

Vengeance is Mine: The Appearance of Revenge  
in Modern South Korean Cinema

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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation  
from the University Honors College  
Summer 2022

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### **Acknowledgements**

To my Mom and Dad, thank you for being so supportive and helping me during my journey of completing my thesis.

Father, thank you for staying up late with me and helping me with corrections.

To my sister, Danielle, thank you for your love and encouragement that you have given me.

To my best friend, Eryka, thank you for helping me with planning and organizing my notes, and for giving me encouragement when I needed it the most.

To my partner, RJ, thank you for encouraging me and cheering me on through this thesis. I am grateful for the wisdom and hope you have provided me throughout this long journey.

Thank you to my tutors at the MTSU writing center. I could not have completed this thesis without your help.

And lastly, thank you to Judy Albakry, and my thesis director, Dr. Philip Phillips. It would not have been possible without your patience and guidance. Thank you for pushing me and encouraging me to complete this thesis.

### **Abstract**

Vengeance is a common trope in many South Korean films. This trope is also known as the *han* concept. This concept arose from the traumatic past of South Korea's colonial rule by Japan from 1910 to 1945. *Han* is a difficult concept for most Americans to grasp, but it is best described as “rancor, grief, and resentment only felt by Koreans” (Bjorn Boman). In this thesis, I offer a brief history of the beginning of Korean cinema and analyze three Korean films—*Parasite* (2019), *Lady Vengeance* (2005), and *Burning* (2018)—and explain how all of them tie in together with the theme of vengeance. Finally, I examine the filming techniques used by each director and how those techniques relate to the films. I end each section by discussing the critical reviews for each film.

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## Introduction

Modern Korean cinema has become popular with western audiences, especially with its theme of vengeance. Korean cinema started to gain more popularity in the 90s and 2000s through a movement known as the “Korean New Wave” movement. This movement consisted of unique films that dealt with societal issues. The drive towards innovation is what makes Korean films distinct. This distinctiveness originates from South Korea’s history with Japanese colonization, war, and military dictatorships (Moon 37). Korean cinema started to experience a change in the 1980s and produce independent films. In the 1990s, their films started to become more mainstream. Movie directors such as Park Chan-wook have helped pave the way for modern Korean cinema that is known today, especially due to the relatable theme of *han*.

*Han* can be best described as rancor, grief or unresolved resentment due to a real, unjust collective experience of the Korean people (Boman, 919-920). It is a very difficult concept for most Americans to grasp. Boman says, “*Han* is an essentialist Korean sociocultural concept that is popularly understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger.” It is an emotional response that is only felt by Koreans. *Han*’s origin can be found during the Japanese colonization over South Korea in the 1920s. The Japanese implemented a system of assimilation that prevented Koreans from assembling, exercising free speech, and having a free press.

South Korea’s history with Japanese colonization began in 1910, when Korea was annexed into the Japanese colonial empire. Because of Korea’s colonization, Japan thought that Korea would be the first step toward their goal of regional dominance (Hundt, Blaker 65). While under Japan’s colonial rule, Koreans were stripped of their identity. In schools, they were not allowed to be taught about their own Korean history,

language, or culture, and they were even forced to adopt Japanese names. They even had to worship at Shinto shrines. These traumatizing events as well as the sexual exploitation of Korean women, which still remain deeply embedded within the hearts and minds of Koreans today, is the basis for *han*.

We see *han* in Korean culture through its visual arts, literature, folk music, and even their films (920). *Han* is seen as vengeance in Bong Joon-ho's film: *Parasite* (2019), Park-Chan Wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, and Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* (2018). Each director uses different tools to convey the feeling of *han* with the audience with these films. Director Bong Joon-ho uses cinematography, lighting, and symbolism to illustrate how *han* has an effect on different families, no matter what class they come from. Park Chan Wook finds unique ways to incorporate color into the *Vengeance Trilogy*, especially in his film: *Lady Vengeance*. For *Burning*, Lee Chang-dong uses symbolism such as class difference and anger to invoke *han* in his characters.

In this thesis, I analyze three Korean films: *Parasite* (2019), *Lady Vengeance* (2005) from the *Vengeance Trilogy*, and *Burning* (2018). I chose these films because they embody the characteristics of the *han* (or vengeance) that is felt through the Korean people. In these films, one sees how an oppressive system has altered the lives of the Korean people, and how it has put them into tragic circumstances, which causes them to seek vengeance. The directors of these films (Park Chan-wook, Bong Joon-ho, and Lee Chang-dong) visually show the audience how vengeance has affected these characters.

I chose these three directors because they help paint a visual picture for the audience the vengeance that these characters display. Each director has a unique way of capturing the theme of *han*: Bong Joon-ho uses unique camera angles and housing levels

to display classism and its correlation to *han*. In Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*, specifically in *Lady Vengeance*, the director uses certain colors surrounding the characters to convey the theme of vengeance. Lee Chang-dong uses unique themes such as fire and greenhouses to symbolize vengeance in his 2018 film, *Burning*.

For my chapter on *Parasite*, I give a brief overview of the film and its background. I then analyze key characters within the film. Next, I touch on themes such as classism and selfishness and explore how they are related to *han*, by giving examples from the film. For the next section of the paper, I mention how lighting and camera angles play into the film's various themes, including classism. Next, I discuss some reviews of the film and adding my thoughts to them. Lastly, I wrap up the chapter by mentioning how *Parasite* visually displays the *han* concept and how it is brought on by vengeance.

In my chapter for *Lady Vengeance*, I also give a brief overview of the film, as well as analyzing the main characters within the film. I discuss certain themes such as purity and innocence and how they serve as the antithesis to *han*. Next, I examine how the director's choice to use certain colors in the film help display vengeance, as well as analyze certain angles and lighting shots. Lastly, I examine some of the critic reviews, and put my own thoughts in them. I conclude the chapter of *Lady Vengeance* and discuss how the movie, as a whole, is the embodiment of *han*.

The last film I examine in this thesis is *Burning*. I start by summarizing the film as well as explaining the film's background and analyze the film's main characters. I discuss certain themes within the film and how the director used perfect examples to express the theme of vengeance. I analyze certain stills and angles in the film and their

importance to the film. I then analyze the dialogue between two characters, Jong-su and Ben. Lastly, I examine the critical reviews for this film and add my own review of it.

To conclude the thesis, I explain why these three films exemplify *han* in Korean cinema and show how they execute this visualization of vengeance. Each film focuses on the main characters' experience, which subtly draws in the viewers. I will discuss the impact that reviewing these films has had on me personally and how the development of this thesis has improved my research skills.

## **Chapter I: Parasite**

*Parasite* is a 2019 South Korean film that was directed by Bong Joon Ho. The film centers around two families: the destitute Kim family and the rich Park family. When a friend of the son, Ki-woo Kim, tells him about a tutoring position for a rich family, Ki-woo takes the position. He later on finds ways to bring in the rest of his family into the Park family's lives, and what develops is a symbiotic relationship between the two families. The Kim's parasitic actions create a chain reaction of tragic events that destroys both families.

The film made history at the Oscars in 2020 as the first non-English language film to win Best Picture, winning four awards in total. Bong's filming style mostly consists of social themes, black humor, and sudden mood shifts (Paquet). Before *Parasite*, the film's director, Bong Joon Ho, created two films that appealed to audiences as well: *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Okja* (2016). It was after the filming of *Snowpiercer* that he started writing the screenplay for *Parasite* (David Sims). In an interview, he revealed that during the filming of *Snowpiercer*, he had thought about the concept of the gap between a rich and poor house. He also revealed that in college he worked as a tutor for a rich family and felt as if he were infiltrating their private lives. He thought about how exciting it would be if all his friends could "infiltrate" this family's house.

*Parasite* centers on the poor Kim family and the affluent Park family. Ki-taek, is the patriarch of the Kim family. He is the optimistic person in the family. His wife, Chung-sook, is more of a realist, whereas Ki-taek is an idealist. Their son, Ki-woo Kim, is academically smart, but he is not street smart. He is a schemer, though, especially when it comes to helping his family members insinuate themselves into the Park family's lives. In the film, he lies and pretends to be a tutor to help his family make a living. Ki-

jung is Ki-woo's sister and has a cunning personality. She is also a schemer just like her brother. She forges a fake letter that states Ki-woo as a graduate from the prestigious Yonsei University. She also pretends to be an art therapist for the son of the Park family, and she manipulates the mother, Yeon-kyo, into thinking that her son's art is a sign of psychotic symptoms. This shocks Yeon-kyo, and she explains to Ki-jung that her son, Da-song, was eating cake from their refrigerator late at night when he saw a "man in the basement" that scared him, thus resulting in him going into a seizure.

Min is the friend of Ki-woo, and the tutor of the daughter in the Park family. He is the cause of the Kims' involvement with the Parks. When Min comes to the Kims' house, he gives Ki-woo an offer to take his place as the tutor for the girl: "Park Da-hye...I want you to tutor her. Take over for me as her English teacher." He presents this offer to Ki-woo because he is aware of his family's unfortunate situation. Min trusts Ki-woo, and even tells him that he likes this girl: "I am serious about her. I'm going to ask her out in two years...I want you to take care of her while I'm gone. I trust you." In the film, when we see Ki-woo tutoring the daughter, Da-hye, she starts to develop feelings for him. It appears that Ki-woo reciprocates these feelings to Da-hye, but we do not know for sure if they are genuine. Ki-woo most likely could have been using Da-hye in order to gain her trust. Not only does he use Da-hye, but he betrays Min's trust by having "romantic feelings" for her, when he told him how he felt about her.

Min also brings a rock from his grandfather's collection as a gift for the Kim family. This gift led to their misfortune. He tells them that this rock is supposed to bring them wealth: "This stone here is said to bring material wealth to families." We see how this rock does the opposite of that for the Kims. It brings them nothing but bad luck. This

rock is physically used against Ki-woo when he goes to check on Geun-sae in the basement, and instead is beaten in the head with the rock by Geun-sae, thus resulting in a serious concussion. The rock can be seen as foreshadowing the Kim's, and mostly Ki-woo's misfortune.

Ever since the Kims started working for the Parks, they faced a lot of misfortune. Their house was flooded, and despite their scheming and planning to enrich themselves, they did not have a home to live in anymore, resulting in them living in a homeless shelter. Another example of their misfortune was when Ki-woo was violently struck in the head by Geun-sae in the basement. The most prominent unfortunate events were Ki-jung's death, and Ki-taek's disappearance after attacking Mr. Park. Because of this, they could not live the perfect life that they dreamed of having.

On the other hand, the Parks are completely oblivious to the Kims' plans to infiltrate their family. They are completely unaware and do not seem to care about what is going on around them. Yeon-kyo, is a stay-at-home mother with a gullible personality, who is unaware of the privilege she enjoys. She hires Ki-woo as a tutor for her daughter without questioning him: "I don't care about documents. Min recommended you after all." She does not question the rest of the Kim family before hiring them as well. When she hires Ki-jung (Jessica) as an art therapist for her son, she immediately believes Ki-jung's statement about her son's art showing psychotic symptoms.

They are also oblivious to the things that happen under the surface (downstairs). They do not know about the housekeeper's husband, and how he has been living underneath the basement all this time. Her husband, Geun-sae, has been hiding in the bunker of the Parks' home for four years, as a result of hiding away from loan sharks.

This obliviousness contributes to the vengeance of three key characters: Moon-gwang, the former housekeeper, Geun-sae, Moon-gwang's husband, and Ki-taek, the patriarch of the Kim family.

Moon-gwang is a humble and loyal woman who worked as a housekeeper for the Parks for years. *Han* is seen in Moon-gwang. She lives in the Park's home as their housekeeper, but the family is unaware of her tragic situation as well. She loses her job, and Chung-sook takes over as the new housekeeper for the Park family. After Chung-sook comes back to check on her husband, who has been living in the basement the whole time she has worked for the Parks, she finds out that the Kims were the reason she was fired. Moon-gwang and her husband, just like the Kim family, are poor. Now that she is not the Park family's housekeeper anymore, she has no way to provide for her and her husband. These factors contribute to her vengeance, or her *han* against the Kims, and she threatens to expose the truth of them being a family, to the Parks.

Moon-gwang's husband, Geun-sae, has *han*. This also makes him a parasite to the Parks. When Moon-gwang and her husband get into a fight with the Kim family, she is pushed down the steps by Chung-sook, and later dies from a concussion. Because of this, Geun-sae smashes a rock over Ki-woo's head, giving him a concussion. This is the same rock that was gifted to Ki-woo by Min, as a sign of good luck and fortune. We also see *han* when Geun-sae comes up from the basement and stabs Ki-jung at Da-song's party.

The patriarch of the Park family, Dong-ik, is a hard-working businessman with an assertive personality. He seems not really to care about what is going on at home. He, just like his wife, Yeon-kyo, is oblivious. Dong-ik does not even know that Geun-sae has been living in his basement for years. Geun-sae praises and idolizes Dong-ik for

providing him with food and shelter when Dong-ik is not even aware of Geun-sae's existence (Cameron Slate).

We see *han* in Ki-taek. As he is working as a personal chauffeur to the Parks, he is living in a basement with his family. This same basement later floods, which leaves the Kims homeless. The Parks' expression of disgust every time they smell Ki-taek is another factor that leads to Ki-taek's *han*. When Dong-ik and Yeon-kyo are sitting on the sofa talking about how the sofa smells similar to Ki-taek's clothing, this upsets Ki-taek, who is sleeping underneath the coffee table unaware of the Parks: "Like an old radish...You know when you boil a rag? It smells like that." Overhearing the Park family talking about the way they smell hurts the Kims. They realize that the Parks do not care about them and only care about them providing for their needs.

The shocking ending of the film takes place at Da-song's birthday party. Things take a turn of events when Geun-sae arrives at the party. He is armed with a knife as he walks over to Ki-jung, and stabs her, in retaliation for the death of his wife. At the same time, Da-song is in shock as he sees Geun-sae, "the man in the basement" and has a seizure. As Ki-jung is dying, Dong-ik ignores her and demands for Ki-taek to give him the keys. When Dong-ik reaches for the keys, he pinches his nose. This angers Ki-taek, and he stabs Dong-ik.

This film exemplifies how society can be oblivious to the problems that other people face. We see it in Western culture too. Sometimes Americans can be oblivious to issues that people face in other parts in the world, only caring about their own needs. It is seen in both modern-day Korean and modern-day American society.

In the book *Social Class, Poverty, and Education* by Bruce Biddle, the author states that “the gap between the rich and poor is more extreme in our country than in most comparable nations” (2). This is because not only are Americans oblivious, but they choose to be oblivious to the ongoing wealth gap in the United States. According to an article by Laurence Barber titled, *Killing the Host: Class and Complacency in Bong Joon Ho’s Parasite*, 2018 showed the biggest wealth gap in South Korea in over a decade. In the U.S., in 2020, 37.2 million people were in poverty, which is just about 3.3 million more than in 2019 ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The statistics show that the rich will continue to stay rich and not care about unfortunate people unless they pertain to them. The gap due to classism displays how many rich people do not care about the suffering of the poor.

The effects of classism are shown in Moon-gwang, the maid of the Park family. Moon-gwang seeks vengeance on the Kims for getting her fired, when she herself was struggling to provide for her husband whom she kept hidden in the Park family’s basement. Ki-taek even seeks vengeance on the patriarchal figure of the Park family not only because he did not help his daughter, but also because of the built-up frustration he held in when putting up with the Parks’ rude comments. Because of classism and greed, we see how both the Kims’ lives and Moon-gwang’s and Geun-sae’s lives have contributed to the grief that they are currently going through, with losing their homes. This grief is one of the main feelings that contributes toward their vengeance against each other, and the Park family.

The director illustrates the gap between the rich and the poor in not just Korean society. He shows it in a way that it can resonate with audiences all over the world. Because the Kim family lose their jobs in the Park family’s house, they fail to escape

poverty and become rich, which was their ultimate goal (Chang Liu). This has hit close to home with many people worldwide, since destitute people like the Kims have a harder time trying to leave their poverty-stricken life and become a part of the upper class (Liu).

Selfishness is a contributing factor to Ki-taek's, Moon-gwang's, and Geun-sae's vengeance in the film. When Ki-jung is attacked at Park Da-song's birthday party by the "man in the basement," Da-song has a seizure. Instead of asking the guests to help both Da-song and Ki-jung, Dong-ik yells at Ki-taek to help his son. Not only are the Kims victims of the Park family's selfishness, but they themselves are selfish as well, for leeching off of the Parks. Their manipulative scheme of getting the housekeeper, Moon-gwang fired displays their selfishness, as they did not want to help her when they saw how both she and her husband were struggling to survive. The Kims' selfish nature of turning away Moon-gwang and getting her fired, makes Moon-gwang want to seek vengeance against them.

Dong-ik's selfish nature towards Ki-taek is shown when he disregards Ki-taek's dying daughter, Ki-jung. He yells at Ki-taek to give him the keys so they can take his son, Da-song to the hospital. He, as a father, fails to sympathize with Ki-taek watching his child die, and only thinks about helping his own son. This reason contributes to Ki-taek's *han*, or vengeance, and leads to him killing Dong-ik.

The film is appropriately named *Parasite* because of the parasitic-symbiotic relationship between the two families. In science, a parasite attaches itself and gets its food from a host, at the own host's expense ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). The Kim family leeches off the Parks, seeking to enjoy and obtain a luxurious life for themselves. As the Parks are

away on a camping trip, we see the Kims take over their house and have a good time as they drink the Park family's alcohol. They are careless and leave a mess with the various alcohol and snack crumbs displayed. The family is also invasive and pretend like they live in the house. For example, while the Parks are gone, Ki-jung is taking a bath in the Parks' bathroom. Another example is when Ki-wook is lying in Da-hye's bed and reading her diary.

Not only are the Kims parasites, but even Moon-gwang and her husband are parasites. They rely on the Park family to provide for their needs. If Moon-gwang loses her job, not only can she not provide for herself, but she cannot provide for her husband. The Kims are so desperate to escape their poverty-stricken life that they are willing to do anything for it. When they finally see themselves climb up the social ladder, their scheming leads to dire consequences that affect not only them, but the people involved in their lives, such as the deaths of Moon-gwang, Ki-jung, and Dong-ik. The toxic symbiotic relationship that forms from these parasites (the Kims, Moon-gwang, and Geun-sae) comes at the expense of the Parks. It drains them and sets them up for failure.

The director uses camera angles and lighting, to call attention to the classism within the film. In a video from Shane Hurlbut's "Filmmakers Academy," the director created mock-ups of the film, which helped the production design team start early on their work (Baker). Both families' homes were made with front-facing windows and mirrors the view of the other home. Bong also shot the film in a downward angle for the Kim family. This idea helped illustrate the destitute state of the Kims. However, the perspective changes when the son becomes a tutor, and instead, the audience is looking up at him (Baker). I interpret this as Ki-woo (the son) moving up the hierarchical scale.

Bong Joon Ho illustrates this as Ki-woo climbing up the social ladder. If he can weave his way into the Park family's lives, then he thinks he can help create a better life for the rest of his family and they will soon be able to fit within society.

He highlights the main themes within the film by using many lighting and camera angle techniques. According to the cinematographer, he used the upstairs to show how viewers would feel “infinitely elegant” walking up them, and how we would “enter into an ominous mood” as we are going down them (Desowitz). Adding onto the filming of the lower and upper level, Hong says that “stairs also function as a tool that makes one realize their true identity after basking in the momentary ‘highness.’”

We see and feel the state of bliss that the Kims are in as they walk up the stairs, but we see their grief as they run down the stairs to go look at their deteriorating home while the rain is pouring.

Lighting is an important factor that contributes to the mood of a scene. We will see this in the next films analyzed in the next two chapters. With *Parasite*, to distinguish between the rich and poor families, the cinematographer, Hong Kyung-pyo, made sure to shoot the Kim family in dimmer lighting (Fig. 1.1). Sunlight comes through a small window in the basement where they reside. The way the scene is shot shows the actual deteriorating state of the Kim's living residence. The inside of the Park family's mansion has a warm-hue from natural light coming through their expansive windows (Fig. 1.2).



***Figure 1.1 The Park siblings are shown in low lighting in the bathroom of their basement trying to get a signal.***



***Figure 1.2 Bright lighting is shown on Yeon-Gyo Park, to illustrate her wealth.***



**Figure 1.3** *Ki-woo Kim walks down the stairs in the home of the Park family.*

The upstairs and downstairs shots (seen in Fig. 1.3) reinforce the theme of classism in the film. We even see the upstairs and downstairs symbolism in a poster of the film. The cinematographer uses these rising and sinking shots for the stairs to illustrate the social hierarchy of the rich and the poor. One example is in the scene where Ki-woo is walking towards the Park family's home for the first time, and an open uphill road is shown (Liu). This illustrates Ki-woo and his family aspiring to enter the upper class (Liu).

This film is phenomenal. It is gut-wrenching and offers an in-depth look at how classism and vengeance affect everyone. Watching this film made me appreciate my love for Korean cinema even more. Bong Joon Ho does a great job of highlighting the classism and selfishness in humans and uses it to show how it can be a “disease,” which “polarizes and dehumanizes people in a bitter class conflict” (Lowachee). It is a disease

because it toxic to how it affects the rich and the poor. This disease causes the rich to care for only themselves, and for the poor to struggle to survive.

According to a review by *Vidette Online*, Bong Joon-ho does a “great job captivating a greedy and mendacious family that makes you feel for them.” Another reviewer from *The Guardian* states: “Parasite isn’t just a great story; it is a great story brilliantly told.” I do agree that this film does make the audience feel for the Kim family. The first couple of times that I have watched the film, I was somewhat hoping that the Kim family would get their happy ending. Because of their unfortunate circumstance, I initially believed that they were the victims the whole time. However, the more I watch this film, I now have a different perspective on them. The film shows that the Kims are victims in a way. They are victims to a corrupt, greedy society. Yet, because of how they treated Moon-gwang and her husband, who were in the stuck in the same circumstance as them, they are not completely innocent individuals. Their parasitic, needy relationship towards the Parks was detrimental to the Parks as well. If the Kims never got themselves involved with the Parks, then tragic and violent circumstances that happened never would have occurred.

In an interview with Bong Joon Ho, E. Alex Jung says that *Parasite* “at the outset, is a black comedy about class differences well suited to our season of scams.” We see these class differences with the lighting, upstairs and downstairs shots, and by the way the characters treat each other and interact. This scam acknowledges that wealth is often created at the expense of the poor. The poor wish to be rich, and in order to become rich, another must be poor (Jung, 29). We see this with how the Kims wish to become, rich but somebody (Moon-gwang) must lose something in the process.

According to the director, Bong Joon Ho, *Parasite* resonates with so many people because of the constant feeling that society is on the brink of a social collapse. “The true horror and fear of *Parasite* isn’t just about how the present-day situation is bad but that it will only continue to get worse” (Jung, 29). *Parasite* expresses the director’s fear of present-day society’s classism, and how it affects the less fortunate.

Finally, another main reason why *Parasite* resonates with so many Koreans is because of how specific it is to Korean society. The *han* that has been brought upon by Korea’s tragic history such as Japan’s colonial invasion, and the Korean War has made Korean filmmaking visionary. It is also visionary because of its association with poverty and authoritarianism (Jung 29). Jung states that “it is less that Korean films have caught up with modern times than that modern times have caught up with Korean cinema.”

The past experiences of the Korean people have shaped the development of the country’s cinema and entertainment industry. The cruel mistreatment and oppression from other countries gave Korea a unique history to draw from as a source of inspiration. As a result, the desire for vengeance is clearly portrayed in cinema. The film *Parasite* embodies these characteristics.

*Parasite* shows the reality of the corrupt society in which we live, both in Korea and in the US, and how the wealthy treat the destitute. The film shows that classism, selfishness, and carelessness can eventually lead up to a destructive path of greed. It also displays *han*—a concept that can be best described as vengeance and is felt only by the Korean people.

We see how pent-up rancor and frustration with being mistreated by the upper class had an effect on the main character, and how this anger led to vengeance. This

rancor and grief aspect of *han* is a consequence of a persistent injustice due to asymmetric power relations or an inability to take proper means to solve the suffering (Boman 920). In *Parasite*, we saw how the Kim family felt *han* towards the Parks due to their destitute situation.

We also saw how Geun-sae showed *han* towards the Kim family, even though they are the same. Because of *han*, not only are the main victims affected by vengeance, but it also affects others around them.

In our next films, *Lady Vengeance* and *Burning*, we see exactly how vengeance leads to a path of destruction, and exactly how it affects others.

## **Chapter II: Lady Vengeance**

*Lady Vengeance* is a feminist revenge thriller directed by Park Chan-wook. It was released in 2005 and is the final film of Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*. This film is about a woman named Lee Geum-ja, who after being wrongfully imprisoned for a crime she did not commit, sets out to exact revenge upon the man who wronged her.

In an interview from *Film Comment*, Park Chan-wook said that the lack of female protagonists in the realm of commercial feature-length films is what inspired him to create *Lady Vengeance*. He says that placing a woman at the center of a film makes the film more enriched, and makes it feel more sophisticated (Topalovic). His daughter and his wife have helped him learn to view the world through the perspective of a woman and help him mature as a person.

The film received a 76% approval on Rotten Tomatoes, with the critical consensus stating, “Stylistically flashy and gruesomely violent, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* fits in nicely with the other two films of Park's revenge trilogy” (Rotten Tomatoes). *Lady Vengeance* has been nominated for many awards, and it even won the “Best Film” award at the 2005 Blue Dragon Film Awards.

The protagonist of *Lady Vengeance* is Lee Geum-ja. She is a young woman who has just been released from prison. She was imprisoned for thirteen years for a crime that she did not commit. Geum-ja falsely admits to killing a six-year-old boy named Won-Mo, and she goes to prison because she was blackmailed. Her former teacher, Mr. Baek, is the actual murderer of Won-Mo, and he makes Geum-ja take the fall for his crime. He blackmails her by kidnapping her child and threatening to kill the child if Geum-ja does

not admit to killing Won-Mo. Because of this, Geum-ja plans her revenge against Mr. Baek.

While in prison, Geum-ja has a saint-like persona and does good deeds for other inmates. She does things such as giving her kidney to an inmate who needs a kidney transplant and volunteering to take care of an inmate with Alzheimer's. Geum-ja is seen as a saint and has a reputation as being kind-hearted. Her nickname that she is referred to is "The Kind-Hearted." However, Geum-ja does not keep up this pure reputation for long while she is in prison. She kills an inmate, nicknamed "The Witch," who was a bully to the other inmates. Not long after this, Geum-ja also adopts the nickname "The Witch" and gains a reputation as someone not to be messed with ("No one could refuse the Witch any favors"—Narrator). The inmates respect Geum-ja because of this, and it leads to them helping her carry out her revenge against Mr. Baek. When Geum-ja is released from prison, she is greeted by the pastor from prison, along with a church choir. He presents her with tofu, which symbolizes, in Korean culture, purity and new beginnings for people who have just been released from prison. When Geum-ja rejects his gift and rudely tells him to leave her alone, he questions what happened to her pure persona. After leaving prison, she heads to the house of one of her fellow former inmates, Yang-hee. She feels that Geum-ja's sweet personality changed as well and confronts her about it: "You never loved me, did you? You were just pretending. You changed a lot, you used to be so sweet and talk so kindly." Geum-ja acts cold because she is obsessed with getting revenge on Mr. Baek. Yang-hee asks her, "Are you starting the plan?" to which Geum-ja responds, "No, the plan already started thirteen years ago."

Geum-ja eventually tracks down her daughter, who had been kidnapped by Mr. Baek years ago, and finds that she was adopted by an Australian couple and currently resides in Australia. Geum-ja eventually takes her daughter, Jenny with her to Korea, after Jenny threatened to harm herself if Geum-ja did not take her with her. Geum-ja goes back to Korea and meets up with another friend of hers (who had also been an inmate) named Li-jeong. Li-jeong is the wife of Mr. Baek. She plans to help Geum-ja kill Mr. Baek because Geum-ja helped her in prison by killing her bully, “The Witch,” and because she is currently being abused by Mr. Baek. When Mr. Baek finds out from the pastor that Li-Jeong and Geum-ja have been plotting against him, he beats up Li-Jeong and sends two thugs to knock out both Geum-ja and Jenny. Geum-ja kills the thugs, saving both herself and Jenny, and eventually goes to Mr. Baek’s house. While there, she sees Li-Jeong tied to a chair, severely beaten up, and an unconscious Mr. Baek, who had been drugged by Li-Jeong. While he is unconscious, Geum-ja ties up Mr. Baek and takes him to an abandoned classroom, where she threatens to kill him. As she is about to kill him, she stops when she hears his phone ringing in his pocket. She takes out his phone to see that there is a keychain on his phone containing the red marble Won-Mo played with before he died, along with other trinkets from children. Geum-ja pieces together that there were other children who died at the hands of Mr. Baek.

Geum-ja gathers the family of the victims in a separate classroom and shows them the videos recorded by Mr. Baek of him torturing their children right before their deaths. She gives the parents the option either to turn Mr. Baek over to the police or to seek their own justice by killing him themselves. The families choose the latter.

Mr. Baek is the antagonist in *Lady Vengeance*. He is a kindergarten teacher and is married to Li-Jeong, the former inmate and friend of Geum-ja. He is abusive to her and beats her when he finds out that she had been helping Geum-ja to kill him. Mr. Baek ironically hates children and only kidnaps them from affluent neighborhoods. He most likely does this because he has a hatred for wealthy people because of growing up in poverty. Geum-ja finds out that there are more children whom he murdered, because of the charms on his phone. He is later killed in retaliation by the parents of his victims.

*Lady Vengeance* centers on Geum-ja's revenge against the man who wronged her, Mr. Baek. Spending thirteen years in prison has increased Geumja's *han* against Mr. Baek. She feels *han* and a deep hatred towards him for not only making her pay for his sins but also because he took her daughter away from her. She wants nothing more than for Mr. Baek to suffer. She even has a dream where she shoots him. We first see Geum-ja's *han* against Mr. Baek when she is aggressively cutting his hair and hyperventilating. She then looks up towards the camera with wide eyes. We then see him tied to a chair, and she shoots him in his feet, to prevent his escape, and to prolong his suffering, just as he made others suffer.

Not only does Geum-ja seek vengeance, but her daughter, Jenny does as well. Jenny feels *han* towards Geum-ja because she thinks she abandoned her as a baby. She expresses her resentment toward her by telling her she wanted to get revenge on her: "When I was younger, I thought about taking revenge on you." Jenny writes a letter in English telling her how she felt about her abandonment.

Jenny: Don't think I forgive you. I think mothers who dump their kids should go to jail.

Jenny's feelings of resentment towards Geum-ja are understandable, given that she does not have a true understanding of the circumstances. As a result, she has no desire to reconcile with her mother.

The parents also seek vengeance in the film. They feel *han* towards Mr. Baek for murdering their children. We see their *han*—their grief, when they watch the snuff films of Mr. Baek murdering their children. The first physical example of this is when the parents wail as they watch these films. They wail so loudly that Geum-ja covers her ears to drown the noise out. Another example of their *han* is when one of the parents picks up a chair in rage and bangs it on the table. Watching these films invokes different and strong emotions in these parents. Their *han* is shown in stages. First, we see grief, then rancor, and lastly, rage. Their rage is shown when they take the option to torture him one by one. They know that even if they kill Mr. Baek, it will not bring back their children.

Parent 1: This won't bring back our child, won't it?

Parent 2: No.

Even though the parents kill Mr. Baek, there is still sort of an emptiness within them. They are supposed to celebrate getting justice for their children as they sit around the table and sing "Happy Birthday" while cutting cake in the bakery where Geum-ja works at but they feel incomplete. The parents then ask Geum-ja if she can find a way to return their ransom money from the killer. They then write down their account number on a piece of paper to give to Geum-ja, perhaps in an effort to achieve some atonement or redemption.

Even though the overall theme of *Lady Vengeance* is vengeance, another important theme that the director highlights is atonement. Geum-ja seeks vengeance but

thinks that she needs to pay for her sins. She is still haunted by the death of Won-Mo and feels that she is guilty of taking part in his kidnapping. She violently expresses her need for atonement when she goes to Won-Mo's parents' home and chops her pinky off. She thinks that her sins will be paid if she chops off all her fingers.

Geum-ja also seeks redemption. She seeks redemption because of Won-Mo's kidnapping and death, and it is something she feels that she has not found, and it is something she is obsessed with obtaining. We see this towards the end of the movie as the narrator states:

Lee Geum-ja made a great mistake in her youth and used other people to achieve her own goals. But she still couldn't find the redemption she so desired...in spite of this, I liked Ms. Geum-ja.

A mother—daughter relationship is an emotional and spiritual connection. In order to regain that connection, there has to be deep level of forgiveness extended and received. The person who has been hurt must see an effort at redemption and a heartfelt attempt to heal the relationship.

Geum-ja makes Mr. Baek translate the letter she wrote for Jenny, expressing why she left her, and how sorry she is. She tearfully apologizes to Jenny as she embraces her, to which Jenny accepts, as a sign that she forgives her. Jenny is able to see true brokenness in her mother. Although she initially felt her mother abandoned her and insisted, she had no desire to be reunited, deep inside she longed for the relationship she missed for so many years.

Innocence and naivety are other themes that we see in *Lady Vengeance*. Jenny, and Geun-shik, the nineteen-year-old boy who works in the same bakery as Geum-ja and

has a crush on her, both represent naivety. Geum-ja even aspires to cleanse herself, and be pure like her daughter, Jenny. We see an example of Jenny's innocence when Geum-ja explains to her that Mr. Baek killed Won-Mo.

Geum-ja: "This man killed a little boy...and I helped him."

Jenny: "Do you want me to say sorry to his mother?"

Jenny does not fully understand the impact of her mother's actions. She thinks a simple apology will fix everything. Her mother is trying to impress upon her how emotionally involved she was with Mr. Baek, and how it continues to impact her.

We see at the end of the film, Geun-shik and Jenny stick out their tongues to catch the snowflakes as it is snowing. This is an example of their child-like innocence.

At the end of the film, Geum-ja meets with her daughter, Jenny, who presents her a white cake: "Be white. Live white. Like this."

In color theory, white represents many things. It represents purity, innocence, and virginity. It represents cleanliness and being made whole again after one confesses of one's sins in Christianity. In Korean culture, it symbolizes rectitude and temperance—as in a "clean state of mind without greed" (National Folk Museum of Korea). The director uses white to exhibit the purity that Geum-ja wishes to achieve. He does it in a way in which the color appears everywhere, as if it is haunting Geum-ja. Geum-ja's face is so white that her vibrant red eyeshadow appears to be a blood-red color. We see white in the tofu at the beginning of the film (Fig. 2.1). In Korean culture, tofu symbolizes starting new after being released from prison. We see white in Geum-ja's polka-dot dress (Fig. 2.2), and white is also shown when it snows at the end of the film. White is used to

represent Geum-ja's saint personality. She is even seen earlier in the film with an illuminated saint halo surrounding her as she is praying in her prison cell.



**Figure 2.1** *The pastor presents Geum-ja with tofu after her prison release.*



**Figure 2.2** *Geum-ja is shown wearing her red and blue polka-dot dress at the beginning of the film.*

Red is a very powerful, and vibrant color with many meanings. It means love, passion, dominance, and anger. Red is seen almost everywhere throughout the whole film. The director shows Geum-ja's *han* with red. We see it in the opening credits and in different variations with her former prison mates (Fig. 2.3) that help her. It is also shown in the room that she stays in after her prison release (Fig. 2.4), as well as her clothing

(Fig. 2.5), and even her eyeshadow (Fig. 2.6). When asked why she decided to wear blood red eyeshadow, she responds: "I don't want to look kind-hearted." This is in response to the angelic-like persona she maintained in prison. Red is used in the film to represent blood, but most importantly, anger and vengeance. I really appreciate the costume design in this film. It shows how much the director wanted to capture the essence of Geum-ja's emotions. It is almost as if she is the embodiment of the color red.



***Figure 2.3 One of Geum-ja's former inmates is pictured wearing red.***



*Figure 2.4 Geum-ja is seen praying in a room that is decorated in various shades of red.*



*Figure 2.5 Geum-ja is pictured wearing a red, patterned dress in front of a red background.*



***Fig. 2.6. Geum-ja is shown wearing blood-red eyeshadow that she wears during most of the film.***

Blue is the last color that is seen in *Lady Vengeance*. It appears in Geum-ja's polka-dot dress at the beginning of the film (see Fig. 2.2), and it is the color of her winter coat (Fig. 2.7). In Korean culture, blue represents cool, feminine energy. It is yin, while red represents the yang-hot, male energy (Lin). Blue also symbolizes punishment and atonement, and we see an example of it in the inmates' prison jumpsuits (Lin).



**Figure 2.7** *Geum-ja is pictured in a blue winter coat while wearing blood-red eyeshadow.*

I think Park decided to choose both red and blue colors because they cannot exist without each other. Red and blue are in the Korean flag, in the symbol of yin and yang. Yin cannot exist without yang. Red cannot exist without blue, and in this case, red, which equals vengeance and anger, cannot exist without blue, which symbolizes death.

The colors, and the way that they are incorporated in specific scenes, whether they are in the background or in clothing, are beautiful. Park Chan-wook's cinematography for the whole *Vengeance Trilogy* is fascinating. However, this film—the final installment of the *Vengeance Trilogy* is the best one. The lighting is a key part of the film. The lighting on Geum-ja's face really displays her innocence. Besides the lighting, I really liked some of the shots the director decided to use for certain scenes. My favorite,

and perhaps the most symbolic shot, is when Geum-ja is telling Jenny why she left her. The camera zooms in as she is talking to Jenny and also holding a gun at the back of Mr. Baek's head. This shot is important because it captures all of the emotions that Geum-ja is going through: guilt, sadness, and anger.

The last half of *Lady Vengeance* is shot in two ways. There is the original one, where the whole film from beginning to end is in color, then there is the other version, which fades to black and white. This version was featured on the DVD versions. When I first watched the film back in 2019, I cannot remember if I watched the ending in black and white or its original format, but I think the black and white version is the better one. This version is better in my opinion because it really adds to the dark, cold and gothic tone of the film, especially when the parents appear. In the scene where the parents surround Mr. Baek, the director purposely used fluorescent light, hitting Mr. Baek's actor, Choi Min-sik from below to make the scene more eerie (Cashill 58).

In an article titled, *Love Your Enemies: Revenge and Forgiveness in Films by Park Chan-wook*, Steve Choe argues that the "foolishness" of retributive justice gives way to the possibility of unconditional forgiveness. In *Lady Vengeance*, Park not only portrays the theme of vengeance, but he also goes underneath the surface and shows the underlying theme of forgiveness. He shows that revenge is one of the most irresponsible impulses things to act upon. In a 2006 interview from Nerve.com, he said:

All revenge films deal with the idea that you can get even-especially when it's the most foolish thing in the world to do. A lot of films try to hide that last fact. You just get the sense that it's fun and that it's cool. But I try to put that fact right in front of the audiences. (Choe 34)

In addition, Choe states that vengeance is the desire to “get even,” and that it both perpetuates and instigates a continuous circle of anger and resentment. We see that with Geum-ja. Not only do we see how “violence begets violence” in *Lady Vengeance*, but we also see how revenge begets revenge. The main example is how Geum-ja got her revenge on the thugs that were sent out by Mr. Baek to harm both Geum-ja and Jenny, and how later it was the parents of Mr. Baek’s victims that got their vengeance. Park’s radical critique of vengeance shows that its intentional goal, purification, and atonement, will be impossible, for the act of revenge only leads to its perpetuation (Choe 42). In an interview published by [fareastfilms.com](http://fareastfilms.com), Park talks about the symbolization of the ending scene:

I wanted to convey the notion of salvation in this final installment, but I actually think this is an anti-religious film. There is a contrast between the white tofu that was given to Geum-ja at the beginning of the film as a means of purification and the cake she bakes toward the end of the film. The tofu is salvation from a supreme being, which she rejects, while the cake, after the climax, is judgment and forgiveness for herself by herself. People often ask if the film is Christian or Buddhist to which I reply, it’s Geum-ja religion. (Choe 42)

As mentioned before, Park Chan-Wook’s *Lady Vengeance* is not just about vengeance, but it is also about redemption and atonement. Geum-ja has been seeking redemption ever since she was in prison. She seeks redemption for her part in Won-Mo’s death, and redemption for giving up Jenny as a child. Director Park is saying that one cannot be fully satisfied if they act upon their revenge. In a beautiful scene where Geum-ja is

reading her letter to Jenny, and Mr. Baek is interpreting it for her in English, she explains to Jenny the true meaning of atonement:

“If you commit a sin, you have to make atonement for that sin. Big atonement for big sins. Small atonement for small sins.”

Choe mentions the scene with Geum-ja and the white cake, and it has made me look at the symbolization of this white cake in a different perspective. He says that by baking this white cake, Geum-ja produces forgiveness on her own terms, and offers it as a token of her own redemption. This whiteness is the gift of forgiveness and affirms the burdens of Geum-ja’s past transgressions, and yet is also morally pure as snow (Choe 43).

According to a review by Kelly Y. Jeong, *Lady Vengeance*, is a feminist thriller, where the protagonist, Geum-ja, pushes through her oppressed, abject, and gendered position as society’s Other, transgressing multiple boundaries to achieve her personal vengeance. It is about a mother’s quest to heal and remember these traumatic events she went through (Jeong 744). I agree with both statements. The film shows how Geum-ja is failed by an oppressive, domineering society, and the obstacles she must go through to get revenge against the man that wronged her.

In conclusion, *Lady Vengeance*, is an emotional film that shows how one can never be truly happy if one seeks vengeance. It also shows the effects that *han* has on a woman who has been failed by an oppressive society. Even though Geum-ja sought vengeance for over a decade, she still had to atone for the sins she committed. She thought that once she got her revenge against Mr. Baek, she would feel better about herself, but she did not, and still feels as if she is empty towards the end of the film. Even

though it is not said, we can tell that even the parents feel somewhat empty after getting their revenge by killing Mr. Baek. This film is something that stuck with me ever since I first watched it back in 2019, and it remains to be one of my favorite Korean films. I highly recommend this movie to people who like to watch action movies and thrillers, and I recommend watching the whole *Vengeance Trilogy* as well.

For my last chapter, I will talk about director Lee Chang-dong's 2018 film, *Burning*.

### **Chapter III: Burning**

*Burning* is a 2018 South Korean film that was directed by Lee Chang-dong. This film is about a man named Jong-su, who reunites with Haemi, a childhood friend of his, and she asks him to watch his cat while she goes to Africa. When she returns, she introduces Jongsu to Ben, a Korean man she met on the trip. The three start hanging out together, and Jongsu starts to become infatuated with Haemi, especially after her mysterious disappearance.

*Burning* is adapted from the short story, *Barn Burning*, from Haruki Murakami's 1993 book: *The Elephant Vanishes*. It is also based on William Faulkner's short story, which has the same name. However, in the film, a greenhouse is substituted for the barn, and explores class and gender, while Faulkner explores class and race in his story (Boman 927). The film won the FIPRESCI Prize at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival and became the highest-rated film in the history of Screen International's Cannes jury grid (Ben Dalton). It also won Best Foreign Language Film at the Los Angeles Film Critics Association and has been featured on many critics' top-ten year-end film lists in 2018. *Burning* was even featured on *Rolling Stone's* "Best films of the decade" list in 2019.

The first main character of the film is Jong-su. He is an average man who aspires to be a novelist, and currently lives in the city of Paju. After reconnecting with his former childhood friend, they go out for dinner, and an intimate relationship forms between the two of them.

Hae-mi and Jong-su are invited to Ben's elaborate house to hang around him and his rich friends. Jong-su seems withdrawn from the conversations between Ben, Hae-mi, and the rest of Ben's friends. He feels the effects of being a lower-class citizen and feels like an outcast whenever he is with Hae-mi and Ben, because he does not appear to be

able to relate to Ben and his rich friends. When the three of them are smoking cannabis at Jong-su's farm, Jong-su later confesses to Ben about his love for Hae-mi, which causes Ben to laugh at. Ben later tells Jong-su that he likes to burn greenhouses as a hobby: "Sometimes I burn down greenhouses. I choose an abandoned greenhouse and set it on fire. You can make it disappear... as if it never existed." Jong-su asks Ben when he thinks his next greenhouse burning will happen, and Ben says that it will be very soon and near Jong-su's house. As Hae-mi gets into Ben's car, right before they drive off, Jong-su tells Ben that he will keep an eye out for the greenhouses.

After Hae-mi's disappearance, Jong-su soon starts to suspect Ben. He tries to reach Hae-mi and starts to get worried when she does not answer any of his calls. He pleads with a landlady to let him into Hae-mi's apartment, to which she eventually does. He becomes even more suspicious when he sees that Hae-mi's apartment appears to be clean and organized. Jong-su soon starts to stalk Ben, and even goes inside a restaurant to ask him about Hae-mi after he sees his car parked outside of the restaurant.

In another incident, Ben invites Jong-su to come inside his place when he finds Jong-su parked outside. Jong-su sees that Ben has a new cat, which he did not have before. When Jong-su goes to use Ben's bathroom, he sees many feminine items inside the bathroom such as jewelry, hair barrettes, and even a pink watch which looks like Hae-mi's. These are a part of Ben's trophy collection from various women. Shortly after, Ben's new girlfriend comes over. As she opens the door, the cat escapes. Ben and his girlfriend have a hard time trying to find it. Jong-su corners the cat, and out of curiosity calls the name Boil, to which the cat responds. This incident as well as finding the feminine items in Ben's bathroom confirm Jong-su's suspicions that Ben was responsible

for Hae-mi's disappearance. In the film's climactic ending, Ben is waiting outside for Jong-su to which Jong-su finally arrives. Ben questions where Hae-mi is, as Jong-su told him that Hae-mi was with him. Jong-su then fatally stabs Ben, gets rid of his own clothes by throwing them in Ben's car, and burning it. He gets back in his car, naked, and drives away. The film then fades to black.

Hae-mi is a woman that Jong-su meets one day. When she returns from a trip to Africa, she is accompanied by Ben, whom she met at the airport. Hae-mi, Jong-su, and Ben go out to dinner, and Hae-mi suddenly cries when she tells Jong-su about a sunset she saw when she travelled. She tells Jong-su that she wants to "disappear": "I want to vanish just like that sunset. Dying is too scary, but I wish I could disappear as if I had never existed."

Hae-mi could feel this way because she has a strained relationship with her family, due to outstanding credit card debt, or for other unknown reasons.

Hae-mi and Jong-su eat dinner with Ben and his rich friends one day. When she enthusiastically tells them about the "Great Hunger" dance, Ben's friends sound interested at first. They become disinterested when she gets up to recreate the dance. The next time that Jong-su, Hae-mi, and Ben hang out together is when they smoke cannabis at Jong-su's farm. Hae-mi then gets up, takes her shirt off and dances as if she is in a trance. She then randomly cries. Hae-mi obviously has a lot of emotional baggage that continues to affect her and impact her relationships. The next and last time that Hae-mi is seen is when she drives off with Ben.

Hae-mi can be described as adventurous and as an idealist, with an unpredictable and peculiar personality. She likes to do pantomime as a hobby and shows it to Jong-su at

the beginning of the film when they have dinner. If we applied a psychological lens to her personality, she would be described as neurotic and histrionic (Boman 928). We see this when she cries at the restaurant with Ben and Jong-su, and when she cries after dancing while high. She could be histrionic because of her random and dramatized acting and dancing in front of Ben's friends. Hae-mi is also most likely depressed. We see this when she cries randomly and when she tells Jong-su that she wants to disappear like the sunset.

Ben is a rich, attractive man whom Hae-mi meets during her trip. Jong-su even likens him to Jay Gatsby (Chang). He never tells Jong-su what he does for a living, only telling Ben that he "plays." It is not until Jong-su talks with Ben, that Ben actually tells him what he likes to do for fun, which is to burn greenhouses: "...I won't get caught. The Korean police never care about those sort of things." Ben has a nonchalant attitude. This quote foreshadows Hae-mi's disappearance, and his nonchalant attitude when he meets with Jong-su in a restaurant to talk about Hae-mi.

In an interview podcast with *Fresh Air*, the actor who portrayed Ben, Steven Yeun, said that Director Lee gave him the choice of what type of character Ben would be. Steven came up with a choice of how Ben is, determining if he really killed Hae-mi or not. However, the actor decided to keep his decision and interpretation of Ben a secret. This leaves Ben's character, and the whole trajectory of the film open to interpretation. Ben displays a multifaceted personality throughout the film. He is indifferent about the impact his behavior and actions have on others, while maintaining the appearance of a stable home life.

On the surface, *Burning* is about classism. However, it is deeper than just classism. Jong-su is a product of the lower class, and we see how he constantly struggles

to support himself. He does not have a consistent job, and he works odd jobs such as shoveling manure. He is jealous of Ben because Ben is rich, has an elegant house, nice car, and gains the interest of Hae-mi. In a way, Jong-su almost feels as if he is intruding upon Ben and Hae-mi even though they are all “friends.” Ben’s interest of Hae-mi makes Jong-su jealous to the point that he disrespects Hae-mi by calling her a whore when she takes off her shirt: “Why do you undress so easily in front of men? Only whores do that.” This is an example of Jong-su’s toxic masculinity. Besides toxic masculinity and jealousy, we also see Jong-su’s obsession with Hae-mi. He becomes obsessed after sleeping with her, thinking that they have a special relationship with each other, and he later fantasizes about her when she is missing. He becomes so infatuated with Hae-mi that he even stays at her place after her disappearance.

Jong-su’s obsession escalates when he repeatedly asks Ben for Hae-mi’s whereabouts. This obsession leads to rage and ends in *han* when he stabs Ben at the conclusion of the film. These elements, classism, jealousy, and obsession led to Jong-su killing Ben. Rage is something that runs in Jong-su’s family. At the beginning of the film, he appears at a court hearing for his dad, who lashed out on a police officer and assaulted him. Jong-su has a history when it comes to rage. He confides in Ben and tells him: “I hate my father. My father has an anger disorder. He has rage bottled up inside of him. It goes off like a bomb. Once it goes off, everything gets destroyed.” This foreshadows Jong-su’s explosive and violent *han* at the end of the film where he kills Ben.

There are many other examples of foreshadowing within the film. When Ben and Jong-su are talking about greenhouses, Jong-su asks him how often he burns them, and Ben tells him that the last time he burned one was about two months ago. Ben then tells

him that it is time for another “burning,” implying that he is going to kill Hae-mi next.

We know this especially because Hae-mi is not Ben’s first victim. The feminine items in his bathroom that Jong-su finds are clues to show that there were other women he killed or made disappear before Hae-mi. He references these other women when he talks about burning down more than one greenhouse: “Sometimes I like to burn down greenhouses.” Ben’s reasoning for burning down the greenhouses is because they are old and “no one would miss them.”

There is something eerie yet fascinating about the way Ben talks to Jong-su about greenhouses, and about Hae-mi’s disappearance. The dialogue between them is very coded and is filled with both foreshadowing and metaphors. The first instance of this conversation is when Ben and Jong-su are sitting outside of Jong-su’s farm, talking about the greenhouses. Ben tells him how easy it is to burn a greenhouse down and make it disappear:

“There are tons of greenhouses in Korea. Useless, filthy, unpleasant-looking greenhouses. It’s like they’re all waiting for me to burn them down...I feel great joy.”

Ben appears to be talking directly to Jong-su about Hae-mi. If the theory that Ben is indeed a serial killer is true, then Hae-mi would be considered his next target. To him, Hae-mi is someone who would go unnoticed, and her disappearance would not gain attention, as we can tell from the “unpleasant-looking greenhouses” quotation.

The next scene is where Jong-su meets Ben at a restaurant to talk about Hae-mi’s disappearance. When Ben answers Jong-su’s questions about Hae-mi, he gives metaphorical responses that allude to him having to do with her disappearance. An

example of this is when Jongsu asks Ben what happened to the greenhouses that he told him about, but Jongsu's question can also be interpreted as: "What happened—what did you do with Hae-mi?" Ben then answers his question by saying he "burned them," which is him admitting to killing Hae-mi. He even tells Jong-su that Hae-mi "disappeared into thin air." Ben says all these things to Jong-su with a nonchalant attitude, which is very disturbing. He shows very little emotion while describing what he did. Ben toys with Jong-su because he feels that he is intellectually superior to him.

Now I will briefly analyze some of the scenes from the movie that were shot by the cinematographer, Hong Kyung-pyo, who also did the cinematography for *Parasite*. One scene that I liked featured a young boy staring in awe at a burning greenhouse (Fig. 3.1-3.2). This scene happens after Hae-mi leaves with Ben. This scene invites interpretation. It can either be Ben as a kid, being fascinated by this burning greenhouse, or it can be Jong-su, imagining burning a greenhouse as a little boy.



**Fig. 3.1. A young boy stares in awe at a burning greenhouse.**



***Figure 3.2. A silhouette of a young boy is shown as he stares in awe of the burning greenhouse in front of him.***

The film also captured beautiful stills with a blue setting. The first still features a foggy outside scenery with a barely visible object in the center background, presumably a tower (Fig. 3.3). The next still is of a countryside at dawn, where we see a lake, with trees and other shrubbery in the midground (Fig. 3.4). This still of the countryside is probably right outside the farm where Jong-su lives. The last still is a close shot of Jong-su looking off into the distance with a barely visible greenhouse in the background (Fig. 3.5).



***Figure 3.3. This shot features a blurry, barely visible landscape in the morning.***



***Figure 3.4. This beautiful shot features a beautiful landscape out in the countryside where the main character, Jong-su lives.***



***Figure 3.5. Jong-su stares out into the open with a greenhouse behind him that appears to be out of focus.***

I think the reason the cinematographer decided to capture these stills during dawn is because the blue of the sky, adds to the eerie tone of the film. As mentioned before in the *Lady Vengeance* chapter, blue symbolizes death in Korean culture. These blue shots might represent Ben's imminent death.

Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* magazine calls *Burning* a “stunning, slow-build thriller that will knock the wind out of you.” It “ignites themes of family, class, envy, crime, and rough justice,” and is a “hypnotic and haunting film that transcends genre to dig deep into the human condition (Travers).” I think this is a wonderful and accurate way to describe *Burning*. This film is more than just about rage, but explores the class struggle, crime, and a burning jealousy which is displayed through our characters. The end leaves unanswered questions and is something that sticks with you till the end.

Critic Justin Chang says that in *Burning*, “Lee explores the boundaries of what can and cannot be seen.” He also says that it is “the most absorbing movie I’ve seen this year, as well as the most layered and enigmatic.” *Burning* is an enigmatic film that captivates its audience with its deep meanings, symbolism, and metaphors.

In a sense, the title *Burning* refers to the burning of the greenhouses in the film. However, it can also refer to Jong-su’s obsession with burning things, such as when he burned his mother’s clothes after she abandoned him and his family; and it can also refer to Jong-su’s burning rage. *Burning* shows the effects that can lead a victim to feel *han* when faced with classism struggles, jealousy, and obsession. This wonderful film is filled with deep, metaphorical messages. However, it is a film that must be watched multiple times, in order to understand these messages. *Burning* is open to interpretation. We do not know how much of the film is real and how much is fantasized. We do also do not know what happened to Hae-mi, and if she was killed by Ben or not. The audience does not know if Jong-su killed Ben, or if it was a revenge fantasy of his. The big mystery adds to the beauty of the film. It is a film that I keep coming back to, and I always find

something in it that I had not discovered before every time I watch it. I recommend this movie to people that enjoy dramatic mysteries with noir elements to them.

### **Conclusion, *Han*, and Final Thoughts**

*Han* is an emotional and spiritual feeling that is deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of Koreans. It is something that is hard for non-Korean people to understand. In these films that I have analyzed, these directors displayed characters who were put in situations that led them to seek revenge against the oppressive society in which they lived. These deep feelings and emotions that the characters go through paint a visual picture of the *han* in Korean society and helps Westerners empathize their feelings to a simple understanding. In *Parasite*, we see the oppressive and destitute situation that led to both the Kim and Park families' downfall. In *Lady Vengeance*, we root for the main character, Geum-ja, to seek her revenge against the man that put her in prison, and for her to mend her broken relationship with her daughter. In *Burning*, we seek to understand how the effects of living in the lower class take a toll on a person's emotions with both Jong-su and Hae-mi. Jong-su continually struggled to control the emotions that resulted from living in poverty and being considered less than his colleagues. Hae-mi's struggle

was with feeling unimportant. She tended to make up stories to sound more interesting in an effort to get attention.

These films have impacted my love for Korean cinema as well as increased my knowledge of Korean culture and society. I first began this project as a research paper for one of my Honors classes in Fall of 2020, and I finally decided on analyzing the theme of vengeance in Winter of 2021. I was also inspired by my Introduction to Film class I took in 2019, when I studied abroad in Korea, in which we watched Park Chan-wook's *Vengeance Trilogy*. Korean culture is something that I have been passionate about, especially with Korean cinema. This research project has been challenging but very rewarding. I have learned much about Korean cinema, and this project has created a desire in me to learn even more. I have also learned how to construct a thesis and the time and effort required to do so. As I look back on this experience, I realize that I spent more hours of research than I thought. I have a new respect for conducting research and writing. I am thankful for the assistance provided in completing this thesis. I am proud I have completed it and I am grateful for this opportunity.

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