Pinay as Subaltern in Korean Cinema

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Abstract

The paper presents an analysis of Korean film texts Yangil Choi’s All Under the Moon (1993) and Han Lee’s Wandeugi (a.k.a. Punch, 2011). The discussion of the paper focused on the interplay among nationalism, post/colonialism, and globalization in these films.

Keywords: post/colonialism, hybridity, subalterneity, nationalism

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The current research was conceived to address recurring questions that boil down to the representation of the subaltern1; that is: 1) Why is it so difficult to speak for the subaltern? 2) What does the image of Pinay in Korean cinema intimate regarding the discursive politics at play? And 3) how do we then represent them without ideological filtering in media praxis? By way of answering those questions, this study will map out the problematic of post-colonial discursive space in Korea by analyzing two film texts depicting diasporic Pinay images – as an entertainer in Yangil Choi’s All Under the Moon (1993) and as a migrant wife in Han Lee’s Wandeugi (a.k.a. Punch, 2011).

The kind of postcoloniality that exists in Korea must be understood side by side with nationalism and globalization. One way of understanding the interplay that gives rise to the postcolonial specificity in Korea would be to take the notion of
glocalization into account, a portmanteau combining globalization and localization. Throughout the compressed version of modernization in Korea\(^2\) one might argue that there has been constant negotiation between these two opposing notions. To wit, whereas in the Western capitalist model, a linear progress was prescribed for economic development in Korea, cultural nationalism had been also simultaneously called on to preserve cultural values and national identity. In effect, Korea became industrialized enough to join the bandwagon of globalization, all the while equally engendering “cultural nationalism” with the outmoded model of the nation-state (cf. Chungmoo Choi).

If global capitalism catalyzed diasporization, hence becoming a way of including diasporic identities in Korea today, nationalist politics initiated with localization would precisely serve as exclusion of these identities due to its essentialist/totalist actuations in defining citizenship. Such strange coupling of two opposing models clues us as to why the country evinces an ambivalent postcolonial nature when interacting with other nations that fall under the now-anomalous categorization of “Third World.” In such a condition, it would be the voice of women that is being silenced, behooving us to hypothesize that the image of diasporic Filipino women in Korean cinema is predetermined by such complicity, and ideologically reincarnated as the subaltern.

The strong fascination that the diasporic image exerts on the public imagination in Korean cinema has rarely been demonstrated more strikingly than by the film Wandeugi, known as Punch in its international release. Based on a popular source novel, Wandeugi depicts the coming-of-age of an eighteen-year-old named Wan-deuk who is a trouble-maker who yet maintains filial devotion to his hunchback father. Unfortunately, for him, his eccentric teacher Dongju, who is also a church minister, keeps singling him out in and outside the classroom, and even at home as he lives across the street. One day, Dongju, who helps illegal immigrants through his church ministry, finds out and tells Wandeuk that his mother is still alive, and is Filipina. The
rest of the plot focuses on the process of conciliation between mother and son until the Filipina is successfully reintegrated in the family that she had earlier abandoned.

As insinuated by the narrative, the film seems to envision the utopic multicultural society in its resolution. However, if we look at the same narrative in terms of the paradigmatic viewpoint (by extracting the plotline of the Filipino immigrant wife from the syntagmatic story), the implication would contradict what the text has designed to be perceived. To be specific, the segmented narrative of the Pinay mother can be unfolded in terms of a three-act structure: the atonement for her abandonment of her Korean family, her desire to return to her family, and her successful reunion with the family.

The first act introduces the Filipino character charged with her remorse for abandoning her family. In this initial segment, her sense of guilt and Otherness engender the first emotional signifier, “passivity,” wherein a sense of belittlement and faceless subjectivity is relentlessly built up by the use of the basic cinematic device to render the character less significant. Accordingly, she is constantly positioned in the background, framed within low-angle compositions, and sutured through the eyes of the spectator as exercised by the POV (point-of-view) device. In addition, such passivity is further maximized by her subservient manner toward the other diegetic characters whose gaze over the Pinay subject constantly reminds audiences of her difference, coming as she did from “over there.”

How do we account though for her predetermined passivity? In the context of globalization and multicultural transformation today in Korea, the nation’s attitude toward Southeast Asia seems to be far more ambivalent in so far as it manifests double-faced politics – that is, a postcolonial but Orientalist condition amid a multicultural but homogeneous situation. Marked by different historical and political forces of colonization and the devastation wrought by the Korean War, the formation of the Korean nation would have been a result of the postcolonial trauma of de-territorialization from colonial discourse together
with the industrial project of re-territorialization of its people in
the name of reason and progress. It is, therefore, this
spatiotemporal confluence between the postcolonial space
mobilizing unitary national discourses and the internalization of
the Western linear temporality that would have engendered a
kind of binaristic consciousness among Koreans, premised on
the Eurocentrically homogeneous linear time\(^3\) that registers the
Pinay character as cultural Other. So by looking back, it may not
be far-fetched to say that the Pinay character’s passivity in this
film-text reflects the Korean attitude toward citizens from
developing countries.

Marked by another emotional signifier, “self-effacement,” the
second act involves her desire to return to the family, taking
audiences on a roller-coaster fluctuation from estrangement to
embracement and from conflict to climax. In this act, her desire
is expressed through her absence. She is now nowhere to be
found onscreen but her presence is constantly disclosed through
explanatory inserts such as the letter and the dinner box left for
the protagonist. In this manner, her wish to nurture her son once
again becomes visible and thus her “nowhere” absence becomes
a “now-here” presence in the mind of the protagonist as well as
the audience that identifies with him, thereby manifesting the
pathos in her situation.

It is particularly the bus station scene that signals the start of
the final resolution for the character, the successful reunion with
the family. Here in the locale, she first utters her son’s name to
his face and finally hugs him and cries over his shoulder. This
whole tearjerker sequence incites a cathartic as well as
dramaturgic release carefully calibrated to draw empathy toward
her and asseverate the reason for her to be reintegrated with the
family. But thence, her role is over inasmuch as her act of
contrition is completed. From here on, her presence is strictly to
be confined to the domestic setting, cooking and caring for her
son, her husband, and the entire community, thereby bestowing
the final signifier upon her of maternalism.
Now if we assemble the mother’s emotional signifiers as a singular whole, we realize how the image of the Pinay is constructed in the film, sculptured as she is with the qualities of passivity, self-effacement, and lastly maternalism acquired through the course of each act. Such representation further affirms the discursive ambivalence I have posited at the onset of the discussion. In these three acts from alienation to acceptance to family integration (symbolically, metaphorical acceptance in the nation), what is suggested is the multi-layered discourses hidden: first, nationalistic exclusion as the Other, and second, patriarchal inclusion as “good” femininity. In short, her voice is translated, rearticulated, and eventually doubly effaced by ideological and cultural filtering and what is left in her now is the ideologically fetishized image of the subaltern.

If Wandeugi affirms Spivak’s classical statement that the subaltern cannot speak, the film All under the Moon would gainsay her statement with the notion of hybridity and third space informed by Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, third space is filled with hybridized cultures and multiple identities whose agency eventually undermines colonial discourse. It is this space that the film All under the Moon visualizes, based on early '90s social vistas in Japan when it was also then proposing a multi-cultural society like that of Korea today.

The film depicts Asian minority groups in Tokyo with its central focus on the romance between a Filipina entertainer named Connie and a Korean immigrant who works as a taxi driver. Meanwhile, there is the latter’s Korean mother (called Mama) who runs a bar where Connie works and who is openly against their relationship. The dialogue provided below is the conversation between Mama and Connie in the bar, after which I will discuss the identity politics between these two migrant subclasses in Japan.

MAMA: Now that you are in Japan, you must act like the Japanese. Connie, translate!
CONNIE (in Tagalog): She said we should behave like the stingy Japanese.
IRENE (whispering, in Tagalog): But how? We’re Filipinos, that’s not how we roll. [Giggles and high-fives with the other girls]
MAMA: Lolita, cut your chat! Make them drink. Japanese men will keep drinking as long as you push them. They are the most generous men in the world since all Japanese men are gentlemen. The more you get drinks from them, the more profit it will bring to the bar and the more your income will rise. Money conquers all! Connie, translate!
CONNIE: Mama, I am not paid to translate.
MAMA (ignoring the complaint): With money, you can build a house in your homeland and make your family happy. So, don’t complain when they grope you.
CONNIE (irritated): We only get paid for singing and drinking with guests, not from the kind of things you are asking us to do.
MAMA: Don’t you forget that I am the one who promoted you as a manager.
CONNIE: Don’t treat me as if I were a prostitute. I’ve been here in Japan since I was fifteen.
MAMA: I’ve been here since I was ten, you cheeky bitch. [Giggling occurs among the employees] I have more experience than any of you. I am your role model so if you listen to me and do what I am saying, it will make your life better. Connie, translate!
CONNIE (in Tagalog): She said her life was a series of miseries. If you don’t follow her, then you will be happy.

Clearly, what’s at play in this conversation is a demonstration of how translation works as mockery. Turning to Bhabha’s postcolonial thinking, we see how he configures the process of translation as a sort of “disjunctive rewriting” (Location of Culture 226) that decenters imperial power in that the colonized subjects can restore their subjectivity by translating imperialist language into their own cultural context. Similarly, the translation performed by the heroine can be articulated as a means of resisting hegemonic language and power. Here, the voice of Mama reflects the capitalist discourse as she uses the
promise of wealth and happiness. But for Filipino interlocutors, such a promise is mere justification of the colonial project in the name of modernization and enlightenment, as experienced in Philippine history. Therefore, when Mama’s language is translated, it is only to be mocked, as Connie points out: “If you don’t follow her [or the wannabe colonizing subject], then you [who experienced colonization] will be happy.”

Concomitant to this, the act of translation does not merely end with restoring Connie’s subjectivity by mocking the authority figure, but goes so far as to displace their Self/Other coordination. If Mama was figured as the Self as opposed to Connie as Other, their subjectivity is reversed upon the act of translation. To figure out such displacement, we need to first redefine their identity in relation to subalternity and hybridity. On one hand, in the context of the film, not only Connie but Mama as well should be considered subaltern – to be precise, the colonized diasporic subaltern in Japan, if we follow Spivak’s categorization. This is due to their shared history which is doubly oppressed by the external colonial power as well as by the internal discourse such as nationalism and patriarchy. On the other hand, they should also be considered hybridized subjects whose agency has the potential to undermine the imperial power.

In fact, the film shares the quality of cultural audio-visual programs in Japan, inviting audiences to its multiple hybrid space fraught with the Korean house, the Catholic church where the Filipino priest preaches in Tagalog, and a wedding hall in which the Korean immigrants in their traditional costume sing a Korean folk song, Arirang. To make it even more conspicuous, the cacophonous use of multiple languages in the film – Japanese, Korean, Tagalog, English, even Iranian – adds another layer to hybridity in the film. What happens then would be the supposedly homogeneous space and time in Japan being questioned as it is consumed by such hybrid elements whose agency transforms Japan, possibly against its will, into third space.
Returning to the question with regard to their identity, we may thus redefine them as the hybridized subaltern in reality, in spite of the theoretical incompatibility where Bhabha’s hybridity is poised against Spivak’s subalternity in theory. With this, the next thing we need to take into account in explicating the displacement is their postcolonial politics being deployed. Aside from the translation performed by Connie, they also display what Bhabha calls mimicry/mockery, from which we may observe both possibilities as well as limitations of postcolonial discourse.

In the case of the Korean mother, it’s clear that her mimicry is meant to reinforce colonial power rather than to mock it. Not only does she resonate Orientalist, borderline-racist logic elsewhere in the film when she denounces the Chinese as sly and cunning and Filipinas as lazy and unproductive, but she also resonates the nativist discourse. For instance, when she finds out that her son is in love with Connie, she reveals her strong opposition due to her anxiety over racial impurity if ever her son will marry Connie. Likewise, she uses mimicry to restore her subjectivity by differentiating herself from other subaltern groups like Filipinas. What she doesn’t realize is that if her project succeeds, it would only wind up silencing her voice further. In other words, she gives in to oppressive structures such as colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism, all of which constrain her freedom. On the other hand, the Pinay subaltern, who was once deemed by Spivak as deprived of material accessibility and agency of enunciation, ironically “speaks” for herself. Here, she uses mimicry and translation to mock the colonial language, thereby finding a means, even within these delimited terms, of restoring her postcolonial subjectivity.

The foregoing film analysis constitutes the bare bones of the interplay among nationalism, post/colonialism, and globalization in Korean films by conflating two critical postcolonial thinking, hybridity and subalternity. Focusing on the ways in which the image of the Pinay interacting with Koreans has been constructed and consumed, I have shown the contradictions in the context of postcolonial politics among Koreans, whether or not they remain in Korea; in spite of its aim
to break away from colonial legacies, the specifically Korean shape of postcolonial politics ironically participates in Orientalist/masculinist colonial strategies for the purpose of its own agenda, which is the restoration of national subjectivity.

In the case of the Filipino mother from *Wandeugi*, we have first seen how various discourses in conjunction with postcolonial practice in Korea construct the subaltern as a mere signifier without its signified since the film’s construction of her image is no less different from the mechanics of the itinerary of silencing its subject. Then, in seeking to find the lost signified of the subaltern, the study adopted the notion of hybridity and third space to show the ways in which the agency of the subaltern subverts and simultaneously reappropriates the authority of colonial power through a repurposed reading of *All under the Moon*. Through the reconceptualization of the term, the hybridized subaltern characterized by Connie and Mama, not only does the film suggest the possibilities, it also intimates the limitations lurking in the postcolonial struggle. If the character of Mama was an inappropriate hybridized subaltern who uses her mimicry to reinforce the colonial vocabulary, Connie could be considered the appropriate hybridized subaltern whose mimicry serves to mock the colonial vocabulary. It would be platitudinous to say that one’s freedom is somebody else’s prison in the colonial narrative, but it would be precisely opposite in the version of postcolonial politics narrated by Mama; it was she who locked herself up in a prison whose boundaries are defined by the parameters set by the colonial episteme in the name of capital, progress, and nation, thereby paradoxically resulting in her reincarnation as the “pure” subaltern.

**Notes**

1. Spivak uses the Gramscian term, the subaltern to refer to the gendered oppressed whose bodies are doubly split as cheap laborers dispersed by global capitalism and as bearers carrying the burden of patriarchy (cf. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 66-111).
2. The term “compressed modernity” refers to the modernization process that occurred in Korea in an extremely condensed manner that transformed the social, political, and economic structures of modern Korean society. Despite its explosive rate of economic development as its result, its sociocultural ramification is far fetching as Chang puts it: “the phenomena of intense competition, collision, disjointing, articulation, and compounding among traditional, modern, and postmodern elements ... or between foreign/multinational/global elements and indigenous element within a compact socio-historical context” (Chang, South Korea under Compressed Modernity 6-7).

3. In Lim’s temporal critique, she illustrates how the discourse of homogeneous time sets aside “the anachronic” and imposes its linear, progressive, modernized conception to justify Western imperialist expansion. As she puts it:

   an anti-colonial critique of homogeneous time points out that the modern notion of progress and its corollary, the accusation of noncontemporaneousness, translate multiple ways of inhabiting the world into a single, homogeneous time. This translation is arguably a deliberate mistranslation in that the allochronic gesture – the appraisal of the other as anachronism – served as a potent temporal justification for the colonial project (83).

4. In Bhabha postcolonial thinking, the colonial discourse evinces ambivalence due to the fear of the colonizer. It is the fear that restrains the colonized subjects from becoming the exact replica of the colonizer in order to maintain a seemingly essential cultural difference between the colonizer and the colonized. Subsequently, this enables the colonized Others to resist the dominance of power through performative “mimicry” thus become “mockery” as he describes it “exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare” (Bhabha, Nation and Narration 121).

5. Refers to the production of the subaltern as “a seemingly freely speaking subject/agent in the discourses of the dominant order” (Schwarz and Ray 452).
References


Yu Taeyun, a scriptwriter and Korean film scholar, recently finished his course works for graduate studies at the University of the Philippines Film Institute, where he had also finished his B.A. in Film (cum laude) and where his thesis on Sadomasochism in Korean Cinema won a special award. He was originally an exchange scholar from Hallym University in Korea and had presented papers at several international conferences including at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies. His works were published in a number of journals including Kritika Kultura and Plaridel Journal.