

# The Portrayal of Women in Park Chan-wook's Films— Using *Decision To Leave* as an Example

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## Abstract

The “patriarchy” that has developed throughout Korean history, and human civilization as a whole, has lasted for millennia. This systematic, structured and unjust system of male domination over women has conferred a higher status, value and privilege on men. These institutions and behaviours form the conceptual framework of sexism, and at the heart of patriarchy is the maintenance and rationalisation of male privilege and power.

Several of Park Chan-wook's highly representative women's films in recent years have stood up to observe society from a woman's point of view, creating a new image of women. This essay takes director Park Chan-wook's latest work, *The Resolution to Break up*, as an example, and discusses the image of women in Park Chan-wook's films. Park Chan-wook creates a special and tense female image with the highly contrasting character of Song Seo-rae. Furthermore, he uses this unique female figure as a leading narrative to create a film that highly combines romance, thriller and suspense. As well as the main character Song Seo-rae, a typical oriental woman, she shows the consciousness of women's self-awareness in modern society, facing up to her emotions and making choices in her relationships, who is no longer a traditional female figure who can be swayed by her emotions.

**Keywords:** Park Chan-wook, *Decision To Leave*, female image

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## 1. Introduction

For a long time in the history of Korean civilization, it has been centered around male dominance, adhering to the ideology of “male superiority and female inferiority.” In Korean cinema, although there are creations centered around women, due to the traditional ethical order in Korea, these works inevitably carry traditional male-centric discourse that defines and regulates “women.”

With the development of society, feminist ideologies and the advocacy of female

subjectivity have gradually awakened and permeated various fields, including the realm of film art. In South Korea, many female directors have started narrating stories through their own writings and self-expression, using women's emotions. Directors like Lee Tae-hyung, who directed *Art Museum by the Zoo* and *The Way Home* depicted delicate and affectionate female characters. Documentary director Bae Jong-dae, who directed *Ardor* portrayed the love and hate in the inner world of women involved in extramarital affairs. Many male directors have also begun to observe society from a female

perspective, shaping new female images. Works like Gu Jae-yong's *My Sassy Girl* and Jo Jin-kyu's *My Wife is a Gangster* feature strong-willed female protagonists, breaking away from the traditional notion of "female weakness and male strength," shattering the previous gentle and quiet positioning of women. Films marked by a distinct feminist imprint have brought a breath of fresh air to audiences, not only causing a sensation in the Korean film industry but also quickly gaining popularity across Asia. The long-established image of a gentlewoman rooted in people's minds has been overturned, receiving enthusiastic support from a large number of audiences, especially female viewers. This reflects the rise in the status of women and the awakening of female consciousness in Korean cinema.

The film *Decision To Leave* directed by Park Chan-wook, was released on May 23, 2022. It is a romantic love mystery film. Currently, it has been screened in over twenty countries, grossing a total of \$20 million globally, with 1.9 million viewers in South Korea.<sup>1</sup> Since its release, the film has won more than ten awards, including recognitions at the Cannes Film Festival and the Busan International Film Festival. Chinese actress Tang Wei achieved the Best Actress award at the Korean Blue Dragon Awards for her role in this film, becoming the first foreign actress to receive such an honor at the Korean Blue Dragon Awards.

In Park Chan-wook's early works, there was initially only a tendency towards feminism. In the film *Joint Security Area*, the original protagonist, an investigator, was male, but Park intentionally made this character a female, initiating the narrative from a female perspective and emphasizing her brave and resolute nature. In an interview, Park mentioned, "After finishing *Oldboy*, I realized that the only character in the film without any vested interest was that female character. She was the only female character in the movie yet was excluded from the truth. This made me uncomfortable and prompted me to create *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*."<sup>2</sup> *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* revolves around the female character Lee Geum-ja, showcasing her oscillation between angelic and demonic personas, commanding

dominance in relationships between the sexes. It portrays her as determined, ruthless, and full of vengeance, narrating her meticulously planned revenge story. Subsequently, female characters in Park Chan-wook's films emerged in extremely assertive and independent postures. Even in his preceding work, *Lady*, Park portrayed a remarkably compelling female figure. Park depicted the abuse faced by Lady, both sexually and psychologically, through a stark lens. He utilized a dark and gloomy visual style alongside an extensive use of long takes to present the suppressed and savage nature of humanity, portraying two gripping stories of female revenge.

## 2. Main Part

In its hundred-year history, Korean cinema, though it has garnered attention from the world for only about thirty years, understanding its present and foreseeing its future necessitates tracing its origins and assessing its historical context. Films that manage to connect history, present, and future are rare, and *Decision To Leave* adeptly bridges old cinematic masterpieces with new creations while also paying tribute to the often-overlooked first generation of female directors in Korean history. The director subtly pays homage to the 1967 classic art film *Mist* meticulously planned and developed by director Hwang Hye-mi, through the use of film interludes and shooting locations. *Decision To Leave* holds a clear progressive stance regarding gender consciousness. This film is also the only one directed by a man but nominated for the "Bechdel's Choice 10"<sup>3</sup> award [Figure 1].



**Figure 1.** Films nominated for 'Bechdel's Choice 10' award

<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/3HN28Xt> 2023.05.09

<sup>2</sup> October 26, 2016, Park Chan-wook's interview was featured in the online magazine 'Interview' [link: <https://bit.ly/42AnoYv>]. May 9, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Bechdel's Choice 10 is an award introduced by the Directors Guild of Korea (DGK) aimed at promoting gender equality awareness in films. The list of nominees comprises domestic Korean films released in theaters from July 2021 to June 2022.

Bechdel refers to the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel. It stemmed from her work titled *The Rule* in 1985, which sharply highlighted the dominance and subtlety of the “male-centered” narrative in films, serving as a starting point to advocate gender equality on screen. Subsequently, the Bechdel Test, derived from this comic content,<sup>1</sup> gradually became recognized as a benchmark for gender equality in cinema, widely used by various film institutions. In the 2018 annual report on the film industry, the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) introduced this gender equality test for the first time. The results showed that only ten commercial films (25.6%) met the standard, revealing unconscious gender biases among the creative groups. As a film directed by a male, *Decision To Leave* being nominated for the “Bechdel’s Choice Top 10” film list is a testament to its egalitarian gender stance and intricate portrayal of female characters. Therefore, this article will begin by examining the portrayal of the female character Song Ruilai in the film. This analysis will serve as a starting point to explore the narrative function of female characters and investigate the societal realities reflected by these female portrayals.

This article will commence the analysis by focusing on the female character of Song Ruilai in the movie, aiming to explore the narrative function of the female image and delve into the societal realities reflected by these female representations.

### 2.1 Analysis of Female Images in *Decision To Leave*

*Decision To Leave* follows detective Zhang Haijun (played by Park Hae-il), who investigates a murder case in the mountainous region and encounters the deceased’s wife, Song Ruilai (played by Tang Wei). Ruilai displays no signs of excitement about her husband’s death and her behavior starkly contrasts with that of grieving relatives, leading the police to suspect her as the prime suspect. As Haijun interrogates and monitors Ruilai, he finds himself gradually becoming intrigued by her. Despite being accused of the crime, Ruilai starts making bold moves towards Haijun, leading to a romantic involvement between the two. A suspect

concealing the truth and a detective seeking to doubt the suspect become entangled in the complexities and struggles of love. Park Chan-wook’s portrayal of the female character Song Ruilai in the film is indeed a unique and compelling persona. Outwardly serene and unassuming, she carries a hidden obsession within. This obsession brings her pain and loneliness, exuding an aura of restraint. She is delicate and sensitive, yet when her obsession is touched upon by the outside world, she displays remarkable strength.

Song Ruilai was born and raised in China, working as a nurse. When her mother fell seriously ill, Ruilai, wanting to relieve her of pain, administered four pills to help her peacefully pass away. However, by doing so, she violated the law. To escape legal consequences, she illegally immigrated to South Korea. After drifting at sea for several days and nights, Ki Doo-su witnessed her in her most wretched state but still agreed to marry her, helping her to stay in Korea. Little did he know that this was the beginning of another nightmare.

Ruilai is an incredibly courageous and responsible individual. She held deep affection for her mother, yet she made the difficult choice to respect her mother’s decision and help her end her suffering through euthanasia. This act transcended moral boundaries; some might call it reckless, while others might view it as remarkably bold and courageous. As a nurse, she might have been aware of the consequences of her actions. However, for the sake of her mother, perhaps after grappling with inner conflicts, she proceeded nonetheless. She willingly took on the label of “matricide,” crossed seas, and left her home. This reveals her decisive nature—unrestricted by norms or conventions, bold yet astute—showing her extraordinary character.

Song Ruilai is a character of stark contrasts. In the first case, she demonstrates astute planning, calm rationality, and remarkable composure during interrogation by law enforcement. Her psychological resilience and ability to disguise herself are exceptional. In the second case, she reads people well, manipulates the situation, and orchestrates her husband’s murder through the hands of another, nearly ensuring her own escape without consequences. On one hand, she exhibits extreme indifference towards life, such as the lives of her two husbands, enabling her to act decisively and efficiently. On the other hand,

<sup>1</sup> The comic’s female protagonist mentioned that finding a movie she wants to watch is challenging because it must meet the following three criteria: 1) The film must feature at least two named female characters; 2) These female characters must have a conversation; 3) The conversation’s subject matter should not involve males.

she displays utmost tenderness and consideration towards Haijun. For instance, upon returning home and sensing the pungent smell of blood, she worries that it might discomfort him while investigating the scene. She immediately begins cleaning the bloodstains at the crime scene, completely disregarding the potential consequences it might pose for herself.

Song Ruilai is a woman brimming with vitality and possessing a strong sense of agency. With her intelligence and wit, she had initially managed to excel amidst interactions with men, escaping dire situations and securing a chance for herself. However, upon encountering Haijun, she embarked on an irreversible path.

At the end of the film, Song Ruilai's act of self-sacrifice and self-immolation reaches a climax. First, we can discern the initial motive behind her self-destructive behavior. Haijun once asked her, "Why did you come to Lipo?" Ruilai's internal response was, "Maybe I came to Lipo to become your unsolved case, to have my picture plastered on your wall, causing you sleepless nights, just thinking about me."

Then, considering her direct motive for choosing to end her life. If Haijun were to uncover the truth once again, he would inevitably face another agonizing choice: would he, like last time, continue to compromise his principles and pride to protect Ruilai? Or would he reach a breaking point, fulfill his duty as a detective, and bring Ruilai to justice? If Haijun chooses the former, he will undoubtedly plunge back into the depths of agony. If he chooses the latter, it will utterly shatter Ruilai's romantic myth. He will no longer shield her as he did before, eradicating the way he once showed love for her. Neither of these outcomes is what Ruilai desires. What she truly yearns for, Haijun cannot provide, nor can she attain it. It's akin to her response to Haijun's question about why she married such a despicable man—because upright men like Haijun would never marry her. Hence, Ruilai chooses an extreme path, ending her own life.

Another female character in the film—Haijun's wife—is also worth noting. She, with a background in the sciences, keeps track of their intimacy, calculating the frequency of lovemaking per week. This might seem like a mockery of scientific love, but it actually mocks the modern advocacy for a rational and scientific lifestyle. For Haijun's wife, using various

scientific data to guide marital life is the most logical and rational approach: intimacy can enhance cognition, even when they dislike each other, consuming pomegranates to maintain female hormones, drinking turtle extract to sustain male hormones against mid-life depression, and so on. There is a lack of emotional communication and understanding between the couple; she doesn't permit Haijun to smoke and consistently exerts strong controlling behavior by intervening in his habits and pushing him to consume various supplements, creating a stark contrast to Song Ruilai.



**Figure 2.** Comparison between scenes of Haijun with Song Ruilai and his wife

One of the most typical scenes (Figure 2) is when Haijun's wife strictly prohibits him from smoking and even demands him to take supplements to help him quit. However, when Haijun is with Ruilai, he assists her in ashing her cigarette, and their understanding seems more like that of a long-married couple.

### 2.2 Narrative Function of Female Images in *Decision To Leave*

Since his debut with *The Moon is What the Sun Dreams of*, Park Chan-wook has delved into the desires intrinsic to human nature and societal reactions to those desires, particularly under the estrangement or discrimination within social systems and groups. This exploration has extended across his films, from *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, *Stoker*, *The Little Drummer Girl*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Films produced and released on the OTT service platform Watcha.

to *Decision To Leave* all centering narratives around female protagonists. This choice to portray women in leading roles has transcended the habitual focus on male characters within films, delivering a meaningful shift. By revealing the desires of these female characters openly and showcasing their explicit life purposes, these films have placed women at the forefront of the narrative, effectively becoming the central figures of the story.

The director affirms female desires by portraying characters with strong desires in female narratives. However, this depiction doesn't necessarily present a world reconstructed to pursue gender equality or offer a genuine insight into contemporary women's lives. Nevertheless, Park Chan-wook specifically mentioned that his films after *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* are led by female characters, stating that he has always pursued a 'female narrative.' In this regard, Park Chan-wook's films concerning women seem to aim at showcasing certain themes through a particular cinematic form rather than engaging in discussions solely centered on the concept of a 'female narrative.' So, what might be the reason behind his insistence on using the term 'female narrative' to discuss his films?

Similar to this viewpoint is Alison Butler's analysis of 'female film' and the distinct aspects of 'female narrative.' 'Female film' refers to films produced by women, films engaging in dialogue with women, or films signifying women. It represents films made by a minority group that inherently carries a sense of resistance.<sup>1</sup> Alison Butler places women within the realm of a minority group, considering issues related to women. However, within patriarchal and male-centered historical and power structures, women's rights have not been respected, and they haven't been easily integrated into the societal mainstream. This perspective reflects a politically motivated way of thinking.

If that's the case, then Park Chan-wook's 'female narrative' diverges from the context of the aforementioned 'female film.' His films about women merely introduce female protagonists as the primary driving force behind events or the

central figures in unfolding stories. From *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* to *Decision To Leave* the multifaceted desires and actions of female characters, the establishment of goals for female figures, and the director's perspective and consciousness have undergone changes.

Park Chan-wook previously created a series of films centered around unconventional and peculiar female characters, including a female prisoner accused of being a kidnapper, a woman reading disturbing stories at a book club, a servant attending to women, a girl engaged in incestuous relations with her father, a double agent, and a woman enamored by vampires seeking to become one. Following this trend, in *Decision To Leave*, the protagonist is a Chinese woman, often considered a second-class citizen in our society. The narrative structure of *Decision To Leave* primarily revolves around the love story and separation of Rui-lei and Hai-jun. Thus, it is challenging to perceive Rui-lei from a standpoint of stark gender discrimination or view the narrative as centered excessively around male perspectives, as they genuinely engage in a narrative shaped from a place of mutual equality and concern for one another.

*Decision To Leave* is a film that intricately weaves elements of romance, thriller, and suspense together. Xu Lai, a woman who arrived in Korea through irregular means following her mother's last wish, smuggles herself into the country. Despite her illegal entry, she manages to settle relatively stably in Korean society through the help of her husband, Qi Daoshu, an immigration officer. To escape her husband's violence, she kills him, leading her to encounter Detective Hai-jun as a suspect in her husband's murder investigation. The movie follows the aesthetic of a crime drama, portraying Xu Lai as a murderer rarely seen in reality. Park Chan-wook's choice to merge the genres of crime investigation and romance in *Decision To Leave* serves a purpose distinct from a traditional romantic narrative, aiming to reimagine classical notions of love in a modern context. His experimental approach to filmmaking in this movie appears to be both extreme and straightforward.

Compared to previous mainstream films that openly depicted gender inequality, *Decision To Leave* presents a narrative that is more difficult to reconcile because the story is packaged as a romantic myth. Park Chan-wook's strategic approach, observed in his prior films, often leaves a profound impression by the end of the

<sup>1</sup> Allison Butler. (2011). *Women's Cinema: Screens Across Boundaries*, Communication Books, translated by Kim Sun-ah and Cho Hye-young. p. 2.

Kim Hee-jin. (2022). *Changing the Way Women's Narratives Unfold in Park Chan-wook's Films*. Reprinted in *Reflection and Representation*, 3, p. 37.

story with hidden meanings. The film sacrifices the hardships faced by outsiders and lower-class women in society for the completion of a myth that convinces the audience of the validity of a romantic relationship between a righteous man and a mysterious woman. Therefore, *Decision To Leave* disregards sincere reflection on women in order to prove the existence of self-awareness through a man's love.

### 2.3 Social Realities Reflected by Female Images

The South Korean society is traditionally rooted in Confucian ideology, where women have often been portrayed as typical Eastern females who adhere strictly to traditional morals. However, recent South Korean cinema has shown a diverse range of female images, moving away from the singular portrayal of obedient, gentle, and traditional Eastern women. Instead, there has been an emergence of gender role-reversed female characters. Gender role reversal refers to "the overturning of the dominant and controlling position of male characters in films, with new, empowered female characters becoming the primary protagonists and actual controllers of the storyline."<sup>1</sup>

In films such as the popular Asian youth comedy featuring the *Sassy Girl* the avant-garde film showcasing the alienated "saintly woman," and the urban romance presenting the independent "intellectual woman," these female characters no longer serve as mere appendages to male characters; they present themselves in a completely new light to the audience. However, "the character portrayals in films not only signify the features of a fictional individual's life but also point to a deeper reflection of the internal thoughts that generate these characters. Rather than merely unfolding a narrative that dissects character images, it is more of an examination of the philosophy of character production."<sup>2</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote the feminist masterpiece *The Second Sex*, positioned all women throughout history as "the second sex": "The reference point used to define and distinguish women is men, while men are not defined and distinguished by women because she is the incidental and the subordinate, the

second sex relative to the primary subject, the other."<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, women were positioned as "the other," confined to a mundane yet distinctly unequal domestic life. However, with societal advancements, traditional roles for women have evolved. Women no longer see marriage, family, and husbands as the sole purpose of their lives. They have stepped outside the domestic sphere, pursued higher education, built careers, sought their own happiness, and explored lifestyles that suit them. This conscious rejection of the inherent status quo for women is vividly reflected in contemporary South Korean cinema.

In the movie *Decision To Leave*, the female protagonist, Song Ruilai, is not a gentle and harmless lotus flower-like character. She has a grasp on her emotions and can perceive men's inner thoughts. The entire plot is actually narrated through Song Ruilai's leadership. The male lead, Junhui, is consistently in a passive position. In fact, every time he is cautious or snoops, Song Ruilai is aware. Junhui appears to be a diligent, family-oriented detective, but his core essence is only pierced by a heightened state of life when a crime occurs. This is when he possesses a pure spiritual existence that breaks out from the confines of the present moment. His pursuit originates from his pride, the sense of duty as an excellent detective, and the mental strain of bearing various cases for an extended period. In traditional male-centric beliefs, the elderly, children, and women are considered to be the objects to be protected by men. They exist as vulnerable groups in society. Their lives are deemed to be under the patronage of male dominance, existing within a man's world without fully owning their authentic lives and world. Moreover, it is not possible for women to engage in equal dialogue with men from the standpoint of men's societal status. In a certain sense, women, in a male-dominated society, apart from the most fundamental right to survive, are essentially in a state of being voiceless.

Therefore, Park Chan-wook aims to convey richer information and broader global themes while exploring themes of human nature. This is because when women survive in such a societal state, the fierceness and independence they display in making emotional choices often

<sup>1</sup> Qu Dexuan. (2006). On the Strategy of Gender Role Reversal in Korean Contemporary Films. *Contemporary Films*, (4).

<sup>2</sup> LAN Aiguo. (2004). *Chinese Films in the Post-Hollywood Era*. Guangxi Normal University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. (1998). *The Second Sex*. Translated by Tao Tiezhu. China Books Publishing House.

resonate more profoundly and captivate. The stirring and captivating essence comes from the awakening and resurgence of women within a patriarchal society, from the resounding force of women as part of societal existence breaking free from a state of being voiceless within a male-dominated society. It also stems from the despairing resistance and resolute desolation depicted by female characters in the film, which bring about a more penetrating vitality to life.

Park Chan-wook decided to extensively employ female characters to elaborate on his rich topics. He aims to comprehensively illustrate his profound understanding of themes regarding human nature and explore and contemplate common societal and humanistic topics as much as possible within these rich narratives. In South Korea, a society where male dominance prevails, Park Chan-wook chose to represent his cinematic artistry through female characters. His goal is to present a beautifully compassionate love story through movies centered around female characters. Moreover, he seeks to articulate his comprehension and cognition of themes regarding human nature through the portrayal of these female characters. Simultaneously, he aims to focus on the existence and discourse of female subjects within South Korea's survival rules entrenched in a male-dominated society. His filmic artistic creation stems from a sense of humanistic care and compassion for women who, in almost a voiceless state, are subjects of concern in the face of the survival rules imposed by the patriarchy.

Furthermore, in the past few years, South Korean society has undergone accelerated globalization, experiencing the influx and influence of various Western cultures. The Western feminist movement has gradually seeped into South Korea's native culture. With this cultural shift and the ongoing development within South Korean society amidst globalization, various artistic ideas and Western progressive cultures have subtly influenced the country's people. Over time, this cultural infiltration and permeation have accumulated in the hearts and minds of all South Koreans. Ultimately, through the penetrating and pervasive influence of culture, it has gained favor among the populace.

### 3. Conclusion

Renowned feminist theorist Laura Mulvey once pointed out, "Film offers a number of possible

pleasures, one pleasure in the cinema is 'scopophilia,' voyeurism in certain circumstances, the pleasure of looking is itself source of pleasure, just as in reverse, being looked at can also be a source of pleasure."<sup>1</sup> Regarding these gender role-reversed female images, there can be two explanations: one is to provide viewers with fresh aesthetic objects, satisfying the viewers' "scopophilia," and the other is feminist assertiveness. I would rather believe that the directors' original intention leans towards the former. In my view, the emergence of these gender role-reversed female images is simply a requirement and inevitability of societal development, aimed at diversifying and altering the audience's aesthetic tastes, rather than having any substantial meaning for the development of feminist theory.

The female characters in Park Chan-wook's films, including Song Ruilai from the movie *Decision To Leave*, are elusive, like uncatchable ghosts. They harbor secrets, not to mystify but to hold secrets that can tear you apart, devour you, or drown you. With a siren-like allure, they attract the audience, yet they also explore the brutal undercurrents hidden beneath these secrets. In Park Chan-wook's movies, compared to men who tend to be timid and cowardly, women are more likely to make decisions regardless of consequences. Whether it's the determination to destroy demons or become one, to fall in love with their own kind or to kill them, women are less afraid of being eliminated compared to men. They either embrace elimination or determine its significance themselves.

In the film, the male and female protagonists unexpectedly meet and attract each other, gradually touching upon ethical and legal taboos within what seems to be an asymmetric relationship (pursuer and pursued, gazer and gazed at). Throughout the narrative, Song Ruilai is the one who is more proactive and courageous. Her final act of walking towards the sea precisely completes the reversal of the unequal relationship between the two, leaving Hai Jun with an unsolvable puzzle and an eternal wound, even subverting the conventional "man pursues woman" romantic pattern we are familiar with. This is also why the enchanting allure of female characters in storytelling can be so compelling.

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), London.

In Park Chan-wook's films, the contrast brought about by revenge, violence, and taboo elements like incest, filled with a sense of ritual and spectacle, can effectively, to a certain extent, undermine the deeply rooted family ethics and the often hypocritical "gentleness, propriety, and humility" prevalent in East Asian societies. The imaginative direction, transitions, and editing further fuel this rebellious sentiment, providing a thorough release for these emotions.

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