

Adapting Western Literature in Korea:  
Colonialism and Gender Politics in *Fingersmith's* Film Adaptation *The Handmaiden*



[www.thehandmaidenfilm.com](http://www.thehandmaidenfilm.com)

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## Abstract

*Adapting Western Literature in Korea* reviews the exploration of colonialism and gender politics in Korean adaptations of Western literature and genres using the case study of *The Handmaiden* (2016), adapted from Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). The thesis goes back to the roots of adapting Western sources in Korea and looks at the context that these adaptations have been created in. Focusing mostly on 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema, it is argued that South Korean filmmakers use Western sources to comment on Korea's colonial history or to voice an opinion on current affairs. In turn, these topics and other Korean elements are used to make the adaptation more familiar for the Korean public. By taking *The Handmaiden* as case study, the thesis discusses one of the most famed Korean films. The original source's themes of gender politics and pornography in the Victorian-era are used to comment on homophobia and female oppression in contemporary South Korea. At the same time, *Fingersmith's* themes are used to explore colonialism and the oppression of the Korean people. Comparing *The Handmaiden* to the other discussed adaptations, this thesis argues that *The Handmaiden* in its combination of exploring colonialism, female exploitation, pornography and homosexuality is entirely unique from other adaptations.

## Introduction

“She is the saviour who came to tear my life apart. My Tamako. My Sook-hee” (02:12:40-02:12:45). With these words, the Japanese Lady Hideko gives expression to two central themes of the South Korean film *The Handmaiden* (2016): female sexuality and Korean<sup>1</sup> national identity. It expresses Hideko’s love and admiration for her Korean maid Sook-hee, who also goes by the Japanese name ‘Tamako’ as was forced upon her. The way these two themes are explored will be the focus of this thesis, specifically the love between two women and their suppression by men and the question of how to give expression to the national Korean identity in the context of Japanese occupation. The film, directed by director Park Chan-wook, was adapted from Sarah Waters’ novel *Fingersmith* (2002). In this Victorian-set novel, an orphaned girl named Sue Trinder is pulled into a scheme set up by family-friend and conman Richard Rivers, or ‘Gentleman’. She is brought to the land house Briar to serve as a maid to the lady Maud Lilly, who is kept there by her book collector uncle Christopher Lilly. Unexpectedly, the two women end up falling in love, complicating Gentleman’s scheme.

In the adaptation, Park has reinterpreted the novel about feminism, lesbianism and Victorian pornography to fit the narrative of a South Korean film about colonialism and nationality. While the story has been subjected to much change, it has still maintained the novel’s initial themes along with a similar layout and characters. This way, the director has found a method to comment on both colonialism and gender politics. In the context of Korean national history, a joint discussion of such seemingly unrelated themes is more than sensible. During the colonial period, Korean nationalists began to question both the Confucian belief system, according to which the woman was to obey the men in her life and her sexuality suppressed and supervised, and the traditional dynamics of society at large (K.-A. Kim 65-

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<sup>1</sup> Some adaptations and time periods discussed in this thesis are dated before the separation of North and South Korea. This thesis will refer to it as ‘Korea(n)’ unless a situation specific to South Korea is discussed. In the case of cinema, it will sometimes be shortened to simply ‘Korea’ as there is no mentioning of North Korean cinema in this thesis.

66). Somewhat ironically, this desire for change was partly a consequence of Japanese rule which had introduced Korea to Western society. Korean intellectuals concluded that in order to become a more developed society that could put an end to Japanese imperialism they had to, among other things, model parts of their culture and way of life after advanced countries (66). The traditional Confucian view of women had to make way for the Western conviction that women ought to be able to, for instance, get an education and explore new interests.

While the novel deals with the position of women and their sexuality in the culturally stagnant context of Victorian England, the film does so in an era in which the position of women had been made political in resistance to the Japanese colonists. The film additionally uses the treatment of women in the novel to reflect on the treatment of Koreans by the Japanese.

*The Handmaiden* thus entwines the novel's feminist views with the subject of colonialism.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of academic discussion in Anglophone literature on the creative process of adapting *Fingersmith* to a Korean colonial film. Excepting Chi-Yun Shin's "In Another Time and Place: *The Handmaiden* as an Adaptation", the novel and film are rarely linked to one another. The film's themes and adaptive deviations remain unexplored. That is not to say that this near absence of literature on this particular adaptation should be equated to a lack of interest in Korean adaptations. There have been studies on Korean theatrical and cinematic adaptations. Several have focused on the works of William Shakespeare, which were instrumental in fostering and expressing a sense of longing for political and social freedom amongst Korean intellectuals. Other studies concerned films, mostly from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that were adapted from Western literature. Even more have focused on cross-cultural cinema and films that play with genres from Western cinema. In this thesis, the term 'cross-cultural' is used to refer to South Korean films with influences from Western culture and South Korean films that directly involved Western co-production.

Through a close reading of primary sources and the theoretical framework, this thesis will discuss in what way *The Handmaiden*'s treatment of its central themes of colonialism and gender politics in its adaptation of *Fingersmith* is typical for Korean adaptations of Western sources. Furthermore, two other questions will be asked for a better understanding. The first one is: How do Korean adaptations of Western literature and genres deal with colonialism and gender politics? And the second: How does *The Handmaiden*'s exploration of colonialism and gender politics differ, or not, from *Fingersmith*? And does the change of medium affect this?

The first chapter of this thesis will answer the question about the practice of Korean adaptations of Western literature and genres by looking at a couple of examples of Korean adaptations in theatre and cinema. The second chapter will analyse the theme of gender politics in *Fingersmith*, Korean society and *The Handmaiden*. The third and final chapter will disclose how Park has added the element of colonialism to the story and how this changes the plot. Finally, the thesis will end with a conclusion on *The Handmaiden*'s position in relation to other Korean adaptations of Western sources.

## **Chapter 1. A History of Adapting:**

### **Colonialism and Gender Politics in Korean Adaptations of Western Literature**

Adapting creative work from a dissimilar culture will bring along a couple of concerns. Not only does the creator have to take into account factors of transcoding from one medium to another or satisfying the fans of the original work, but the adaptation must also feature cultural elements that are recognisable for the local audience. As a result, many Korean adaptations have used the original Western material to explore historical events, East-Asian values, and contemporary political and social issues. When talking about transcoding, this thesis defines it as “a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel)” (Hutcheon 35). Surely not all adaptations are about colonialism or gender politics, however, this thesis will focus solely on adaptations that do explore colonialism and gender politics to narrow it down.

#### **1.1 Adapting Shakespeare in Korea**

Korean adaptations of Western literature begins in earnest with the introduction of William Shakespeare to Korea. During Japanese rule, Korean intellectuals found in Shakespeare a spokesperson who served as a symbol of Western civilisation (M.-W. Lee 129). Korean intellectuals recognised the West, and thus Shakespeare, as their liberator from whom they should learn (J.-S. Lee 67; Moran 202). Strict regulations from the Japanese, however, prevented Koreans from producing and enjoying plays, especially those opposing the Empire of Japan. As a result, there is only some evidence of Shakespearean productions that “reflected the heavy control over culture imposed by the Japanese government” (J.-H. Kim 41). In these adaptations, Korean playwrights used Shakespeare’s voice to express a longing for freedom (Moran 201). By using Shakespeare, they could essentially say that they were merely executing his words and hide their true intentions of an anti-Japan agenda.

After the liberation from Japan and the separation of North and South Korea, a great number of Shakespeare adaptations were produced in South Korea. Some of these adaptations, for instance the *Hamlet* adaptation *The Prince of Hamyul* by Ahn Min-soo, involved setting the story in Ancient Korea and adding traditional elements such as costumes and Oriental philosophies. Their purpose was to reintroduce contemporary South Korea, which they considered a society stripped from its culture, to traditional Korean culture (J.-H. Kim 46; M.-W. Lee 134). In Lee Youn-taek's *Hamlet*, for example, shamanism was integrated. Shamanistic adaptations of *Hamlet* often portray Ophelia as a medium as she reminds the public of the traditional role Korean women have in the patriarchal society (H.-U. Lee 106). She is also supposed to represent the concept of 'han', which is a resentful characteristic often epitomised by women with a hurt mental state due to oppression and inferiority to men (106). In the adaptation of Lee, however, she is not given the role of medium and her character has become more comfortable with her sexuality as she openly speaks about her sexual relationships. This is often interpreted as the liberation of Korean women (113; 124). These Shakespeare adaptations thus served as a reminder of traditional Korean culture, but also as commentary on this culture and contemporary society.

### **1.2 Cross-Cultural Trends in Korean Blockbusters**

After decades of cultural oppression and censorship, first by imperialism and then by the South Korean government, Korean filmmakers experienced a new sense of freedom of expression after the late 1980s when censorship decreased. This led to films debating social issues and the past. At the end of the 1990s, an era of producing blockbusters had begun. The South Korean film industry became bigger and aside from regional recognition, it gained more admiration from non-Asian media (J.-Y. Shin 51). These Korean blockbusters set themselves apart from previous generations by combining foreign influences with regional



elements creating a 'hybrid' cinema (J.-Y. Shin 57; Wilson 28). The following text will focus on how filmmakers of this new era Koreanised Western texts and film genres. The text will particularly look at films that comment on contemporary affairs by setting the film in a historical period, and films that explore colonialism.

In recent years, South Korean directors have gained more fame abroad resulting in a couple of Hollywood and Hallyuwood<sup>2</sup> crossovers. A great example is the Korean-American sci-film *Snowpiercer* (2013). The film was directed by Bong Joon-ho and stars Hollywood actors Tilda Swinton and Chris Evans. Bong takes a stance against capitalism and comments on global warming in this adaptation of the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (1982). The film, like the novel, tells the story of survivors on a class-divided train after an environmental disaster caused an ice age. Though following the graphic novel's greater lines and thoughts, Bong also diverges from the original source by adding a storyline about Korean identity and colonialism. There are three prominent Asian characters in the film: South Korean anti-hero Namgoong Minsoo, his daughter Yona, and a Japanese assistant Fuyu. The contrast between Fuyu, who belongs to Minister Mason's crew and therefore the ruling system, and Namgoong, a prisoner, is striking. As Ye-dam Yi remarks, this relationship has "historical significance attached to a Japanese oppressor and a Korean prisoner" (23). In one scene, the rebels enter an ecosystem inside the train where the working-class is harvesting food. A different Japanese man enters the screen and expresses concern for Minister Mason's safety. This scene is followed by another scene where Yona is introduced to soil and worms. This reflects the relations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which the Japanese shadowed the Europeans and Americans and introduced Korea to new technology. Thus, traces of Korea's colonial history are present even in this Korean-American adaptation of a French novel about a dystopian world with a Western narrative.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Hallyuwood' is the term used to describe Korean entertainment and film industry. It comes from the word 'Hallyu' meaning 'Korean Wave' which refers to the sudden popularity of South Korean pop culture.

Contemporary South Korean cinema has expressed a great interest in French cinema and literature (Wilson 94). This has led to several adaptations and ‘hybrid’ films. In these hybrid films, Western influences are mixed with traditional Korean elements to make the film more attractive to the South Korean audience (27). E. J-yong’s *Untold Scandal* (2003) is one of the blockbuster films based on a French novel, *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782), that has been Koreanised. The novel, which is set in pre-Revolution France, contains feminist and progressive stances. The female protagonist, for example, is a woman who “resents the socio-political disenfranchisement of her sex and gender-biased double standards regarding promiscuity and is determined to subjugate and punish men” (132). E. used the content of the novel to comment on the duality of conservative and liberal sexual values and gender politics in South Korea (146). He has changed the setting to the late Joseon period<sup>3</sup> in which Confucian gender rules controlled the interactions between men and women (128). The female protagonist Lady Cho voices progressive opinions and goes against Confucian beliefs by telling her husband’s second wife that all ladies of nobility have lovers besides their husband. She also comments that the gender norms as stated by Confucianism are not reality (141). Another female character, widower Lady Chong, goes against Confucianism and Joseon law by converting to Catholicism. She is considered to be a modern educated woman who is also an egalitarian (141). Both women become involved in love affairs and defy Confucian gender norms, expressing a more liberal view of women’s position in society and their sexuality. With this E. at the same time criticises conservative views in contemporary South Korea.

Adaptations are not just limited to written texts. Sometimes it is Western film culture, and in particular American genres, that is Koreanised. Kim Jee-woon’s *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) is one such film. Paying homage to *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966),

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<sup>3</sup> The Joseon dynasty was the last dynasty of Korea and held Confucianism as its main philosophy. The dynasty lasted from 1392-1897 before it became the Korean Empire.

which itself is an Italian version of the American Western, Kim used the Western genre to create a comical action film about Japanese imperialism. The film introduces characters from different groups that were present during the events of the 1930s: Korean Japan-sympathisers, Korean independence fighters, the Japanese, Manchu people, and Koreans living in Manchuria. The fact that the film is set in Manchuria is an important detail. Manchuria was one of the regions occupied by the Japanese and a large group of Koreans migrated to Manchuria during this time. Manchuria therefore serves as the perfect location to see the effects of the Japanese empire beyond Korea. Another important factor is the costumes. The characters are dressed in a mixture of Western and traditional East-Asian clothing, the latter mostly worn by the Manchurian bandits. The Western fashion, mostly cowboy costumes, is a reference to the American Western genre. Additionally, the film makes some political statements and captures the emotional state of Koreans at that time. During one scene the good guy Park Do-won makes several comments about losing his land to the Japanese: “If you have no country, you still got to have money,” “Why buy land when your country’s stolen,” and “Every Korean has a sad story” (01:12:38-01:15:36). Some characters are also accused of betraying their country for money. These characters are depicted as the villains.

## Chapter 2. Transcoding Gender Politics: From *Fingersmith* to *The Handmaiden*

*Fingersmith* is a novel about lesbianism, feminism, and pornography. More specifically, it's about the representation of women in pornography and their oppression and exploitation by the patriarch. By setting the story in the Victorian era and reflecting on real pornographic texts, Waters goes back to the modern roots of pornography (O'Callaghan 562). She criticises the oppression of women and fetishization of lesbians in Victorian society and pornography. At the same time, Waters disapproves of the exploitation of women and lesbians in contemporary pornography created by men for men (O'Callaghan 569). The novel aims to put the male-gaze in contrast with an authentic lesbian relationship narrated by women. It also shows the effects of male dominance over women and the perception women have of themselves and their sexuality.

Maud Lilly has been a victim of male dominance ever since her childhood. She was raised in a madhouse before being brought to Briar at the age of ten. Here she became Mr. Lilly's personal possession. She was taught to duplicate pornographic books and recite them to a male audience, and was not allowed to leave the Briar estate:

I am as worldly as the grossest rakes of fiction; but have never, since I first came to my uncle's house, been further than the walls of its park. I know everything. I know nothing. You must remember this, in what follows. You must remember what I cannot do, what I have not seen. (203-204)

In the following passage, her position in the house in regard to the men whom she must entertain becomes evident:

...He takes my hand and kisses it. Behind him comes Mr Huss. He is a gentleman collector, a friend from my uncle's youth. He also takes my hand but takes it to draw me closer to him, then kisses my cheek....I have been

several times surprised by Mr Huss upon the stairs. He likes to stand and watch me climb them. (208)

They see her as a doll and a sexual object whom they can touch and look at whenever they please, but with Mr. Lilly's approval of course. With the arrival of Sue, she is able to escape from this objectification and experience what love and intimacy are supposed to be like.

## **2.1 Gender Roles and Homophobia in Contemporary South Korea**

Before looking at how *Fingersmith* was adapted to a South Korean film, it is important to disclose the current situation of women, in particular lesbians, in the country. South Korea is right now experiencing many drastic changes. Globalisation and social media have created new generations that are more in touch with other cultures and their norms and values. The treatment of minorities and women has been receiving much criticism by Korean youth. As was conveyed by E. J-yong's *Untold Scandal*, there is a divide between conservatives and liberals when it comes to sexual values and the role of women. The Korean patriarchy, which is strongly connected to Confucianism, continues to hold a conservative position (Park-Kim et al. 174). While South Korean women are becoming more independent, the older and often religious generations still hold certain expectations. The man is supposed to be the head of the household while the woman takes care of the house and children. Women are also expected to be modest and pure.

These conservative morals are not only affecting women, but also those who do not identify as heterosexual. After the 1990s, when South Korea acknowledged homosexuality, there have been issues related to homophobia (162-163). It was also around this time when "Western sexuality politics" were introduced in colleges (170; 174). While the progressive liberals studied gender politics and began talking about homosexuality, conservatives and

religious institutions expressed their homophobic ideology. As a result, many have denied their own sexuality to fit in the heterosexual norm posed by society (165).

Similar to Waters, Park wanted to connect the past to present in order to comment on homophobia in contemporary South Korean society. He has stated that he found it important that a mainstream film presented a loving lesbian relationship as normal as mainstream media would attract an audience that normally wouldn't see a film about lesbianism:

It was an encouraging sign for me to find that average cinema-going audience would come to the cinema thinking that they are in for a good movie or that they're there to see their favourite stars, but come out of the theatre thinking about homosexuality as a natural thing. (Ongley)

## **2.2 Gender Politics in *The Handmaiden***

The discussion of lesbianism and female oppression and exploitation is essential to the novel's plot and an adaptation without these themes would fail to include the novel's strongest points. Luckily, Park did not overlook these themes when he decided to set the story in 1930s Korea. Park continues Waters' discussion of oppression and sexuality. Hideko, the Japanese counterpart of Maud, is brought to Korea from Japan where she serves the same purpose as Maud. She is taught how to orally and physically perform her uncle's books for a male audience. It is not until her encounter with the Korean Sook-hee (Sue) that she is able to break free from this male dominated world.

Instead of following the entire plot of the novel, which would have been impossible due to limited time, Park creates a plot twist of his own by letting the two women conspire against the Korean Gentleman, Count Fujiwara. In an emotional and tense scene Hideko tries to hang herself on a cherry blossom tree, a tree planted in Korea during the Japanese rule. Sook-hee finds her just in time and prevents her from committing suicide as she confesses that

she cares for Hideko. Hideko then reveals that Sook-hee is the one being set up in this scheme and not Hideko (02:06:33-02:07:44). What follows is a sequence of events that ultimately leads to the death of both Count Fujiwara and Kouzuki, Hideko's uncle, at the mansion while the two women escape to China. As part of this twist, Hideko grants Sook-hee entrance to the library and exposes the books she has been made to read. In a very powerful move, Sook-hee then decides to destroy the library. Hideko first watches in astonishment before joining Sook-hee. In the novel, Sue doesn't find out about the pornographic books until the end of the novel and Maud destroys the book alone before leaving Briar:

I go to the stairs, and from there to the library, and once inside that room I lock the door at my back and light a lamp. My heart is beating hardest, now. I am queasy with feat and anticipation. But time is racing, and I cannot wait. I cross to my uncle's shelves and unfasten the glass before the presses. I begin with *The Curtain Drawn Up*, the book he gave me first: I take it, and open it, and set it upon his desk. Then I lift the razor, grip it tight, and fully unclasp it... (290)

This moment is read very swiftly and only describes Maud cutting the books with a razor. The scene in the film lasts about two minutes and the destruction of the library is met with anger and chaos. The books are dumped in water, splashed with ink, ripped apart by sharp objects and hands. The two women destroy the library together and with that fight against their oppressor together and become equals.

While the film has limitations due to screen time, an advantage the film has over the novel is that it has pictorial possibilities which allows it to not only describe, but also show important moments such as the sex scenes and tension between the two women. The film plays with this contrast between pictorial and linguistic when Hideko presents a pornographic scene from a recited book as the print picturing this scene has been ripped out of the book.

Words are not enough to describe the scene from the book and therefore a real life presentation must be shown to the men (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1: CJ Entertainment, [www.berlinfilmjournal.com/2016/12/review-the-handmaiden-reframes-lesbian-sex-and-queer-feminist-cinema/](http://www.berlinfilmjournal.com/2016/12/review-the-handmaiden-reframes-lesbian-sex-and-queer-feminist-cinema/)

Before this, the film also sneaks into the men's heads and depicts how they imagine performing the sexual acts from the book with Hideko. The viewer is confronted with the objectification of Hideko through the depiction of the men's

facial expressions and fantasies. They become a direct witness to the exploitation of women.

Despite its success, the film has been met with some negative criticism in regard to its portrayal of female sexuality. First, the fact that the film's director is a man caused some concerns as the story would be told from a male perspective whereas the novel's point is to go against male representation of lesbianism. For some this fear was confirmed after watching the erotic scenes. The sex scenes were considered unrealistic, echoing the scenes seen in lesbian pornography directed by men for men (Davis). Furthermore, the film focuses a lot on the physical relationship between the two women and their lust for each other rather than their emotional connection. While the novel likewise speaks a lot of this sexual relationship, Park has the benefit of capturing emotions and small gestures that the novel can't show. Instead, he almost oversexualises the film by adding more sloppy kissing scenes, sex scenes and other erotic moments resulting in a lack of pure romance. Subsequently, a number of people have reviewed the film as too pornographic.

The idealised representation of the female body in the film also received some critique. In the novel, Maud is surprised when she sees the body of her first maid:



Her legs—that I know from my uncle’s books should be smooth—are dark with hair; the place between them—which I know should be neat, and fair—darkest of all. (200)

She soon starts to understand that her uncle’s books are “to be filled with falsehoods” (201).

Waters thus confronts the non-realistic representation of the female body in pornography.

Hideko and Sook-hee on the other hand have smooth, neatly shaven bodies, similar to the bodies described in the pornographic books. On the representation of the female body in *The Handmaiden*, Waters comments:

They are like mirrors of each other which I’ve found rather troubling in the past because it blacks out the difference, but when I spoke to Park he said he was bringing the Japanese mistress and the Korean sewing girl together on an equal level. (Armitstead)

Nonetheless, this is an unnecessary element to the film as the women are already considered equals in their suffering from oppression, and eventually become equals in their relationship and their conspiracy against Fujiwara and Kouzuki. It would also have been possible to achieve equality through physical traits by giving both women pubic hair, for example. The decision to present their bodies in such a near perfect state seems to come from visual motives rather than progressive politics.

### Chapter 3. Locating a British Novel in Colonial Korea

In his interview with Curzon, Park explained that his producer Syd Lim suggested setting the story in 1930s Korea after finding out about the BBC adaptation of *Fingersmith*. They decided for 1930s Korea, because Park needed a setting that consisted of “the element where we have an aristocratic lady, and the idea that there is a handmaiden...and in addition, this modern idea of a mental hospital which finds its roots in the west” (Curzon). The gender, sexuality, and class concerns of the novel made it possible for Park to look at the dynamics between Korea and Japan in a new way. Vice versa, colonialism allowed for a reinterpretation of the characters in *Fingersmith* and their relationship. This chapter will discuss the changes that have been made to fit the colonial narrative.

#### 3.1 Setting *Fingersmith* in Colonised Korea

In the film’s production notes, Park mentions the mansion and library as important spaces (6). While this makes sense as this is where most of the action takes place, he highlights these settings for a different reason. When Sook-hee arrives at the mansion, she is greeted by Miss Sasaki who explains the design of the mansion to her:

The property has three buildings. A Western-style wing designed by an English architect and a Japanese wing from the main house. Not even in Japan is there a building combining the two styles. It reflects Master’s admiration for Japan and England. (00:04:41-00:04:59)

The mansion not only serves as background, but its design is also a crucial element in illustrating the historical and social context this film is set in. The power dynamics between the characters and glorification of Japanese and Western culture are represented by the mansion. In contrast to Briar, which Sue describes as “... straight and stark out of the woolly fog, with all its windows black or shuttered, and its walls with a dead kind of ivy clinging to

them” (57), the Kouzuki mansion is less gloomy. When Sook-hee arrives there is no fog and the house is lit up. While there is ivy clinging to the walls, the windows are quite open. There is a vast difference between the appearance of Briar and the Kouzuki mansion. Gentleman further describes Briar as:

...a damnable place: two hundred years old, and dark, and draughty, and mortgaged to the roof—which is leaky, by the by. Not a rug or a vase or piece of plate worth forcing so much as a fart for, I’m afraid. The gents eats his supper off china, just like us. (24)

The Kouzuki mansion on the other hand is filled with paintings, floral prints, decorated wall-paper, colours and a mixture of English furniture and Japanese ornaments (see fig. 2).

This difference lies with the owners of the mansions. Mr. Lilly is an established man who wants Maud’s inheritance to expand his library. Kouzuki, however, started as a Korean common man and interpreter who “bribed his way into translating for high officials [to help Japan annex Korea]” (00:27:05-00:27:13). His admiration for Japan made him want to trade his Korean identity for a Japanese one. This is mirrored by the lavish British and Japanese decoration in the house which gives the impression that he is a wealthy educated Japanese man.



Fig. 2: Ryu Sung-hee, [www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag\\_id=84314](http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag_id=84314)

Moving to the library, a small yet significant change has been made. In *Fingersmith*, Mr. Lilly guards his library and the obscene contents of his books by a pointing hand. When Sue is about to pass it, Maud stops her and explains that no servant is allowed to look at his books as they might spoil them (76). Park transformed this “flat brass hand with a pointing finger” (76) to a snake. In the interview with Curzon, Park explains that this snake is

supposed to mark the 'bounds of knowledge'. The depiction of this snake in the library can be interpreted in various ways. First there is the link with temptation as the snake can be seen as a phallic entity. The snake represents and at the same time guards the pornographic content of the books. The words 'bounds of knowledge' could mean that only those with a specialised knowledge of the content of Kouzuki's books are allowed to enter the library. This is also a reference to the biblical snake that tempted Eve to eat a forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. By adding this biblical reference, Park stresses Westernisation of Korea as Christianity is another Western influence that altered Korea's society. Lastly, the snake represents the characters' habit of pretention. The snake is often seen as a sly vicious animal that is capable of shedding its skin. All the characters in the Kouzuki manor pretend to be someone they are not. They keep changing their identities and are not to be trusted.

Apart from Briar, London, in particular Lant Street, play a significant role in *Fingersmith*. For Sue this is the place she grew up in and Maud dreams of escaping to it. After her escape from Briar, Maud is brought to Lant Street by Gentleman where she then discovers that Gentleman's scheme was actually set up by Mrs Sucksby. *The Handmaiden* pays less attention to the Korean version of Lant Street as well as the rest of Korea. A short glimpse is given at the beginning of the film to indicate the poor conditions Sook-hee grew up in. The colonial era is in addition disclosed by the marching of Japanese soldiers through the neighbourhood. Instead of bringing Hideko back to this neighbourhood, Fujiwara takes her to Japan. Here the Westernisation of Japan becomes more palpable. The streets and architecture mimic those of England, and the two have dinner at a fancy restaurant of which the guests are Japanese and Westerners dressed in sophisticated clothing. Instead of letting Hideko experience the poverty that Sook-hee endured, Fujiwara is allowing her to continue to live a luxurious life. This change of setting is a consequence of two matters. The first is a change of plot. In the novel, the scheme was set up by Mrs Sucksby who is Maud's real mother. Maud

was born at Lant Street and Gentleman takes her back to her place of birth. In the film, Hideko is the actual niece of Kouzuki and was born in Japan. She's therefore brought back to Japan. Secondly, while the novel emphasises financial and gender hierarchy, the film focuses on ethnic classification. Bringing Maud back to Lant Street means making her equal to the underprivileged. In the case of *The Handmaiden*, Fujiwara set up the scheme by himself and his desire for a rich Western lifestyle could not wait. By bringing Hideko back to Japan, she is put in the position of partaking in Fujiwara's pretentious act. Simultaneously, the difference between Koreans and Japanese is displayed.

### 3.2 Giving Character to Colonial Korea

This pretending is something that the characters in *Fingersmith* are acquainted with. They are constantly pretending to be someone they are not and the dynamics between the characters are defined by financial status and gender. This along with the motifs of oppression and frauds makes the plot of *Fingersmith* the perfect base for Park's colonial film. The class difference observed in *Fingersmith* has been broadened in *The Handmaiden* by adding ethnic hierarchy. The characters, their actions, and relationships are no longer based on only gluttony and gender, but also on whether the characters identify themselves as Korean or Japanese. The four most prominent characters in the film are all based on the characters in the novel: Hideko – Maud, Sook-hee – Sue, Count Fujiwara – Gentleman, Kouzuki – Mr. Lilly. Yet, they are different from the novel's characters.

The two female protagonists of the film are victims of male oppression and the political and social matters resulting from the happenings between Korea, Japan and the West. The relationship between Hideko and Sook-hee is partially defined by their ethnic background which gives them a different social status. Sook-hee invades the house as a Korean housemaid to the Japanese noblewoman Hideko. From the moment she enters, Sook-hee has to dual

between her Korean identity and satisfying her masters by taking on a Japanese name and speaking in Japanese. This is different from Sue who only took on a different last name to hide her real identity. Hideko's role also slightly differs from Maud. Hideko comes up with a majority of the scheme making her the deceiving mastermind. She is the one who brings up the idea of replacing herself with a clueless maid, making her more devious and powerful than Maud. Throughout the entire film she makes sure that she is one step ahead, unlike Maud who is at times more a follower and a bit naïve. This not only empowers the female character, but also emphasises the dishonesty of the Japanese characters. This is also revealed by her costumes. Hideko is most of the time presented in colourful Western clothing and hats to indicate her affluence and Japanese status. Hideko is only seen wearing traditional Japanese clothing when she is either tricking someone or performing for men. Japanese elements are thus related to deception, but also female oppression. Eventually, it is the Korean Sook-hee who gains power by destroying the library, rescuing Hideko, and overcoming Japanese oppression.

The men in the film in turn are not only branded for their belief that they are superior to women, but also for their fascination with the West and support for the Japanese empire. With the character of Kouzuki, Park wanted to represent Koreans who “were captivated by Japan” (Barnes). He uses the term ‘sadaejuui’ to refer to Kouzuki, which is a term describing people of smaller countries who worship larger nations for their power (C.-Y. Shin 6). Fujiwara asks Kouzuki why he has such a strong urge to become Japanese to which Kouzuki answers “Because Korea is ugly and Japan is beautiful...Korea is soft, slow, dull, and therefore hopeless” (01:34:48-01:35:11). The foolishness of these people is exposed by how easy they are manipulated. Fujiwara enters the mansion with ease due to Kouzuki's desire to socialise with Japanese noblemen. He also convinces Kouzuki to let Hideko paint by telling him that all the ladies in England are taught to paint in vibrant colours. Similar to Mr. Lilly, it

is his obsession with pornography and exploitation of women that destroys him in the end.

Eager to hear about Hideko's first sexual experience on her wedding night with Fujiwara, he keeps giving the imprisoned Fujiwara cigarettes in hopes for more details on Hideko's body, taste, and sexual abilities. These cigarettes are, unbeknown to him, filled with mercury, ending the lives of both men.

A noteworthy change of character is that of Mrs Stiles who becomes Miss Sasaki. Mrs Stiles is the main caretaker of the house who lost her daughter. She resents Maud partially because of Maud's attitude towards her and partially because she has to raise another woman's child after the loss of her own. Miss Sasaki is very similar to Mrs Stiles. She is insensitive, has an abusive relationship with Hideko, and does everything to please Kouzuki. The reason for her resentment towards Hideko comes from a different place, however. The Korean Sasaki was Kouzuki's wife who he marginalised in order to marry a Japanese noblewoman. He still kept Sasaki around the house and in his bed as his lover while planning on getting married to Hideko after her aunt's death. Sasaki's position in the house is lowered to that of a housekeeper. She is another Korean woman hurt by the belief that Japan is superior to Korea and by male superiority.

While Sasaki is given a storyline that makes her a direct victim of Kouzuki's mansion, another female character is nearly left out of the entire plot. A big part of the novel revolves around the discovery of Mrs. Sucksby's true intentions and the switching of Maud and Sue at birth. It would have been difficult to delve into Mrs. Sucksby's character due to time limits. Omitting Bok-soon's background story, the Korean Mrs. Sucksby, could also be interpreted as a victory for Korean women. Mrs. Sucksby is portrayed as a caring mother figure, and while we do not see as much of Bok-soon she is still recognisable as the mother figure. Bok-soon plots with the girls and rescues them from oppression which could be recognised as a Korean woman fighting a battle against Japanese and male oppression and setting other women free.

## Conclusion

This thesis discussed a few historical and socio-political Korean adaptations of Western texts and culture. Most of the Western sources were literary works that contained political and social discussions which served as an inspiration for Korean creators. The overview discussed in chapter 1 showed that Korean creators used these Western influences to review Korea's colonial history and comment on present-day issues in South Korea's society. Unlike the other adaptations discussed in this thesis, which mainly focused on one specific issue or historical event, Park took the themes of *Fingersmith* and used these themes to address the novel's issues, but also added new themes to the original story. Park set the British novel in 1930s Korea to comment on colonialism and the attitudes of some upper-class Koreans towards Japan which negatively affected Korea. He used Mr Lilly's obsession with female sexuality and pornographic books to create a character with the same type of obsession with pornographic books, but also with Japanese culture. Besides observing these characters, he also took advantage of the novel's themes of lesbianism and progressive gender politics to present the conservative Korean public with a positive image of homosexuality, and to explore the oppression of women and Koreans. *The Handmaiden* thus sets itself apart from other adaptations by discussing both colonialism and gender politics while also addressing the taboo topic of homosexuality.

Due to the margins, this study only focused on certain elements of the film and novel and left out other interesting aspects of the adaptation such as the switching between the Korean and Japanese language. Shin already touched upon this topic in her article, but it could definitely be explored more. Furthermore, a separate, more intensive review of the usage of Western literature, in particular British literature, in Korean adaptations would make for an interesting study.



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