

# **KOREAN STUDIES**

## **WORKING PAPER SERIES**

### **Avenging Females in South Korean Films**

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#### **Abstract**

Based on the three films, *Tell Me Something* (1999), *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005), and *Bedevelled* (2010), the aim of this paper is to provide an account for how violent vengeful women are represented in South Korean films. Furthermore, it explores how far such representations of women can be traced back to previous depictions of women in South Korean cinema.

The first half of the paper is concerned with a psychoanalytical reading of vengeful women, where there will be given interpretations of her as monstrous and as a femme castratrice. In the latter half of the paper, the setting is changed to a more historical context. A problem with the psychoanalytical analysis is how it is generically based, confirming the vengeful women to the horror genre, resulting in static and ahistorical accounts for the vengeful women. Therefore, I set out to explore if there has been any previous depictions of women as monstrous or evil. In the 1960s, the South Korean cinema started to screen films with femme fatales who posed a threat to the traditional patriarchal family, and this female character was created as abject and monstrous. In the paper, I argue how the femme fatal avenger of modern cinema can be seen as an offspring of the 1960s femme fatale.

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## Introduction

Revenge films are far from a new genre in South Korean cinema. In fact, this genre has been around for quite some time and has enjoyed a huge success both in Korea and abroad. One of South Korean cinema's big flagships is the famous revenge film *Oldboy* (2003) produced by the king of revenge films, Pak Ch'an-uk. However, in this thesis I wish to focus on women's revenge in films, or what I will be referring to as woman's revenge films throughout. First of all, I will attempt to piece together a definition of what I mean when I refer to woman's revenge film. It is a term that has not yet been defined very concrete, and it might easily get confused with other notions; such as rape-revenge films. Though, to steer us in the right direction I will turn to the few lines Barbara Creed (1994) has written about woman's revenge films to try and capture a perception of what a woman's revenge film might imply:

Usually the heroine takes revenge because either she – or a friend – has been raped and/or murdered by a single male or a group of men. In some films, woman takes revenge for causes other than rape: the reason however, is almost always linked to some form of male exploitation. (123)

The definition appears to be somewhat loose and flexible. The woman's motivation for revenge can be quite far-ranging, however, Creed does point out one distinctive factor that seems repetitive for woman's revenge films: The reason for revenge is almost always linked to some sort of male exploitation. This has been a big decisive factor for how I have chosen my films.

In this thesis I discuss three Korean films: *Tell Me Something* (1999), a thriller, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* (2005), a thriller; and lastly *Bedevilled* (2010), a horror. Though they differ in genres, and more noteworthy none of them were promoted as woman's revenge films, they all fit into Creed's definition of a woman's revenge film: These films all depict three women's road to revenge after having been exploited by a male character. In *Tell Me Something* the female protagonist Su-yŏn was raped by her father at a young age continually into her adult years, in *Lady Vengeance* Kŭm-ja severed 13 years in prison because a man blackmailed her into taking the blame for a killing he committed, and in *Bedevilled* our female protagonist Pong-nam is the victim of domestic violence committed by her husband while she is sexually abused by her brother-in-law.

In this thesis I wish to explore how these three films construct women who seek revenge as a category. When setting out to examine the women in these woman's revenge films the western examination of gender in relation to horror will be helpful. Scholars such as Barbara Creed and Carol Clover have discussed the cultural tendency to offer representations of women that are aligned with monstrosity or evil. To my knowledge, there has been little written about female representations in Korean woman's revenge films in English. Though general studies of gender representations in South Korean cinema exist (Kyung-hyun Kim, Jin-soo An) they do not specifically concern woman's revenge films. This thesis will be an attempt to fill this gap.

Finally, in *The New Avengers – Feminism, femininity and the rape-revenge cycle* Jacinda Read (2000) notices that scholars tend to confine their analysis of the violent and vengeful women to specific genres (22). What psychoanalysts like Barbara Creed and Carol Clover fail to acknowledge, according to Read, is that the deadly and dangerous woman might as well be historically rather than generically defined. I therefore wish to examine how far the vengeful woman seen in the contemporary Korean cinema may be historically defined.

## **The generic question of woman's revenge films**

As mentioned in the introduction, rape-revenge can cause confusion with woman's revenge film, so here I will try to account for how they differ from each other. Their differences should be found within the narratives and the motive for revenge. In woman's revenge film the narrative usually concerns some kind of male exploitation and the narrative looks like: male exploitation – transformation – revenge. In rape-revenge, on the other hand, we no longer include any kind of male exploitation, but only refer to male exploitation as rape, so that the narrative ends up looking like: rape – transformation – revenge. So we can distinguish rape-revenge films from woman's revenge films on the basis of the presence or absence of a motive of rape. By choosing to look at woman's revenge films it allows me to embrace films beyond those typically regarded as rape-revenge films, while woman's revenge still include rape-revenge. Throughout this thesis I will be drawing on the rape-revenge "genre" – simply because there is a lot more information available about rape-revenge than woman's revenge films – to shed some light upon woman's revenge films.

First, while looking at rape-revenge films let's take a look at how rape-revenge has been generically discussed. When discussing rape-revenge films as a genre one thing is clear: rape-revenge films only take up a very small section of films and is hard to describe as a genre as itself. The same can be said about woman's revenge films. But scholars have debated whether it then should be considered a sub-genre or a narrative structure. Carol Clover situates the rape-revenge genre within the sub-genre of horror. In Jacinda Read's *The New Avengers* (2000), Read is talking up against scholars like Clover, as she argues how rape-revenge film is not a sub-genre but instead a narrative structure:

For me, rape-revenge was clearly not a genre, not only because it seemed to cut across genres, but because it lacked many of the elements used to define genres, such as coherent iconography. [...] Rather, rape-revenge seemed to me to constitute a clear, though somewhat primitive, example of narrative structure. (242)

A very important point of Read's definition of rape-revenge film as a narrative structure is how such a definition allows the films to work across genres. Indeed, I am more likely to agree with Read than Clover on this point, as I have discovered that this is exactly what these woman's revenge films do. In Korean cinema woman's revenge films are not confined to the horror genre, but instead I have found that, as Read argues, it is a plot that is found across genres: woman's revenge drama (*Pieta*, 2012), woman's revenge thriller crime (*Tell Me Something*, 1999), woman's revenge psychodrama (*A Girl at My Door*, 2015), and so forth. What all these different films have in common is a narrative that include some form of male exploitation, which functions as the catalyst, a motive for vengeance, and this is what transforms the protagonist from victim to avenger.

However, the generic discussion of rape-revenge films does not end here. Nowadays the discussion is on-going and it has taken a new turn where scholars define rape-revenge films as a hybrid genre. Back then in 2000 Read wrote: "with the maternal avenger, the rape-revenge cycle may have run its course [...] the narrative possibilities the rape-revenge structure offers may have been exhausted" (245). But now, here 15 years after Read published her work, contemporary rape-revenge film has not run its course yet; if it is ever going to. Now scholars like Claire Henry argues that rape-revenge films should be considered a hybrid genre. Henry claims: "Rape-revenge has shown to be more versatile and durable than Read expected, sustained through a high numbers of remakes and adaptations as

well as hybrids...” (2014, 3). Henry agrees with Read and also distances herself from Clover’s narrow viewpoint of rape-revenge films as a genre confined to the horror genre. However, Henry’s main point is that despite the genre diversity, and its frequent hybridity with other genres, does not mean that the rape-revenge films cannot be considered a genre in itself (2014, 3).

To describe rape-revenge as a “narrative structure” is limiting, as although rape-revenge may appear in many guises, it does have its own loose iconography (mud-covered semi-naked rape victims; red lipstick and fetish costumes of the transformed avenger; castration; women with guns), stock characters (young, white, attractive victim turned *femme fatale* avenger; rapists; rednecks), and key themes and conflicts (transformation; rape trauma; ethics of revenge; vigilantism; torture) [...].

(Henry 2014:4)

So where Read argued that rape-revenge does not have a “coherent iconography,” Henry is now arguing that it in fact does have its own “loose iconography.” Whether woman’s revenge film is a narrative structure or a hybrid genre, is not in my interest to determine in this paper. But what I hope the past paragraphs have illustrated, is some of the problems I have encountered in relation to Creed and Clover’s tendencies to look at the woman’s revenge films as confined to the horror genre, where I have found this not to be the case.

## Creating the other

Robin Wood says that one of the core characteristics of horror is that “normality is threatened by the Monster” (2000, 26). In *Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* Creed (1994) argues that horror films seek to “bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily waste, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and redraw the boundary between the human and non-human” (14). The abject was introduced by Kristeva in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in which she describes, rather than she defines, abjection as being: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.” (1982, 1) To quote again: “[M]assive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me radically

separate, loathsome” (Kristeva 1982, 2). The very indefinable quality is an important character of abject, as it opens up for multiple interpretations. In the following I will explore some of the many different faces of abject and how the three woman’s revenge films make use of it.

The more the protagonists try to recover from what they have lost from their revenge, the more they seem to be changing and becoming the ‘Other’. When Kūm-ja in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* finally is released from prison after having spent 13 years behind bars for a crime she did not commit, people are constantly commenting on her appearance. They keep noting that she looks different – she no longer looks like herself. She is no longer a victim, but an avenger ready to take her revenge on the man who framed her. In the quest for revenge, the protagonist drives further and further away from the initial role as the victim, and the line between justice and sadistic violence becomes unclear (Jeong 2012, 173). In the process of getting their revenge, the protagonists become tainted and corrupted; they become monstrous. Again, in *Lady Vengeance*, we are introduced to a character called ‘the witch’, a woman who is in prison because she ate the flesh of her husband and his mistress upon killing them. ‘The witch’ is presented as monstrous through these abnormal eating habits. However, it does not end here. When Kūm-ja then later in the film kills ‘the witch’ by feeding her bleach over the course of three years, Kūm-ja also becomes monstrous. Interestingly, the dichotomy of good and bad does not apply here. Kūm-ja takes over the title of ‘the witch’ by killing the old one, but she also becomes a hero, as she releases those from hell who was tormented by the now dead woman. Kūm-ja then becomes good by being bad.

Kristeva claims that food loathing is “perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection” (1982, 2). The universal taboo that dictates that we, human, do not eat other humans draws a line between us civilized people and the others who consume the wrong, inappropriate foods. Mr Paek in *Lady Vengeance* also mixes foods with things that might shock the audience. For instance, we see how he out of the blue jumps his wife during breakfast. During the sudden and violent sexual intrusion, his wife calmly asks his permission to go see her friends in the evening. The unsympathetic and greedy Paek grants her permission reminding her not to treat her friends to dinner, and he then finishes his task. When the characters on screen violate our food taboos – such as food mixed with sex or cannibalism – it enforces the feeling of abject.

According to Creed a crucial point in Kristeva's writing is abjection in relation to religion. Creed says the following about Kristeva's abjection:

[D]efinitions of the monstrous constructed in modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious “abominations”: sexual immorality and perversions; corporal alterations, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest. (Creed 1994, 9)

Such religious notions of abjection seems to be a repeating element throughout these three woman's revenge films, where we are forced to face issues like incest and child sexual abuse. When Pong-nam in *Bedevilled* confronts the possibility that her husband has been sexually abusing their daughter, she advocates the words “I... I think my husband screwed my daughter.” The phrasing provokes a horrified reaction from Hae-wŏn. The film does not show us the extended suffering as a mother caused by her child's misfortune or the methodical activities of a child rapist. The focus is instead on how Pong-nam's stark characterization of the situation as “my husband screwed my child” creates a dissonance with the socially and legally accepted conception of such behaviour among the “normal” people, creating the abject.

In *Tell Me Something* incest is also current. In flashbacks it is revealed that Su-yŏn's father, a famous and renowned artist, used to impose himself sexually on Su-yŏn. A flashback shows a young Su-yŏn, barely in her teens, sitting on the bed in a white dress with blood on her thighs while the father is kneeling in front of her whipping the blood off her thighs. All three films seems to be playing with the sensibility surrounding sexual abuse and violence against children. Also *Lady Vengeance* plays with this sensibility. In *Lady Vengeance* Paek is the root of all evil, disguised as a friendly kindergarten teacher. But he is truly monstrous, a boogeyman, who will kidnap your kids and kill them. The most horrific scene in *Lady Vengeance* is where we see the videos of Mr Paek killing the children. Director of *Lady Vengeance* Pak Ch'an-uk says in an interview “And the reason that I showed the video of the children as they were being killed — to the families as well as to the audience — was I wanted to heighten everyone's rage. That way, revenge would be the natural step” (Smith 2006 Interview). Showing such scenes may make the audience squirm in their seats

and effectively establish the evil character by drawing out certain responses from the audience.

Another characteristic within the films is the presence of law is either minimal or ironic. In one of the narratives the police is even helping out the protagonist in the protagonist's personal journey for revenge. Kristeva has pointed out:

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because the heighten display of such fragility. (1982, 4)

As an example of this fragility of the law a police detective participates in the killing of Mr Paek in *Lady Vengeance*. In an abandoned school Küm-ja presents the videos of Mr Paek's killings to the parents of the children who have died at Mr Paek's hands. The atmosphere is weirdly business-like – Küm-ja presenting in front of the blackboard with the parents behind school desks, while the police detective is running around providing coffee. In the scene right before the parents get their chance to take revenge on Mr Paek, the police detective shows the parents how to use a knife in a proper way. The scenes flirt with black humour and ironic depictions of the law.

The law furthermore seems to be on the side of those who can pay, and the legal authority and justice seem to have become decentralized. This is more so visible in *Bedevelled* where a police officer is summoned to the island after the death of Pong-nam's daughter. Pong-nam and her daughter tried to run away from the island, but the men find out and Pong-nam is literally dragged back home by her hair. In a heated argument the husband pushes the daughter away and she falls and smashes her head on a stone. She's dead. All the older women deny the fact that Pong-nam's husband had any blame in the little girl's death. But the police officer does not seem convinced by the older women or the husband. However, when he's about to leave the island Pong-nam's husband bribes him to keep quiet, and nothing more is done about the case. O Sŭng-hyŏn claims that a portrayal of the law enforcement as limited acts as a motive for the protagonists to take matters into their own hands and avenge themselves (2011, 155).

In Carol Clover's work *Men Women and Chainsaws* she has dedicated the chapter "Getting Even" to revenge films and especially rape-revenge films. In the chapter she investigates a number of revenge films, among those the rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your*

*Grave*. In this film she notices a theme of what she calls ‘urbanoia’, which constitutes a split between city and country. It is by no means a feature confined to revenge films, but *Bedevilled* shares some of the features usually associated with urbanoia revenge films, so an exploration of the concept of urbanoia is justified.

Clover notices a trend in horror films that moves its protagonist out of their ordinary urban life and into a more rural setting: “An enormous proportion of horror takes as its starting point the visit or move of (sub)urban people to the country” (Clover 1992, 124). Referring to the Little Riding Hood, Clover illustrates how going to the country in horror films is very much like going to the dark forest in fairy tales. It is in this dark place where the monsters exist. Little Riding Hood leaves her safe surroundings and takes off into the wilderness only to be captured and eaten by the wolf. Clover argues the following about what this shift from city to country enables for the narrative: “The point is that rural Connecticut (or wherever), like the deep forest of Central Europe, is a place where the rules of civilization do not obtain.” And that “people from the city are like us. People from the country... are people not like us” (Clover 1992, 124). It is in this rural setting that the people unlike us (the monsters) can strike us “normal” people without any consequences, as they stand outside the normal existing rules.

Let us dwell a little on how the rural people are not like us, according to Clover. Country people fail in hygiene, they snort when they breathe, they snore when they sleep, talk with their mouths full, and so on. In short they are surly, dirty, and slow. Clover says that they drive old cars, wear old clothes, eat badly, have bad teeth, are uneducated, and are often unemployed. The urban visitors stand in great contrast to their rural counterparts. They are well-dressed, drive better cars, sophisticated, and so on. But what is it about these uncivilized people that make them dangerous? Clover (1992) says:

In horror, the man who does not care of his teeth is obviously a man who can, and by the end of the movie will, plunder, rape, murder, beat his wife and children, kill within his kin, commit incest, and/or eat human flesh (not to speak of dog- and horsemeat, lizards, and insects), and so on. (126)

It is these uncivilities that threatens the civilized lives. One of Clover’s important points in connection to urbanoia is that, the thing at stake in the city/country axis is social class – the confrontation between have and have-nots (Clover 1992, 126).

With that in mind, let us take a closer look at *Bedevilled* and how it makes use of the city/country axis. In *Bedevilled* the contrast between city and country especially shines through in the two female protagonists, Hae-wŏn and Pong-nam. First and foremost they greatly differ in their looks. City Hae-wŏn has pale skin, wears crispy white clean dresses, Louis Vuitton bags, and high heels. These stand in stark contrast to Pong-nam's dark tanned skin, dirty work clothes, and messy hair. But not only do they differ in physical appearance, but also emotionally. Hae-wŏn is emotionally cold and emotionally distant as she isolates herself from those around her, while on the other hand, Pong-nam is friendly and warm-hearted. They are furthermore different in physic and elegance. In one scene Pong-nam walks in on Hae-wŏn while she is doing yoga. The urban Hae-wŏn, who has taken yoga classes, is able to do controlled and elegant yoga postures, but when rural Pong-nam tries to do the same postures appears to be more clumsy and unsophisticated.

In spite the fact that *Bedevilled* shares a lot of characteristics with urbanoia, in some aspects it also manages to differentiate itself from the traditional urbanoia storyline. We identify with the character Hae-wŏn because people from the city are like us, as Clover says. On the same hand, Hae-wŏn's coldness distances her from us, and we are more aligned to sympathize with the more warm-hearted Pong-nam. Even though Hae-wŏn's city life is more familiar to us viewers, it is a city that in the film seems alienated, as it presents a less positive image of urban life: Hae-wŏn is a lonely creature in the city, no friends, dinning alone in restaurants, and when she is given time off work she spends her time on the sofa starring at empty Guinness beer cans. Furthermore, we learn that it is not only in the rural areas that the monsters exist; they prosper in the city as well. In the initial scene of the film we see how a girl gets assaulted by some city thugs in Seoul. Hae-wŏn witnesses the crime and is called in for questioning by the police but keeps quiet. As she is leaving the police station she is intimidated and sexually humiliated by the very same thugs who assaulted the girl. This once again displays the fragility of the law – the authorities in the city is unable to prevent or provide justice for the victims. So no matter how cruel and sexual dysfunctional Pong-nam's husband and brother-in-law might be, they are not much different than the city thugs who is ravaging in the city. As a critique of Clover's urbanoia and the 'dangerous rural Other', Read writes that Clover herself in her analysis of *I Spit On Your Grave* points out that the rapists are not odd specimens but in the normal range of variation. Their acts of brutal rape are not traced to dysfunctional upbringing, and thereby Clover contradicts herself where she earlier

said that such country people are indeed highly abnormal (Read 2000, 26). Like this seemingly there are no rural monsters in *Bedevilled*, but instead it draws a picture that shows how men in general suppress our protagonists. So differing from Clover's urbanioa *Bedevilled* escapes the traditional "good" city and "bad" country narrative, and instead focuses more on the morality and victimhood (women assaulted by men) rather than class.

## The Female Castrator in Slasher

I feel bad for Do-hee, but I do not get a good feeling about her. Maybe because her mother ran away and she was abused. She's different from other kids. I can't figure her out. She does not seem like a child. Sometimes, she seems like a little monster.

(A Girl at My Door)

So says the police officer to his female colleague in the car in the ending of the independent film *A Girl at My Door* (2015). But what is it that makes her seem "like a little monster"? Referring to Laura Mulvey and the male 'castration anxiety', for Barbara Creed the feminine is monstrous because she can castrate. Her discussion of the *femme castratrice* embraces two kinds of films: The slasher and woman's revenge films. They differentiate on the basis of whether the castrating woman is justified or unjustified, motivated or motiveless. Said differently, she argues that the *femme castratrice* assumes two forms, "the castrating female psychotic... and the woman who seeks revenge on men who have raped or abused her in some way" (Creed 1994, 123). So in the following I will explore the different forms of *femme castratrice* and their motives for revenge.

First, I wish to look at *Bedevilled*'s resemblances and differences in connection to the slasher genre in accordance to Creed's description of the slasher genre shown below.

In general, the term 'slasher' is used to define those films in which a psychotic killer murders a large number of people usually with a knife or other instrument of mutilation. The killer stalks and kills relentlessly; his powers seem almost superhuman. His weapons are sharp instruments such as knives, pokers, axes, needles, razors. His bloodbath is finally brought to an end by one of the group – usually a woman. Intelligent, resourceful and usually not sexually active, she tends to stand apart from the others.

(Creed 1994:124)

At first glance *Bedevilled* does not appear to be a slasher film. The first killing does not happen until halfway into the film. Instead the first part of the film is seemingly devoted to describing the protagonist Pong-nam's miserable conditions on the island. Pong-nam is a slave to both the brutal males and the controlling matriarchal older women on the island, and is routinely raped and beaten. It serves to rack up the tension steadily to the point of pure discomfort. As a result, when the violent vengeance finally begins, it comes with a sense of relief and ensures that the audience's sympathy is placed where and with whom they should be.

Confirming to the slasher genre, the tool that Pong-nam uses to slaughter the islanders is a sickle and a hammer. The sickle – a 'sharp instrument' indeed – is an interesting choice of weapon, as Pong-nam transforms her agricultural tools into a deadly weapon. She transforms the essence of her servant-hood into an instrument of revenge. There are definitely feminist implications within the narrative, but the murders are not only aimed at the men of the island but also at the older women. The two men of the island seems like they have been able to do whatever they please, but the older women are equally as guilty as the men, as they allowed the men to proceed their vicious behaviour, because the older women saw it right and fair. Therefore it seems like the castrations isn't specifically gender orientated, but more so like an individual's attempt to put an end to all the people who have been oppressing her.

Approaching the end, after having slaughtered all her oppressors on the island, Pong-nam turns her attention towards Hae-wŏn and goes to the mainland to kill her. While on the island Pong-nam had great luck in murdering her oppressors, but when the setting is relocated to the mainland her luck seems to have run out. This final dual between Hae-wŏn and Pong-nam is the longest of them all, but in the end Hae-wŏn successively accomplishes in killing her friend who intended to murder her. Returning to Creed's definition of slasher films, the fact that it is Hae-wŏn who kills the murderer is not a coincident at all. Hae-wŏn clearly stands out from the others on the island due to her urban status. But even more so due to the fact that she seems to lead a largely asexual existence. In a scene Hae-wŏn reprimands her female work colleague for what she sees as the colleague's flirtatious behaviour with male superiors and tells her to be careful, an event that occurs right after Hae-wŏn has been sexually assaulted by a group of thugs outside the police station. Additionally, she remains mainly to herself and avoids contact with other people, locking

the door tightly every time she gets home to keep others and potential monsters out. She even gets suspicious and uneasy when the doorbell rings. She freezes and asks:

Hae-wŏn: “who is it? ... who is it?”

The superintendent: “The superintendent.”

Hae-wŏn: “I do not recognize your voice.”

The superintendent: “I’m a superintendent.”

She shows no interest in men, in fact she seems to be fearing them. If there is ever any sexual desire hinted the desire is not directed towards men, but instead towards the female friend Pong-nam. In a flashback we get hints of a childhood crush on Pong-nam, but later when Pong-nam in a current timeframe seizes the opportunity to approach Hae-wŏn, Hae-wŏn withdraws confirming her asexual status.

According to Creed very little attention has been given to the female castrator in slasher films. But Creed argues that there are two kinds of female castrators in slasher films: as a slasher and as heroine. In *Bedevilled* Pong-nam plays the role of the slasher while Hae-wŏn technically plays the role of heroine, as she is the one who manages to kill the murderer. Clover argues that the slasher film phallicizes the heroine – who Clover also calls the ‘Final Girl’. For instance, the heroine’s usually boyish name suggests, according to Clover, that she is not a typical ‘feminine’ figure. To Clover (1989) a celebration of the heroine as feminine is nothing but meaningless, as she is not she:

Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate; to the extent that she ‘means’ girl at all, it is only for the purposes of signifying phallic lack. ... The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they ‘read’ some aspect of male experience. To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development... is, in the light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. (119)

Now, even though Clover talks about the heroine and not the slasher here, Clover’s consideration might not be irrelevant in conjunction with Pong-nam, the slasher. Pong-nam is defined by her non-female status. Her husband and the husband’s aunt treats her like a mere animal, often reminding her of this by comparing her to pigs and dogs. “Didn’t I tell you to show respect talking about me and my family? Even dogs and pigs learn if they get

beaten. Why not you!” says her husband and beats her up with a leather strap to teach her a lesson. The following morning at the breakfast table the husband notes “Are you a dog? Do not eat on the floor.” Moreover, she isn’t able to satisfy her husband’s desires, because he pays prostitutes to come to the island to take care of his sexual needs. Furthermore, the protagonist is named Pong-nam. In Korean Pong-nam means ‘blessed man’ directly resolving in a de-feminisation of the protagonist. Director Chang Ch’öl-su also seems to have been drawing inspiration from classic Korean literature. The scene where Pong-nam is working like a maniac under the glaring sun in the potato fields after the loss of her daughter recalls similarity with Kim Tong-in’s classic short story *Kamja* (‘Potatoes’) from 1925. This short story also ends with the death of the female protagonist, Pong-nyō (meaning ‘blessed woman’). In the short story, Pong-nyō starts to sell her body as a way to claim a higher and higher status. She gets caught up in jealousy when her rich lover/client intend to marry another woman. In madness she tries to kill her lover with a sickle, but her attempt fails and she is instead the one who is killed (Kim 1925, 193). So what seems eye-catching is that in contradiction to *Kamja* where Pong-nyō’s revenge is unsuccessful, *Bedevilled*’s blessed man, Pong-nam, is successful in her vengeance because she is more resourceful due to the empowerment of her masculine name.

However, Creed is not convinced by Clover’s statement that the female heroine is an illusion, simply because Creed points to the fact that there are many heroines of slasher films who do not have boyish names. Like-wise the reasoning for director Chang naming the protagonist ‘Kim Pok-nam’ might be found elsewhere. In an interview with Chang, he says the following about his source of inspiration for making the film: “There were three shocking cases that had given me inspiration. In Namwŏn was the ‘Kim Pu-nam’ case in 1991, in Ch’ungju was the ‘Kim Po-ŭn, Kim Chin’-gwan case’ in 1992, and recently ‘the case of the Milyang high school girls’” (Song 2010). The case of Kim Pu-nam refers to Kim Pu-nam, a 30-year-old woman, who murdered a man who used to be her next-door neighbor who raped her when she was 9 years old. Especially the resemblance between the name Kim Pu-nam and our protagonist Kim Pong-nam (김부남/감복남) seems striking. The fact that the different stories told in *Kamja* and *Bedevilled* seems to draw upon some restrictions related to gender and the name of the protagonist seems hard to ignore, but might just as likely be explained by director Chang’s inspiration from these previous tragic cases.

## The Femme Castratrice in Films

In *Tell Me Something* a serial killer is at stake. The victims are all male and their bodies appear in black plastic bags with various body parts – a torso, a head, a leg, an arm. Soon after detective Cho finds out that all the victims have one thing in common – they have all been romantically involved with a woman named Su-yŏn. When detective Cho visits Su-yŏn's home he uses the opportunity to take a look around in her house. Here he sees a portrait hanging on the wall painted by Su-yŏn's father. It is a depiction of Ophelia featuring Su-yŏn's adult face. This acts as a clue that hints about Su-yŏn's 'unstable' mental state by linking her to the mad character of Hamlet, Ophelia. Su-yŏn's madness and motivation for murder is hinted once again, this time even more vividly, in a flashback. In the flashback we see an adult Su-yŏn who is painting on her own in a studio, as her father suddenly shows up unannounced. Even as an adult Su-yŏn is unable to break loose from her father who sexually abuses her. In the scene to follow we see Su-yŏn having an anger outburst where she tears the studio apart, cutting the paintings into pieces. As she finally collapses on a chair the camera slowly moves from Su-yŏn and over to the painting of Ophelia. This is an insane woman. However, the fate of Su-yŏn isn't like the fate of Ophelia in Hamlet, as Su-yŏn does not destroy herself. No, Su-yŏn takes use of her insanity and turns it into a tool – a driving force for vengeance.

In cinema, the gaze is important. Clover draws attention to the fact that modern horror cinema has two gazes: Assaultive and reactive gazing. The first gaze – the assaultive gaze – is in line with the traditional Mulveyan gaze, the male gaze, which can be either voyeuristic (sadistic, controlling, and punitive) or fetishistic (turning the woman into an object). There are multiple examples of the fetishistic gaze in *Tell Me Something*. For example when one of the male victims is spying on Su-yŏn through the video cameras he installed at her home. The walls of his secret surveillance-room is set up in a fetishistic way, looking at footages of Su-yŏn on several TV screens. Also in a flashback Su-yŏn's father is seen painting a young nude Su-yŏn and fetishistically gazing at Su-yŏn's legs. The second gaze – the reactive gaze – is the frightened gaze, the eye wide open in terror. Clover quotes George Metz who also distinguishes between two gazes, a projective and an introjective gaze (1992, 207). This last gaze, the introjective gaze, is where we look at things and retain them in our minds, where they may come back to haunt or please us. Often in these woman's revenge films the female protagonists refuse to be intimidated into the position of the victim and

reactive gazing. Also Su-yŏn does not take the position as victim and does not use the introjective gaze (being scared). Instead she turns the male fetishistic gaze into an assaultive gaze, a projective gaze “casting” itself onto the men who objectify her. In *Tell Me Something* the male victims’ acts of looking literally sends them to their death— detective Cho’s partner O is murdered right after he looks at a Polaroid of Su-yŏn and her friends. (Kim 2005, 108)

Later in the film, Su-yŏn’s medical resident friend Sŭng-min is first identified as the murderer. The identity of Su-yŏn as the real mastermind behind the killings is set into action when Cho casually watches the surveillance tape of Su-yŏn. While watching the tape Cho finds a clue that leads towards Su-yŏn as the real murderer. Following the clue leads him to Su-yŏn’s studio in the forest. Here he finds the portrait of Su-yŏn as Ophelia hanging next to an aquarium-like tank. Cho turns on the lights in the tank and Su-yŏn’s work in progress is revealed – a headless male body composed by different body parts from different men all stitched together. Su-yŏn’s motive for committing the murders are clearly gender-related. She castrates the man who has been sexually abusing her for years, her father, by killing him, but also her past boyfriends. Her mission does not stop with the death of her father. Her goal is not the man who raped her, but all men. However, Su-yŏn is not a castrating “bitch” like the usual rape-avenger, like that of Jennifer in *I Spit on Your Grave*. Bitches, manipulate, and seduce; they operate in the field of male lust and female strategy. Su-yŏn rarely smiles, never opens her body to men. Her desire is not for flesh, and her look is not seductive. Rape-revenge films either include a transformation in which the initial rather plain rape-victim is transformed into a deadly but irresistible femme fatale or is frequently peopled with beautiful actresses (Read 2000, 36). The latter variant is *Tell Me Something*. Though Su-yŏn is not seductive in her demeanour, she is the stereotypical beautiful woman. Su-yŏn’s role was played by Shim Ũn-ha who was a major star in Korea at that time, known for her beautiful look and admired by many men (Kim 2005, 109). Detective Cho also falls for the beautiful woman, but is seemingly the only man who walks free. When they separate the day before Su-yŏn takes off to Paris, she tells him “Thank you for not dying.” However, though she does not kill him she still manages to castrate him symbolically. “The final shot of the film is a slow zoom-out of Cho stumbling out of Su-yŏn’s studio, crawling on all fours, emitting inarticulate noises: a picture of a man symbolically castrated” (Kim 2005, 110).

## The Maternal Avenger

Creed also talks about another castrating female, the ‘castrating mother’, as she calls this character. A narrative involving a ‘castrating mother’ usually explores the relationship between mother and son. The relationship is represented in terms of repressed Oedipal desire, fear of the castrating mother and psychosis (Creed 1994, 139). Henry talks about another kind of ‘castrating mother’ in *Maternal Transformation and the Post-feminist Dilemma: Can I Have My Violent Revenge and My Children Too?* In this essay, she talks about the maternal avenger, a contemporary variation of the female avenger within the rape-revenge theme, that undergoes a transformation from heroine into mother. Where the classic rape-revenge narrative of the 1970s and 1980s was about transforming the heroine from victim to avenger, this contemporary maternal avenger is the transformation in reverse so the protagonist shifts from avenger to mother (Henry 2010, 1).

In *Lady Vengeance*, Kūm-ja finds out that she is pregnant at a young age, and she seeks help from her old teacher Mr Paek. While she stays with Mr Paek in his apartment she witnesses the kidnapping and murdering of a little boy and Paek threatens Kūm-ja’s baby and makes Kūm-ja confess the crime. Later in the film, when she is released from prison, she seeks out her daughter who had been adopted by an Australian couple. But before the introduction of her daughter, Jenny, there are several ways in which Kūm-ja is also constructed as mother. In prison Kūm-ja assumes the role of mother by volunteering to take care of an old inmate, by donating a kidney to a fellow inmate, and poisoning a rapist, the ‘Witch’, for another inmate. The only actual act of rape-revenge by Kūm-ja is against this female rapist in prison, reflecting a postfeminist perspective on rape, which asserts that men are not the enemy and that women can rape too (Henry 2010, 5). Kūm-ja’s gradual poisoning of the rapist is a maternal act, saving her fellow inmate from further abuse. Her actions are not impulsive or emotional, which contradicts usual stereotypes of women as emotional creatures.

While Kūm-ja is not personally raped, the marital rape scene where Mr Paek rapes his wife on the dining table can be read as a displaced rape. The wife of Mr Paek is a friend of Kūm-ja from her time in prison and the rape of her friend can function as motive for Kūm-ja to take revenge on Paek. When Mr Paek finds out that his wife is associated with Kūm-ja he beats and ties up his wife. The wife, however, has already put sedative in his food and he falls asleep while eating his dinner. Kūm-ja soon after arrives at their home to find Mr Paek

unconscious and his wife bound and beaten. Kūm-ja focuses her attention on Mr Paek and pushes him to the ground, and then starts cutting his hair with scissors. Her reaction at first might seem displaced, considering she has long dreamed about taking revenge on Mr Paek. However, her behavior is related to the religious subtext of the film, as the hair-cutting refers to the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. When Delilah cuts Samson's hair, she robs him of his strength, so this reference makes the hair-cutting a form of castrating vengeance (Henry 2010, 5). The role of rape is not to function as a key motivation for revenge, but to provide a background of sexual exploitation to which Kūm-ja can play maternal avenger.

According to Henry a key turning point occurs in the vengeance narrative when Kūm-ja finds the dead little boy's charm hanging from Mr Paek's mobile phone. Along with the boy's charm are several other charms, indicating that Mr Paek continued to kill children while she was in prison. Filled with guilt Kūm-ja steps aside at the film's climax, denying herself the revenge. As she denies herself the revenge and hands the revenge over to the deceased children's parents, it intensifies the image of Kūm-ja as a self-sacrificing mother. Park says that "when Kūm-ja yields the power of revenge over to the grieving families, I felt that was a very feminine characteristic — and a female character fit into that story" (Smith 2006 interview). Like this the film on several occasions shows Kūm-ja as maternal and deals with the struggle between the brutality of Kūm-ja as a female avenger and her maternal figure.

## Historical Contextualisation

My investigation of the vengeful woman in films has so far mainly been analysed from a psychoanalytical point of view. Read argued in the beginning of the dissertation, that the psychoanalytical approach has a tendency to investigate vengeful women with a generic mind-set. In his writing *Horror as Critique in Tell Me Something and Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* Kyu-hyun Kim uses a psychoanalytical approach to analyse the two films *Tell Me Something* and *Mr Vengeance*. In the beginning he justifies for how the two films can fall into the horror genre despite that *Tell Me Something* was promoted as a "hardcore thriller" and *Mr Vengeance* as an "authentic hardboiled movie" (Kim 2005, 106). But my question is then: how do we understand a film like *A Girl at My Door? A Girl at My Door*, a Korean drama that is difficult yoking to the horror genre. In a review on the internet, made by the very same man, Kyu-hyun Kim says the following about director July Jōng's film:

Intriguingly, she [July Jöng] incorporates certain aspects of quasi-feminist neo-noirs into her plot machinations: one of the characters almost becomes a *femme fatale*, her ability to manipulate perceptions of the other human beings both chillingly and sympathetically commensurate with her disposition molded by the conditions in which she had to grow up. (Kim 2015)

Such interpretations indicates that the director was inspired by the female figure *femme fatale* and the neo-noir genre – a genre inspired by the older genre film noir. Thus, in the following I will try and move away from a psychoanalytical analysis and try and look at the vengeful woman as historically defined.

Read wants to offer an alternative to Clover's generic account for the rape-revenge. She draws on Jim Collins and his *Genericity in the Nineties* to give insight in how genre works in this contemporary age of ours. Collins points out that the emergence of new technologies such as television and video has only complicated the understanding of genre and how it navigates, and he tries to rethink how to think genre. He claims that these new technologies have resulted in a renaissance phase in which we rethink the old texts available. According to Collins this recycling manifests itself into two different ways. The first is the 'eclectic irony'. An important point of 'electric irony' is that the features of conventional genre films are not simple recycled but rearticulated. They do not represent the mere detritus of exhausted cultures past. Rather

Those icons, scenarios, visual conventions continue to carry with them some sort of cultural 'charge' or resonance that must be reworked according to the exigencies of the present. The individual generic feature then, are neither detritus nor reliquaries, but *artifacts* of another cultural moment that now circulate in different arenas, retaining vestiges of past significance reinscribed in the present. (Collins 1993, 256)

The other form of genericity, 'the new sincerity', is "obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony, where everything works in unison" and consequently "rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of a lost purity" (Collins 1993, 242-43). Texts in this category tend to use a genre text in order to facilitate and guarantee a "[m]ove back in time... towards a lost authenticity" in which the unresolvable problems of the present can be magically resolved in an imaginary and unrecoverable past (Collins 1993, 259).

Works like Julianne Pidduck's *The 1990s Hollywood Fatal Femme*, differing from Clover and Creed, has taken its cue from more historically contextualized study. Pidduck traces the origins of violent women of contemporary cinema to the femme fatale of film noir. Where Creed's location of the monstrous-feminine within the horror genre relied on re-conceptualized psychoanalytical approaches to the genre, Pidduck's situation of the fatal femme within neo-noir depends on re-articulated feminist reading of femme fatale of film noir. Pidduck (1995) argues that:

If the femme fatale in wartime and post-war cinema is often connected to a deep-seated unease in the shifting gender roles in that society, the fatal femme ... marks the ongoing troubled status of issues of gender, violence, and power within North American society.

(65)

Pidduck identifies a number of similarities between the film noir of 1940s and 1950s and the neo-noir of the 1990s. Both film noir and neo-noir are marked by the absence of family, and both put the males at risk by the femme fatale/fatal femme and their authority is undermined. Finally, both often punish the monstrous woman for the attack she made on the patriarchal society by making her insane or killing her. Thus, for Pidduck, the killer women in the 1990s cinema are seen as the offspring of the femme fatale of film noir, resulting in an 'eclectic irony'.

Trying to think down the lines like those of Pidduck, I wish to explore and try to identify an older sister of the female avenger in South Korean cinema. In Gina Yu's *Images of Women in Korean Movies* she situates women in Korean cinema. Yu says that there are two major images of women in Korean films. One is the "good wife and wise mother" and the other is the wicked woman who is either a femme fatale or a seductress (Yu 2005, 261). Especially director Kim Ki-yŏng's film show extremely strong and evil women. These women, like the female lead in *The Housemaid* (1960) sexually exploits men, seducing them and destroys the family orders (Yu 2005, 264) – classic femme fatale.

There are no studies available that exclusively account for the femme fatale in Korean cinema (Yang 2007, 197), so instead I will turn to what So-young Kim and Kyung-hyun Kim has said about how the maid in *The Housemaid* is portrayed. In the story of *The Housemaid* a working-class housemaid moves into a middle-class urban family home. Here she seduces the husband of the family and the husband impregnates the maid through this

extramarital relation. The husband's wife then persuades the maid to abort her child resulting in the maid reluctantly throwing herself down the staircase. Interestingly, the maid seeks revenge upon the abortion and Kyung-hyun Kim argues that the act of revenge twists the plot: "[T]his excessive family melodrama becomes a horror film where the crazed maid takes revenge upon the family" (K. Kim 2005, 210). And he argues that this sudden shift from melodrama to horror results in a portrayal of the maid as a monster. So-young Kim contextualises the femme fatale by relating her to the modernization in the 1960's where "unmarried migrant female workers... moved from rural areas to Seoul – a social phenomenon that influenced the depictions of women in films of this period" (S. Kim 2005, 191). Talking about how the 1960s films portray the women she writes: "[U]nmarried female workers who are suspected of being working-class femme fatales pose dangerous threats to urban middle-class families. Their feminine sexuality combined with their working-class status place them in an abject position" (S. Kim 2005, 191). In these earlier films the feminine was also represented as abject and monstrous. But there is no connection made between the Korean femme fatale and the female avenger that we see in contemporary Korean cinema today.

Though the connection between the Korean femme fatale and the female avenger has not been made, Rikke Schubart has made such a connection in relation to popular cinema. Talking about rape-revenge, Schubart (2007), similarly to Pidduck, argues that the femme fatale avenger is a relative of the femme fatale in forties film noir (95). The film noir femme fatale is greedy, guilty, and is punished in the end. The femme fatale avenger is neither greedy nor guilty, and is usually not punished in the end. But like her film noir sister she is sexy and lethal.

The protagonist of *Lady Vengeance*, Kūm-ja, is sexy and beautiful and is on several occasions objectified by men throughout the film. Her beauty paralyzes men. For instance, in one scene a boy comically freezes in his task while doing his job – stunned by her beauty – upon his boss notes "I told you she was pretty." However, Kūm-ja is well aware about the fact that she is objectified by people and therefore she tries to take control over her own looked-upon-ness. She does so by changing her appearance to change the way others perceive her look. She does so by doing her make-up, applying red eye shadow, in order to disrupt her own beauty. She directly says the following about the reason why she applies the red eye shadow: "I do not want people to think I am kind-hearted." Kelly Jeong writes: "On-

screen objectification is not always feminization or disempowerment... Geum-ja is often objectified and adds to her own innate feminine quality with make-up, but she is anything but powerless” (Jeong 2012, 172). The femme fatale avenger arms herself with guns, butcher knives, saws, makeup, and a killer outfit. “For the first time in the new femme fatale cinema makeup is thematised as a pose *constructing* rather than *hiding* an angry woman” (Shubart 2006, 96). Schubart’s statement only intensifies the fact that Kūm-ja wearing make-up functions as an empowerment. In *A Study of the Costume and inner symbolic meaning of the movie >Sympathy for Lady Vengeance<* Kūm-ja is directly connected to images of femme fatale. In the scene where Kūm-ja is dressed in a red silk dress while casually smoking a cigarette and talking about her desired vengeance after having slept with a young boy, strengthens the representation of a femme fatale (Chang 2008, 23). Later in the film Kūm-ja is furthermore empowered by a new wardrobe: approaching the revenge she appears in an all-black suit signifying death and action.

Pong-nam is also seen as a femme fatale avenger in *Bedevilled*, as she makes use of her femininity to manipulate and hypnotise men. In the heated battle between life and death, Pong-nam’s husband manages to catch Pong-nam and tie her up. He intends to kill her as he points a knife at her, but freezes when she starts erotically licking the pointing knife. Hypnotized he watches her lick the knife and then his finger. But soon after Pong-nam’s teeth are bloodily grinding their way through his finger. She is a woman who, claims Creed (1994), is “playing on a masochistic desire for death, pleasure and oblivion” (130). She represents women’s new permission to use femininity as a mask and turn it against men. The similarities between the erotic female avenger and the femme fatale suggest, that, while the origins of the rape-revenge structure do lie in the horror genre, they go back further than the horror sub-genre (Read 2000, 36).

According to Schubart, unlike her femme fatale sister the femme fatale avenger often escape the sense of guilt. But how is the question of guilt portrayed in *Lady Vengeance*? Does the female avenger in *Lady Vengeance*, as Schubart suggests, escape the feeling of guilt? In Kūm-ja’s case, because she is constructed as mother, the sense of guilt is intensified. This is reflected in Read’s analysis of earlier Hollywood maternal avengers: “These narratives constantly work to construct the mother not as morally justified but as guilty” (Read 2000, 226). Read says that the deployment of the codes and conventions of classic melodrama work to construct the mother as guilty, and thus to legitimate a backlash politics,

which pushes women back into the domestic sphere of home and family (Read 2000, 18). Perhaps the dominance of melodrama in South Korean national cinema has had a similar influence on *Lady Vengeance*. Henry (2010) directly talks about the different influences that might have played a factor in the creation of the character Kūm-ja:

It is difficult to pin down a origin for the construction of Geum-ja as guilty, because the cultural archetypes of the Madonna versus the slut, the self-sacrificing mother versus the neglectful working mother, and the femme fatale in need of redemption, are so prevalent and film buff Park has clearly drawn on a range of these well-worn images in creating Geum-ja. (8)

Seemingly a lot of “well-worn images” of previous women in films were used in the creation of the character Kūm-ja, testifying that past representations are still functioning in the present.

## The Endings

Finally, I want to examine whether or not the Korean femme fatale avenger gets punished in the end, where Schubart argued that they usually do not. Kyung-hyun Kim in *The Remasculinization of Korean Cinema* does not have great expectation for such a development to have happened, as he says the following when comparing *Happy End* (1999) to *The Housemaid* (1960) “When comparing a film released in 1960 with one released exactly thirty-nine years later, most remarkable is *not* the changes that take place in terms of gender representations, but rather the fixity” (K. Kim 2004, 235). In the introduction he also writes: “... the representation of femininity remained strikingly unchanged while the representation of masculinity underwent various mutations and diversifications in configuring itself to mould a modern subjectivity” (2004, 8). In the contemporary film *Happy End* the woman Po-ra is unfaithful to her husband, but in the end the husband kills her. Kim comments “Bora’s extramarital affair, the cause of the family demise, is now over, but it required her death to conclude in a “happy end”” (2004, 240). Contemporary films still portray similar gender representations like those found in femme fatale films from the 1960s, indicating that there really hasn’t been a big change in gender relations.

But does the femme fatale avenger within the woman's revenge film also confirm to such fixed gender representations? Starting with *Tell Me Something* this is a film that clearly depicts a woman walking free from her monstrous work. Kim (2005) writes:

The film ends, not with the reinstatement of the patriarchal order (through the apprehension/destruction of the 'monstrous' Su-yŏn) but with a truly terrifying conclusion for the majority of male viewers – that a female 'artist' devoted to the counter-objectification and emasculation of men like them is set free: Ophelia's art project, that is also her vengeance, continues. (110)

Mary Ann Doane describes the femme fatale as "symptom of male fears about feminism" and "an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the 'I', the ego" (Doane quoted in Schubart 2007, 97). Doane is referring to a male ego and to men's loss of a sense of stability. Men lose power while women gain it. The femme fatale in film noir was killed in the end. But here the woman stays in power. *Tell Me Something's* monstrous woman is not punished, and so the patriarchal order is not reconstructed.

As for *Lady Vengeance* Jeong (2012) writes in her analysis of the ending of the film: "*Lady Vengeance* visually represent redemption and the opening of a new life by juxtaposing the protagonists against a striking, snowy landscape at the end" (181). Jeong's reading of the ending is characterized by a religious interpretation. For example when the snow is silently falling from the sky, Kŭm-ja and her daughter are facing each other in an ally, and stop and open their mouths catching the snowflakes in their mouths. Jeong interprets this as a symbol of the Catholic ritual of taking of the host at the conclusion of the church service. And when Kŭm-ja smashes her face into the white cake it is a reenacting of the symbolic gesture of repentance and purification, which she rejected from the priest in the beginning of the film.

Steve Choe has a different reading of the *Lady Vengeance* ending. In the very last scene of *Lady Vengeance*, when Kŭm-ja encounters her daughter in the ally she tell her to "live white, like tofu." The daughter answers, "you too mom." But Kŭm-ja does not offer her tofu, but a white cake she baked at the cake shop. "What might this gesture mean?" Choe asks. To answer this question he includes an interview with director Pak:

I wanted to convey the notion of salvation in this final installment, but I actually think this is an anti-religious film. There is a contrast between the white tofu that was given

to Geum-ja at the beginning of the film as a means of purification and the cake she bakes toward the end of the film. The tofu is salvation from a supreme being, which she rejects, while the cake, after the climax, is judgment and forgiveness for herself by herself. People often ask if the film is Christian or Buddhist to which I reply, it is Geum-ja religion. (Pak quoted in Choe 2009, 42)

Rather than to appeal to a third party, Kŭm-ja produces the terms of her own forgiveness, baking her own white cake and offering it as a token of her own redemption. Whether you take Choe's 'Kŭm-ja religious' reading or Jeong's catholic reading of the ending scene, both readings made by Choe and Jeong agree on one point – Kŭm-ja does find redemption in the end.

Lastly, in *Bedevilled* Pok-nam dies, but seemingly not in vain. After the bloody incident on the island, Hae-wŏn returns back to Seoul. Like Pong-nam right before she took her vengeance, Hae-wŏn stares up into the sun and walks straight into the police station and points out the thugs who killed the girl in the initial scene of the film. Like this the patriarchal order is not restored in *Tell Me Something* or *Bedevilled*, and in *Lady Vengeance* Kŭm-ja seemingly gets her violent vengeance and redemption in the end; this indicates that the Korean femme fatale avenger in fact does go unpunished.

## Conclusion

We have seen how women are constructed as monstrous and castrating in their road for vengeance. However, the psychoanalytical theories used work within a generic analytical approach, which can create static and ahistorical explanations for the vengeful women. In these contemporary times genre texts from the past are increasingly being recycled in the present. Thus, the Korean woman's rape revenge films must be understood, in part at least, as a product of the particular ways in which generic discourses from the past are circulating and functioning in the present. I am not writing off the psychoanalytical approach, but I think it is crucial to acknowledge that the vengeful dangerous women are not confined to the genre of horror, and to try and find a golden middle way where it is possible to incorporate a historical approach.

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