings that is at some point replaced by meaningful relationships with a person, a kind of a

¹ The scope of this article is limited to the chosen coming-of-age films within the Korean film industry, and it does not aim to present a comprehensive analysis of all Korean cinema. It is worth mentioning that this decision has been made intentionally in order to concentrate on a particular category, rather than to offer a comprehensive overview of the entire industry.

² Moretti's research on the social class of Bildungsroman characters sheds light on the genre's deep entwinement with a "particular social class, region, and sex". By analyzing the social and economic aspects of bourgeoisie representatives, Moretti highlights the genre's specificity. The emergence of the literary genre of Bildungsroman paved the way for the coming-of-age cinema, making it an indispensable part of the film industry. Moreover, contemporary directors, particularly those in South Korea, have adapted the fundamental principles of Bildungsroman, making it relevant to modern times and the challenges facing adolescence. This illustrates how the genre's specificity can be modified and used constructively to address present-day issues.

³ Sung-Ae Lee is the sole researcher who has endeavoured to study the genre of coming-of-age films in South Korea. Her pioneering research is an invaluable resource on the subject matter. Currently, there are no other publications available in the canon of film literature on representations of adolescence in South Korean cinema.

mentor who, by supporting the protagonist in the process of gaining experience, initiates their internal transformation process and helps them to come of age. A similar role is played by the sequence of events which require the protagonist to take a stand or participate in projects that impact the protagonist's life and people around them. It is worth referring to Franco Moretti (1987: 7) again, who describes the story of such novels as "teleological rhetoric". According to this historian of literature, the significance of the events in the novel is their conclusion, which means that they become significant when they lead to a single ending.

Sung-ae Lee (2022: 546) observes that Korean films pay attention to social practices (primarily the hierarchy), which increases young people's anxiety. Hence, movie endings often show an individual's resistance towards existing social standards.

Researchers Insook Han Park and Lee-Jay Cho (1995: 124) claim that this resistance is often born of the opposition towards Confucian values, which are still present in the Korean society. Korean culture is highly collectivist, placing emphasis on the family, group membership, and the "us" awareness. In the context of the family, it is worth mentioning that the central relationship is not the one between spouses, but between parent and child. Park and Cho (1995: 124) stress that the most important relationship is the one between father and son. Interestingly, according to the authors, family ties are not based on mutual love and equality, but on authority, obedience, and goodwill. This unequal system of hierarchy and values makes women and girls obedient to their fathers, husbands, and sons.

Films such as *The Recorder Exam* and *House of Hummingbird* by Kim Bora, *Moving On* by Yoon Dan-bi, *Bori* by Kim Ji-yun, and *The House of Us* by Yoon Ga-eun depict different protagonists, fates, and adventures. Common to the images of girls shown in these films is the depiction of the process in the course of which the contacts with family members and new relationships start affecting the protagonists' emotions and decisions. This shows how the hierarchical order, social status, and interpersonal relations presented in those films are essential to finding an answer as to how the space in which the protagonists live affects them.

The oldest film, with the story going back to the 1980s, is a short film by Kim Bora called *The Recorder Exam*, which was made in 2011. This debut would become basis for a feature-length film by the same director, called *House of Hummingbird*, the two sharing the protagonist's name, certain storyline aspects, and the social status of the protagonist's family. The Seoul Olympic Games from 1988 provide the background for several days in the life of Eun-hee. The announcer connects the broadcast message about excellent achievements of the South Korean national team with the immense international progress of the entire state. This message is contrasted with a mother who sits in almost complete darkness, dispirited by accumulating everyday problems. She

will be the one who her daughter will come to for comfort. In less than 30 minutes, Kim Bora shows that the success and modernization of the state, achieved thanks to the hard work of her compatriots, not only failed to improve the living conditions of lower social classes but it also affected interpersonal relations.

The director uses the celluloid grain to attenuate warm hues and even earth tones. All the same, she gives a nostalgic, melancholic mood to her film. Watching this film is like browsing through an old family photo album. The interplay of shadows is natural, not intensified by any extra lights, making the shots at home subdued and more intimate. Eun-hee, the protagonist of this film, is depicted as a highly emphatic child, looking for closeness and acceptance not only in her own family. The motif driving this story is the girl's preparation for her flute exam. The melody rehearsals are intertwined with everyday life when the girl faces her parents' antagonism, amplified both by economic problems and by the growing disintegration of their relationship. She keeps trying to get the adults' acceptance and approval.

A visit to her friend's home opens up an entirely new world for her, as Hanna lives in a wealthy neighborhood and is a child from a "good family". A bright, sunny room, enhanced by paintings on the walls and a piano which is played by Hanna, is a fairy land for Eun-hee, which she will try to bring to her own home. Newspaper clippings depicting women, which are hung on the walls, and the exposed knick-knacks make up the customized interior design of the room shared by Eun-hee and her older sister. However, this attempt at "improving" her home is a short-lived. At the film's climax, the girl understands that she cannot live in the world of her dreams, that her home is not modern, her family members are not elegant high-class people, and the ability to recognize and acknowledge one of your nearest and dearest is painfully absent from her everyday life. Eun-hee may be a prototype of an adolescent girl for the other female protagonists. The motifs of uncertainty, looking for acceptance, and attempts at finding one's place in the world play a significant role in the films mentioned above.

Eun-hee from *House of Hummingbird* and Ha-na from *The House of Us* can be seen in their rooms which they have designed themselves. Both rooms have pastel details, including colorful curtains or wallpapers that add some color to their common spaces. The rooms lack dressing tables for girls, so characteristic of Western films, which are used not only for make-up, but also often play the role of altars surrounded by numerous photos and artefacts proving their femininity. The desks visible in those rooms are covered with many school items used by the protagonists for their hobbies. For Eun-hee, this is a comic strip drawing, whereas for Ha-na, it is a recipe book full of collages. The rooms of their elder brothers are full of books and electronics, which may be intended to prove that the boys are expected to learn and represent the family in the future. Ok-ju from *Moving On* lives in entirely different circumstances as she

has to move to her ill grandfather's house with her father and younger brother. The villa of the widowed senior is an unknown, strange place for her. The room with only a solid wardrobe and a table is not a typical teenage girl's room, but Ok-ju quickly stakes her claim in this new environment. Forced by the circumstances, she crosses the threshold and names it "her room". This overwriting of space is visible when the siblings go to bed in the evening. Ok-ju asks her younger brother to leave, claiming that this is her space. However, she does not mind her aunt sleeping with her under the pink mosquito net, the only detail adding a "girlish" touch to the interior. Ok-ju adapts to the conditions fast.

Kim Ji-yun, the only male director mentioned in this article, introduces the audience to the world of a deaf family in his 2018 film *Bori*. Bori, the girl whose name was used for the title, is the only non-disabled person in her home. Her parents and younger brother use sign language, so the girl, although very young, plays the roles usually reserved for adult members responsible for their families. She is a caretaker and an interpreter mediating between the external world and her relatives. Shady rooms of their house protected from the hot sun and lace curtains swinging lazily in the seaside breeze create a cozy interior. The sound of waves, birds singing, and the everyday sound of an alarm clock or occasional bell ringing create the aural realm of the film where spoken dialogues are rare. The protagonist watches her relatives and, over time, starts to doubt her place in this family. Bori comes to believe that her parents pay much more attention to her brother, that they care for him more, and worry about his future. The sense of being a misfit, of exclusion and growing jealousy about her parents' love, makes the girl want to go deaf. This experiment shows her how difficult the life of deaf people who cannot speak is, and how much people with that disability are excluded from the world of those who are healthy.

The routine everyday life and harmony of spaces occupied by the girls are frequently disturbed by other people or interrupted by events taking place elsewhere in the house. Eun-hee's room becomes the scene of violence committed by her older brother. Unable to understand why her parents pamper the boy, she is defiant in contact with him. Such disputes usually end in a hassle, tears, and trauma because the parents are mostly indifferent to the siblings' conflicts. Ha-na also doesn't have an easy relationship with her brother. There is no violence, but growing impatience and indifference. The girl, despairing over her parents' possible divorce and looking for her brother's support, must enter his room. The boy, however, does not want to talk to his sister about the situation at home. Not only does he, as a teenager, have more important things to do, but he also needs to endure his sister's presence when she should not even be there. He does not allow Ha-na to go to the seaside. In the girl's memories of the past, going to the coast is a beautiful time spent by a loving, happy family. The relationships of Bori

and Ok-ju with their younger brothers are filled with much more positive feelings, although the girls must often take responsibility for their younger siblings and act as grown-ups. In *Moving On*, the brother often enters his sister's space. It appears to be more difficult for him to find his place in the new circumstances following the move to the grandfather's house. He clings to his sister who seems to be the most important female figure in his life. Jung-woo, Bori's brother, is an energetic deaf boy who loves playing football. Initially, he is shown as a child free from any worries and enjoying his every moment. It is not the parents, but his sister who learns that the boy feels alone among his peers, who do not like playing with him and do not make any effort to communicate with him.

The directors emphasize the protagonists' bonds with their families, including, but not limited to, their parents. These relationships encourage the girls to look differently at their surroundings, both in- and outdoors, and find some place where they could feel needed, secure, and have a sense of agency. The sounds of everyday life in their immediate environment often reach the heroines' rooms. Eun-hee, at the age of 9 and at a slightly older age, must endure the shouting of her parents who are facing a difficult financial situation. She hears the mother's words, blaming her father for marital infidelity. As the youngest in the family, the girl is often ignored during family discussions. Kim Bora depicts Eun-hee as conscious of the adult world and reconciled with what it looks like. The director adopts this solution in both her films, i.e., *The Recorder Exam* and *The House of Hummingbird*. It is different for Ha-na, who overhears her parents' conversations and learns about their plans to divorce. She denies that thought despite everyday conflicts and disagreements of her parents.

On the other hand, Ok-ju has to cope with the fact that her father and aunt want to place the senior in whose house they live in the care of strangers. Even worse, they want to sell the grandfather's house because of the man's deteriorating health.

All these protagonists face circumstances in which their peaceful life and trust in adults are compromised. The vibrant teenagers' emotions make them look for solutions to those problems.

In the full-feature film by Kim Bora, Eun-hee finds support in an adult, a teacher of the afternoon Chinese classes. The girl engages in lengthy discussions with this friendly woman carefully and gracefully, learning many important lessons about life, which she should have learned from her parents. Ha-na, who craves parental warmth and care, understands the anxiety of younger children she has just met. Acting thoughtlessly, she decides to organize an expedition to look for their parents. The children carry a makeshift house made from painted cardboard throughout the journey. During this expedition to the unknown, the protagonist takes on a role of an adult with knowledge of the surrounding world. The audience does not get an answer

to whether this expedition taking place on a beach was planned consciously by Ha-na, for whom going to the seaside used to be a memorable time of warmth and happiness with her family. The adventures during this trip make Ha-na feel fully responsible for the other girls' fate. Although those activities postpone the reality check and return to the divorcing parents, the teenager decides to turn back and face the unavoidable family circumstances for the sake of the younger children. Ok-ju's coming of age is an attempt to tame new space, understand her relatives' incentives, and face the unavoidable phenomenon of death. The grandfather's house is full of knick-knacks and memories associated with them, of melancholy and remnants of the life which used to be lived there, but also a place of joyous moments spent with family members. Ok-ju gets accustomed to the new location so fast thanks to her ability to get to know her grandfather and observe his habits and wistful, warm eyes. Her response to the proposal that her ailing grandpa should be placed in a nursing home is surprising to her father and aunt. The girl shows her attachment to the senior and stresses that the house where they came to live is his property. The actual outpouring of emotions occurs when Ok-ju realizes that the adults decided to place the grandfather in an institution, and sell the house without asking her if she agrees with this. The older man's death makes the girl realize how empty the house is without its owner. This is the first contact of Ok-ju with the death of someone close to her. She watches the extreme emotions of adults who, in her opinion, lacked empathy, and tried to solve the growing problem of caring for an ill grandfather in an incompetent and unacceptable way. Beneath it all, she also observes their true despair caused by losing a family member.

The girls acquire new experiences, which are often far from easy, even for adults. This makes the life of the maturing protagonists not easier, but more conscious. The selected films clearly show that the space, primarily home, is more than where individuals live — the final shots of *Moving On*, directed by Yoon Dan-bi, present empty rooms in the grandfather's house. Quite recently, it was very lively, filled with discussions and favorite songs of the senior. The melancholic shots follow one another and call to mind personal memories of many people, thus proving that the sense of belonging and closeness acquired in contact with others also shapes the space in which we live.

The films examined in the article feature intentionally ambiguous endings, conveying a powerful message that life continues despite the hardships suffered by the protagonists. The young girls experience intense emotions such as sadness, anger, and disappointment with their loved ones, who appear preoccupied with their own prob-

lems and indifferent to their children's concerns. Heroines often fail to recognize that adults have their best interests at heart and seek to shield them from the harsh realities of everyday life. Nevertheless, the girls persist in their journey to connect with other people and to self-discovery.

The spaces where the girls circulate, their rooms, and their outdoor surroundings serve as a backdrop, and complement the overall picture of where the protagonists' lives and coming-of-age processes unfold.

Additionally, the movies showcase the complex relationships between the girls and their mothers, highlighting the challenges faced by young women entering the patriarchal realities of South Korea. The younger generation is portrayed as rebelling against existing norms. At the same time, the mothers who have experienced these realities and have more or less conformed to them, cannot offer any alternatives to their daughters. As a result, the films place even greater emphasis on the relationships between siblings, particularly those of mixed gender, highlighting the deep-seated patriarchy in Korean culture. It is best seen in movies where brothers are older than the protagonists. Society often instills in young men the belief that their education and welfare should be prioritized over their younger siblings. On the other hand, the younger brothers treat the heroines as mother-like figures who can play with them, creating a symbolic bridge between childhood desires and the adult world filled with the drudgery of everyday life.

The protagonists of the selected films, driven by a desire to have a say in their destiny, take courageous steps, even if this is possible only to a certain extent. That is the experience of loss. Girls face inevitable events such as family disintegration, the inability to protect others, and the symbolic loss of childhood innocence. Although the impact of their actions on others may be fleeting, the rebellious actions of these girls are explosive, and serve as a powerful protest against being ignored, silenced, or oppressed. While these films maintain a conservative image of the family in Korean society, they offer a glimmer of hope for the heroines. They showcase the progress made and experiences gained by the protagonists, which can serve as a foundation for building a better future.

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GDJE JE MOJE MJESTO? O KONSTRUKCIJI IDENTITETA U DOMAĆEM PROSTORU I ŠIRE U JUŽNOKOREJSKIM COMING-OF-AGE FILMOVIMA

Sažetak

Dvadeset prvo stoljeće razdoblje je iznimnoga globalnog uspjeha južnokorejske kinematografije. Ova postignuća proizlaze npr. od pojave autora-redatelja kao što su Kim Bora, Yoon Ga-eun ili Yoon Dan-bi, koji u svojim filmovima prikazuju sudbinu adolescentica i djevojaka te nude novu perspektivu u južnokorejskim dramama. Spomenuti umjetnici odrasli su tijekom političke transformacije Južne Koreje nakon koje je ona postala demokratska država. Uočene društvene promjene pratile su odrastanje ovih žena. U njihovim djelima veliki naglasak stavlja se na ulogu žene u procesu metamorfoze. U južnokorejskoj kinematografiji o odrastanju, adolescentice pregovaraju o pojmu svoje ženstvenosti, krećući se između različitih slika žena oko sebe: zaposlene majke iz srednje klase, elegantne žene iz takozvanih dobrih domova, lijepe prijateljice ili starije sestre koje imaju više prava da odlučuju o sebi. Ženske protagonistice ovih filmova ne samo da se pokušavaju pronaći u jednom od njih već i shvatiti da je razvoj ljudskog karaktera kontinuiran, izrazito individualan proces. To iskustvo često završava razočaranjem, odustajanjem od potrage za idealnim uzorkom koji bi se mogao implementirati u vlastiti život i težnjom da postane vrijedan u vlastitim očima.

Cilj je rada pokazati da su hijerarhija, društveni status i međuljudski odnosi prikazani u tim filmovima ključni za pronalaženje odgovora na to kako prostor u kojem žive protagonisti djeluje na njih.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *južnokorejska kinematografija, politička transformacija, film o odrastanju, adolescentice, identitet*