A Timely Tragedy: Deviant Women and Cultural Dissonance in Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid*

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Abstract
In recent history, the Korean peninsula has endured change at a remarkable pace, transitioning from an insular unified entity to a battleground of cultural encounters and political upheaval. This article examines the renowned Korean director Kim Ki-young's (1919–1998) film The Housemaid *(1960) as an expression of the culturally contingent anxieties surrounding modernisation in post-war South Korea. This film serves an allegory for the dissonant socio-political climate during the early 1960s, presented through a narrative of a fatal affair between an emasculated husband and a young housemaid. Kim explores themes concerning Korean patriarchal norms, the state's paranoia regarding the West and the role of women in a rapidly modernising Korean society. Central to* The Housemaid *'s narrative is the presentation of deviant women as symbolic of broader societal concerns, embodied by an industrious housewife whose material ambitions signal a departure from the state-sponsored ideal of personal frugality. The housemaid is hired to compensate for the housewife's inability to fulfil her expected domestic and maternal responsibilities, and her introduction heralds the destruction of the Korean family. Kim's portrayal of the housemaid's unpredictable behaviour and her manipulation of the patriarch illustrates the destabilising force of modernisation. The underlying cultural tensions surrounding the undermining of gender roles in the traditional Confucian family are also evident in Kim's depiction of an emasculated husband. This article highlights the multifaceted anxieties of post-colonial, post-war Korean society surrounding the erosion of traditional values, the liberation of women and the looming threat of ideological intrusions from the West. By examining Kim Ki-young's writing and his unique cinematic approach, this article offers valuable insights into the cultural, social and psychological aspects of this period of South Korea's modernisation process. Ultimately,* The Housemaid *serves as a compelling and provocative reflection of the prevailing sentiments concerning modernity and the patriarchal family.*

Introduction

Once a unified, homogenous and proudly insular socio-political entity, the history of the Korean Peninsula has been marked by a series of undesired yet seemingly unavoidable cultural encounters (or confrontations). Arguably, the most pivotal moment occurred in the early twentieth century when the Japanese Empire colonised Korea in 1910, an occupation that persisted until the end of the Second World War. The turbulent process of colonisation brought the short-lived Korean Empire (1897–1910), a successor state to Korea's long-standing Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1897), to an abrupt end—initiating a thirty-five-year period of occupation marked by cultural oppression, political suppression and forced modernisation. This last factor was used by Japan to justify its presence in Korea. After the colonial era ended in 1945, Korea faced further interventions from foreign military powers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Divided along the 38th parallel, an arbitrary border delineating what is now regarded as

North Korea and South Korea, the Korean Peninsula functioned as a proxy mediation zone during the Cold War (1947–1991). The Korean War (1950–1953) effectively solidified these charged political conditions, which still affect the peninsula today. Moreover, successive authoritarian regimes (1948–1988) in South Korea continued to suppress political opponents while implementing harsh modernisation policies, resulting in civil unrest, widespread student protests and retaliatory state brutality. However, coinciding with the de-escalation of the Cold War, South Korea began transitioning towards democratisation and globalisation, a shift epitomised by Seoul's hosting of the 1988 Olympics (Snyder, 2017, p. 53).

The process of reconciling the innumerable traumas of the twentieth century, coupled with anxieties surrounding modernisation and the "Westernisation" of Korean society, are distinctly communicated through the work of acclaimed Korean film director and auteur Kim Ki-young (1919–1998). He is noted for his unique blend of traditional melodrama with elements of psychological horror, used to convey salient concerns regarding the claustrophobic socio-political climate during the Cold War, the role of women in Korean society, the influence of the West and the modern condition in a Korean context. No film so adequately distils these cultural discourses as Kim's seminal work *The Housemaid* (1960). This unsettling and thrilling psycho-drama functions as a cautionary tale about a fatal affair between an emasculated husband and a young, unpredictable housemaid, who is hired to alleviate the stresses of an upper middle-class family. This article discusses how, through this dramatic encounter, Kim Ki-young encapsulated and exploited cultural anxieties regarding the transitory social conditions in post-war South Korea.

The Housemaid is centred around an aspiring middle-class Korean family striving to enhance their social status through the acquisition of a larger, two-storey house and modern conveniences. Kim Dong-sik (Kim Jin-kyu), a composer employed to play the piano for a factory's after-hours choir and father of two children, along with his wife, Mrs Kim (Ju Jeong-ryu), a seamstress, are expecting their third child and have just moved into their new residence. To alleviate their stress, the Kim family hires the titular housemaid, Myung-sook (Lee Eun-shim), a cleaner at the factory. However, instead of assisting the family as intended, her presence in the household causes additional problems. A sexual affair between Myung-sook and Dong-sik creates tension between him and Mrs Kim, entangling her in a psychological tug-of-war with the housemaid for dominance over the patriarch. Myung-sook becomes pregnant with Dong-sik's child, giving her powerful leverage over the family. Mrs Kim encourages her to terminate her pregnancy and Myung-sook becomes a vengeful agent within the household. Fearing the economic and social repercussions of Dong-sik's involvement with Myung-sook,

the family are coerced into accommodating the affair. Dong-sik's capitulation to the desires of the housemaid, coupled with the family's self-interest and material aspirations, results in the demise of this modern Korean family. Chang-soon (Ahn Sun-ki), the eldest son of the Kim family, tragically dies, followed by Myung-sook and Dong-sik, who end their lives by drinking poison together, leaving Mrs Kim to contemplate her own culpability. The audience is also prompted to consider her involvement, particularly in the light of her unrelenting ambition. There is also a final caveat as the director returns the audience to the opening scene of the film where a similar affair had been mentioned in a newspaper article. This revisitation suggests that the narrative just witnessed may represent a cautionary alternate reality. In this reframed sequence, Mrs Kim adopts a more modest, submissive role, now weary of the influence of a young, unmarried housemaid. As will be discussed in more detail, the hypothetical tragedy serves as a commentary on the ramifications of straying from the traditional Confucian model of the Korean family.

The expression of real-world, transitional anxieties, most notably concerning the mobilisation of women in the industrial workforce, are manifest through this dramatic encounter. This is most visible in the director's presentation of Mrs Kim and Myung-sook, who are both ambitious, working women positioned outside of the state-sponsored image of the modest housewife. More broadly, Kim Ki-young's characterisation of the modern Korean family communicates prominent concerns surrounding the modernisation of Korean society and the resulting emasculation of Korean men, thus threatening the traditional order. These themes should be considered in the context of a Korean society that had endured a traumatic process of assimilation under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). The resulting liberation and partition of the Korean Peninsula led to a period of rapid modernisation and, with the promise of security from the United States, South Korea paved its way to becoming a global economic powerhouse. Crucially, the significant displacement of the Korean population during Japanese occupation, the disruptions resulting from partition and the Korean War, in effect, "helped […] break up traditional, rigid class lines" and set the stage for Korean society to experience "change and mobility" (Seth, 2011, p. 499).

The Housemaid, released during a brief transitory period between the tenure of inaugural President Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) and military coup leader Park Chung-hee (1961–1979), serves as an effective mediator of the socio-cultural repercussions of this era. For context, Clark W. Sorensen (2013, p. 317) asserts that post-liberation the South Korean state continued to create standardised bourgeois family structures to maintain social order through patriarchal authority. In *The Housemaid*, this authority is challenged by the wife's refusal to

assume a traditional, submissive role, opting instead for a more assertive and industrious presence within the family. The ambition of upward mobility, expressed through Mrs Kim's material aspirations and the housemaid's effort to transcend her own status, is presented as the antithesis of traditional Confucian Korean values (Sorensen, 2013, p. 317). Kim Ki-young constructs his characters within this dynamic, post-colonial framework, with the housemaid embodying the collective anxieties of a modernising Korean society. To contextualise Kim Ki-young's commentary and explore the encoding of socio-political dialogues in the film, this article will examine how the characters are written in relation to the post-colonial authoritarian state and the omnipresent influence of Confucian ideology in Korean society. In short, this article demonstrates how a culturalist literary analysis of the characters in *The Housemaid* reveals more about the intimately domestic yet universally resonant concerns that emerged from the complex geo-political climate of the Cold War.

Kim Ki-Young: Framing *The Housemaid*

Kim Ki-young was born in Seoul during the colonial period, later moving to Pyongyang while in elementary school before eventually travelling to Kyoto, Japan to prepare for medical school (Kim, 2021, p. 310). Upon returning to Korea after its liberation and partition (1945), Kim attended the Seoul University School of Dentistry, where he engaged with a modernist theatrical group (Kim, 2021, p. 311). When the Korean War broke out, Kim began his career as a documentary film director for the USIS (United States Information Service). During this time, he developed his skills as a filmmaker while being influenced by Japanese cinema and experiencing the West as filtered through Japanese theatre (Kim, 2021, p. 311). Already, a myriad of influences can be discerned, which will become evident in this article's reading of *The Housemaid*. The film itself forms part of the lasting impact of *shinpa*, a Japanese mode of theatrical melodrama that was introduced to Korea during the Japanese occupation (Pierse and Martin, 2013, p. 5). *Shinpa* has been described as 'an emphatically sad' mode of melodrama, 'focusing on romance and female suffering', which is particularly reflective of Myung-sook's tragic encounter with the Kim family (Pierse and Martin, 2013, p. 218). Although Kim Ki-Young produced this film during a period when South Korea was still recovering from the Japanese occupation, the Korean War and severe poverty, as Kyung Hyun Kim (2013) argues, *The Housemaid* "is far from the product of an underdeveloped cinematic sensibility". Indeed, Kim Ki-Young's work may prove that early Korean cinema, even during times of disarray, transcended its socio-economic conditions, perhaps as an indirect consequence of Japan's

colonial influence and the infrastructure provided by the security arrangements with the United States.

The Housemaid can be further situated within the broader significance of melodrama in 1960s Korea. Korean melodrama, including early Hollywood-derived cinematic melodrama, is recognised as a "national specificity" for its focus on the lives of ordinary lower-middle and working-class citizens (Jin, 2016, p. 76). This represented a departure from Hollywood's grandeur or general concern for upper-middle-class bourgeois housewives and widows (Jin, 2016, p. 76). *The Housemaid* exemplifies this trend, presenting a melodramatic narrative concerning a familial conflict enriched with locally resonant and timely concerns. Myung-sook is a young, unmarried woman and factory and domestic worker whose uncompromising pursuit of motherhood challenges societal norms. Likewise, Mrs Kim's consistent vying for her family's economic advancement is indicative of the ongoing changes and mobility within post-war Korean society. These aspects of *The Housemaid* gain additional importance from Jin's (2016, p. 76) insights into the cultural relevance of Korean melodrama during this period, specifically its consciousness of pertinent social issues. Indeed, Kim Ki-Young's film exemplifies this focus, as it examines the complexities and challenges to societal changes.

Discussing the history of the South Korean horror film, Art Black (2003, p. 188) considers *The Housemaid* as "a modernist film noir with naturalistic opening and closing scenes bookending the expressionistic main story", forming part of Kim Ki-young's legacy of "deeply personal psychodramas". The film's structural choice in its framing is particularly intriguing. In the opening scene, the audience is drawn into the living room of the Kim family, where they are presented with a typical portrait of a modern Korean family. This sets the stage for the story that is about to unfold to function as a cautionary potentiality, contained and presented in an alternate reality that explores the potential consequences of certain actions. Having witnessed the dramatic unravelling of the Kim family due to Myung-sook's actions, the audience is returned to this opening scene, where Dong-sik and Mrs Kim resume their discussion in reference to a newspaper article about a man who had an affair with a housemaid. The shocking drama of *The Housemaid* is, therefore, suggested to be a hypothetical imagining of the story in the newspaper. To reaffirm, two textual "realities" are created: one where the Kim family remains prudent and adherent to Confucian norms (the bookending scenes) and one where they do not and thus fall victim to the housemaid (the internal plot). Kyung Hyun Kim (2013) argues that this way of framing of *The Housemaid* distorts the viewer's perception of fiction and reality, potentially influenced by neorealism and further complemented by Kim Ki-young's experience of producing documentary films (Kim, 2013). In the framing sequences,

the Kim family is presented in a less theatrical, more authentic manner, which also contributes to this distorting effect. Moreover, Dong-sik directly addresses the audience in the final framing scene, rendering the film even more surreal. Now aware of the threat of the housemaid, Dong-sik, speaking to camera, forewarns men of women "who could lead to their downfall". This abrupt shift from the formal theatricality of the film, up to that point, dispels the intoxicating double-reality created by the director. By breaking the fourth wall with a somewhat jovial public announcement, Dong-sik's remarks reaffirm the fictionality of the film, situating it as a nightmarish, cautionary reality. However, Kim Ki-young's directorial approach in using the camera to invite the audience into the Kim household as passive voyeurs who are thrust into the drama as it happens, simultaneously undermines their awareness of the film's fictionality. Although operating within the melodramatic mode, the plot has also been described as "not overwhelmingly implausible", which further adds to its potency (Kim, 2013).

Additionally, comparisons have been drawn between Kim Ki-young's cinematic panache on display in *The Housemaid* and German dramas of the 1920s and 1930s. This observation considers elements such as the use of close-ups, contrasting shadows and modernist musical scores (Kim, 2013). Moreover, considering Kim Ki-young's portrait of a Korean family and the overtly emotive nature of the plot, Kyung Hyun Kim (2013) explains that it almost feels as if it were produced "in a society as liberal as Weimar Germany" (Kim, 2013). This can be verified by examining Kim Ki-young's early life and experience. In his early twenties, Kim Ki-young spent three years in Kyoto, a period considered crucial for the formation of his aesthetic taste. This time was significant for Kim Ki-young, marked by his exposure to Japanese theatre and "avant-garde film watching experience" of German expressionism, which were the only foreign films available in wartime Japan between 1937 and 1941 (Kim, 2021, p. 311). Among the genre, Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) stands out as a prime example. The events of this film are contained within a hallucinatory flashback and given these similarities drawing a comparison between *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Housemaid* is justifiable. Kim Ki-young's exposure to German expressionist cinema in Japan likely influenced his directorial approach, particularly concerning the dream-like framing of his film. In Wiene's film, the narrative unfolds as a flashback, told from the perspective of an asylum inmate named Francis, casting doubt on the authenticity and reliability of the recounted events within Wiene's fictional universe. Here, there is an attempt to distance the horrific events of the film, not only from the audience but from the protagonist himself. Similarly, in *The Housemaid*, a fiction-within-a-fiction emerges, which functions to doubly insulate the internal story and perhaps temper its unnerving impact.

For instance, the introductory scene of *The Housemaid* is only revealed as a framing device when the narrative circles back to this moment following Dong-sik's apparent death, after consuming poison. This technique is reminiscent of its German expressionist counterpart, notably Wiene's emphasis on the use of narrative framing and perspective to manipulate viewer perception and emotional response.

The German expressionist inflections of Kim's work become more compelling when considering the framing of his later film *Insect Woman* (1972). Therein, the internal plot is suggested as being a similarly hypothetical scenario or a dramatisation of a story told by a patient at an asylum for unfaithful men who have become impotent. The film comments on the emasculation of men and the suspected threat of industrious, sexually liberated women. In the final scene of *Insect Woman*, Kim again transports the audience back to the film's opening scene, using the opportunity to deliver a cautionary message about leading "a good married life". Kim Ki-young presents the audience with unsettling yet tentatively plausible scenarios in both *The Housemaid* and *Insect Woman*. He frames these narratives to reinvoke their fictional nature while also imparting a dream-like or uncanny quality. Not unlike many German expressionist film directors, the framing of the narrative in this way is particularly potent, delivering striking, socially resonant commentary while maintaining sufficient aesthetic distance. This cinematic approach has proven to be conducive to exploring post-conflict anxiety, as seen in Weimar Germany of the 1920s and in 1960s South Korea, re-surfacing through the films of Kim Ki-young.

Cultural Context

As outlined, during the latter half of the twentieth century South Korean society grappled with the aftermath of occupation as well as new forms of domestic authoritarianism, which embraced modernisation and globalisation, while entangled in the broader geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. However, it is the more intimately domestic tension between reconstructing and maintaining a national identity informed by pre-colonial Confucian values, while simultaneously opening up South Korean society to influence from the West, that is evident in *The Housemaid*. This struggle is mediated through the Kim family's encounter with the housemaid. Dong-sik and Mrs Kim are presented in a way that relates to many of the anxieties of this period. The burden of having to work extra hours to sustain their social ascendancy effectively primes the married couple to be exploited by Myung-sook. Mrs Kim, who works as a seamstress, reneges on the traditional duties of her role as housewife and undermines Dong-sik's authority as the family's primary earner. This shift in household dynamics leads to an

unexpected development: the patriarch is approached by a factory worker, Miss Cho (Um Aing-ran), with Dong-sik agreeing to give her private piano lessons to earn more money. Following the sudden death (suicide) of Miss Kwak (Ko Seon-ae), a factory worker who was fired for sending a love letter to Dong-sik, a guilt-ridden Miss Cho confesses to Dong-sik that she pressured Miss Kwak into writing the letter. Now revealed as his true admirer, Miss Cho is vehemently rejected by Dong-sik, resulting in a violent encounter in the household. Myung-sook, having quietly observed this development, seizes the opportunity to blackmail Dong-sik and threatens to tell Mrs Kim everything, granting her an initial influence over the family.

Myung-sook's motivations are generally well established, as in her role as the family's maid she is treated unfairly. For example, she is scolded for smoking yet Dong-sik enjoys this freedom without judgement. Similarly, her request to receive piano lessons, just as Miss Cho does, is denied. Prior to her manipulation of Dong-sik, Myung-sook is weary of the hardships that accompany her social status as a housemaid and she yearns to be given the same level of attention and freedom Miss Cho is afforded (as Dong-sik's mistress). Myung-sook must outcompete the other women around her by any means necessary to attain upward mobility. It could be argued that this turn of events would not have happened if Mrs Kim had assumed a more subordinate position in the family. Additionally, Dong-sik lacks the sort of patriarchal authority that one might expect of a married man during this period, which is central to the messaging of the film and a key component of the present enquiry.

The Housemaid's portrayal of the modern Korean family raises questions about patriarchal norms, the role of the mother and the threat of an unmarried woman who endeavours to subvert the matriarch. The narrative is based around the idea that Mrs Kim's determination to transcend their current economic and social status is damaging to the traditional Korean family. Dong-sik's vulnerability to the advances of young, unmarried women, is enabled by the corruption of the traditional family that is indirectly instigated by Mrs Kim's motives. As stated above, this analysis is concerned with Kim Ki-young's exploration in *The Housemaid* of the undermining of Confucian norms and the modernisation of Korean society. One approach to this enquiry is through a period-specific reading of the characters in the film. This method seeks to unveil deeper insights into the broader socio-cultural implications of Myung-sook's ruination of the Kim family.

The Patriarch, Dong-sik

Dong-sik is predominantly presented as a rather despondent, somewhat uncharismatic man who works as an extracurricular music teacher in a women's textile factory. This portrayal

contrasts sharply with the witty, confident version of Dong-sik witnessed in the film's opening and closing scenes. For the majority of the film, Dong-sik is depicted as a man who has lost his potency, presumably due to the corruption of the patriarchal family structure resulting from his wife's deviancy. To contextualise his occupation further, it is important to consider the sociopolitical landscape of 1960s South Korea. During this period the Democratic Republican Party, the country's ruling party, viewed the middle class as being exclusively composed of businessmen. The opposition party, the People's Party, defined the middle class more broadly to encompass "middle-level peasants, salaried men and shopkeepers" (Yang, 2018, p. 39). These views are important in understanding how Dong-sik's job might have been perceived by the more conservative sectors of society as inadequate for supporting an aspiring middle-class family.

Although Dong-sik is married, he is positioned as an object of desire for the women in the factory. At home, he is a dutiful father and husband. Kim Ki-young emphasises Dong-sik's commitment to his family by highlighting his resistance to extramarital advances. Dong-sik also expresses concern for wife's wellbeing amidst her attempt to the assume the role of both housewife and breadwinner, further supporting the idea that he is a man of good character. Yet, it is interesting that even a dutiful, thoughtful husband like Dong-sik ultimately succumbs to the charms of the housemaid. The patriarch falls prey to the housemaid's manipulation of the modern Korean family, revealing a plot that is encoded with cultural anxieties about women's rejection of traditional Confucian norms.

Exploring the role of Confucianism in Korean society and determining whether Kim Ki-young addresses such themes are necessary to further situate these events. Prior to the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula in 1910, the Chosŏn dynasty, which endured from 1392–1897, saw a revival of Confucian values. Consequently, as Park and Cho (1995, p. 199) have articulated "the ideal of male superiority within the patrilineal family became more prominent". According to traditional gender roles, decision making and economic provision were considered the realm of the husband, while women were expected to focus on raising children and domestic duties (Park and Cho, 1995, p. 132). However, in *The Housemaid*, these roles are not clearly defined. Dong-sik lacks the sort of patriarchal authority that might be typically expected, while Mrs Kim also deviates from social expectations. Under the Chosŏn dynasty a strict hierarchal relationship between spouses was maintained, where a woman was expected to "sacrifice herself completely […] to serve her husband and family in an exemplary manner" (Park and Cho, 1995, p. 124). This is at odds with Mrs Kim's aspirations for social and economic advancement, highlighting a contradiction between her ambitions and the

traditional ideology. The erosion of patriarchal control in the Kim household leads to the employment of the housemaid, Myung-sook, triggering the ensuing horrific events. The message is clear: deviation from Confucian norms—perhaps toward Western liberalism—results in the breakdown of the traditional Korean family. In other words, the traditional, philosophical ties that held Korean society together for centuries were under threat from the allure of modernity. This ideological conflict is deftly encapsulated by Kim Ki-young in *The Housemaid*.

A Culturalistic Reading of Mrs Kim and Myung-sook

As the colonial period neared its conclusion, the industrial workforce saw significant participation from women. This demographic was predominantly assigned to menial and repetitive roles (Seth, 2011, p. 285). These women were primarily young, unmarried and worked to support their families while also saving for future marriages (Seth, 2011, p. 285). In the decades following the Korean War, millions of people migrated from rural areas into the cities, where the combined forces of industrialisation and education fostered the growth of a substantial, literate industrial working class (Seth, 2011, p. 428). These phenomena are distinctly reflected in Kim Ki-young's presentation of the textile factory, where Dong-sik works, and the female characters within it, all of whom are unmarried. The literacy of the women is demonstrated when Miss Cho, Dong-sik's student and initial admirer, presents him with a letter. Moreover, the presence of these single women introduces a dynamic of potential temptation to married men like Dong-sik. Kim Ki-young explores the threat that these young unmarried women pose to the established social and familial order through the character of Myung-sook.

The contrasting appearances of Myung-sook and Mrs Kim further reflect cultural beliefs and social stratifications. Even among her colleagues in the factory, Myung-sook, who is first presented as smoking a cigarette in the wardrobe of her dormitory, stands out for her more casual, if not generally unkempt, appearance. In contrast, Mrs Kim represents a more sophisticated cohort of women in Korean society. This is supported by her formal demeanour and traditional attire. However, her refined appearance does not shield her, and women like her, from criticism. Yang observes that the state and the intellectual elite were critical of upper-class women for their perceived "self-indulgence and extravagance" (Yang, 2018, p. 43). More precisely, this criticism extended to the consumption of foreign cosmetics, which was seen as "an especially immoral and unpatriotic act" that left the Korean economy vulnerable to "infiltration" from Japan or the West (Yang, 2018, pp. 43–44). The impact and influence of the

West is also commented on by Kim-Ki young. The arrival of a television set to the Kim's home serves as a signifier of the West and of foreign influence in Korean society, a point that is emphasised by the images shown of American showgirls. Myung-sook, too, is shown to be influenced by Western culture. In contrast to the formal appearance of Mrs Kim, Myung-sook adopts a more Western-inspired style. This underscores her working-class status, but her appearance also mirrors the state's paranoia about ideological intrusions from the West. This dynamic underlines the complex intersections of gender, class and nationalism in Korean society.

The conservative Korean state during the 1960s believed that "prudence in everyday life" would lead to rapid economic development and strongly disapproved of any form of material excess, which was believed to signal "moral decay" (Yang, 2018, p. 42). Instead of indulgent upper-class women or "unenlightened" rural women, the state focused on "wise and frugal" middle-class housewives, who were deemed capable of "rational household management", being therefore "the key to national economic development" (Yang, 2018, p. 44). One of the ways the state encouraged frugality was through popular women's magazines, which featured articles about "smart and economical" middle-class housewives (Yang, 2018, p. 44). In short, the state targeted middle-class housewives as "agents who would introduce a disciplined lifestyle into their households and society as a whole" (Yang, 2018, p. 44).

This context is important in reading Mrs Kim and Myung-sook, both of whom deviate from the state-endorsed model of womanhood. For example, the arrival of the brand-new television as a significant moment for Mrs Kim and her family is indicative of the sort of extravagance that the government actively discouraged through public messaging (Yang, 2018, p. 43). Furthermore, Myung-sook's character encapsulates societal anxieties surrounding poor but uneducated domestic workers, as well as factory workers, often stereotyped as ignorant or sexually deviant. She demonstrates a certain ignorance to domestic sensibilities, as illustrated by her unceremonious maiming of a rat, alongside her inappropriate sexual behaviour toward Dong-sik, both of which reinforce these concerns. As Yang (2018, p. 45) states, housemaids "were often portrayed in films as dangerous and wicked home wreckers who seduced their landlords". Yang (2018, p. 154) further observes that *The Housemaid* exemplifies this narrative, providing insights into the societal archetypes from which Kim Ki-young constructed the characters of the ambitious housewife and the guileful housemaid.

Deviant Women in Fiction

The depiction of Mrs Kim and Myung-sook in *The Housemaid* shares parallels with the representation of deviant women and conflict among women in fiction more generally. Influenced by Western concepts introduced through Japanese theatre, Kim-Ki-young presents Mrs Kim and Myung-sook in relation to the patriarchal family in a way that has a certain universality. In relation to fictional representations of "wicked women", Carretero-González *et al.* (2009, p. 199) note that "female independence has traditionally been perceived as a menace for the order established by patriarchal society". As outlined, *The Housemaid* portrays the dismantling of the patriarchal family through forms of female independence. The disruption begins with Mrs Kim's nonconformity to traditional gender roles. This is particularly evident in her employment of the housemaid, which frees her from the typical responsibilities of a housewife. Mrs Kim's choice enables her to engage in paid work and to contribute financially to the household. Conversely, Myung-sook, driven by her fetishisation of the patriarch and her longing for maternity, attempts to take Mrs Kim's place in the family. Both women deviate from the state-sponsored archetype of the modest housewife, prompting a consideration of the argument that "popular representations of the collective imagination" often present "female independence" in the form of "wicked, evil women who sometimes are the worst enemies to their own gender" (Carretero-González *et al.*, 2009, p. 199).

While the audience's initial condemnation lies with Myung-sook, Mrs Kim's culpability comes into question when it is revealed that the housemaid is pregnant with Dong-sik's child. Dong-sik's complaint that: "this never would have happened if we had stayed in our old house", reinforces the idea that Mrs Kim's desires have ultimately damaged their marriage. At this juncture, Myung-sook appears vulnerable for the first time, which Mrs Kim exploits. In a desperate act of self-preservation, Mrs Kim feigns pity to manipulate Myung-sook. She reassures her that "you're like a little sister to me". This chilling exchange leads to the miscarriage of Myung-sook's child, as she throws herself down the stairs at Mrs Kim's instigation. Mrs Kim reminds her husband that: "we can't let our precious lives be destroyed now", highlighting the extreme measures she is willing to take to elevate their status. The transformation of Myung-sook from perpetrator to victim is symbolised through the changing of her clothing from black to white. This portrayal of Mrs Kim and Myung-sook aligns to dynamics commonly found in fairy tales, as observed by Carretero-González *et al.* (2009, p. 202). They describe these narratives as illustrating enduring conflicts among women, often depicted as "female enmity […] directed from a mature wicked woman towards a young, virtuous girl" (Carretero-González *et al.*, 2009, p. 202).

As the film progresses, Mrs Kim becomes the quintessential older, malevolent woman. Although Myung-sook's pursuit of motherhood is executed in a reprehensible manner, her motivations are arguably less egregious, given that Mrs Kim is driven by self-interest. With that being said, the housemaid's earlier actions complicate this narrative convention, creating a layer of moral ambiguity. In *The Housemaid* both central female characters exhibit traits typically seen as "wicked". This is perhaps reflective of a system whereby, as Carretero-González *et al.* (2009, p. 202) suggest, "wickedness may be the only way left for them [women] to survive whilst maintaining their autonomy". Carretero-González *et al.* (2009, p. 204) also argue that "instances of female enmity contribute to maintain the same order that oppresses women" and thus, "it is important for a patriarchal society to keep women as enemies". Where conflict among deviant women arises in fiction, there is an apparent universality in its function to critique or reflect the pressurised social conditions within patriarchal systems. Notably, the daughter of the Kim family, Kim Ae-soon (Lee Yoo-ri), suffers a physical condition that makes it difficult for her to ascend the staircase of their new house, symbolising the broader struggle for women's upward mobility.

A Psychoanalytical Reading of Deviant Women: The *Wonhon* and the Vengeful Mother

The loss of Myung-sook's child is shortly followed by the birth of Mrs Kim's baby. This juxtaposition situates the housemaid as a vengeful agent, torturously unresolved in her ambition to become the mother of Dong-sik's child. Although *The Housemaid* never truly incorporates supernatural elements, this iteration of Myung-sook's character is particularly poignant when understood in the context of Korean folk beliefs concerning the vengeful female spirit or *wonhon*. Originating from Korean shamanistic culture, the *wonhon* has been described as the spirit of those who died an unjust death (Nam, 2019, p. 196). Situating the *wonhon* in the context of 1960s Korean cinema, Hyangjin Lee states that:

> their ultimate enemy is the man, who tends to be portrayed as a helpless child caught up in the turmoil of women's war. (Lee, 2013, p. 33)

Dong-sik undoubtedly conforms to this pattern, as he spends much of the film grappling with the aftermath of his affair with Myung-sook. Both characters fall victim to the ensuing conflict, while Mrs Kim desperately attempts to maintain the social integrity of the family. Lee (2013, p. 33) further suggests that "the return of the *wonhon* points to a potential loss of patriarchal power and the symbolic castration of masculinity". Although Myung-sook does not return as a literal ghost, her symbolic resurgence as a grieving mother situates her as the cultural archetype

of the *wonhon*—a vengeful figure seeking retribution for injustices perpetrated against them. Oh (2013, p. 61) notes that Korean horror films often "feature motherhood as the primary motivation of the *wonhon*", which further supports this reading of Myung-sook. The first victim of her vengeance is Chang-soon. Myung-sook pretends to poison a glass of tap water, causing Chang-soon to panic and fall down the stairs to his death, a striking signifier of the loss of patriarchal control within the family. Dong-sik learns of what has happened and confronts Myung-sook: "you are the devil […] I'm taking you to the police". Seemingly glossing over the sudden and tragic death of her son, Mrs Kim reminds Dong-sik that "if the factory learns about this, you'll lose your job". Ultimately, the audience is reminded that Mrs Kim's concern for upward mobility and status is a fatal vulnerability that leads to the destruction of her family.

Kim Ki-young's presentation of Myung-sook, manifest as the *wonhon* and vengeful mother, can be further examined through Barbara Creed's formulation of the monstrous-feminine, in tandem with Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection. Creed (1986, p. 44) contends that "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine" which focuses on the aspects of womanhood that are considered shocking, terrifying, horrific or abject. Kristeva (1982, p. 2) outlines that the abject "has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I", as such it is conceptualised as "a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me". The abject, a concept which Creed applies to presentations of "monstrous" or deviant women, attempts to describe that which threatens one's perception of self and identity. Creed (1986, p. 44) links the monstrous-feminine closely with Freudian themes of sexual differences and castration. Such an approach might suggest that Kim Ki-young's construction of Mrs Kim represents the symbolic castration and emasculation of Dong-sik. Through her perverse manipulation of the patriarch and the killing of his son, Myung-sook is effectively positioned as the monstrous-feminine; or that which is abject or undermining of patriarchal authority. She is manifest, or quite literally invited into the household, because of Mrs Kim's deviation from Confucian norms, thus in *The Housemaid* the monstrous-feminine is symptomatic of the loss of patriarchal control.

Creed (1986, p. 45) further notes that Kristeva (1982) "suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine […] in relation to the maternal figure" while similarly "attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies". While Myung-sook is the most overtly "monstrous" character in the film, given her frantic demeanour, Mrs Kim is similarly abject in relation to her reluctance to assume a more traditional role in the household. Considering the maternal figure in Korean film, Oh (2013, p. 61) argues that "like Creed's archaic mother, she does not respect the Law of the Father" and

thus, in a Korean context, "will not follow Confucian models of patriarchal gender inequality". In *The Housemaid*, both maternal figures are indirectly antagonistic to Confucian gender roles through their desire for upward mobility. Oh (2013, p. 61) recognises that there is also a duality to the maternal figure, particularly in Korean horror films of the 1970s and 1980s. It is suggested that mothers are both victims and agents of Confucian patriarchy. Arguably, evidence of this is present much earlier in *The Housemaid*, released in 1960. For example, Mrs Kim subverts patriarchal norms by means of her industriousness, yet at the same time fiercely protects her family's reputation and her husband, despite his infidelity. Similarly, Myung-sook's ultimate aim is to become the mother of Dong-sik's child, effectively reconstituting the patriarchal family. Perhaps what is being described here is a contradictory or irreconcilable yearning for more autonomy within a pressurised patriarchal society. With this in mind, the enmity between Mrs Kim and Myung-sook can be attributed to their shared experience as victims of the patriarchy (Lee, 2013, p. 33). Mrs Kim's animosity toward Myung-sook stems from her determination to preserve the very patriarchal family structure that subjugates them (Carretero-González *et al.*, 2009, p. 204). Myung-sook's desire to be a mother and her subsequent denial of this role lead her to seek revenge. Myung-sook's actions, which resulted in her own demise and that of Dong-sik and his son, may symbolise the fear that Koreans had about the collapse of the patriarchal order and the traditional Korean family. However, Mrs Kim's aspirations are confirmed as the cause of the family's turmoil as she confesses in a statement that aligns with Dong-sik's earlier sentiments: "if only I hadn't wanted the new house". This admission aligns with the state-sponsored propaganda, which encouraged frugality and modesty.

The idea that the abject functions in opposition to meaning and the self may reveal more about the presentation of the deviant mother in Korean horror cinema. In patriarchal systems, deviant women have the potential to break that system, thus undermining identities constructed in relation to that social ideology. Mrs Kim and Myung-sook are abject in the context of a modernising Korean society informed by the Confucian model of patriarchy. Kristeva (1982, p. 9) proposes that "we may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity". This conceptualisation can be considered in relation to the psycho-cultural subtleties of horror and the ambiguity of roles inferred by these characters relates to that which does not adhere to fundamental perceptions of order and reality as prescribed by Confucian ideology. Therefore, the horror presented in *The Housemaid* is not simply the disturbing and violent acts that are conducted by Mrs Kim and Myung-sook respectively. As Kristeva's concept suggests, what is truly terrifying about the Kim family's encounter with Myung-sook is the crossing of cultural

boundaries and, ultimately, the loss of patriarchal control in a more egalitarian, modern Korean society.

Conclusion

Kim Ki-young in *The Housemaid* encapsulated many post-war anxieties that were germane to the rapidly modernising South Korean society. The Kim family is presented in opposition to the traditional Confucian family, where women are expected to assume a submissive role in relation to their husband, who in turn is expected to exhibit patriarchal authority. Through a close reading of the socio-political climate during the 1950s and 1960s, Mrs Kim's yearning for material gain and her deviancy from the state-sponsored role of frugal housewife is suggested as leading to a fatal corruption of the traditional Korean, Confucian family. Myung-sook demonstrates the absolute defilement of Dong-sik's authority. Dong-sik's surrender to the desires of Myung-sook is symptomatic of Mrs Kim's material aspirations, which is central to Kim Ki-young's commentary. Due to their adherence to conservative social values, the Kim family need to accommodate the sexual affair to save face, which compounds their misery. Through consideration of Kristeva's theory of the abject, the translocation of culpability from the housemaid to Mrs Kim reveals her to be the primary antagonist, suggesting a textual repudiation of her deviancy from Confucian ideology. Kim Ki-young's commentary reveals a certain dissonance at the heart of South Korean society concerning competing social ideologies, specifically the threat of Western liberalism, in the form of materialism and social mobility, in contrast to Confucian values, such as frugality and patriarchal authority. Importantly, Mrs Kim's efforts to reconcile both sentiments, seeking to maintain her own extravagances and the traditional family, results in tragedy, which includes the deaths of her son, her husband, and Myung-sook and her unborn child. While serving as a cautionary tale against deviating from Confucian norms propagated by the state, the film also illustrates how conservative values can be disserving, through the accommodation of Myung-sook's behaviour, for example.

As mentioned, the central message of the film is clearly and somewhat satirically communicated in the final scene, after the internal story has concluded. The audience is returned to the opening scene: an alternate timeline where these events have not occurred or have been prevented. Referencing the newspaper article that details a similar story, Mrs Kim questions "how a man of good character" could become involved with a housemaid, to which Dong-sik responds "it's a man's greatest weakness". Myung-sook enters, offering to make Dong-sik's bed, but Mrs Kim insists on doing it herself, noting that "having a young girl in the house is like offering raw meat to a tiger". Dong-sik, whose inherent vulnerabilities are

mitigated by his wife's adherence to Confucian norms, addresses the camera and the audience, forewarning that, "as men get older, they spend more time thinking about young women". This somewhat jarring conclusion repositions Mrs Kim in her state approved role as modest housewife, now reluctant to allow Myung-sook to assume her position in the family, which effectively reaffirms patriarchal control. What is most fascinating about *The Housemaid* is that while on the surface it appears to resonate with Confucian state ideology, there is a veiled suspicion that social conservatism is problematic in terms of the physical and psychological cost of maintaining one's social integrity.

This article has demonstrated that *The Housemaid* is a useful conduit for examining cultural dissonance and transient, post-conflict anxiety, specifically, in this instance, where deviant women are presented in opposition to the patriarchal family. In summary, Kim Ki-young's film is not only an example of master-crafted, genre-infused cinema from this period, but it also reveals more about Korean history through these recurring cultural archetypes and the mediation of competing social ideologies in response to the tumultuous events of the twentieth century.

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