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An old mind in a young body: womanhood between oppression and expression in *Miss Granny*

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ABSTRACT

In a neoliberal society that sanctifies youth, the devaluation that accompanies old age among women joins hands with gendered power relations to produce intersectional oppression. Accordingly, the available possibilities for challenging this intersection in fantasy films carry a particular interest from a feminist perspective. This qualitative study examines the intersection of gender and age through the analysis of Dong-hyuk's comic fantasy *Miss Granny*, which depicts the dramatic changes in the life of its heroine, who magically transforms from a woman in her seventies into a young woman in her twenties. The focal point of the study lies in the question of how aspects of oppression and expression are articulated at the distinct time periods and chronological age in which the film's heroine is depicted. The findings suggest that the film undermines the existing social structures by placing an old woman at its center, allowing the audience to get to know and like her. The miraculous alternation between old and young demonstrates that women in the neoliberal present may have more opportunities to express themselves; however, their struggle for agency continues, as the values of hyper-individualism clash with relational values, preventing them from actualizing themselves as complete human beings.

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Introduction

For over 30 years, statistics monitoring the unfair treatment of women in global film industries, has presented a consistent pattern (Deb Verhoeven et al. 2020). The persisting worldwide phenomenon of male dominance in the film industry raises questions relating to the ability to portray leading female characters who demonstrate freedom and choice. These questions are enhanced in view of the fact that cultural and social treatment of appearance and the significance of age carry higher expectations for women in comparison with men (John Berger, 1972; Laura Hurd Clarke and Meridith Griffin 2008).

The intersection of gender and age expresses a state where, in addition to aspects of oppression stemming from gender, signifiers of old age work to deepen the marginalization of women in society. The cinematic world often reflects this intersectionality through representations of women that are intended mostly for the pleasure of the male gaze, through a clear characterization of women by their sexuality (Laura Mulvey, 1975;

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Lisa Cuklanz 2016; Maggie Humm 1997). And while older female actors in films often become transparent, older male actors are offered active roles in which their age does not necessarily play a notable role (Raquel Medina and Zecchi, Barbara. 2020).

The exclusion of older women from the screen and the cinematic tendency to objectify women raise the questions of whether and how cinematic expression could present agency among women and deliver agentic portrayals of older women in a patriarchal society that worships youth (Berger 1972; Liat Ayalon and Lir Shlomit 2022 Aharoni Lir and Ayalon, 2021). In this context, it is especially intriguing to examine cinematic representations that portray the main character as both a young and an old woman, and to explore aspects of agency and voice in two distinct periods of her life, which also represent two different historical periods.

The prize-winning dramatic comic fantasy, *Miss Granny* by director Hwang Dong-hyuk 2014[1] which presents the story of Oh Mal-soon, an older woman in her seventies who miraculously transforms into a young woman in her twenties, serves as a valuable testcase to examine the issue of the heroine's agency and voice at different life periods. This qualitative study analyzes the intersection of gender and age in the movie, in order to find out how aspects of oppression and expression are conveyed at the various time periods and ages portrayed by the film's heroine.

Gender and age offscreen and onscreen

Ageism is defined as age-based stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, expressed in the way we think, feel, and act towards people because of their age. Ageism can be directed towards others, but also towards ourselves (self-ageism). The widespread prevalence of ageism in society can be seen with about one-third of the European population reporting exposure to ageism (Liat Ayalon 2014) and worldwide, with every second person reporting ageism of a medium to high level (Alana Officer et al. 2020). Ageism is also expressed by the fact that most relationships are generally limited to those within the same age group (Jeffrey A. Smith, Miller, and Lynn 2014) and older people are perceived by younger people as warm, but incapable and irrelevant (J. Cuddy Amy and Fiske Susan 2002).[2]

Ageism is both reflected and spread through the media and culture. In fact, the media is a major factor in the enhancement of ageism, as the high value placed on youth by popular culture increases ageist responses, including feelings of repulsion and superiority toward older people (Dalia Liran-Alper and Amit 2007). This phenomenon is not gender-neutral, as popular media follows the established artworld that has throughout history objectified women, presenting negative aspects of older femininity in prominent hegemonic narratives (Berger 1972). Years of socialization have subjected women to strict visibility norms and to the oppressive practices of the judgmental gaze (Ann Kaplan 1997; Cuklanz 2016; Mulvey 1975). Hence, physical changes in appearance that occur over time, and are often regarded by society as a loss, are often emphasized with regard to women, whose status is frequently associated with their appearance (Clarke and Griffin 2008; Toni Calasanti, 2005).

These gendered differences are accentuated in the film industry, where it is widely acknowledged that aging among women is viewed significantly differently from aging among men, and the treatment of women as older occurs earlier than it does for men. For

instance, women over 45 years of age are underrepresented onscreen in comparison to older men, both in popular films and in films rated appropriate for the whole family (Caroline Heldman et al. 2020). In fact, older women are often depicted as transparent, asexual, or sexually perverted, while older men still play active roles in which their age does not seem significant and, thus, they are "allowed" to date women much younger than they are (Medina and Zecchi 2020).

The dominance of gender asymmetry in Hollywood films manifests itself in the manner in which representations of young women are primarily intended to respond to and please the male gaze directed at them (Cuklanz 2016; Mulvey 1975). In this way, male dominance in a patriarchal society transforms sexist representations of women, established by men, into something perceived as natural and the way things are meant to be (Caryn M. Voskuil 1998).

The topic of resistance to change and the question of the intersection between age and gender are particularly intriguing in the context of South Korean cinema. The cultural and social changes in the wake of the modernization and industrialization era transformed a traditional culture, based on respect and esteem for older people into one in which older people are now marginalized and viewed as a social problem; this has occurred due to the increasing growth in the size of the population of older people and changes in the common family structure from an extended family to a nuclear family (Hyun-Sim Lee, and Han Eun-Hwa 2015). These changes in the family system can possibly account for the fact that ageism is considered a common occurrence not only in Western societies, but also in Eastern cultures, such as the South Korean culture (Michael S. North and Fiske Susan 2015). Studies that addressed ageism in South Korea show that ageism begins early and influences the chances of older people to find employment and remain in the job market (Dong Seon Kim and Seon Hee 2014). A recent study found that in South Korea, ageism towards older people is especially common and their economic status is fragile (Kim et al. 2021).

In addition to older age, which represents one form of social inequality, gender is a socially constructed category, which often results in substantial inequalities in treatment and opportunities. Women in South Korean society are highly prone to experiencing gender discrimination and lower socioeconomic status compared with men (Heeran Chun et al. 2006). The industrial processes established the hegemonic understanding of women's and men's proper roles as part of modernity. This gendered worldview was formulated with the notion of the man as the protector and provider of the family, and the woman as the reproducer of children in charge of everyday life (Seungsook Moon 2005). In addition, widely spread neo-Confucian patriarchal conceptions view the married woman as being placed under the authority of her husband and his family, particularly his mother. She is expected to be modest and submissive; her reward being the future gain of authority in the lives of her adult children as a mother-in-law (Kelly Kelly H Chong, 2008).

The intersection of ageism and sexism and the winds of change brought by Western American culture are evident not only in everyday life but also in varied cultural representations such as the South Korean media and music scenes. South Korean popular culture has been greatly influenced by Hollywood stars, due to Hollywood's status as a cultural powerhouse and the United States' ranking as South Korea's primary ally both during and after the Korean War. Over the years, American

films were intentionally distributed by the United States and the Korean military government with the purpose of instilling ideals of freedom, democracy, and capitalism. By the end of the war, Hollywood films were often considered a source of comfort for local audiences, making it possible for both men and women to shed traditional perceptions of identity and to adopt characters linked to the American superpower, on the path to becoming a modern society (Kim, Yaeri 2020). The Americanization of popular culture and the emergence of consumerist youth culture are not only reflected in films, but are also considered contributing factors to South Korea's unique K-pop music culture, which delivers the message of female empowerment, within the boundaries of the entertainment industry, neoliberalism and the existing gender hierarchies (Kim 2018).

The present study

This qualitative study focuses on the dramatic comedy fantasy film *Miss Granny*, directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, which hit the screens in January 2014 and garnered great success as well as re-worked adaptations, in several countries. The analysis was conducted in order to better understand how aspects of oppression and expression are articulated in relation to age and gender.

This was done based on identifying issues relative to subjugation and agency, in the distinctively different phases of the protagonist's life course and chronological age. The first reviews of the film were carried out with the objective of extrapolating the understanding of the intersection of age and gender. Subsequent reviews were dedicated to identifying and analyzing the central aspects related to time and age depicted on screen. The results of this effort are presented in four sections: "The present: This is a Man's world," "Present continuous: Life as an old lady," "Past imperfect: Recollections as a young woman," and "Dream time: A young woman once again."

The present: This is a man's world

The film opens with two exposition segments that set the tone for what is considered the accepted social norm. The first scene is very brief, lasting only one minute and forty seconds. The role of the scene is not to present the actors or the plot, but rather to illustrate, through a cinematic metaphor, the intersection of ageism and sexism. Against a background of rhythmic music which accompanies a dribbling basketball against the wooden floor of a sports hall, where a group of men fights to sink a basket, the voiceover of a young woman nonchalantly notes that if we compare a woman to a ball, then just-blooming young women are like a basketball; even if it bounces high in the air, men will stubbornly try to overtake it. The comparison between a woman and a ball continues to develop throughout the axis of ageism; in which, against a backdrop of shots of dozens of men struggling against one another, trying to catch the ball, the narrator compares a woman in her twenties to a rugby ball, which men will fight one another viciously to catch. The camera jumps from a rugby pitch covered with players to an indoor gym. Now, a woman in her thirties is compared to a ping-pong ball, being battled over by two players who pass the ball back and forth. Continuing to middle age, the woman is now presented

as a golf ball, sent as far as possible by a man swinging the club. Finally, in old age, women are compared to a withered ball, which no man wants to handle.

In the second exposition scene, the statement on sexism is more subdued, and the ageist perspective hits hard. This scene is not based on a cinematic metaphor, but rather on a university class, learning the topic of gerontology. In response to the professor's question: "What is ageism?," the students present a variety of negative stereotypes regarding characteristics of old age, including mentions of wrinkles, age spots, body odor, slowness, needing a heater in winter, and the absence of shame. These signifiers, which in some cases, like wrinkles, are mainly directed towards women, correspond with a common social conception of old age as a disease, indicating an unacceptable lack of control over one's decline (Calasanti 2005). Accordingly, in response to the lecturer's second question, whether they understand that one day they too will age, one student answers that she would kill herself when she reaches thirty, a comment which sums up the ageist attitude and the approach to old age as something unacceptable, rendering the phenomenon irrelevant to younger people.

Although the initial exposition is accompanied by sports scenes that provide an air of comic false ease and the second includes the familiar scene of a university class, the two are mutually blunt in the unapologetic extravagant statements that neutralize both sexism and ageism. The comic motif works to validate existing social structures by presenting them as common knowledge, thus reinforcing the norm of viewing women as commodities whose worth is determined by men based on their attractiveness and youth. Like sexism, ageism is presented as a cultural phenomenon, that is undisputed. And while the lecturer does introduce the term "ageism," he does not reprimand the students' offensive comments about older people, and they are left hanging in the air, as if they reflect an acceptable, common truth.

Unlike common Hollywood cinematic conventions, in which the sexist (and ageist) gaze are subsumed within the cinematic discourse and require research analysis to extract and investigate (Mulvey 1975), these scenes seem to point to a postfeminist point of view, delivering the message that great things lie ahead for young women who adapt to the modernized world around them and are willing to work hard (Angela McRobbie 2004), as they appear to celebrate a neoliberal world, individualization, and youth. These stereotypical views of women and old age are presented as something well-known and acceptable, so there is no point in arguing against them. It is as if these exposition scenes work to tell the viewer that this is the face of things; there is no point in disputing this worldview. The only question that remains is what does it mean to be an old woman and a young woman in such a reality.

Present continuous: Life as an old lady

In the leap from the exposition scene, in which a young female student states that life after thirty isn't worth living, to the main plot, in a scene in a coffee house for older people, Oh Mal-soon, the 74-year-old protagonist, consents to the same viewpoint, saying that she was also certain that she would end her life before thirty. However, once her husband emigrated to Germany and died there, she was unable to leave her son alone in the world. The parallel stance of the two statements strengthens the dichotomy that opens the film, presenting youth as detached from old age and occurring along two pathways that have

no point of interface. On the one hand, a classroom of young students, who find old age repulsive, and, on the other, a café built specially by the protagonist's son to cater to older people.

While being old is presented in the exposition as worse than being dead, initially, it seems that the protagonist, Oh Mal-soon, sets an example of agency and successful ageing (John W. Rowe and Kahn 1997); This is cinematically demonstrated from her first scene in her portrayal as an independent, healthy, verbal woman with a job and a close friendship with her coworker, Mr. Park. However, cracks quickly begin to appear on the surface of this desirable, respectable situation, in a manner that exemplifies the repercussions of old age for women.

The first hint is given in the admiration the protagonist displays towards her son, Hyunchul, a gerontology lecturer at the local university. In effect, though, this pride, alongside the life story of sacrifice to care for and nurture him as a young woman, which reappears throughout the film, and her preference for her relationship with her grandson over her granddaughter, which emerges during the film, challenges the sense of her having a voice and agency, in a patriarchal society in which women are of secondary importance and in which there is a clear preference for boys over girls and for men over women (Lee and Eun-Hwa 2015).

The second hint is provided during a light conversation in which Mr. Park informs Oh Mal-soon that the wife of the manager was sent to a treatment center in the country by her son. In response to her surprise in view of the fact that the woman had not been suffering from any health issues, he bluntly informs her that the decision was taken once the woman had finished raising her grandchildren and there was no more use for her. This conversation, held casually while making coffee, serves as a negative reminder of what can happen to older women who become a burden to their families. It recalls that a woman's place is one in which she fulfills the needs of others (Chong 2008); and sets a reminder of the potential loss of independence that accompanies aging, whereas the transfer to a treatment institution means the total loss of personal independence, control, and decision-making over life (Chris Gilleard, and Higgs Paul 2010).

The third hint occurs in the next scene, when a harsh fight breaks out between Oh Mal-soon and Ok-ja, a client in the café who was flirting with Mr. Park. The bitter rivalry, based on insults regarding physical appearance and aging signs, illustrates life in a patriarchal society, in which women internalize the subjugating gaze and fight each other over resources and the attention of men (Ehud Bodner, 2009; Sylvia Walby 1989).

The cinematic comic element of exaggeration enhances the understanding of the meaning of life within a patriarchal society. This is also apparent in the following scene, in which tension emerges between Mr. Park's daughter and Oh Mal-soon, who claims that he treats his friend better than he does her. Oh Mal-soon's suggestion to the daughter to marry and stop clinging to her father forever, emphasizes the dependent position of women within the traditional social structure; whereas women are confined to the private sphere, men have resources and connections to the world at large (Nancy Fraser 1997). In this case, the scene indicates not only a lack of women's solidarity, but also the manner in which the nuclear family in a patriarchal society is the source of oppression of women, based on unequal power relations, that allow women no place and status of their own (Chong 2008).

In accord with the traditional position of the mother-in-law in South Korean society (Chong 2008), Mr. Park's daughter expresses her fear of marrying and ending up with an angry, critical mother-in-law like Oh Mal-soon. This position, in which women are doomed to internalize patriarchal oppression and oppress other women, is illustrated in the scene that takes place in Oh Mal-soon's home, where she lives with her son, her depressed daughter-in-law, and her two grandchildren. Oh Mal-soon's critical attitude towards her daughter-in-law appears over and over, as she criticizes the way she cooks, interferes in arguments between the mother and her grandchild, mocks her, claiming that she is only a housewife whose husband supports her and who does not need to work, as well as claims that she (Oh Mal-soon) is better at educating children and has already raised a successful son with no help from his father.

Within the film's framework, even this limited power of the weak over the weaker, manifested in the treatment of the old protagonist towards her daughters-in-law is shown as limited, and Oh Mal-soon's place in the bosom of the family is not guaranteed. Though aspects of her agency are expressed in her bluntness and willingness to fight for survival, the film nonetheless demonstrates that greater powers than her are in control of her life and are pointing towards an upcoming move to an institution, seen as a comprehensive loss of agency over life (Gilleard and Paul 2010).

Past imperfect: Recollections as a young woman

Features of oppression and ageism, which characterize Oh Mal-soon's life as a woman in her seventies, reveal the hope that her past as a young woman was more positive and characterized by more opportunities for choice and power. The film, however, presents an inverse image of the situation, demonstrating in some of its most dramatic scenes, that in the past, youth involved problems and difficulties of their own, especially insofar as it comes to women's lives. Aspects of the lack of choice and oppression appear not only during the life of the protagonist as an older woman, but also as an integral part of her life as a young widow; this is shown in three central scenes in which Oh Mal-soon's past is presented through flashbacks and recollections.

The first main scene connects the protagonist's past with poverty, shame, and a lack of choice. This is depicted when a woman arrives at the café where Oh Mal-soon works and accuses her of stealing a secret recipe belonging to the family who helped her when she was a young woman with a baby. The woman says that Oh Mal-soon used the recipe when she opened a competing restaurant in the same market. She shames Oh Mal-soon publicly and hits her in the restaurant in which she works. In her defense, Oh Mal-soon claims that she acted as she did because she had to care for her baby son and that, despite all her difficulties, she managed to raise him. Sitting, defeated, on the floor, with her hair awry, she explains to the diners around her that now her son is a professor at a state university. "Who managed to raise their child better than I did?" she yells at the audience of people staring at her.

The importance of the scene lies in Hwang Dong-hyuk's choice not to beautify old age or wrap it in some sort of imagined perfection. He presents a protagonist whose moral behavior is imperfect but adds a heart-wrenching explanation that succeeds in preserving the viewer's identification with the character. At the same time, he signals that the past was a harsh place for women. This allows him, later on in the film, to juxtapose the present

to the past in a manner that enhances the present as a place where women can display more agency.

This concept gains further strength in the second section, in which Oh Mal-soon's life is episodically shown. It takes place when, now transformed into a young woman, she sings the song "White Butterfly" (Hayan Nabi, 1983) and her memories appear in a flashback, in a manner that dramatically illustrates a life in which the choice before her was minimal, given that her life revolved around a struggle to survive. The camera moves between brown-red filtered images of her farewell to her partner at the airport when she was pregnant, to the letter in which she receives notice of his death, to her image on the deck of a boat as she scatters his ashes in the water while her baby is strapped to her, and to additional flashbacks of short picturesque scenes which illustrate her life of pain, loneliness, and odd jobs to keep poverty at bay. This life, as we discover later, was an absolute contrast to the fantasy she had nurtured of becoming a successful singer.

By using flashback scenes, Hwang Dong-hyuk adds a visual layer to the previously told story. His film demonstrates the protagonist's ability to fulfill herself and her agency when transformed into a young woman as standing in contrast to her past, stubborn struggle to survive, escape poverty, and raise a successful son. The fact that the flashback occurs while the protagonist is singing as a young woman adds layers of emotion that help the audience identify with the character on a personal level and, as a result, metaphorically, with older people and the historical Korean heritage. At the same time, the film conveys the message that the present holds great promise of agency for young women in relation to the past.

The third and final part in which Oh Mal-soon's past life is described occurs towards the end of the film, in an emotional monologue by her tearful son. Once Hyun-chul discovers her identity, he is shown exhorting her not to give up the gift of youth she received and to enjoy the opportunities she could not take advantage of in the past. In this scene, he describes how he became ill as a baby and how she fought for his life. "You don't need to eat garbage, or the leftovers of others," he says, in a way that recalls Oh Mal-soon's flashback to her past. However, his words about her not needing to live for someone else expose Oh Mal-soon's absolute lack of choice or ability to express herself as a young woman in the past. The scene demonstrates how her life in the present as an older woman, despite all the inherent difficulties, might still be better than her life was as a young woman.

The flashback scenes strengthen, both in their dramatic nature and narrative line, the understanding of the past as a place in which women were oppressed as they were granted a reduced place in which to live their lives as individuals. Society's view of them and the way in which they perceive themselves was based upon concern for their children and family relationships, which is shown to create a system of dependence which continues throughout their lives.

Dream time: A young woman once again

The time which charges Oh Mal-soon's life with physical, emotional, and social strength occurs in the wake of the cinematic magical transformation, which allows her to return to being a young woman. Following this change, however, a question arises regarding whether the capability granted by the film to the protagonist will allow her to fulfill

herself wholly or only partially. The fantastic element of transformation from an older protagonist to a young one occurs a moment after a scene in which Oh Mal-soon is shown sitting in tears at the bus station—her invisibility and solitude highlighted against the background of the representational discrepancy between her and the giant image of a young model. The looming future relocation to a home for older people marks a loss of independence and the nearness of death, which Oh Mal-soon seems to be preparing for in an act that expresses both agency and lack of agency, as she enters the photo studio to take one last, fitting, portrait of herself, intending to display it, as is traditional in Korean society, at her funeral (Kim 2020). This is also the place in which Oh Mal-soon, after looking at herself in the display window containing the image of a young Audrey Hepburn, enters the store and expresses her wish to resemble her favorite character from the film "Roman Holiday."

The magical shift to the body and appearance of a 20-year-old creates several immediate changes from a place that signifies oppression to a place that holds the power of agency and expression. The first and most blatant of these is Oh Mal-soon's rescue from invisibility. Her invisibility as an older woman is reversed within moments of her transformation, as she suddenly finds herself being flirted with by three young men on the bus. This aspect of visibility, flirtation and presence is repeated over and over in a variety of scenes in which Oh Mal-soon is surrounded by men, including a boy band with whom she is placed as a lead singer, participating in a musical talent contest on a television show. The visibility she suddenly owns increases her opportunities for choice, while also increasing her agency.

The second aspect of agency can be seen in the shift from self-ageism, accepting her social marginality, to identification with the perception of power ascribed to youth (Bodner 2009). Alongside the renewed physical strength Oh Mal-soon discovers as a young woman, identification with the cultural perception of youth recharges the protagonist with determination and a sense of inner strength. As an older woman, Oh Mal-soon walked around with shredded shoes, argued with the vendors in the market about the price of new ones, and did not buy them out of frugality. However, as a young woman, she undergoes an immediate transformation. Instead of saving, she starts spending on an eye-popping shopping spree, in a comic scene played against the background of the American "Oh Pretty Woman" song, which emphasizes her regained power as a beautiful young woman.

The scene deliberately references director Garry Marshall's hit movie "Pretty Woman" (1990) giving it a new twist, while retaining what can be considered a similar neoliberal framework. Unlike the Hollywood film, with Julia Roberts as the leading star, the shift in status from a marginal place in society to one which signifies luxury through expensive clothes does not occur through a wealthy man who bankrolls the protagonist, as part of an unequal power relationship, but rather as an act of agency undertaken by Oh Mal-soon herself. She is the one sending the shop employees back and forth on errands, trying on a variety of clothes, and buying entire new outfits. This shift to a postfeminist message of self-empowerment at the same time continues to deliver the neoliberal message that young women's self-expression and strength lie in the ability to spend money as they please.

The third and most significant aspect of agency is Oh Mal-soon's voice. In her magical reincarnation as her younger persona, Oh Doo-ri, the grumbling, argumentative voice is

transformed into a strong, heart-stopping singing voice, that expresses her ability to finally realize her past talent and build a new life based on her vocal skills. Her voice opens doors for her, brings her together with people, and grants her visibility, publicity, and live performances on television. At the symbolic level, the protagonist's voice also alludes to the ability of young women in South Korea today to join the new world of pop culture and gain empowerment and strength.

In the fictitious world portrayed in the film, the protagonist has the power to use her talent only as a young woman—a state in which her beautiful voice allows the transformation from a powerless position to strength and greater agency. The power of the voice, however, lie in its ability to move and to carry within it an entire world of pain and life experiences that live inside the protagonist. This, the film suggests, is what creates the link between the past and present, and among people of different ages.

Discussion

One of the claims made by politically oriented critics about films as a form of popular art is that they can empower various cultural groups and serve as sites of struggle rather than as a means of maintaining the status quo (Keith Barry Grant 2007). Examining this assertion in relation to *Miss Granny* produces a complexity due to the multi-layered social outlook within the film.

Analysing the manner in which the film depicts aspects of sexism, ageism, and social conventions, it is possible to identify three major outlooks delivered by the film through overt and covert means. The first, *Regained respect to women of old age*, offers an answer to the ageist and sexist perspectives introduced in the film's prelude. The second, *Altering neoliberalism through age*, suggests a nuance to neoliberal dogma through paying respect to South Korean historical and cultural tradition. The third, *Women's complex positioning in the social order*, raises questions about women's ability to actualize themselves within the existing social structures.

Regained respect to women of old age

On the overt level, the movie deals with the concepts of sexism and ageism that were introduced in the exposition scenes, while offering a new and more nuanced view on these issues. Following research literature that points to a parallel between the film and the romantic comedy "Roman Holiday" (Kai Soh and Yecies 2017; Kim 2020) it is possible to summarize the plot of *Miss Granny* as the story of a protagonist who takes a holiday from her life as an older woman and gets to experience herself, at least for a while, as a young, beautiful woman, before returning to her original age. From the viewers' point of view, it is possible to see how the movie allows taking a break from ageist perspectives while gaining a more respectful and appreciative perspective of older women.

The protagonist's shift from old age to young age facilitates the realization of the movement the film weaves, by healing the rift between the world of younger people and that of older people. In contrast to the opening scene, which emphasized a situation in which young people and old people belong to two parallel worlds which rarely intersect, the heart of the film is the meeting between the world of youth and that of older people,

manifested in numerous scenes, including the moment in which the producer and the grandson arrive at the older people's café and hear Oh Mal-soon sing for the first time.

This optimistic message of reconciliation that allows the old and the young to intermix in a natural way is also very much present in the film's closing scenes, which occur one year after Oh Mal-soon returns to her true age. It is shown in the newly established relations between Oh Mal-soon and her daughter-in-law, noted as the two laugh and talk together for the first time, demonstrating a connection between them that is more extensive than a connection merely based on the character of the son. Oh Mal-soon is saved from her invisible place not only vis-à-vis her relationship with her daughter-in-law, but also by the deep look she exchanges with the television producer whom she passes randomly. He takes a long look that acknowledges her existence as an older woman as well.

In addition, Oh Mal-soon's relationship with Mr. Park, the man who admires and loves her (as an older woman) gets a second chance, as part of the recurring fantastic motif of the film, with Mr. Park as an attractive young version of himself. This occurs in a scene when he picks her up on his motorcycle, leaving three young women at the bus-stop thunderstruck, in a manner that hints at the fact that the protagonist's life adventures are to be continued in her older age with a new regained visualization in the eyes of the young.

Altering neoliberalism through age

Probing more deeply however, the film's message is less about the oppressive intersection of gender and age than it is about a specifically South Korean version of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, we learn, does not need to obliterate the past tradition, in favor of hyperindividualism and prioritizing market activities (Mary V. Wrenn 2015); instead, the film suggests the importance of giving place to the past as a necessary focal point of heritage. This is shown through the realization that unlike the complete adoption of Western culture shown through various contestants on the TV talent show, old songs and traditions hold a sense of belonging, longing and identity that can captivate audiences of varied age groups. This is actualized in the process of transference created by the film, which is based on the admiring looks of TV audiences towards Oh Mal-soon, who serves as a token of authentic South Korean music and culture.

In this light, unlike the claim that "Mal-soon's failure to imitate Hepburn's appearance indicates the impossibility of recreating a Western star's beauty on a South Korean woman's body" (Kim 2020, 10), it is possible to view Hepburn's image as an intended bridge, and a necessary stage in the protagonist's process of self-realization through referencing Korean heritage, culture and style. Although the protagonist imitates her at the beginning in her name, Oh Doo-ri, and in her dress and hairstyle, from the start, the imitation is never meant to be complete. This is cinematically shown in the way Oh Mal-soon gradually develops her own style, based on South Korean fashion and her own voice, based on old South Korean songs she knew when she was young.

The film's positioning of an older female character as a subject of passion and longing, expressed through the yearning displayed by the orphaned producer, Han Seung-woo, who is in love with Oh Mal-soon, enhances the motif of presenting the South Korean past in a positive, attractive light. As the film develops, it becomes clear, in several scenes, that

Oh Mal-soon's existence as a young woman with the behaviour, walk, manner of speaking and dress of an old person gives her additional power and strength that a younger woman, lacking life experience, would not have. This is especially evident in the comparison of the sense of identity of Oh Mal-soon compared with more Westernized singers who are depicted as lacking authenticity and essence.

Women's complex positioning in the social order

Notwithstanding the film's ability to promote an anti-ageist approach, without dulling the glow and desirability of youth while granting more respect and space to old age, the theme of the status of women and their power, as presented in the film, remains complex.

By the expressed desire to imitate the character of Audrey Hepburn, which came true, the protagonist becomes young and succeeds in fulfilling her life-long dream; she makes her voice heard and achieves both stage and fame. In terms of cinematic gaze, the movie sets a focal point which is based less on the heroine's beauty and sexuality and more on her skill, talent, and comic mannerism. Furthermore, the film appears to allow the heroine a much-needed process of maturation, as she comes to terms with her former rival and mourns her death, establishes a positive relationship with her daughter-in-law, and explores possibilities for love relationships at both young and old ages.

Nonetheless, this gained insight is not related to the neoliberal motif as offering possibilities that were not available before, but rather to the miraculous change that enabled the heroine to gain a new perspective on life. Additionally, in accordance with the neoliberal postfeminist viewpoint, her success does not challenge the existing patriarchal social order, but is carried through it, with an added flavor of the wisdom of the old.

After having tasted freedom, Oh Mal-soon again sacrifices herself and maintains her marginal position within the social order and her perception of her dependent self, as a person for whom the greatest importance lies in how her son sees her:

> I am going to live for you even if being old is bitter and wearisome … then I will be the mother you are proud of.

Oh Mal-soon replaces her professional singing voice with her maternal voice, which expresses the soft, tender concern of a mother for her children. According to Jose Brunner (1993) this was the only voice permitted for women until the early 20th century as a means of limiting their social position and agency to their private sphere.

Oh Mal-soon's choice to protect her grandson at the cost of losing her youth and giving up the voice she had begun to discover can be read in two ways. One the one hand, it can mean accepting and fulfilling the role ascribed to women by the patriarchy. Oh Mal-soon relinquishes her passion for recognition and her free, self-aware existence, agreeing to fill her traditional role as one who grants recognition and cares for the corporeal needs of other family members; in this case, her grandson.

On the other hand, giving up youth in an act of self-sacrifice can also be read in a more complex way as a means of preserving a different value system from that of the neoliberal world. Hence, this choice can be interpreted as representing women's challenging positioning within the male dominated social order, being both within and outside of it at the same time. Through the cinematic fantasy that allows the reversal from old to young and flashback scenes that jump back in time, the theme of the heroine's social positionality is highlighted,

emphasizing her difficulty in fully belonging to the postfeminist, modernized world around her and actualizing herself as a complete human being; as she is actually in a completely different mindset from most of the people she meets and work with. In this reading, the act of self-sacrifice is also an indicator of having genuine relational values that precede hyper-individualistic ones.

In conclusion, in *Miss Granny*, Hwang Dong-hyuk portrays the film's heroine as a round character not only in terms of the complexities associated with her being both young and old, annoying and charming, but also in the sense that, in addition to her worldly traits, her character is iconized as a token of nostalgic adoration. The protagonist's consistent mismatch with the world around her can be interpreted as a symbol of women's struggle to actualize themselves not only in the past, but also in the present. The film's centrality of the fantasy element strengthens this understanding while also enhancing questions about women's ability to actualize freedom and agency in real life.

Notes

1. Translation of the original meaning, "Suspicious Girl." Korean: 수상한 그녀.
2. Age is perceived differently by different cultures, and different chronological ages are associated with middle-age or old age (Ayalon et al. 2013). While the World Health Organization considers the age of 60 to be a marker of old age, others consider the age of 50 to be such a marker (Kristen MacLeod 2015).

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