

Subjective Freedom: Expressions of Lesbianism from Multiple Perspectives in the Handmaiden—Thematic Expressions of Lesbianism

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Abstract: In the Korean film *The Handmaiden*, director Park Chan-wook does not adopt conventional narrative enmities or present traditional ethics. Instead, he uses lip close-ups to amplify the lust contained within the bodies of the protagonists. This is gradually brought to the foreground, where subjective freedom is expressed through various kinds of tension between the film's characters. The present study analyses the film's thematic expression and narrative characteristics of lesbianism.

1. Analysis of South Korean Homosexual Films, Television Programmes, and Literature

Homosexuality-themed films encompass gender, social, and cultural identity. The largest difference in gender identity between homosexuals and heterosexuals is that sexual orientation is an atypical development for the former and is something of which they gradually become aware. Homosexuals are a marginal social group. In terms of cultural identity, homosexual culture involves scepticism towards and even rebellion against conventional sexual relations.

Homosexuality has remained an implicit or marginal subculture, which is reflected in its limited exposure in films [1]. Although homosexual movies have become a topic of discourse in the West, the phenomenon of homosexuality is still alien to most Koreans and is generally less visible than it is in Western or even Chinese cinema. When it is presented, directors tend to approach it secretively or circuitously. Homosexuals exist at a distance from the eyes of the majority, many of whom know little or nothing about them. Because homosexuality has low acceptability amongst audiences, most producers and directors are not prepared to engage with it. As a result, homosexual films are few and far between.

Road Movie (2002), which discusses the emotional issues experienced by two men, was the first official homosexual movie in the country. *King and the Clown* (2005) was another turning point; since its release, the protagonists in homosexual films have begun to challenge societal confusion about their sexual identity. The rise of similar films and TV series has aroused widespread attention and social concern. Therefore, the interpretation of and interest in homosexual Korean films is not only a matter of subject material, but also a means for the mainstream culture to contact, communicate with, and understand homosexual subcultures in an otherwise culturally pluralistic society.

2. The Construction of Different Images of Lesbians in *The Handmaiden*

The Handmaiden (2016), is one of the most critically acclaimed cinematic works by the renowned Korean director Park Chan-wook. The appeal of his first film, *Fingersmith* (2016), lies in its constant reversals and the unravelling of serial deception. However, Park Chan-wook dilutes the suspense of Sarah Waters's (2002) original tale in *The Handmaiden*, preferring to focus on the spiritual interaction and physical integration of the two women, as well as their deep-rooted desire for freedom, through a nuanced portrait of sex, lust, and violence. Female initiative, desire, and power are realised within a narrative structure that is ultimately determined by males [2]. In the film, the two women gradually attract each other after falling into a trap set by a man, through which they overturn the erogenous vision. The director explores the ideas of power and initiative, especially relating to gender and gender politics, and the notion that intelligent women are seductive but disquieting [3].

The emotional development of the heroines is presented as a clue in the three stories of the film. The affection between the maid and the young lady progresses from ambiguity at the beginning to an emotional outburst when the conspiracy gradually surfaces and, finally, to a powerful release of lust.

The plot begins from the point where Sook-hee becomes the maid of Hideko and helps her dry herself after a bath. In the small bathroom, with the sunlight streaming through the window, the water vapour is so dense that the space becomes hazy. The young lady is lying in a steaming bathtub, holding candy in her hand with her head slightly raised. Because she has a toothache, the maid leans down and places her hand into her slightly open mouth to help her massage her wisdom teeth. The close-up of the maid and the young lady's skin touching and eyes flashing indicates they feel emotionally ambiguous. Subsequently, the Earl arrives, and Sook-hee helps him to seduce the young lady; however, she feels conflicted, and her passion for Hideko increases. In a love scene that lasts 5 minutes (and which is absent from the original film, the young lady and the maid have sex. Thereafter, sex plays a leading role in their relationship, prompting them to break through its ambiguities, consolidating their mutual affection and feelings of lust. The director stresses both throughout the remainder of the film, thus highlighting the theme of lesbianism.

3. The Multi-Perspective Narrative Strategy of *The Handmaiden*

The narrative and structure of homosexual films must be skilfully arranged so that the sensitivity of the topic and the attendant social norms and moral taboos can be successfully negotiated. The director makes full use of the layered structure of *The Handmaiden* by repeating the narrative from multiple perspectives.

4. The Maid's Perspective: Reversing the Position of the Protagonist and the Supporting Role

The maid is closely followed by the camera at the beginning of the film, which creates the misleading impression that the story revolves around Sook-hee. The overlapping of narrative techniques such as narration interposition, supplementary narration, and flashback are repeatedly employed for the scene in which Sook-hee recalls the plan through inner monologues, indicating that she is in control.

The tone and rhythm of the scene are respectively soothing and brisk. Everything operates as planned, and Sook-hee gains the trust of Miss Hideko. The two become intimate and begin to share each other's clothes, sleep in the same bed, and take baths together. Under the guidance of Sook-hee, the young lady gradually gives in to the temptation of the duplicitous Earl. After forming a long-term friendship with Hideko, Sook-hee begins to take pity on her and even considers ruining the original plan, but the lure of money keeps her speaking positively of the Earl and inducing the young lady to elope with him. Finally, as planned, the young lady marries him; however, she soon becomes delirious.

Eventually, Sook-hee is committed to an asylum. This represents the first dramatic reversal in the film; instead of being the major actor in the narrative, the maid becomes a scapegoat. The film is subsequently narrated from a new perspective.

5. The Young Lady's Perspective: Setting Things Right

Although the plot is reversed by Sook-hee's confinement, the question raised at the end of the preceding storyline remains unanswered. Suddenly, Hideko has a flashback to her childhood. She lost her parents at a young age, was abused by her uncle, and lived in fear of the housekeeper, Sasaki. Her aunt is the only person who cares about her, but she dies early.

However, as a result of her extensive reading of obscene novels, Hideko becomes extremely worldly and begins to detest the idea of sex with men. When the Earl meets Hideko, he realises that he will not be able to tempt her and that his original plan to take her away from her estate by inducing her to elope will not work. It is this realisation that prompts his plan to cooperate with Hideko to confine Sook-hee in the asylum so that he can seduce Hideko and seize half of her estate.

Sook-hee thereby becomes the subject of observation rather than the observer. So far as the young lady is concerned, she is a stupid, materialistic, and ignorant maid. However, this does not prevent Hideko from falling in love with her. Upon speaking to Sook-hee, she discovers that she is still trying to convince her to marry the Earl out of her strong desire for money; as a result, and in despair, she tries to commit suicide. Finally, the young lady and the maid express themselves honestly to each other under a cherry tree. They are determined to escape by taking advantage of the Earl.

The plot carefully and compassionately reveals that Hideko has serious psychological defects, offering the audience a different perspective and uncovering the veil of another conspiracy.

6. The Omniscient Perspective: Filling in the Gaps

At the end of the film, the young lady and the maid are removed from the narrative perspective. Using the omniscient perspective of the narrator, the first two stories are integrated with the missing parts included. This device not only answers the question raised in the first two stories but also completes the film's overarching narrative. Sook-hee is rescued from the asylum and the ambitious Earl is drugged with a highly concentrated essential oil made of opium. He is then sent back to his uncle by Hideko, and he and his uncle perish after undergoing torture. The truth of Hideko and the Earl's wedding night is also revealed, and the audience is exposed to the uncle's basement.

It is full of obscene articles, instruments of sexual torture, and various sexual organs soaked in formalin. It can be inferred from the narration that the uncle enjoys pornographic stories. Finally, Sook-hee and Hideko set sail on a cruise ship and embark on a new life.

7. Cultural Connotations of The Handmaiden

For Liu and Zhang, "sexual orientation, an essential attribute of human culture with cultural, temporal, geographical, and historical consistency, develops in the foetal period or early childhood due to the influence of biological factors such as genes or hormones [4]. It is nonselectable, while sexual identity and development are part of the process of discovering and admitting the nature of sexual orientation". There are two explanations for homosexuality. Some believe it to be innate. Most homosexuals accept society's unspoken rules about their sexuality. Only a small number confirm their sexuality. This may be due to the acquisition of more knowledge, a change of lifestyle, or an awakening of their sexual consciousness.

Others argue that homosexuality is the result of disappointment regarding the opposite sex (which may in turn be occasioned by a response to social and external stimuli, such as family and previous

relationship experiences; [2]). The latter explanation seems to fit Hideko. She has been imprisoned, intimidated, brutally beaten, masturbated, and forced to read aloud from obscene books. Consequently, she is disgusted by men physically and psychologically, loses her ability to feel male love, and develops an aversion to heterosexual relationships. It is because she has been overstimulated by the outside world that her sexual consciousness awakens and she becomes a lesbian.

Hideko and Sook-hee's mutual affection develops gradually. Hideko's experience of physical sensations, breaking her uncle's discipline over her body, marks the beginning of a woman's overthrow of male repression and a reassertion of her body's stimulated desire for homosexual love. The mutual recognition of both reasserts the protagonist's belief that freedom can be won through a love driven by the hatred of male power and by the affection of her housemaid. This represents the most fundamental difference between *The Handmaiden* and *Fingersmith*. The former does not confine itself to the spectacle of the body or the satisfaction of voyeuristic desire but completes the narrative through a lesbian lens. Previous to this, Hideko is like that of a bird in cold water, held under the long-term tutelage of her uncle. The housemaid's desire to possess Hideko leads to both women gradually and consciously entering into the narrative of the body, rewriting the narrative according to fate, and writing a body-inspired hymn of love and freedom.

The young lady is transformed by the director into an independent woman through an embodied narrative strategy that promotes the formation of a modern subjectivity, the realisation of self-identity, and the pursuit of liberty [5]. The love of the two women finally helps them to build up their belief in freedom. This is represented through a long-distance shot in which the wind rustles through the vast grassland; the sea releases the previously imprisoned subject and frees her with abandon.

8. Conclusion

The emergence of Korean homosexual films and TV series is a by-product of an increasing openness in society and the campaign against homophobia. With the increasingly widespread awareness of homosexuality, homosexual films have gradually become enduring and attractive topics. Their initial mystery and novelty have given way to a sense of acceptance. Park Chan-wook has stated that he aimed to portray the subjectivity of freedom in *The Handmaiden*. The film completely undermines the role of fate in the narrative and pays a body-inspired tribute to love and liberty.

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