

The Suffered, the Un-represented,
Yet Still the Protesting:
The Cinematic Un-representations of the
Bereaved Mothers in post-Kwangju May Uprising
Movements

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Abstract

This article examines how feature films represent mothers who became activists after having lost a child during the Kwangju May Uprising. As a means to reconsider how the mass medium helps shape the public's understanding of various factors in the historic event and its contribution to democratization in Korea, this paper examines whether the popular entertainment genre provides the audience with a sound perspective to learn different human factors in the Uprising as well as post-Uprising social movements. Specifically, this article examines how the film portrays women's involvement in post-Uprising movement, focusing on the gendered nature of representation, or un-representations of female activists in the movies on the Uprising and other social movements. This paper calls for a more just recognition of various human components that contribute to social transformation, by overcoming the epistemological hegemony of patriarchy.

Keywords: Kwangju May Uprising, post-Uprising movement, bereaved mothers of the Uprising, spectatorial moralization, cinematic discourse, cinematic representation

1. Introduction: Film, Gender, and Kwangju May Uprising

By reconsidering popular film's discursive and political impact in society, I pay critical attention to the cinematic representation of the most active, yet unduly neglected group of post-Kwangju May Uprising movement activists: mothers-turned-activists upon the unfortunate loss of their child during the Uprising. In general, I agree with Steve Choe's (2018) observation that the commercial and critical success of contemporary South Korean (hereafter, Korean) cinema "makes visible an existential reality that is repeatedly disavowed by the national psyche" (80). However, in regard to cultural representation of the Uprising, I contend there are still muted, or invisible subjects, that is, women in general and the bereaved mothers in particular. In this respect, I examine how movies on the Uprising, or the post-Uprising movements ignore and/ or neglect an important contribution of the bereaved mothers' activism, by confining them to a stereotypical cultural trope of passive, mourning, or wailing mothers. Actually, this cinematic trope disregards the mothers' personal and socio-political transformations during their struggles for truth and justice for their slain child. On top of what Kyung Hyun Kim (2004) indicates that "women are largely left outside the scope of the thematic concerns of films" (28), the bereaved mothers' activism and contributions have been outside of the public recognition as well as cinematic discourse. Mainly due to an epistemological hegemony of the Confucian patriarchy, I contend the mothers have not received a due recognition for their transformative engagement in the socio-political configurations of contemporary Korea in the same way they are silenced in society at large. Thus, I reconsider the mothers' struggles and cinematic erasures in order to redress this undeserving negligence.

With the popular success of New Korean Cinema in a more embracing, libertarian social atmosphere, which was possible with the onset of civilian presidency in 1993, there has been a continuous cinematic effort to reconstruct

various historically, politically, and socially significant, yet controversial events. *Like The President's Last Bang* (2005), which portrayed the assassination of Park Chung-hee, various recent films deal with contentious contents and debates that were previously excluded as a topic for popular entertainment. Likewise, the Kwangju May Uprising, as one of the most important historic events in contemporary Korea, has enjoyed popular culture's favorable treatment. Since the release of the TV drama, *Sandglass* (1995), and the feature movie, *A Petal* (1996), the Uprising has been directly or otherwise represented as the fundamental motivation for transformative socio-political movements and successful democratization in Korean society. Differently put, exhibiting "the highly individuated experience of trauma ... [that led to] a posttraumatic space where the collective can again emerge" (Zelizer 2002, 711), cinematic representations on the Kwangju May Uprising provide the public with a chance to appreciate the event's multiple, variegated contributions, meanings and values, which allow its broader applications and deeper understandings. Fragmented, elusive, yet deeply contextualized testimonies of various actors offer an essential piece for the whole that is replete with different interpretations and perspectives. In this respect, the cinematic representation assumes a popular means of documenting historical events and people's reaction to them, which in turn becomes a part of broader, society-wide discourse.

Despite their broad, positive implications, movies about the Kwangju May Uprising are not immune to criticisms. Amongst them, I focus on an issue in the cinematic representation of women. In a reconstructive process of film production as cultural politics, "how what happened has been remembered and interpreted" is often times more important than "what really happened." In other words, in an active editorial practice of inclusion and exclusion, there is a grave danger of simplifying and in turn distorting a full complexity of the Uprising, which is far multifaceted with vast spatio-temporal backgrounds, factors and impacts. So far, the subjects of the Kwangju Uprising in popular culture have been represented in a simplistic binary system between female, "innocent victims who were mostly apolitical" and

masculine “heroes, idealistic political activists who risked their lives in a noble attempt to build a democratic and just society” (Baker 2003, 91). As opposed to the movement’s many important actors and contributors, the dominant discourse is limited to examining roles and achievements of patriarchal subjects like male college student activists, elite male political leaders, and male trade union leaders. However, the bereaved mothers’ activism in the post-Uprising movement suggests an important counter-point to the representational stereotype, in that they have dialectically 1) transformed themselves from the most truthful, daily practitioners of Confucian gender norms and expectations to the most fierce activists against the junta regime upon their bereavement of their child, 2) scored many important, proactive achievements, and 3) exercised critical socio-political subjectivities by engaging in various social movements besides the post-Uprising movement. In other words, their commitment to post-Uprising activism indicates a transformative power of motherhood that divorces its conventional apolitical, reproductive service for the status quo, and helps them become an unapologetic agent for social change (Gooyong Kim et al. 2016). Thus, on top of popular culture’s simplified, hegemonic representations of the Uprising, one has to pay careful attention to many contributing elements of the Uprising in order to understand its better complexity. In this paper, I critically examine how the popular entertainment genre illustrates whose participation, interest, damage, sacrifice, and/ or benefits have played an important role in movements related to the Uprising. By doing so, I hope to pay due tribute to the invisible, neglected, and/ or under-appreciated activism of the bereaved mothers in the post-Uprising movement.

No one does not have a mother and she suffers most from a death of her child; however, there is a grave paucity of research on how bereaved mothers of the Uprising have dealt with their tragic losses, and taken different paths afterwards, more specifically, their activist transformations to date. Compared to various studies on how a bereavement of a child led to mothers’ fierce socio-political activism in Argentina (Navarro 1989), Chile (Noonan 1995), Palestine (Mayer 1994), South Africa (Britton 2005), and Russia (Caiazza 2002), there is

no scholarly work on their activism with the exception of the work by Gooyong Kim, Young-Khee Kim and Hae-Kwang Park (2016). According to these researchers, the bereaved mothers' activism in post-Uprising movement raises important challenges to the hegemonic gender ideals, and suggests a practical, dialectic potential of Confucian gender norms as a pillar of the patriarchal status quo and a basis for their sociopolitical engagements simultaneously. In this respect, I strive to redirect one's attention to how many "victimized heroes as well as heroic victims" have been omitted in popular cinemas on the Uprising (Baker 2003, 106).

2. Film as Discourse and Politics: Cinematic Representations of Madres de Plaza de Mayo

Film transcodes various cultural, economic, political, and social discourses into its representational operatives (Jameson 1981; Ryan and Kellner 1988; Kellner 2010). If something is defined real, it becomes real in its consequences. For the same reason, a discursive practice is political and *vice versa* (Pelinka 2007): representation is constitutively intertwined with and works in tandem with them simultaneously. In this representational dimension of the discursive and the political, politics is an effort to create and control a meaning over a certain action (Edelman 1988). Put it differently, if "political actions are constituted as so many images" (Canclini 1995, 211), popular culture becomes a major political battlefield as an effective system of discourse that is structured by and structuring material conditions of society. In this representational and discursive echo-chamber of popular culture, the popular is practically politics disguised as entertainment. Especially by "fleeting perception of the real," audiences are easy to get lost in an endless succession of ephemeral visuals and susceptible to a re-constructive power of a hegemonic discourse (Canclini 1995, 226).

Therefore, as an audio-visual embodiment of discourse and politics, film helps condition the daily systems of

individuals' behaviors, emotions, thoughts, values, and subjectivities. In this respect, popular movies are one of the most effective tools for spreading and normalizing a dominant hegemony, in the way in which discourse reproduces the *status quo* and *vice versa* (Fairclough and Wodak 1997). Their subtle, pleasurable, and affective properties can be a "form of social action control ... [and] control over the minds of other people, that is the management of social representations" (van Dijk 1993, 257). While the medium does not always reveal its ideological message explicitly, it still exerts important political effects due to its embeddedness in the establishment. Especially, on a historic event that is refashioned to meet the needs of the present, cinema has been particularly powerful in shaping the public's understanding of it. This results from inciting a certain socio-psychological need and in turn fulfilling a certain socio-political function by satisfying it (Cohen 1997). Sergei Eisenstein's (1925) classic movie on revolutionary events that led to the 1905 Russian Revolution, *The Battleship Potemkin*, is case in point.

In contrast to the absence of movies devoted to the Kwangju mothers' post-Uprising activism, many films have dealt with bereaved mothers' activism in Argentina, who "lost" their children, *Desaparecidos* who "disappeared" during the Dirty War, 1976–1983. Cinemas on the activism of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the bereaved mothers, and the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the bereaved grandmothers, are popular representations of their activist discourse that visualizes "the family legacy of social activism," which the transformative women relay their disappeared children's "unselfishly work for a better world" (O'Keefe 2009, 533). As one of the most comprehensive measures to maximize the discursive power of the audio-visual, movies on the disappeared and their bereaved families have covered various dimensions of the worst human right abuse in Argentina. Released as early as 1985, only two years after the demise of the junta regime, films on the bereaved mothers' activism reveal how they exercised an alternative gender role by trespassing the conventional, gendered demarcation of the private and the public and practicing a transformative potential of maternal politics. Such movies as *La Historia Oficial* (1985, feature

film), *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1985, documentary), *La Amiga* (1991, feature film), *Olympo Garage* (1999, feature film), *Imagining Argentina* (2002, feature film), *Nietos: Identidad y Memorial* (2004, documentary), and *Cautiva* (2004, feature film) depict the bereaved mothers' activism for truth and justice for their disappeared children as a powerful agent, or catalyst for social change. Indicating how the bereaved mothers transformed themselves to activists, the movies show how they supported fellow mothers to gain agency and exercise solidarity. For example, using real video footages of the mothers' protests and interviews, *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1985) documents how the mothers came to formulate their activist subjectivities and assumed the public spaces, by overcoming various traditional confinements imposed by the state, the family, and the church. Bereaved mothers' exhibition of grief on a "private" family issue was not consumed as a sentimental outburst, but transposed as a motivation for transformative activism that accompanied their physical, albeit temporary, appropriation of the Plaza as a central public, and political space. Thus, Argentine cinemas on the *Madres* are exemplarily "manifestations of oppositional culture," which open up a popular, discursive forum that helps go beyond individual mourning to creating a transformative, communal space of social remembrance, mutual healing, and structural changes (Velasco 2004, 43). In turn, they help "promote the reconstruction of a community able to transcend the trauma," which allows new perspectives and meanings on personal loss (50).

3. Blind Spot in the Cultural Politics of Movies on the Kwangju Uprising: Spectatorial Moralization and Its Outsiders

So far, there are a few commercial films that helped to change the previous propagandistic notion of the Uprising

as an anti-governmental riot instigated by communist infiltrators. *A Petal* (1996) dramatizes a story of heavily traumatized girl who lost her mother during the Uprising and gets sexually and physically abused by a number of anonymous men thereafter; *Peppermint Candy* (1999) shows how the Uprising ruined not only the everyday lives of ordinary, innocent citizens of Kwangju, but also those of the paratroopers who were deployed; *The Old Garden* (2006) portrays a tormented life of a fugitive dissident who fled from the Kwangju Uprising and is torn between his love interests and guilt consciousness to his comrades who had been incarcerated; *May 18* (2007) explicates how innocent citizens were agitated by the merciless paratroopers and subsequently determined to resist militarily against them by risking everything including their lives; *26 Years* (2012) shows how victims, especially the bereaved families, have not been able to live their normal daily lives due to never-ending traumas, and want to bring justice to Chun Doo-hwan by themselves; *A Taxi Driver* (2017) provides a third party view of the Uprising, showing how a German journalist was able to deliver his coverage of the Uprising. Most recently, although not directly related to the Uprising, *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017) portrays the lasting impact of the Kwangju Uprising on the incessant, grassroots struggles for democratization in the 1980s.

In a nutshell, the movies try to moralize the innocent citizens' armed resistance against the junta's illegal and indiscriminate suppressions, and in turn win public support for the legitimacy of people's struggles for truth and justice, and subsequent democratization movement. However, this "spectatorial moralization" (Choe 2018, 82), a central tenet of cinematic representations on the Uprising, has not done its due justification on female subjects, especially a ceaseless activism of the bereaved mothers. Especially, considering the movies retain, by and large, genre repertoires of melodrama, that is a "key for understanding the ethics of grievance in all popular moving image narrative as well as the logic of affect operative in emotionally moving Korean films," they do not incorporate the mothers' trajectories to become active fighters from obedient patriarchal housewives, which retain

a lot of dramatic story lines filled with love for their child, mourning/ wailing for the bereavement, and demand for justice as one of the most salient “interconnected realms of affect and ethics” (83). In this respect, Soyoung Kim’s (2011) criticism on Korean movies on traumas, which “predicated on male trauma, privileging a sense of a gendered trauma of Korean society, [that is] hidden under the veil of universalist narration and the weight of history, prevents women’s trauma from being exposed” (180), still rings true in the hegemonic, representational conventions of the Kwangju Uprising movies.

With an agreement with Jooyeon Rhee’s (2019) argument that “the isolation of certain historical elements and figures so crucial to a fuller understanding of the uprising and the democratic movement in the 1980s ... [that is] the gendered representation of victims and heroes in the ‘5.18 cinema’” (70), I examine the marginalization of the bereaved mothers’ contributions to the post-Uprising movement. While Rhee’s (2019) argument is factually valid and historically important, she does not empirically examine women’s active involvement in the Uprising and post-Uprising movement, but solely relies on a literary report found in a novel, *The Boy is Coming*. In other words, she does not review and incorporate the critical literature on the marginalization, or omission of women in the Kwangju Uprising scholarship, while Kang Hyun-ah (2002; 2003; 2004), Ahn Jean (2007), Soyoung Kim (2011) and others previously tried with a different degree of effectiveness. Furthermore, while she intends to investigate stereotypical representations of women in 5.18 cinemas, Rhee is barely successful examining the cinematic texts either. While she describes a narrative structure of movies, *A Petal* (1996), *Peppermint Candy* (1999), *May 18* (2007), and *A Taxi Driver* (2017), she is not able to explicate how they fail to pay due tribute to women’s contribution to the movement. In other words, as much as Rhee (2019) criticizes that the movies depict “much emotionally charged male bonding while female characters do not play central roles” (82), she should have considered how the films reproduce the hegemonic omission of female activists in the cinematic settings, plots, and the narrative structures. To be more specific, while Rhee is correct point out that sexually victimized women by the

state, that is, paratroopers, riot police, and/ or interrogators, are silenced and invisible in the movies as well as the society at large, there are many more (mainly female) actors, like sex workers and female factory workers, who have been omitted in the official narrative or account of the Uprising. To some extent, it makes sense in Rhee's argument that a tabooed status of female sexuality along with women's marginalization accounts for the absence of women in 5.18 cinemas due to their trauma of having been sexually violated and /or tortured. However, any female representation that challenges the hegemonic patriarchal gender ideals does not get a due chance to be presented in reality. For example, while 5.18 cinemas depict mothers as a passive, mourning subject as much as other cultural genres, they completely leave out the bereaved mothers' successful engagements in the post-Uprising movement. In this respect, despite a significant argument on the gendered representation of Kwangju Uprising in the movies, Rhee's (2019) examination does not overcome an epistemic hegemony of the traditional, Confucian gender boundaries and ideals.

To help redress the hegemonic bifurcation between a feminization of victims and a masculinization of transformative movements, I examine, in comparison to 1) what the bereaved mothers' activism has achieved as an integral part of the post-Uprising movement, 2) how they are represented in popular cinemas as well as academic literature. To be more concrete, with a brief chronological review on their contributions, I analyze representations of female characters in the narrative structures of *26 Years and 1987: When the Day Comes*. Amongst a handful of movies on the Kwangju Uprising, I focus on the two since their stories deal with post-Uprising events and situations. In terms of the bereaved mothers' contribution to post-Uprising movement and broader democratization endeavors, their storylines that delineate how activists try to transform the country into a more democratic, just society resonate well with this paper's main argument.

4. Women's Place in the Kwangju May Uprising: Negligence or Under-appreciation

While the Kwangju May Uprising and a tragic death of Park Jong-Cheol rekindled people's aspiration and struggle for democratization, a revelation of sexual tortures in Bucheon Police Station was the watershed moment that led to women's organizational efforts to participate in the transformative movement along with other socio-political organizations: "minjung feminism in the 1980s demonstrated its contributions to the democratization movement" (Kyounghee Kim 2002, 16). On top of paucity of research on feminist movement in general (Young-Hee Shim 2000), there is a grave dearth of literature on women's transformative endeavors, except for those of "large organizations and [liberal] women's activism at the national level" (Song-Woo Hur 2011, 181). Furthermore, the current literature since 2000 deals with contemporary women's interest organizations that advocate liberal, middle class issues like identity politics, consumer rights, and sexuality, leaving earlier struggles and victories uncovered. In this respect, it lost an everyday life criticism on the capitalist and patriarchal status quo, and became a "mainstream women's organization," concerned with their (consumerist) needs, which inadvertently got coopted by the state's neoliberal policies (190).

In this mainstreaming trend of feminist scholarship, there is an inevitable shortage of research on women's participation/ roles in both the Kwangju May Uprising and the post-Uprising social movements. What is worse, the existing literature is not adequate to explicate the bereave mothers' activism in the post-Uprising movement either. Rather, it tends to piece female activists' testimonies together to confirm predetermined feminist perspectives. For example, Kang Hyun-ah (2002; 2003; 2004) analyzes how female activists involved in the Uprising from feminist perspectives, which reconsider women's active, major contributions, as an attempt to revise the previously held dogma on women's supplemental roles to male counterparts. All of the 11 people

whom Kang studied had already been active in different types of social movement organizations on gender and labor issues before they actively involved in the Uprising. For this reason, Kang's (2002; 2003; 2004) studies cannot address how ordinary women, who had not been previously active in movement organizations, actually got involved in the Uprising, or post-Uprising movement to begin with.

In an effort to overcome a phallogocentric discourse on the Uprising, Ahn Jean (2007) suggests possible reasons why women's contributions have not received a due recognition while they performed essential duties like organizing rallies, blood donations, cooking, and nursing till their last moments in the Provincial Government Office on May 27. She believes it stemmed from 1) women's silence due to guilty conscience about the fact that they survived the massacre, 2) the Confucian tradition's under-appreciation of female roles in general, 3) female activists' psychological distance from ordinary citizen protestors, and 4) their exclusion from the post-Uprising organizations. Despite her significant contributions to enriching perspectives on women's active roles in the Uprising, Ahn (2007) is not interested in motivations and/ or processes of ordinary women's involvement in the Uprising or the post-Uprising movement.

There are few studies that examine how literary works represent gender issues in the Uprising (Lee Song-hee 2012; Shim Young-eui 2012). Analyzing how female poets represent the Uprising, Lee Song-hee (2012) indicates that there are recurring themes of: 1) mothers as mourning subjects, 2) struggling female subjects with frail or violated bodies, and 3) abstaining, yet willing subjects who fight against social problems. In turn, she maintains that these provide new foundations and motivations to contend with a patriarchal system of violence and destruction. On the other hand, while examining more than 80 Uprising-related novels, Shim Young-eui (2012) maintains that women are portrayed as aesthetic objects of agony, passive subjects of sacrifice or waiting, or maternal subjects with guilty consciences. However, there is a lack of works that highlight how women actively reflect and redefine themselves against oppressive dichotomies of center/periphery, subject/object, and male/female in the massacre.

While Lee (2012) and Shim (2012) sophisticate a feminist understanding of the Uprising by incorporating literary imaginations, their studies still bear a significant, practical limitation since they do not deal with actual women who took part in the Uprising.

Alternatively, there are few efforts to document real-life narratives of female participants in the Uprising. Under the theme of “A history of ordinary people who assumed important roles,” Kwangju Women’s Hope Forum with two other feminist organizations (2010) published an anthology of testimonies in order to investigate how “women in general” played a role in the Uprising. However, this publication remains as a mere collection of verbal accounts as raw data that require further critical interpretations and analyses.

5. The 5·18 Bereaved Family Association: Bereaved Mothers and Their Activism

Women, bereaved or not, have been the crux of post-Uprising social movements as well as organizers of protests and rallies during the Uprising itself (Kang Hyun-ah 2003; Katsiaficas 2012). Along with the Family Association of the Incarcerated, the 5·18 Bereaved Family Association is the most active, aggressive post-Uprising movement organization, where the bereaved family members of victims during or after the Uprising gather together. With mothers being most active and devoted, the Bereaved Association was instituted on May 31, 1980 after the bereaved families of 126 victims established a memorial cemetery for their slain loved ones on May 29, 1980. Ever since, the members of the Bereaved Association have never stopped protesting, facing the state’s brutal oppressions and violence including harassment, surveillance, and incarcerations. While elite activists utilized their records of involvement in the Uprising for their own personal career developments as professional politicians, the bereaved families have been most active and dedicated to achieving truth and justice. To that end, the organization has

fought for 1) revealing the truth behind the massacre caused by paratroopers who indiscriminately and mercilessly beat, clubbed, stabbed, and shot hundreds of innocent civilians to death, 2) reinstating the tainted reputation of the victims who were condemned as communist spies or rebels by the state, and 3) having the state accountable for the massacre by legislating special laws. For example, after intelligence surfaced about Chun Doo-hwan's visit, the mastermind of the massacre, in 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1987, the members took every measure to stop the junta/ murderer from visiting Kwangju. For that reason, not only when they staged a protest, but also in their everyday settings, the mothers were under constant surveillance by plain-clothed police officers. However, despite those odds, they have ceaselessly lodged numerous protests, and scored many victories: they played a crucial role in introducing special legislations that 1) demand compensations for the victims and casualties of the Uprising in August 1990, 2) request punishing those responsible for the massacre in December 1995 by waging 180 consecutive days of tent protests in front of the Myeongdong Cathedral since July 1995, 3) honor a national celebration day for the Uprising in May 1997, and 4) enact the 5.18 Democratic Veterans Law in December 2001. Despite getting older and weaker in their 70s and 80s, the bereaved mothers are still actively engaging in various protests and movements. For example, they have been organizing tent-protests to preserve the Provincial Government Office since September 2016. To protest conservative politicians' defamatory statements and policy proposals, they staged multi-day sit-ins and lie-ins in front of the National Assembly in January/February 2019. The bereaved mothers have exercised solidarity with other victims of the state violence, such as the bereaved families of the Sewol Ferry disaster that claimed more than 300 lives of high school juniors in 2014.

However, as a caveat, I do not make a generalization, or an essentialization on the activist-transformation of the bereaved mothers. In reality, due to the patriarchal constraint of domesticity under which they have to take care of their children, household economy, and other reproductive duties, not all the bereaved mothers were able to continue

their earnest involvement in the movements. Even amongst mothers who have always been active, they retain limitations on their socio-political subjectivities. In an effort to theorize a notion of political maternity based on the bereaved mothers' post-Uprising activism, Gooyong Kim et al. (2016) indicate some of the bereaved mothers have not fully developed socio-political consciousness, by being "confined by cognitive domesticity, which inhibits them from analyzing diverse sociopolitical issues and drawing connections between them, even though they care for and protect other children in society, show sympathy for other bereaved families of state crimes and violence, and practice solidarity with them by participating in protests and events" (33).

In a severe case, while being most devoted to the post-Uprising movement, a mother is fixated upon her son's "accidental death and the state's defamation of his innocent death," lacking critical socio-political consciousness (30).

6. Cinematic Representation of Women's Struggles in Post-Uprising Movements: *26 Years* (2012) and *1987: When the Day Comes* (2017)

26 Years examines how victims, whether the bereaved families or paratroopers, exercise an assertive agency of rightful vengeance by actively taking on socio-structural backgrounds of the *status quo*, which prevent justice from being served. The movie helps the audience better understand lingering traumas of the Kwangju Uprising, especially the bereaved families' on-going agonies and a greater social burden of having undelivered justice to those responsible for the massacre. It is about a story about a plan to kill Chun Doo-hwan, the architect of the Kwangju Uprising, by a group of the victims that consist of Kwak Jin-bae, a Kwangju-based gangster, Shim Mi-jin, a rifle-shooting athlete, Kwon Jeong-hyuk, a police officer in the precinct that holds jurisdiction over Chun's residence, Kim Ju-ahn, a deputy director of a

private security company, and Kim Kap-sae, the company's CEO. Four members are bereaved children of victims who were killed during the Uprising, while the CEO is psychologically and physically traumatized by his murder of an innocent civilian during his active duty as a paratrooper in his deployment to the Uprising. The movie begins as a cartoon that depicts deaths of Mi-jin's mother, which is tragic beyond a capacity of realistic description. Mi-jin witnessed and "experienced" her mother's death on her back when she was shot to death at home. Her mother was killed while discussing a choice of her would-be name with her father, and Mi-jin was named after her mother wish for her to be a "brave, forward-looking" lady. Jin-bae witnessed how his mother retrieve his father's decaying corpse in the pile of other bodies that were abandoned and concealed by the paratroopers: he has lived with a bone-chilling horror that his mother gets paranoid whenever she hears anything about Chun. Jeong-hyuk lost his sister in front of the Provincial Office when the soldiers opened fire at point-blank range toward the innocent civilians who demanded their retreat and democracy. He eye-witnessed his sister's tragic, painful last moment when she worried about his safety till her last moment holding her intestines that were burst by the bullet. Kap-sae lost his sanity out of fear during his deployment to Kwangju, and killed a civilian by opening fire accidentally. He later adopted Ju-ahn who lost his parents during the Uprising, and became a mastermind of the operation that mainly aimed to demand Chun Doo-hwan's sincere apology to the victims. *26 Years* deftly delineates how the victims of the Uprising have been living with vivid memories of losing their families to date and being infuriated by the fact that truth and justice have not been done.

The movie warrants a careful examination on its intrinsic quality, as well as its extrinsic feature: It is the first feature film on the bereaved families' endeavors to bring justice to the architect of the massacre during the Uprising, and the first commercial, crowd-sourced film on the historic event. *26 Years* was completed its production with crowd-sourced fund of USD 700,000 from about 15,000 voluntary donors on www.26years.co.kr between June 25 and October 20, 2012. Individual donors were desperate to keep the movie project

alive when they learned the movie's production had faced unspecified obstacles during the conservative administration of Lee Myung-bak during 4 years of production attempts, 2008–2012.

While there are few movies that depict an aftermath of Kwangju Uprising, such as *A Petal* (1996), *Peppermint Candy* (1999), and *The Old Garden* (2006), they depict how individuals, whether they are an innocent civilian, a protester, or a paratrooper, are gravely traumatized by the tragic event and suffer from their memories and injuries from it. The main characters in these movies are deeply exploited, disturbed, and haunted by physical and psychological violence the state inflicted during the Uprising to the extent that they are not able to perform everyday life activities. They are represented as helpless victims whether they remain passive recipients of violence (*A Petal*), or internalize and exercise it till committing suicide (*Peppermint Candy*). Put differently, these movies reproduce the hegemonic representational trope of gendered violence that has portrayed female characters as helpless, or mindless victims of physical, psychological, and/or sexual violence (*A Petal*; *Peppermint Candy*), or victims are feminized and in turn become passive (*The Old Garden*). Most disturbingly in *A Petal*, as Soyoung Kim indicates, the female protagonist is continuously ravaged by sexual assaults from any number of male characters to the extent that violence takes the central role in reminding the victims' lingering traumas.

Textually, while the male characters take the majority of leading roles in *26 Years*, a female protagonist assumes the crucial role as an assassin, the centerpiece of the narrative structure. As opposed to stereotypical representations of female characters in commercial movies, Mi-jin is not passive, sentimental, or blinded by emotions. Even during a heated debate on a viability of the assassination plan, Mi-jin remains composed and firmly expresses her determination to the operation. Rather, she is most driven to kill Chun to the extent that she wants to execute him in the middle of the street by asking Jeong-hyuk to manipulate the traffic signal. However, not orchestrated with other members, she failed her “spontaneous” attempt since her rifle's air chamber

was destroyed due to an overcharge by her dire hope of successful assassination. Shortly after her failure, at Jin-bae's condescending attitude and contempt, Min-jin does not show any emotional weakness but rather re-assures him of the importance of and her commitment to the revenge. Despite being frustrated by her father's psychological breakdown that ruined her professional career, Mi-jin does not blame him but sympathizes his tormented life, which is traumatized by her mother's tragic death. Though maintaining her stone cold status of mind, she donates some money to a drunken homeless man, who reminds her father.

26 Years is the only movie that effectively represents not only the bereaved family's ceaseless struggles for truth and justice of the Uprising, but also visualizes fissures in different methods of delivering activists' demands between an idealistic, violent measure and a realistic, reserved one. While Jin-bae, Mi-jin, and Ju-ahn insist Chun Doo-hwan have to go at any cost, risking their own lives too, Jeong-hyuk is skeptical of the violent measure and worries about losing his job as a police officer. The former three represents an immediate, yet rather fantastical desire of revenge; however, Jeong-hyuk is rather a realistic figure that has to worry about the survival in the everyday life while suffering from an agony for revenge. However, Jeong-hyuk's desire for revenge is no less than the other members: rather he suffers from most tormented psychological despair from the fact that he is not able to do anything significant to redeem his sister's tragic death.

While *26 Years* provides an alternative cinematic representation of a strong female character, a strong-willed female activist of the post-Uprising movement to be precise, it still omits an important series of the bereaved mothers' activism that overlaps with one of the movie's main storylines. The bereaved mothers started practicing an "arrest-squad" in front of Chun's private residence in the 1980s. Since his house is heavily surrounded and secured by the police and secret service agents, the "arrest-squad" has not had any chance of success from the beginning; however, regardless of practical probability, the mothers have not disregarded any possible means of protests as far as they can make their demand for truth and justice known. By their ceaseless, unconditional

struggle, many important landmarks of victory in the post-Uprising movement were possible. To date, despite dealing with a state of permanent grief, that is a loss without an ending that leads to a permanent mourning, the bereaved mothers have still been fighting against the remnant of the junta regime, which is responsible for the innocent deaths during and after the Uprising. In other words, without being trapped in a state of melancholia, attached to the past that erases the present of the possibility of the future (Freud 1917), the mothers have practiced a transformative mourning that goes over a deadlock of overwhelming melancholia. Eventually, their long, blood-and-tear-filled struggles have laid a condition of possibilities in the movie's cinematic imagination as well as Korea's democratic transition.

1987: When the Day Comes does not particularly deal with the Uprising, or bereaved people's struggles for truth and justice for the massacre during May 1980. Rather, it chronicles a series of events that led to the June Uprising from a tragic death of Park Jong-Chul by torture in January 1987 to another loss of Lee Han-Yeol in June 1987. Unanimously agreed in the academic community as well as the general public, the June Uprising was the culmination of the people's decade-long struggle for truth and justice for the innocent casualties of Kwangju. The people's guilty consciousness led them to fight until the achievement of democratization, resulting in the end of military dictatorship and direct presidential election. In the movie, there is a scene of the Kwangju documentary screening that indicates how the Uprising has motivated people to commit themselves to democratization movements taking risks of even getting killed.

However, *1987's* storyline is centered around male protagonists: plain-clothed male police officers who hunt down democratic activists by an excuse of quelling anti-communism and try their best to cover up hard evidences of Park Jong-Chul's death by torture; a male prosecutor who tries to deal with the murder case according to legal postulates; male investigative journalists who try their best to unearth the government's cover-up manipulations; male prison guards who played liaison roles between activist inmates and protest organizers outside; male religious leaders who helped

prepare a series of protests during the June Uprising; (male) activist college students.

While there are several female characters in the movie, they are by and large passive by-standers, helpless victims, or hesitant band-wagoners. 1987 re-conforms the stereotypical representation of women as passive, apolitical, materialistic characters. In regard to this paper's argument on women's or bereaved mothers' activism, the movie does not care for their significant contributions to democratization movement. While there is a scene that a middle-aged female shoe-shop owner provides two main characters, Lee Han-Yeol and Yeon-Hee, with a shelter during their escape from the riot police, she seems to care more about selling a pair of sneakers than her sincerity to hide the young activists: she makes her face while finding out Lee does not have money to afford the pair, but gets relieved when Yeon-Hee pays on his behalf. Later, as homage to women's supporting roles during protests, the movie shows a middle-aged woman who offers a bucket of water in the middle of the street. However, except for this passive, largely invisible, or supportive act, there is virtually no active involvement of mothers. Rather, they are helpless, wailing for a loss of her son (the bereaved mother of Park Jong-Chul), or an incarceration of her brother (a widowed mother of Yeon-Hee).

Yeon-Hee, one of the main characters and the lead female one, is even more troublesome. Despite union activist backgrounds of her late father and uncle, she is indifferent, or rather skeptical to people's aspiration and desire for social change, or democratization. She runs some errands as an apathetic liaison that delivers messages to democratization movement organizers on her activist uncle's behalf. However, she not only does it for a materialist benefit of receiving a brand new portable cassette player from her uncle, but also tries to dissuade him from being involved in the activism. While the movie suggests that the death of Lee Han-Yeol gave her a moment of awakening, it is still unclear whether she transforms herself into a socio-political agent or not. The ending scene only insinuates she becomes a part of the mass funeral procession when Yeon-Hee joins other protesters on the rooftop of a bus. While the director seems to represent

Yeon-Hee's gradual conscientization and transformation, she does not indicate a successful socio-political subjectivation, but exhibits her guilty consciousness that leads her to the protest site.

As the last fodder to the climax, the movie depicts a Catholic priest's semi-press conference to reveal the government's systematic effort to cover up the tortured death of Park Jong-Chul during the 7th annual commemoration service of the Kwangju May Uprising in Myeongdong Cathedral. It is evident that the conference played a watershed moment that mobilized nation-wide anti-governmental sentiment and in turn helped usher to a step-down of Chun Doo-hwan from his dictatorial desire to keep the presidential office. However, leading up to the historic event, there were a number of the bereaved mothers who had various protests in front of Chun's residence, the National Assembly, governmental buildings, and religious facilities including Myeongdong Cathedral. It is definitely the film director's decision on what to edit in and out amongst various historical facts along with fictional devices. Nevertheless, the omission of the bereaved mothers' struggles facing the government's all-out oppression shows that the movie is patriarchal in its way of remembrance and interpretation of the democratization movement and the post-Kwangju Uprising movement.

7. Concluding Remarks: Activism, Representation, and Democracy

In the contemporary history of democratization in Korean society, women's contribution is not negligible, despite a general ignorance in the academia as well as the public sphere. Especially, bereaved mothers' activism, inspired by the spirits of their late children, has been particularly influential in motivating and keeping a socio-political momentum for egalitarian transformation. Most saliently, Lee So-sun, the bereaved mother of Jeon Tae-il, had been a constant inspiration and encouragement for social

movements until her death in September 2011. Bae Eun-shim, the bereaved mother of Lee Han-yeol, is still active in participating in various protests. Mostly recently, Kim Mi-sook, the bereaved mother of Kim Yong-kyun who was killed in the work place of a local power plant that was not properly equipped with necessary safety measures, has devoted herself to labor activism to demand for workplace safety and stable full-time employment for workers. Subsequently, recognizing their important contributions, *OhmyNews* selected several bereaved mothers as the Person of the Year in 2019 (Ahn Geon-mo 2019; Kim Ji-hyun and Kim Jong-hoon 2019). Along with Kim Mi-sook, several mothers who fought to legislate safety stipulations in school zone areas after their children got killed by car accidents in or near school zones were featured in the story.

In her examination on women's place during and after the democratization movements in Korea, Seungsook Moon (2002) maintains that they have largely been marginalized in the nation's "masculinist nature of institutionalized politics" which is in continuity with a centuries-long legacy of Confucian patriarchy (36). Despite the women having been active in the country's decade-long democratization movements, their significant contribution has mainly been invisible or at least under-appreciated. In this respect, writing about women's contributions to Korea's democracy is an egalitarian project to reinstate the "subjugated knowledges ... that have been buried or masked in functional coherence and formal systematizations" of the patriarchal status-quo (Foucault 2003, 7). Under the hegemonic gender norms and expectations, Korean women's opportunity to participate in the public domain has been improbable. Or, if anything, it has mainly been "disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, in insufficiently elaborated knowledges" (7). For the same reason, a lack of cinematic representation on the bereaved mothers' post-Uprising activism stems from "the symbolic order inaugurated ... [by Korea's Confucian patriarchy] is still directing the imagination of what it is possible and forbidden to represent when expressing protest and demanding change" (Melgosa 2004, 154). While considering democracy as a modern political system which aims to provide the

marginalized and the oppressed with an opportunity to be represented and participate in both private and public realms for the betterment of their living quality, due representation, either in academic discourse or popular culture, is a necessary step in making Korean society substantially democratic. This representational egalitarianism will better give the marginalized and the oppressed a voice that insurrects against the dominant knowledge/ discourse/ power system. For most immediate, practical benefit, the cinematic reinstatement of the bereaved mothers' activism will "provide a foundation for healing at both the personal and cultural level without pretending that all the questions have been, or can be, answered" (O'Keeffe 2009, 535).

Movies on the Kwangju May Uprising and post-Uprising movement have provided "alternative" accounts and perspectives to "what really happened." As a culturally corrective measure to the authoritative regimes' propagandistic definition of the Uprising as anti-government riot influenced by communist spies, the movies endeavor to pay due recognition and tribute to those who sacrificed their own comforts, prosperity, well-being, status, and even lives during the Uprising and/ or subsequent transformative social movements. As much as most democratization activists were motivated by their guilt consciousness to those who were killed or violated during the Uprising, the movies are discursive and political efforts to reinstate a correct meaning of their sacrifice for the justice and democracy. However, due to the lingering confinement to the hegemonic epistemology of Confucian patriarchy, the movies on the Uprising or post-Uprising movements have neglected important contributions of the bereaved mothers' activism. This paper's argument against the cinematic erasure on the mothers' personal, activist transformations and their subsequent victories is a small, yet necessary step to understand, remember, and interpret the historically accurate meanings of the Uprising and people's sacrifices related to it. The bereaved mothers have been able to endure most painful tragedy of losing their child and fight the brutal oppression of the authoritarian regimes by sticking to their goal of reinstating their children's tainted names. Like O'Keeffe (2009) indicates "hope is created

in an attempt to construct social memories in the absence of an agreed-upon set of facts or clear evidence of those crucial moments” (535), various cinematic representations on the bereaved mothers of the Uprising will contribute to better comprehending and applying the Uprising’s multifold meanings and implications. Now, with the 40th anniversary of the Kwangju May Uprising, it is our turn to give due recognition and credit to their ceaseless struggles and many important victories by academic research, public memorialization, and more inclusive cultural representations.

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