Marriage Migrants' representation in Korean Cinema

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Abstract

This paper studies how marriage migrants are being depicted in Korean Cinema. In the recent years, the foreign population in South Korea has been increasing and so has done the presence of migrant minorities in media, including cinema. This study discusses that Korean cinema shows dominant ideologies of power in Korean society where marriage migrants are located at the bottom. Five films were analyzed and from this analysis five frames were extracted. Marriage migrants are frequently depicted as subordinated or powerless, they are usually women in the role of wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law, they are treated as ethnic others, sexualized others or commodities. Consequently, their relationships with Korean nationals are formed by power relations. Moreover, Korean nationals who do establish some sort of intimate relationship with the marriage migrants are represented as people in the margins of Korean society. In this way, it is reinforced the social position of marriage migrants as outsiders in the Korean society.

Keywords: Korean Cinema, Media representation, Marriage Migrants, Discourse, Hierarchies of power

1. Introduction

The number of foreigners in South Korea has augmented considerably in the last two decades (1996-2016) from 148,731 to 2,049,441 registered foreigners who constituted 3.96% of the whole population[1]. The inflow of migrants is expected to keep increasing in the future. This phenomenon has become especially relevant not just in the academia but also in the mass media where the presence of migrants minorities has increased.

The portrayal of migrant minorities in media is becoming more visible and the interest of media researchers to evaluate how migrant minorities are being portrayed has also grown[2-5]. The increase of migrant portrayals in media has been much influenced by the growth of marriage migrants and multicultural families between 1990-2005. Especially, since 2007 Korean television has been broadcasting a variety of shows portraying foreigners ['minyodeuleu suda'

This paper focus on analysing the representation of marriage migration in Korean Cinema. It tries to answer two main questions: (1) How are marriage migrants represented in recent Korean cinema? and (2) How are the Koreans that establish close relationships with the migrants (hereafter Intimate Koreans) represented? I suggest that the films selected reveal and reinforce hierarchies of power where migrants are at the bottom. Consequently, the relations that they establish with Koreans are represented in terms of power relations. Also, the fact that Intimate Koreans are also alienated within the society stresses the social position of migrants as outsiders.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used as theoretical framework. CDA studies how discourse (language) reproduces power, dominance and inequality in the society. Social power of dominant groups in the society is expressed and legitimated in discourse through the expression of social cognitions[6]. Discourses give simplified representations of more complex realities by including and excluding certain aspects[6]. In the films, considered also a ‘powerful mode of discourse’[7], stories and characters are selected and depicted in a particular way with a particular characteristics.

For the analysis, I have paid special attention to the characters, their traits and their actions. According to Bordwell, in his Bull’s-Eye text schemata, the characters, their traits, actions and relationships are central for the interpretation, less important are the surroundings and the world within the story, which is followed in importance by the cinematography[8]. Bordwell highlights that the viewer’s interpretation process will focus first on the characters as a point of reference[8].

I used as well Robert Entman’s concept of frame to explain the representation of migrants. Films choose some information and make it more meaningful for the audience to “promote a
particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation”[9].

1.2. Methodology

For the methodology, I have used films as a primary source data and I have reviewed secondary sources for a better understanding on the topic. I have selected films that approach the topic of marriage migration or depict marriage migrants within their main characters. The films were produced and released between 2000 and 2013. Within this time, migration grew more rapidly in Korea. Therefore, I assumed that, during this period, media concern about the figure of the migrant has been higher. The list of films selected are as follow: Failan (dir. Hae-sung Song, 2005), Innocent Steps (dir. Young-hoon Park, 2005), Wedding Campaign (dir. Byeong-guk Hwang, 2005), Punch(dir. Han Lee, 2011), and Mai Ratima (dir. Ji-tae Yu. 2013).

2. Marriage Migration Discourse in Korean Cinema

2.1 Frames representing marriage migrants

This section describes five frames used to portrayed marriage migrants: as powerless and subjects of male/state power, as mothers/daughters-in-law/wives, as ethnic others, as sexualized others, and as commodities.

(1) Subordinates and powerless

Marriage migrants in the films, who are all women, are portrayed as subordinates and powerless characters that suffer in many occasions from the dominant power of Korean males. They face discrimination not just as non-nationals but also as women. They are portrayed as having no power as they lack of the resources to influence other people’s decisions[10]. They lack of money, charisma, influences, persuasive skills, or control of information, resources highlighted as power bases[10].

Failan comes to Korea after her parents passed away to meet her aunt but when she arrives she gets to know that her relatives have fled to Canada so she has no ‘social capital’ to help her neither in Korea nor in China.

Restaurant manager: Go back to China. It is hard to live here without any connections.
Failan: There is no one in China either.

In Mai Ratima, the main character portrays a young Thai woman who married Sang-pil, a mentally challenged man who stutters, in order to come to Korea to support her Alzheimer afflicted mother and her sister. However, although she works all day, she has no money to sustain herself or her family, rather she is described as fully dependent on her family in-law not just economically. Her stay permit depends on them as well. The migrant character in Innocent Steps, Chae-rin, is also described as having no resources and as being dependent to three male characters Na Yeong-sae, Ma Sang-du, and Hyeon-su. In Punch, Wan-deuk’s mother is represented as very humble and with no much assets.

Marriage migrants’ are depicted in the film as ‘power subject’, which means that in many cases their actions and decisions is influenced or controlled by other person who is the ‘power holder’ [10]. Failan and Chae-rin become subject of authoritative power (exerted by the state or law) in some of the scenes. At the beginning of the film, Failan goes through the immigration control. Her position is powerless waiting for the civil servant to approve her entry. The subjective view of the civil officer scrutinizing her takes the spectator to a powerful position whereas Failan’s corporal expression with the face looking down shows her underpowered status. Chae-rin's marriage is investigated by two immigration officers who keep the couple under close surveillance. She is under suspicion for having a bogus marriage.

Marriage migrants are represented as being subjects of physical coercion, which is one of the principal ways to show power in human relations[10]. Chae-rin is beaten by Sang-du after he discovers that she has faked her identity and Mai is mistreated and beaten in front of the immigration office. In most cases, migrant women are represented as submissive, dependent and lacking power in contrast to Korean nationals.

(2) Mothers, daughters-in-law and wives

Different authors had recognized this frame as a recurrent way of representing migrant women in media [2-5]. These frames support what is called ‘feminization of migration’, a major discourse in the representation of migrant women. In these films, marriage migrants are represented in gendered role positions such as wives, daughters-in-law or mothers. And so, gender becomes a determinant factor that influences the process of migration. As Boyd and Grieco (2003) suggest gender is an important element that influences the process of migration, the adaptation to the new country, as well as, the transnational relations[11]. Gender is socially constructed and, therefore, it implies certain social expectations related to gendered ideals, roles and behaviors[11]. Those expectations shape the experience of migrant women.
In Korea, women migration is seen primarily in terms of marriage migration. Whether it is fake (Failan, Innocent Steps) or legitimate (Wedding Campaign, Punch or Mai Ratima), in film discourse, marriage appears to be the only way for women to migrate to Korea. Those women are “meeting the need for specific (gender) roles that contemporary South Korean women have fought and refuse to accept”[4]. Through marriage, migrant women contribute to the nation-building [12] and help men to consolidate their masculinity and social status [13]. As Sumi Kim pointed out discourses of foreign brides reflect their role as child-bearers for the nation, their role in re-populating the rural Korea[4]. In Wedding Campaign, which is a film that idealizes international marriage as a solution for the bride shortage crisis in the countryside, there is a recurrent image of migrant women being pregnant or holding babies. There are many other films that frame migrant women in the same manner [Hello, Stranger (Dir. Kim Dong-hyun, 2007) and You are my sunshine (Dir.ParkJin-pyo,2005)] portraying wives as new members of the Korean families who bring joy and life to rural areas. Having descendants is very important in Korean society and it is often considered as part of filial duties. In Mai Ratima, Mai’s mother-in-law complains about the fact that Mai has not conceived any child yet. She even makes an ethnic comparison between Mai and a ‘joseonjok’ (Korean-Chinese) migrant bride who is more proper and dutiful daughter-in-law.

Mother-in-law: When are you thinking to have a second one after Eunju? (referring to her first son’s wife)
Sang-rim’s wife: Mother, what a thing you say!
Mother-in-law: If you had brought a good one (referring to Mai), would I be saying this? The mill-owner’s joseonjok daughter-in-law is already pregnant.

Migrant brides are also considered as cheap labor. Piper and Roces point out the interconnection between marriage and labor migration[14]. A woman who marries across national borders may enter labor market that is why they are portrayed as assimilable labor force.

(3) Ethnic Other

In most of the films, migrants’ ethnic ‘otherness’ is ascribed to language. Although ethnic distinctiveness is not solely attached to one characteristic, when the physical differences are not so evident as in most of the cases in the films, language became the most important sign to show difference. Language is utilized in these films to classify who is and who is not Korean. Language is a strong tool to identify ourselves and others. Language is a strong mark of ethnicity. Korean language is linked to Koreans who have maintained for long time a ethnic
identity based on the belief of a common ancestry. Therefore, those who look different are not expected to speak Korean, and those who do not speak Korean are consider outsiders.

In the films, ethnical distinction is shown when migrant women characters use their native language. At first, Failan can not speak Korean and she only speaks in Chinese which shows her distinctiveness. Mai also speaks in Thai language on the phone with her mother and her sister. Language is a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity in their case. Also the inaccuracy when they speak Korean language is used to depict migrants as ‘other’ in both cases, especially, due to bad pronunciation and improper use of language. Failan’s bad pronunciation of simple expressions such as ‘welcome’, ‘thank you’ or ‘did you have dinner?’ causes laugh and frustration to the owner of the laundry where Failan works, and her calligraphy in the letters that she writes to Gang-jae is an element of mockery to Gyeong-su who says: Her writing is a total mess unlike her face...

In the case of Chae-rin, who is ethnic Korean-Chinese and speaks Korean fluently, her ‘otherness’ is shown through her intonation and the expressions that she uses, which are considered strange. For example, she uses the word ‘ajeubai’ ["아즈바이"] that is an appellative word equivalent to ‘ajeossi’. Her accent is also a element of bewilderment for Na Yeong-sae who recurrently ask her to change it.

Although physical differences are not used that frequently to portray migrant brides in the selected films. The representations in Mai Ratima and Punch show how a combination of language and physical differences are utilized to create bewilderment. Specially, dark skin color become a descriptive sign of physical difference in Mai Ratima. The mother-in-law refers to Mai’s dark skin color as some sort of punishment for her.

Mother in-law: We should have more luck with the women entering this family...I must be a criminal...where did you find and take this dark girl?

(4) Sexualized ‘Other’ under male gaze

The ‘sexualized other’ is another frame used to portray marriage migrants. In Failan, when Gang-jae delivers the marriage registration documents, Gyeong-su suggests him to have a look to his new ‘wife’. In the dialogue, Gyeong-su talks about her as an object of sexual desired.

Gyeong-su: Come on! Just look at her once. That’s your wife, over there. Don’t you wanna do it?
Gang-jae: Is that little chick?
Gyeong-su: Why? don’t you like her?
Gang-jae: You do it yourself!

In Korean, they use the verb ‘dakda’/‘닦다’ which means to brush, polish or brighten. Gang-jae says ‘neona dakkara i saekkiya’. The expression implies some sexual connotations. To make sure, I also asked about the meaning to five Koreans who watch that scene and all agreed in the sexual sense of the sentence.

Mai is portrayed as object of sexual desire. She suffers from the sexual insinuations of Sang-rim, her brother-in-law, who feels attracted to her. In one scene, Mai is working at the clothes workshop until late and Sang-rim is watching her from behind, he approaches to her and touches Mai’s back and shoulder. Touch is a powerful way of non-verbal communication as well as “one of the closer invasions of personal space” which sometimes “implies a privileged access” to the touched person [15]. It can have very diverse meanings such as liking, intimacy, compliance, attachment, but when the relation is not intimate (as it is the case), it has the meaning of power in which the person with higher status (or power) tends to touch more the other person[15].

(5) Commodities

In many of the films, migrant women are treated as commodities rather than as people. They are treated as objects with price tags and they are valued in terms of money. Migrant women are described in terms of money, usually, being extorted by brokers or commercialized. Wedding Campaign collaborates to establish this kind of image showing an scene where Man-taek and Hui-cheol talk about women as importable goods.

2.2 Representation of Intimate Koreans

Intimate Koreans are represented as alienated subalterns within the society. They are depicted as living in the margins of the society or assuming the role of outsiders. I argue that this representation, rather than favor the acceptance of the immigrant, segregates them in the margins of the society. There are five male characters that establish intimate relationships with migrants: Gang-jae (Failan), Na Yeong-sae (Innocent Steps), Hong Man-taek (Wedding Campaign), Gak-seol (Punch) and Su-yeong (Mai Ratima).

Gang-jae (Failan) is a third grade gangster in a crime organization. He lives in very poor conditions in a suburban apartment. The place is very dirty and messy, and there is not even a toilet facility. In one scene, he urinates in the sink. He also lacks prestige or social recognition. As a criminal, he does not have the respect from anyone around him. Other
gangsters from the organization consider him a blot. Gang-jae is dominated and mistreated by his boss, Yong-sik, who exerts strong power over Gang-jae.

Na Yeong-sae (Innocent Steps) lives in complete isolation, enclosed in his disastrous and messy apartment without having contact with anybody. He spends his days sitting on the sofa, eating cup noodles and watching dancing competitions on the TV. He was a successful dancer but after breaking his leg and losing his partner because of his rival, Hyeon-su, he stops dancing and his career collapses. He is betrayed by his old manager and beaten by Hyeon-su's subordinates.

Hong Man-taek (Wedding Campaign) is a rural bachelor with no prospects for getting married. Man-taek's mother considers him almost a failure for not being able to marry at his age and she considers Man-taek as part of her bad luck. During their trip to Uzbekistan, Man-taek is unable to show himself as an attractive partner to any of the brides-to-be and has difficulties to establish a connection with the women he meets.

Gak-seol (Punch) worked all his life as a tap dancer in a night cabaret. He lives in a small attic room in a poor neighborhood with Min-gu (who has verbal disability) and his son, Wan-deuk. He is mistreated and abused by two men on the market when he tries to start a hawking business. Although he is treated badly, he refers to both men as 'mister'. He is lowering himself by elevating the status of the two thugs. He is portrayed as underpowered and defenseless against them.

Su-yeong (Mai Ratima) is described as a looser. He does not have a job and he has almost no money in the bank. Moreover, he did not renew his ID card so his identification is not valid, which makes it difficult for him to get an employment. He goes to Seoul trusting the promise of a 'netizen' who assures him that he will help him to make easy money. However, when Su-yeong meets that person, the netizen with some friends rob and beat him.

He finds a job in a noraebang as 'a guy for everything' (attending clients, cleaning the restroom...). There, he meets Yeong-jin, a hostess, who seduces him and later betrays him. He continually suffers the physical coercion of others with more power.

3. Conclusion

This paper has expounded upon how marriage migration is represented in Korean cinema. First, I examined the portrayal of marriage migrants. Marriage migration is framed as a female phenomenon. Migrants are portrayed in the roles of wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers, but also they are considered as a cheap (free) labor. Gender also plays an important role in their
depictions. They are shown as sexualized object of Korean men’s gaze, as a commodity that can be bought and sold, and as powerless and subjects of power situated at the bottom of the power hierarchy. Films also frame them as cultural ‘others’ through their use of language and their appearance. They are discriminated and disempowered, and, in many occasions, they are subjects of the Korean male power.

Second, it has examined how Koreans that establish close relationships with marriage migrants are represented. These intimate Koreans are depicted as outsiders of the society or belonging to the lower strata of the social hierarchy. They are alienated within the Korean society and that is what influences the emergence of sympathy feelings that help to the development of the relationships. This reasserts migrants’ position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, along with an internal hierarchy within the hierarchy where lower status Koreans are more empowered than migrants.

It is required to re-evaluate the representation that media, including cinema, is providing about immigrants and encourage a more diverse and embracing representation that promotes acceptance and multiculturalism rather that pity and bewilderment.

References

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