

The Silent or Silenced Father

A Review of *A Tale of Two Sisters*

A woman is the only thing I am afraid of that I know will not hurt me. -Abraham Lincoln

Director Ji Woon Kim's aesthetically pleasant psychological horror film *Chang-hwa Hong-ryŏn: A Tale of Two Sisters* (2002) is reviewed essentially as a narrative told of the women, by the women, and for the women, for it has "handsomely portrayed and visualized the girlish sensibilities" (Chung). The film deserves this rather grandiose epithet, because by taking advantage of the pre-existing paradigms of women in the Korean family that have persisted in the culture beginning from the folktale that the film derives its title from, the film manages to establish a new paradigm for female characters in the East Asian horror genre. However, despite this feat, the film essentially remains vulnerable to the power of man. By examining the character dynamics through the lens of family structure, this essay argues that although *A Tale of Two Sisters* is successful in introducing a novel paradigm of the female horror heroine, the power of the female protagonist cannot transgress the gaze of the "hidden father." This is to say that although the male character is not apparent and barely visible throughout the film, the structure of narrative works in favor of his voyeuristic gaze.

The formula Asian horror narratives have often adhered to is quite simplistic in that it abides by the following equation: men as perpetrators victimize women; these victimized women die, traverse to the realm of the supernatural, only to return to the world as vengeful ghosts who cannot rest until their honor or cause have been redeemed. As seen, the subjects of Asian

¹ graduate of Underwood International College, Yonsei

horror films have traditionally been men. *A Tale of Two Sisters* attempts to topple this generic stereotype, ironically, by propping the film as if it were a faithful representation of the folktale; the film is able to earn shock value and gravitas by overturning the audience's expectations.

The film is loosely based on the Korean folktale *Story of Chang-hwa Hong-ryŏn*. Motherless sisters Chang-hwa and Hong-ryŏn are abused by their vicious stepmother, who feels threatened by the sisters' beauty and considers them flicks in her newly consummated marriage. She pushes Chang-hwa, the elder sister into a pond; the father is oblivious to this fact. Unable to withstand the aggravating abuse of the stepmother, the younger sister Hong-ryŏn throws herself into the pond as well. The two sisters blossom into a rose flower and a red lotus. As seen, the Korean folktale delves into the issue of female suppression in the face of an overpowering force, the Stepmother. The two sisters and the stepmother seem to dwell on different rungs of the status ladder; this discrepancy is due to the fact that the folktale inhabits the notion of the family hierarchy, where in which the parent always supersedes the children. Thus Chang-hwa and Hong-ryŏn are virtually the most suppressed and violated members in that they are females, daughters, and motherless. Thus it is only natural that they should return to vindicate others for their forsaken deaths in the form of ghosts. An important element that embellishes the folktales of like is that the father is portrayed as a man who is either unable to exert his influence on his wife or is completely oblivious to the fact that his daughters are being abused. Although the paternal figure is the cause behind the abuse and deaths, he is silent and unseen. This idea of the hidden father will serve as an important point in determining the power relations in the film.

To the Korean audience, the title Chang-hwa Hong-ryŏn conveys such a culturally charged context. Thus the film takes advantage of this pre-existing prejudice of family dynamics. In the beginning of the film, Sisters Su-mi and Su-yŏn arrive at the house they are returning for the first time, after the death of their biological mother. Eŭn-ju the Stepmother greets them, which is ironic since Eŭn-ju worked as Mother's nurse. Su-mi is unnerved by the fact that Eŭn-ju considers the house hers, which can be sensed in how Eŭn-ju treats the girls as guests rather than rightful residents of the house. Su-yŏn hides behind her sister's shadow. The audience suspects that there is a story streaming through the tension in the family, as seen in

how at the family dinner table, the conversation is clipped and awkward, with only Eŭn-ju trying to make strained conversation. The audience is able to empathize with the two sisters, the strong and defiant Su-mi and the angelic Su-yŏn.

The faithful abidance of the conventional stepmother-stepdaughter stereotype facilitates the audience's understanding of the characters. Firstly, Su-mi is first propped as a highly protective of younger sister and strives to assume the maternal role of dead mother. She challenges stepmother's role as "female head" of the household and formulates a taut rivalry for acquiring the father's affection. Her femininity and potential sexuality is underlined by virginal costume. Su-mi is immersed in the "mirror stage" of the imaginary, dominated by the identification of duality that exists within her. Su-mi's misrecognition of herself, as well as the apprehension she feels of both herself and herself as the other will function as a strong motivation behind the unexpected actions she commits.

Meanwhile, vulnerable and fragile Su-yŏn is shadowed by Su-mi's presence to the extent of being ghostly. She is almost sexless, or rather "the original androgynous whole" (Silverman, 27). Thus Su-yŏn remains an asexual character till she is reborn as a female on the day of her first menstruation; it is only then does she become a psychologically unconscious threat to Su-mi. Su-yŏn is the object of protection and abuse by both Su-mi and stepmother. Therefore, the audience feels that rather than being a unique individual, she resembles nature, a prop that is always assimilated into the background. This facet is accentuated by flower print blouses that Su-yŏn always wears.

The artificiality and non-humanness stepmother Eŭn-ju is visually accentuated by her chalky complexion, red lips, glossy hair, high pitch voice. She is an image of beautified horror, a sexually charged symbol. Her sexuality starkly contrasts with Su-mi's virginal sexuality. The fact she was originally a nurse adds an odd flavor to the inappropriateness of her perched and unnatural character.

Finally, Mu-hyŏn the father and husband is the "silent and hidden" figure of the household; he comes off as being indifferent and emotionally detached from the feud between Su-mi and Eŭn-ju. He isolates himself from the drama, and acts as a detached observer rather than a

participant.

Keeping such conventional stereotypes of the broken family in mind, the film slowly begins to overturn the dynamics. Although it would be expected that the virginal and powerless girls Su-mi and Su-yŏn would be maltreated by Eŭn-ju the Stepmother, the film purposefully discards this dynamics by empowering Su-mi. Su-mi's character is posed as being defiant and aggressive in expressing hatred toward Eŭn-ju. Thus as the film progresses, it is evident that Eŭn-ju is also a victim in the household. This idea is amplified in how her pet canary, which stands as Eŭn-ju's micro self, is found dead. Eŭn-ju is also haunted by the ghost of the sisters' mother, who had hanged herself in Su-yŏn's closet. Because Mu-hyŏn is unwilling to protect Eŭn-ju, Eŭn-ju must fend for herself and preserve her dignity in trying to keep hold of the crown of the house in which she is unwelcomed.

When the audience is given insight into the epiphany that it is actually Su-mi who is the sole perpetrator behind all the horrific incidents, they cannot be but overwhelmed by the sudden turn of the game. The feeling of betrayal that the audience feels toward Su-mi for not maintaining her credibility as a reliable narrator is aggravated by the fact that Su-yŏn has never existed in reality but only in Su-mi's imagination. In fact, Su-yŏn's misfortunate death of being suffocated under a fallen wardrobe is reflected in how the Su-yŏn in Su-mi's imagination harbored an intense fear of the closet. In this line of thought, Su-mi's loathing for it also goes far as for to imagine that her stepmother sacking Su-yŏn and beating her to death. This is a probe into Su-mi's unconscious. Thus Eŭn-ju also becomes a victim of Su-mi's schizophrenic imagination in that through distorting Eŭn-ju's image as a cruel stepmother, Su-mi is able to exert her pent up violence without feeling guilty about her actions. Through the aforementioned twists in the character dynamics of the female characters, the film offers a new paradigm of how the victim and perpetrator are not always those who seem to be.

The Lacanian model of psychoanalysis penetrates the heart of understanding and interpreting the complex yet formulaic family dynamics of the three women. According to Kaja Silverman's reading of Lacan, the theory of the subject can be read "as a classic narrative," (Silverman, 25) beginning with 'birth,' 'territorialization of the body,' 'the mirror stage,'

‘access to language, ‘and the ‘experience of the Oedipus complex.’ Lacan ascribes a state of lack or self-loss pervading each of these stages, as if the subjects are by default an incomplete entity eager to replenish its missing parts but never quite achieves fulfillment. Interestingly, the individual experiences of the three female characters in *A Tale of Two Sisters* come together to construct the identity of one subject.

First, Su-yŏn represents the “first lost in the history of the subject at the moment of birth” which is aggravated by the “separation of the child from the mother at birth” (Silverman, 27) which in Su-yŏn’s case is her dismemberment from Su-mi on experiencing her menstruation. In lieu with Lacan’s agreement with the Aristophanes’ projection of an individual’s lack being ‘real’ “because it relates to something real, namely, that the living being, by being subject to sex” (27), the younger sister now harbors the desire to become complete by the feared but necessary with the opposite sex. This is how Su-yŏn must reign over the territorialization of her body.

Su-mi find herself grappling with her identity of the “imaginary” in the Lacanian mirror stage. The term “imaginary” is used to explain the “order of the subject’s experience which is dominated by identification and duality” (32), the very definition implying that the process of self-identification may be equated with discovering the duality within oneself. Due to such internal crisis, Su-mi desires to direct coherence in her identity and thus searches for “an external image that is defined through self-alienation” (33). The act of self-alienation is delineated in Su-mi’s constant exhibition of enmity toward her father and stepmother. In Su-mi’s psychological mirror, she sees her own mother, the figure she wishes to become yet hates, because of the ‘lack’ that the death of her biological mother has forced upon the two sisters.

Lastly, Eŭn-ju is situated in the process of ‘signification,’ the subject’s access to symbolic language. Eŭn-ju exhausts all sources of signification that come hand in hand language acquisition; her obsession with upholding practiced social rituals such as insisting that she be called mother and her effort to make jaded conversation at the dinner table is a result of the subject’s introduction and familiarization of language. According to Lacan, with language and signification, Eŭn-ju is able to “give birth to desire” and meaning (52). Due to this new

utility, Eün-ju is the only one of the three female characters who is able to vocalize her emotions and directly enforce her will of banning the sisters out of her ideal family. This desire is manifested in her ignorance of Su-mi's cry for help when the younger girl is crushed under the fallen wardrobe.

Then, amidst all this violent action, where is the father?

Mu-hyŏn, the only male figure throughout the film is hidden. For the head of this patriarchal unit, he is too silent. However, contrary to the impression the folktale gives, as the father being either ignorant or powerless, Mu-hyŏn is neither. Rather, he identifies himself with the audience in that from his aloof distance, he is able to witness the fascinating drama on stage. The "paradox of phallocentrism" (Mulvey 837) is well reflected in the film in that the whole concept is dependent on the imagery of the "castrated woman to give order and meaning of its world." The three women, Su-mi, Su-yŏn and Eün-ju are essentially fighting for the power that comes with the acknowledgement that a "woman's desire is subjected to her image as a bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (838). Thus because the woman's existence is bound to her relationship with the penis, or rather, the lack thereof, she is inevitably bound to the man's assessment of herself. In this context, the idea that the "woman is image, man as the bearer of the look" (841) is quite useful in interpreting the role of the hidden father in *A Tale of Two Sisters*

The absence of Mu-hyŏn throughout the film alludes to the possibility that behind all the theatrical and dramatic events, there is an observer who the female characters are acting for. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" alludes to the idea of "scopophilia," the pleasure of being looked at. The three female characters are keenly aware of the fact that they are being watched throughout the boundaries of the house. The notion extends to the knowledge that their sexuality is being displayed on screen, to a larger audience. They are aware of their being objectified. A piece of evidence that supports this interpretation is the fact that the three female characters themselves are also obsessed with the catharsis that derives from looking at things they should not be looking at. The tiptoeing around the house, lifting and returning paraphernalia that do not belong to them, trips to the warehouse to fetch old emblems, peering into keyholes are all forms actions that play with the idea of looking

and being looked at. The psychological competition that is triggered between Eŭn-ju and Su-mi when snooping into each other's drawers and shelves while feigning indifference all the while is a thrill; the engagement in such behavior is affected by the rivaling forms of voyeurism and awareness that one is always being watched by another. Indeed, the abnormality of house serves as pretext for objectifying people in it.

Therefore, the role of Mu-hyŏn the Father in the film is not that of an absentminded father figure, but an absent figure whose absence reversely functions as a strong presence that overlooks the unfolding of the film. To borrow the analogy of the dollhouse, Mu-hyŏn is the master who pulls strings of his marionettes for them to endorse in some form of action that will please him. Su-mi, Su-yŏn, and Eŭn-ju are "locked into male "views" of them, imprisoned in their master's dollhouse" (Modleski 861). Thus it may as well be the case that Mu-hyŏn does not himself participate in the actual narrative, but appears momentarily in scenes as a reminder that he does exist. The idea is that Mu-hyŏn sets out a stage for his actresses to act on; although his presence at the dinner table is brief, the consequences that arise from his presence is critical in that it provokes an argument between Su-mi and Eŭn-ju. Only when his eldest daughter and new wife are embroiled in severe conflict does he intercept to offer a pill to Eŭn-ju. The argument is silenced. This proves that Mu-hyŏn, while having the power to instigate and terminate incidents and conflict, does not *choose* to do so, which further buttresses the assertion that while the female characters seem to be guided into thinking that they are independent entities, their free will is actually a granted endowment made by the male gaze.

In conclusion, *A Tale of Two Sisters* offers an unprecedented portrayal of the Korean family in its contortion of the conventional female stereotype to invent a wholly new image of the female heroine in horror who does not resemble the culturally iconic female phantom "yurei," (Sumpter 12) that symbolizes the orthodox ghost of the Japanese Edo and Korean Chosŏn period. Yet the film suggests such creation is made possible only within the scope that the male character, namely the "hidden father" allows. Perhaps Mu-hyŏn embodies the "clandestine fetish" (Shim) that crawls out from Su-mi's ghost, the universal male desire of being empowered to be able to gaze at the virginal sexuality. The hidden father is merely hidden.

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