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The "Good" Mother's Self(ish)-Sacrifice: *Violence, Redemption, and Deconstructed Ethics in Bong Joon-ho's Mother (2009)*

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Abstract

This paper examines the permutations of ethical norms within the "good" mother- figure in Bong Joon-ho's Mother (2009) in relation to South Korea's historical relationship with redemption. As a symptom of anxiety that stems from a particularly oppressive modern history of political subordination, civil division, and economic struggle, South Korea has exhibited a pattern of retrospection—repetitions of communal overcoming and remembering—to combat national "failures" and redeem national sovereignty. Similarly, the "good" mother's condition of possibility is maintained by a recurrent loop of responsibility that obligates not only perpetual selflessness, but also never-ending guilt. Considering the "good" mother's entrenchment in the parameters of nationhood, the film becomes an ideal site to interrogate the formation and viability of her sacrificial and redemptive moral framework. Looking beyond defining maternal identity within the scope of the national and historical, the film offers an opportunity to investigate how, reversely, this "retrospective" identity may also work to outline, or limit, the conditions of her ethical conscience. Bringing to the fore the "good" mother's affective dependency within guilt and the subsequent moral twists, the paper presents the possibility of breaking from the totalizing nature of her self-sacrifice.

Keywords: sacrifice, redemption, guilt, ethics, national identity, motherhood, South Korean film, Bong Joon-ho

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Introduction

Mother's blood-splattered face fills the screen as she mutters with disgust, "You're not even worth the dirt in my son's toenails" (Fig. 1). Her expression remains distant yet determined, even as she wipes a speck of blood from the corner of her eye. It is only when she notices the pool of blood oozing from the man's bludgeoned head that she regains awareness and shifts to a more human response. She screams and starts to frantically mop up the blood. The panic does not last long, however, as she quickly returns to her stony glare and slips back, both physically and mentally, into her role as the *good* mother.

Figure 1. Mother commits a violent sacrifice in Mother (Bong Joon-ho, 2009)
Source: CJ Entertainment.

This scene from Bong Joon-ho's aptly titled *Mother* (*Madeo*, 2009), exemplifies the film's narrative theme of transgression. The director presents the moral archetype of the good mother-figure only to upend her pre-determined identity and utilize its tropes, not as demonstrations of proper behavior, but as justifications for gross misdeeds and violent indiscretions. The act of bludgeoning a man to death, in of itself, is immoral in any circumstance. But, when the violence is committed by a doting mother

whose sole motivation in life is to protect her son, the murderous deed enters an ethical gray zone. She does not commit these acts of her own accord, but is compelled to do so by her pre-ordained title of *mother*. Her maternal duties trump her individual morality and in the end, any action, whether moral or immoral, performed under the umbrella of motherhood is considered an act of selfless sacrifice.

This paper examines such permutations of ethical norms within Bong's *Mother* and juxtaposes the film's narrative themes against the backdrop of South Korea's historical relationship with redemption. As a symptom of anxiety that stems from a particularly oppressive modern history of political subordination, civil division, and economic struggle, South Korea (hereafter, Korea) has exhibited a pattern of retrospection—repetitions of communal overcoming and remembering—to combat national "failures" and redeem national sovereignty. Similarly, the *good* mother's condition of possibility is maintained by a recurrent loop of responsibility that obligates not only perpetual selflessness, but also never-ending guilt. Considering the *good* mother's entrenchment in the parameters of nationhood, then, the film *Mother* becomes an ideal site to interrogate the formation and viability of her sacrificial moral framework, precisely because it operates within the same network of redemptive retrospection. Looking beyond defining maternal identity within the scope of the national and historical, the film offers an opportunity to investigate how, reversely, her *retrospective* identity may also work to outline, or limit, the conditions of her *ethical* conscience. I argue that the inherent reversals within the good mother's pre-determined subjecthood actually possess the capacity to not only transform her selfless sacrifice into an act of violent redemption, but also, conversely, mistake that violence for a performance of sacrificial motherhood. Bringing to the fore the *good* mother's affective dependency within guilt and the subsequent moral twists, this paper presents the possibility of breaking from the totalizing nature of her self-sacrifice. Ultimately, by deconstructing one of the nation's most foundational moral pillars, I hope to not only expand the understanding of Korean subjectivity, but also highlight the importance of considering ethical identity, apart from national identity, within an increasingly dissonant world order.

Retrospective Legacies and the Good Mother's Ethical Identity

The image of the *good* mother has long occupied the social and cultural fabric of Korea. While much of the parameters of ideal Korean motherhood is rooted in neo-Confucian principles, the canonization of the *national maternal* was in part an extension of Korea's search for modern subjectivity during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Choi 2009).[1] For this reason, it is important to first understand the discursive construction of Korea's national identity in order to situate the filmic representation of the "good" mother's "retrospective" identity.

Korea's modern history is a history of identification. The question of what it means to be Korean is a matter of constant inquiry among historians and sociologists alike. Despite continuing debates on the origins of Korean nationhood and identity, many recent scholars have stated that the ideological conception of the Korean *nation* and the identification of its people (*minjok*) occurred in conjunction with, and in some ways in reaction to, modernity (Em 1999; Schmid 2002; Shin 2006).[2] As collective opposition to the loss of state, citizenry, and thereby national identity during the period of Japanese colonization, Korean intellectuals of the time tasked themselves with articulating a uniquely *Korean* subjecthood that did not require physical boundaries or an active government. By taking inspiration from native foundational myths (i.e., Dangun), they conceived of an "autonomous subject for the nation"—an "essence of Koreanness" (*minjokseong*)—that not only toted civilization and enlightenment as its guiding principles, but also

1. The *national maternal* is most often invoked with the ideological moniker, *wise mother*, *good wife* role (*hyeonmo yangcheo*). Choi approaches, "the ideology of 'wise mother and good wife' as a modern construct with significant influence from Japanese colonial gender ideology and the import of Western domesticity and modernity" (Choi 2009, 3).
2. The debate regarding the origins of Korean nationhood and the historical foundations for its nationalism has been cogently outlined in Shin (2006, 4–8), Em (1999), and Park (1999). Historiographical trends within the study of Korea, ranging from nationalist, post-nationalist, post-colonial, to modernist (or postmodernist), are discussed. Henry Em's more recent book, *The Great Enterprise* (2013), further elaborates on the discourse regarding the historiography of modern Korea over the past two centuries.

negated colonial sovereignty (Schmid 2002).[3]

It is important to emphasize here that while this paper will involve Korea's national or collective identity, its primary concern does not lie in its definition, but rather in its *direction* of construction. I argue that this modern conception of the Korean "autonomous subject," as a product of redemption from the very start, paved the way for a specific self-reflexive trajectory within the Korean conscience, ultimately affecting the *good* mother's own moral platform. Both discursively and historiographically, modern Korean history's successes are often juxtaposed against its so-called failures. In addition to modernity coming hand-in-hand with colonization, specifically by the Japanese Empire between the years of 1876–1945; global alliances bring about a fratricidal war and national division in the 1950s; and economic growth during the postwar period is noted to have resulted from decades of military dictatorships from the 1960s to the late 1980s. As a result, the already *redeemed* autonomy of Korea's modern subjecthood was repeatedly perceived as being lost or under threat of being "taken away" by a slew of past iniquities, persistently reinforcing the need to retroactively reify its value. As such, each historical moment of crisis, from the Korean War (1950–1953) and the subsequent era of Cold War imperialism to decades of military dictatorships and civil unrest, called upon a collective effort to retroactively fix the past and thereby (re)affirm the strength of the Korean spirit and its impact on the preceding moment in history. Put simply, Korea's modern construction of national identity has been greatly informed and maintained by a platform of redemptive retrospection.[4]

For example, after the Korean War, which further intensified the need to emphasize "wholeness," subsequent political leadership introduced a

3. As an extension of this essence, many of these same intellectuals constructed and employed a metonymic image of the ideal women—*wise mother*, *good wife* (*hyeonmo yangcheo*)—that would emerge as a new social and political platform and serve "an integral part of the transformative experience Koreans had in their pursuit of modernity and national sovereignty" (Choi 2009, 5).
4. Focusing primarily on the Japanese Other, Jerry Won Lee (2014) also discusses how the rhetorical construction of South Korean national identity is inextricably linked to a process of "othering."

tradition of authoritarian rule that lasted well into the late 1980s. While there is no question that these imperialistic and militaristic regimes under Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan demanded physical, political, and spiritual sacrifices from the nation, it is also important to note that citizen reaction to these decades of political strong-holding also exhibited a desire to redeem from past failures. Despite the nation's rapid economic growth, especially during Park's reign, student activists interpreted Korea's post-war experiences with modernity as detrimental to the nation's collective conscience. Calling for the end to authoritarianism and foreign imperialism, they began what is called the *minjung* movement, or the people's movement, to recover what they saw as Korea's lost subjectivity from the post-colonial narrative of negative and failed modernity. By articulating and then opposing a number of totalizing "others," such as communism, state oppression, and American intervention, the *minjung* practitioners or intellectuals (*undonggwon*) aimed to resituate the past's negativity formed through passivity to a rebellious and active agency capable of transformation (Lee 2009). Successively, this retrospective framework to redeem was further cemented during the democratic era, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. Called the "IMF period" by Koreans because of the state's bailout of US$58 billion by the International Monetary Fund, this economic breakdown demanded a collective act of sacrifice in the form of not only gold, but also national diligence to bring the nation back from the brink of economic ruin (Cho and Kim 2002). Ultimately, such unfortunate histories solidified the nation under a common goal to recover, and that common goal further intensified the need for a nationalized identity fueled by a unified and retrospective conscience.

Such collective efforts to retroactively "fix" the past, I argue, is where the confluence of nation, historiography, and identity seep its way into affecting the formation and practice of local ethics. In line with Benedict Anderson's contention that the origins of nationalism are based on the "imagined" conceptions of a limited and sovereign community, in combination with Melissa Brown's depiction of national identity as reliant on "constructed narratives of the past" (what she calls 'narratives of unfolding'), I emphasize the preconditions of moral trajectory set forth by its entrenchment in the

parameters of nation-building (Anderson 1983; Brown 2004).[5] As the historiography on the construction of Korea's modern national identity shows, various stages of Korea's "imagined" national narrative rely on establishing, relocating, or protecting the nation's essential subjecthood. Each time the *minjok* is redeemed, the nationalistic narrative builds and compounds, eventually converting it to what Grinker calls "myth" imbued with sacred character (Grinker 1998). Invoking its "totemic" value in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, some have even equated nationalism's moralistic (and sacrificial) structure to religious sectarianism (Marvin and Ingle 1996; Hutchinson 2006). While I will not go so far as to say that Korea's *minjokseong* is a totem or that its nationalism is a religion, it is important to point out the moralistic hold any form of collectivized society can enact on its inhabitants.

So, how does nation shape ethics? As Kwame Anthony Appiah states, "Identities make ethical claims because—and this is just a fact about the world we human beings have created—we make our lives *as* men and *as* women, *as* gay and *as* whites" (Appiah 2007, xiv). While one's individualism is defined and presented through choice, our *social identity* is almost always affected by greater powers at play, effectively determining and limiting the spectrum of choice in the first place. If one identifies as a Korean, for example, by virtue of this social (and national) identity, this person is given the option to accept or reject certain choices—food, dress, interest in shared histories, etc.—pertaining to a variety of values defined by that specific society.

Put another way, apart from the obvious stipulation that my morality

5. In her discussion of Taiwan's process of identity negotiation, Melissa Brown (2004) describes how ideologies of a solidified and unified nation undermine singular and particular experiences of belonging or departing. She studies the complex mechanisms at play in Taiwan's construction of the national and asks the question: "Is Taiwan Chinese?" Her answer is in the negative and the basis for this lies in her characterization that identity is primarily informed, not by culture or ancestry, but social experience. Distinguishing between "constructed narratives of the past and the totality of what is actually known about past events" (2004, 5) she labels the former as "narratives of unfolding," which places identity negotiation within the realm of ideology and politics, thereby forbidding variability and flexibility.

shapes my identity, it is important to recognize the reverse contention that identity itself can very much mold and frame how I make decisions and relate to my surroundings. So, if Korea's societal and national history has been informed by cycles of redemptive retrospection, would it not be safe to say that such contours of Korea's shared historical identity may, in turn, determine the direction of an individual's ethical trajectory?

This push-pull between such shared social (and historical) subjectivities and particular moralities is exactly where the good mother finds herself. Although the representation of the mother-figure should be differentiated from the actual real-life practice of mothering, the grand paradigm of good motherhood has often disregarded the individual mother and positioned her within the confines of mother-as-institution or social discourse. E. Ann Kaplan, in her study of representations of the mother in American popular culture, attempts to separate her discussion of the "historical mother" and the "discursive mother," but ultimately agrees that society's understanding of her role will always emerge as reaction to or rejection of more powerful hegemonic modes of subjectivity (Kaplan 1992). Similarly, Korea's filmic treatment of the maternal has historically been ambivalent at best. Perhaps influenced by a greater Confucian and colonial discourse regarding gender roles, maternal films starting from Korea's Golden Age of the late 1950s mostly delegated the mother-figure to past pre-conceived morals of the selfless mother paradigm. While condemning any form of active motherhood outside the family, these dramas highly valorized maternal sacrifice as a means of upholding the nation's collective values.

Soyoung Kim, for example, defines South Korea's *yeoseong* film (woman's film) as a cinematic category that "inevitably deals with the colonial past, which provides a matrix of unresolved anxiety that spills over into the present" (Kim 2005, 190). While discussing the film *Bitter but Once Again* (dir. So-yeong Jeong, 1968), she investigates how the "fallen" maternal figure was used to antagonize the Korean female's anxieties regarding the changing times and the resulting shift in class structure. Kathleen McHugh, too, argues that such Golden Age heroines remain trapped as paradigmatic emblems

representing the failures of the nation as a whole.[6] The mother's eschewing of her sacrificial duties for the sake of her economic independence, for instance, embodies the nation's subjugation by modernism and thereby its regret and guilt for losing track of tradition. The mother in *Madame Freedom* (*Jayu buin*, Han Hyeong-mo, 1956), for example, becomes the focus of this irresolvable ambivalence, inhabiting the place of what both is and is not South Korean. Through her, "the film plays the domestic against the global, with the nation hiding behind her figure" (McHugh and Abelmann 2005, 37). In addition, Eun-ah Oh further complicates the maternal figure by looking at the "monster-mother" in Korean horror films but still finds the prevailing influence of Confucianism's "celebration of self-sacrificing mothers and the sacred nature of motherhood" (Oh 2013, 69). In combination, the mother, regardless of her *good* or subversive performance, is never more than a gap or gray zone within a larger system of social discourse. Her subjectivity is rarely located individually or internally, but is always found in relation to the master paradigm of sacrificial selflessness. As this rhetorical subject formed to reflect and uphold the nation's moral framework, the *good* mother has become not only representative but also an extension of Korea's inherent *essence*.[7] And as its extension, she is also imbued with an intrinsic *goodness* that is perpetually vulnerable to outside threats, prompting a continuous effort to redeem it when it is lost. In other words, the *good* mother's *identity*, entrenched in the parameters of a *retrospective* nation, works to determine her *morality*, thrusting it into the realm of sacrificial redemption.

Films, such as *Madame Freedom*, that perpetuate the so-called "melodramatic mode" rely on the continuation of certain ethical narratives: The good remain good even through suffering, while the bad are wrong precisely because they embody the general evils of the world.[8] Such films

6. McHugh and Abelmann (2005) define the Golden Age of film as taking place between the years of 1955 and 1972.
7. Kelly Jeong (2006, 2013) discusses a similar trend within the "nationalized" patriarch.
8. Peter Brooks (1976) defines the "melodramatic mode" as a construct to reveal the "moral occult" of the real world hidden within the gestures and emotions shown in metaphoric narratives.

operate under strict binaries that leave little room for moral ambiguity. But Mother does not continue this tradition. Instead, *Mother*, in her never-ending quest for an absolute and impossible selflessness, demonstrates the *good* mother's moral paradox. The film portrays Mother's condition of possibility as governed, not by her inherent *goodness* as one might assume, but by an inescapable loop of guilt and responsibility that demands continuous retrospection. Her unconditional love, rather than signal a love with no bounds, works to indicate and delimit the very conditions of her unconditionality. Her devotion remains atemporal, illogical, and most of all, never completely fulfilled. In following, Mother's inevitable failure to perform this conditional unconditionality, in turn, demands a perpetual cycle of redemption that can only end in violent sacrifice. Required to persistently overcompensate as a way to meet impossible expectations, the *good* mother's retrospective identity shapes the direction of her ethical foundation.

Mother's Selfish Sacrifice

Mother is a murder-mystery narrative that follows an elderly single mother on her quest to prove her son's innocence. Perhaps out of guilt for causing his mental disability after a botched murder-suicide attempt, Mother is completely selfless when it comes to caring for her son, Do-joon. Her quiet life as an herbalist and unlicensed acupuncturist is harshly interrupted when Do-joon becomes the primary suspect for the murder of a teenage girl and is placed in prison. Determined to prove his innocence, Mother decides to investigate the incident herself, leading her to eventually visit a potential witness. But rather than confirm her son's innocence, the old man provides proof that Do-joon is in fact the actual killer. In a moment of pure rage and protective instinct, Mother bludgeons the man to death and sets fire to his workhouse. Just when she is about to lose all hope, she learns that the police have apprehended a new suspect and visits him in prison. Despite knowing that his confession was coerced and inaccurate, Mother decides to sacrifice her morals once again for the sake of her son, allowing the innocent boy to

take the blame. The film's ending shows Mother at a station, waiting with Do-joon to board her leisure tour bus. Just before she is about to leave, Do-joon slides a scorched tin box across her lap, scolding her for leaving such valuables for anyone to find. Mother recognizes the box as her acupuncture kit and looks up at Do-joon in horror as she realizes that he must have found it among the ruins of the workhouse fire and was now fully aware of her murderous sacrifices. Sitting quietly on the bus, Mother carefully takes out a needle from the tin, lifts her skirt, and jabs her upper thigh. After a moment of silence and now seemingly blind to her past misdeeds, Mother slowly stands up to join the dancing crowd.

The film's moribund setting in rural Korea with its seedy and destitute inhabitants only adds to the tragic plotline. No stranger to social commentary, Bong Joon-ho often employs themes of criminal injustice, poverty, and societal dysfunction in his films. Having gained international attention through films such as *Memories of Murder* (*Salin-ui chueok*, 2003), *The Host* (*Gwoemul*, 2006), *Snowpiercer* (2014), and most recently the Oscar-winning *Parasite* (2019), Bong is often noted to appropriate and rework common genre conventions, "using them as a framework for exploring and critiquing South Korean social and political issues" (Klein 2008, 873). In line with such interpretations of his work, readings of Mother's violent transgressions have focused mainly on her relationship to the elements of patriarchy represented throughout the film. Mother's violence is made inevitable by the male-dominated society and "is effectively pardoned through the (re)constitution of the patriarchal family" (Abelmann and Sohn 2013, 35).

Ji-yoon An, for example, reads Mother's "extremization" of maternal instinct as not only conforming to "motherhood cultivated and fostered by patriarchy," but further reinforcing the contemporary prevalence of that very ideology (An 2019). Michelle Cho, specifically invoking the "generic" signification of Kim Hye-ja (the actress playing Mother) as her own genre, also discusses how her activation of a "fantasy of idealized maternity" highlights the dangerous effects of a national ideology centered on the

preeminence of the family (Cho 2014, 188).[9] And Sungjun Yi argues that Mother's transformation to murderer ('from mother to murder') expresses Korean society's need to re-evaluate its understanding of motherhood (Yi 2013). To further engage with these readings, which envisions Mother's excessive display of maternal instinct as a product of or reaction to dominant social norms, I would like to direct attention to the *good* mother's *inner* workings to reveal not only the imbalance of such social predeterminations, but also and more importantly the inherent paradoxes of redemptive sacrifice itself. By placing ethics at the forefront of my reading, I bring attention to Mother's transgression of moral boundaries in order to expose the inevitable nature of her transgression in the first place.

Figure 2. The opening scene from *Mother* (2009)
Source: CJ Entertainment.

As if caught in a loop, *Mother* begins and ends with the same scene: Mother dances carelessly, first in an empty field and then on a crowded tour bus, with a haunting expression on her face (Fig. 2). This visual choice to repeat the beginning mimics the film's narrative theme that focuses on a cyclical return

9. Kim Kyong-Ae (2010) also discusses Kim Hye-ja's face and treats it as a "psychological space" actively depicting Mother's unstoppable spiral into violence.

to self-sacrifice. Mother's retrospective bind lies in her inability to escape the boundaries of motherhood that is infinitely selfless and thus, perpetually inadequate. This disjunction between the mother's ultimate mission and the impossibility of ever performing that goal to completion creates a narrative in which Mother's selfless love not only justifies and condones a violence *for*, but also facilitates a one-sided and thus immoral relationship *with* her child. Reinforced by a nationalized narrative mandating eternal selflessness, the good mother is obligated to perpetually redeem her past inadequacies through compounding acts of inevitable sacrifice.

The issue lies in the retrospective binds of sacrifice itself. According to Moshe Halbertal, the act of sacrifice holds "binding power" to manufacture obligation and control the direction of future moral action (Halbertal 2015, 99). Reminiscent of how national origin narratives implicate future generations to uphold the sanctity of the initial act, any performance of sacrifice exhibits a teleological imperative that engenders retroactive meaning-making. What is interesting about this pattern is that over time, the value of the original object or person—the recipient of the sacrifice—rather than self-manifest, is retroactively imbued with meaning by the act itself. In other words, the act of sacrifice constitutes both the giver's transcendence (as in, he is made good through sacrifice) and the receiver's value (he is worth sacrifice in the first place). Sacrifice, then, can manufacture morality through repetitive replications of even more sacrifice that work to reaffirm and strengthen the meaning of the previous act. And because sacrifice is always self-justified through its very designation as a performance for the "sake of an other," the act is often manipulated to reversely and pre-emptively imbue value to its cause or intent, regardless of its actual moral implications. Within the film, Mother's selfless sacrifices *for the sake of* her son fully employs these reversals to foment an immoral mother-son relationship that not only perpetuates a never-ending cycle of guilt and redemption within the maternal, but also necessarily maintains the ensuing inferiority of the dependent child. Put simply, the mother's pre-determined conditions of selflessness or self-sacrifice, in effect, provides a platform for violence, that is both cyclical and inevitable.

The first source of violence caused by the selfless maternal lies in

the imbalance and thus inequality in the relationship between giving-mother and receiving-son. The act of giving, or even giving-back, is seen as an expression of moral humanity and thus the foundation for an ethical relationship. While reciprocity within the marketplace is a legal expectation, it becomes a moral duty between two individuals. As Marion states, "In the three cases, under the imprecise (and confused) names of gift, exchange, and sacrifice, the same economy of contract obtains: I bind myself to you by abandoning a possession, *therefore* you bind yourself to me by accepting it, therefore you owe me an equivalent item in return" (Marion 2011, 75). In order to separate the "gift" of sacrifice from its exchange value without losing its significance in the first place, the receiver must recognize the gift as such, while at the same time, the giver must shed her attachment to it completely. Put another way, the gift must be received anonymously. By being relegated to a solely receptive role, however, the receiver is forbidden from acting on his moral duties to reciprocate and thus, becomes unable to contribute to the relationship. On the other hand, the giver's sovereignty, by virtue of the receiver's debt, is further accentuated. This imbalance induces humiliation within the receiver and provides cause for a violent reaction against what the receiver sees as an asymmetrical and exploitative relationship.

As per the previously outlined "good mother" paradigm, a child's default position within the mother–son dichotomy is already designated to receive, rather than give. *Mother*'s son-character, Do-joon, is rendered even more helpless, however, by his limited mental capacity. He receives, not only because he is the son, but also because he is incapable of performing any other role. This inability to join the gift exchange as an equal participant, forces subservience and dependence; it diminishes his effectiveness as a moral human who is able to express gratitude or remorse, even after performing acts of immorality. Mother, on the other hand, is able to fully control the relationship by maintaining her son's passive receptivity.

Figure 3. Mother stares at her son while he relieves himself in Mother (2009)
Source: CJ Entertainment.

The film portrays this immoral relationship through Mother's everyday sacrifices that serve to continuously infantilize her son and thereby exaggerate her selflessness through his utter dependence. Towards the beginning of the film, for example, Mother chases Do-joon around with a bowl of herbal medicine in hand (Fig. 3). Do-joon expresses annoyance and fusses over taking his daily dose, until he finally stops to relieve himself against a wall. In a move that exemplifies his subservient and dependent position, Mother stares down at her son's penis as she holds the bowl against his lips. Her hierarchical positioning from this type of one-sided giving continues until it is finally solidified through the ultimate moral sacrifice. While her jailed son is literally incapacitated from practicing any form of reciprocity, Mother commits murder for his sake and demonstrates the extent of her maternal love.

The second source for *selfless* violence lies in Mother's need to demonstrate her maternal duty through such increasingly vicious methods. As mentioned before, the *good* mother's condition of possibility lies in her ability to exhibit and practice infinite and unconditional love. This *condition of unconditionality*, however, by its very definition, is a contradiction in terms. Mother's inability to fully meet her *selfless* requirement creates an insurmountable level of guilt, which in turn perpetuates her need to

continuously seek redemption. Mother can never give enough, and so her ensuing guilt forces her to cyclically redeem. And in the case of the film, her redemption is practiced through an act of murder, a literal sacrifice, for the sake of her son, thereby forcing her within a loop of retroactive justification.

The film narrativizes this cycle of guilt and redemption and also presents a distinct point of origin for its beginning—namely that Mother is responsible for her son's current state of mental disability. When Do-joon was a child, Mother fed him pesticides before taking some herself as a means to escape destitution. As a result, the self-inflicted quality of Mother's guilt transports it to the symbolic realm, in which redemption is not achieved through actions towards the son, but through punishments directed towards the self: Mother's guilt demands atonement. Within the realm of atonement, the victim's (Do-joon's) right to enact retributive punishment for the crime is replaced with the aggressor's need to punish oneself. But, since retribution against the self is impossible, a substitute offering for and of the self must be made. And so, Mother atones for her sins by making a sacrifice to her son, while at the same time, working to achieve redemption for herself in the process.

Mother's first redemptive attempt to locate a sacrificial victim for her atonement fails. Blindly assuming her son's innocence, Mother looks to place blame on Jin-tae, a low-life character that has taken Do-joon under his wing. Determined to find evidence that could implicate him in the crime, Mother sneaks into Jin-tae's house but is disrupted by his return. Clutching a "bloodied" golf club, Mother hides behind a curtain and watches Jin-tae and his girlfriend have sex until they fall asleep. When Mother submits the golf club as evidence, however, the police discover that the "blood" is actually lipstick and Jin-tae had been with his girlfriend at the time of the murder. Soon after, Jin-tae confronts Mother and forces her subjugation in a stark scene, where Mother kneels down in front of a topless and hyper-masculinized Jin-tae to ask for forgiveness.[10] In a sudden turn of events, Jin-

10. Ann Meejung Kim (2016) reads this scene as indication of a past sexual relationship between Mother and Jin-tae. She situates Mother's sexualization as mechanism to disorient traditional representations of motherhood.

tae accepts Mother's monetary bribe and begins to help in her investigation, essentially aiding the search for his replacement and Mother's sacrificial victim.

With Jin-tae's help, Mother discovers that the murdered girl, Ah-jung, had been prostituting herself in exchange for rice to feed her grandmother suffering from dementia. After obtaining Ah-jung's cell phone, which contained pictures of all her sexual partners, Mother recognizes one of the men as the neighborhood junk collector. When the man reveals the truth—that Do-joon is the real killer—Mother bludgeons him to death, returning us to the scene introduced at the start of this paper. And so, Mother finally finds her opportunity to sacrifice *to* her son. As opposed to Girard's "scapegoat mechanism" in which persecutors must remain unconscious of the victim's innocence, a paradox lies within sacrificial atonement. The entire process of atonement depends upon the open knowledge of the victim's innocence (Girard 1988). Only when the sacrificial object is innocent and worthy of sacrifice, will the process of atonement be complete (Halbertal 2015). In other words, Mother's murderous act does not meet the requirements of her redemptive return to a truly selfless motherhood unless her sacrificial act involves an actual risk on her part. In lieu of her physical self-sacrifice, Mother must present a substitution that is equally valuable. Her sacrifice requires sin rather than morality, and in turn, her act of atonement begets further atonement.

It is at this point that Mother demonstrates the film's third instance of *selfless* violence: Mother's morality is ironically justified and bolstered by her immorality. It is important to note that Mother's initial sin, ensuing guilt, and attempt to alleviate that guilt through atonement have all been self-inflicted. While her physical offering of an innocent victim can act as a substitute *for* the self, a symbolic offering manifested through suffering can substitute the need for punishment *of* the self. This atonement through self-inflicted suffering is the foundation upon which self-sacrificial martyrdom is formed. Within this element of redemption through self-victimization lies the ultimate reversal that connects the act of self-sacrifice with its inherent aptitude to promote violence against morality itself.

After Mother is finally convinced of her son's guilt, the police detective

delivers some shocking news. Do-joon is to be released because one of Ah-jung's sexual partners had come forward and confessed to the crime. On their way to the police station, the detective explains that the new suspect had Ah-jung's blood on his shirt and admitted to having an intimate relationship with her. Knowing full well that the blood is from Ah-jung's frequent nose-bleeds, Mother feigns ignorance and insists on meeting the suspect. Mother soon discovers that the wrongfully accused boy has Down syndrome and asks, "Where are your parents? You don't have a mother?" Upon realizing that this boy is not that different from her own, Mother commits the ultimate betrayal to the sanctity of *good* motherhood: she sacrifices a substitute, not of herself, but of her own son.

Although Mother is able to justify her murder by equating it to an act of sacrifice *to* her son, the ultimate immorality of this next sacrifice further compounds her guilt and expands her failure to be a *good* mother. Ironically, however, guilt possesses more than this capacity to bind and immobilize, but in fact acts as an "instrument of reversal" that can enable a flip in the aggressor-victim dynamic and thereby re-grant Mother her lost morality. This process of redemptive self-victimization is achieved by Mother equating her guilt with suffering-as-punishment. Her guilty suffering not only acts as further atonement, but also presents proof of Mother's morality in despite of, as well as resulting from, her justified violence. In other words, Mother may have sacrificed to compensate for her lack of *goodness*, but on the flip side, her act of sacrifice and her very willingness to perform it despite its immorality may be what indicates and creates her goodness in the first place. She does not feel guilty because she is a *good* mother, but her very act of feeling guilt denotes her fulfillment of the role. Once Mother considers herself to be "suffering" enough, she regains footing within morality and becomes free to resent and even blame her son, the person she sees as the source of her pain.

Conveniently, this reversal of roles between aggressor and victim does not require a genuine display of suffering or self-sacrifice. Her acknowledgement of the inhumanity of her actions alone is enough to carry her acts of violence to the sacrificial dimension and redeem her righteousness. While Mother may atone by committing a sacrifice of a

substitute, she only achieves full redemption as a *good* mother when she is righteous enough to sacrifice her morality itself. Only a *good* mother would risk her morality for the sake of her son and only a redeemed mother would feel guilt even after performing such a *selfless* act. Mother's violent atonement grants her the right not only to further violence, but more importantly to see herself as a sacrificial victim in her own right. Thus, the impossible nature of Mother's unconditional role leads her to seek redemption through a repetitive and perpetual cycle of self-sacrifice in order to fulfill her duty as the *good* mother. But, as the films shows, the *good* mother does not perform sacrifices for morality, but in fact, insists on sacrifices *of* it. Mother's selflessness, rather than perpetuate self-sacrifice for the sake of, actually works to accentuate a self-victimization in spite of her responsibility for her child. In other words, Mother's *self*-sacrifice transforms to a *selfish* sacrifice.

Figure 4. Do-joon gives back Mother's acupuncture kit and returns her sacrificial gifts in *Mother* (2009)

Source: CJ Entertainment.

The ending scenes depict Mother and Do-joon sitting at a bus-stop just before she is about to go on a trip tailored for the retired and elderly. With a concerned look, Do-joon offers Mother advice as he slides her scorched metal acupuncture kit across her lap. "You shouldn't leave this kind of

thing just lying around. What if someone else had found it?" he whispers (Fig. 4). Mother's expression turns from confusion to pure horror, as she realizes that Do-joon has discovered her violent acts of atonement. The hierarchical relationship, in which Mother was the only one empowered to give, breaks down as Do-joon is finally able to offer his gift of silence. With this equilibrium, the necessarily *selfless* duty of the maternal crumbles. Since her son has also sacrificed his morality for the sake of his mother, her own previous acts of "sacrifice," committed in the name of selfless motherhood, can no longer be designated as such. Mother must finally confront her acts of violence for what they are; she must come to terms with her selfish motherhood.

Transgression and Ethical Emergence

> "I always try to look for another side to that which we always praise or worship something for— like seeing the dark side of the moon. We tend to regard the maternal instinct as being wonderous, holy and noble. But there must be another, darker side to it. That's the sort of twisted approach that I took."—Bong Joon-ho (Bong and Bell 2010, 24)[11]

Although he does not refer to it directly, Bong Joon-ho, in an interview with *Sight & Sound* magazine, identifies *Mother*'s theme within the parameters of moral transgression. Recognizing the *sacred* character of motherhood, especially within the Korean context, the director sought to release, or at least antagonize, the bonds keeping Mother in such an absolute and universal place. When asked if he had a "wish to make any comment on life in present-day Korea," Bong replies, "If you had to be strict about it, *Mother*

11. In an interview with the Korean film magazine *Cine21* that has now become infamous, Bong Joon-ho also made this comment about *Mother*'s transgression, "Mother is actually a film about sex. The characters are divided between humans that can have sex and humans that can't. Kim Hye-ja's character is also sexually constrained at first but then enters a sexual realm. The previously dry mother who seemed to have no connection to that world is moving into the moist world" (quoted in J. Kim [2019, 1], translation my own).

is set in the present… However, the past is all mixed up into it. … I wanted to break away from territorial [and temporal] boundaries" (Bong and Bell 2010, 25).

Such themes that juxtapose moralistic universals against a critique of the state of contemporary society is greatly reminiscent of Korea's own experience with modernism.[12] In a span of about thirty years, Korea has positioned itself as one of the most economically developed nations in the world. Korea's sudden emergence into the politics of modernity and industrialization, which Kyung-Sup Chang has referred to as "compressed modernity," has undoubtedly affected the social *and* moral structure of the nation that once touted homogeneity and tradition as its founding principles. Authors, such as Chang and Gi-Wook Shin, have commented on the schisms that globalization, urbanization, and democratization has brought to the fabric of Korean society (Shin 2006). Focusing mainly on the transformation of the family, Chang laments that one of the unfortunate side effects of rapid modernization is that it has degenerated "traditional" familial values into a sort of "familial egoism" that prevents development of the social, and in some ways moral, elements of the Korean community. Calling Korea's current state a "situation of *accidental pluralism*," he attributes the nation's societal disorganization to the inadvertent mixing of indigenous values and "Western" institutions without proper harmonization (Chang 2011). The generational dissonance incurred by the rapid succession of shifts in sociocultural patterns is so great, in fact, that some scholars have dubbed Korea's version of modernity a "quasi-modernity" that exhibits a "mixture of heterogeneous and conflicting institutional and cultural programs, with native Korean, Chinese, Confucian, Japanese, American, and European elements" (Hwang and Lim 2015, 87).

Cultural theorists, such as Frederic Jameson and Lauren Berlant, have spoken to *postmodern* society's tendency to rely on misguided perceptions of the present as a way to extend the current era's fractured belonging. While Berlant disagrees with Jameson's contention that postmodernism is

12. So Jeong Moon (2010) also reads Mother as allegorically depicting Korea's shifting familial values during the neoliberal age.

marked by a "waning of affect," instead attributing the era's disorientation to the "waning of genre," both theorists agree that previous attachments to rigid structures of historical and moral expectation no longer hold in the current age (Jameson 1990; Berlant 2011).[13] When taking into account Korea's already fragmented, and perhaps even "incomplete," experience with modernity, this spread of postmodernism, whose influence has become unavoidable in this global era, makes Korean society doubly impacted. Accustomed to anchoring itself to a unified narrative of the past, the Korean conscience is in danger of becoming aimless when history and even memory itself becomes unreliable. As a result of its retrospective moral traditions, South Korean society, in its current day, finds itself bombarded by the immediate ramifications of what Jameson calls, a "crisis of historicity." Postmodernity's merciless demands for a destructuring of the ontological subject—the *I*—threatens Korean national identity's protection under a collective *we*.

These moralistic shakes caused by the clash of the modern and the postmodern are well-demonstrated by the tenuous conditions of contemporary motherhood, embodied by the shifting subjectivities of the Korean woman herself. As Haejoang Cho notes in her study on the transitions of Korean women from the colonial period to postmodernity, female subjecthood, in three generations, experienced as much "compression" as did the society she inhabits. Moving from the "motherly woman" to the "modern wife" and finally to the conflicted postmodern daughter, who is caught between her mother's greed (*yoksim*) and her own self-realization, the Korean woman is read as a subject in desperate need of intervention from dominating familial and universal values (Cho 2001). In

13. Lauren Berlant states that the postmodern predicament is defined by a state of "crisis ordinariness" in which society has lost the ability to apprehend the true state of its surroundings because it has accustomed itself to modes of survival that obfuscate the present impasse. Her term "cruel optimism" articulates an affective structure that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (2011, 1). While I do not fundamentally disagree with this contention, I find it inappropriate for the Korean context because of the nation's tendency towards critical retrospection rather than anticipatory optimism.

conjunction with this burgeoning of female autonomy in the postmodern age, Korean women, and especially mothers, have adjusted their system of care to compensate for neoliberal demands. As a result, they have been exposed to enormous societal critiques that label their motherhood as excessive and overbearing.[14] It would seem that while the requirements of the *good* mother's sacrificial subjecthood remains intact, the environment surrounding the actual practice of her identity has shifted dramatically. Still required to uphold long-standing familial values, all the while juggling added responsibilities that come with the changing times, the contemporary *good* mother is caught between moral expectation and circumstantial reality. Judged for her failures to perform impossible conditions of being and caring, she continues her commitment to a system of redemptive retrospection that may not be entirely suitable for the rapidly shifting sociocultural background.

Mother's references to the *good* mother's *nationalized* identity is by no means overt.[15] But the subtle overtones of universal expectation, much like those experienced by the contemporary "real" mother, do serve as entry points for her ethical dissonance.[16] Mother's extensive portrayal of her inherent capacity for selfish, rather than selfless, sacrifice interrogates the *good* mother's precarious moral positioning and drives her to the edge, where she may finally transgress her retrospective identity. In order to perform transgression, one must first locate the limit. The film's stark ending unveils the *good* mother's "limited" condition of impossibility. Upon locating the constrained boundaries of her retrospective (and sacrificial) identity,

14. So Jin Park (2010) discusses neologisms, such as "helicopter mothers," that contemporary mothers have been exposed to as neoliberal maternal subjects.
15. Geum-dong Kim (2010) examines these subtle "layers of meaning" within *Mother* and attributes each character as representing the tragedies of Korean modern history, such as Japanese occupation, North-South division, democratization movements, and foreign imperialism.
16. As the director himself states, "From the very beginning, I was most interested in portraying the mother as a dark destructive figure—not the typical gentle maternal representation… Simultaneously, although it is dark, I wanted people to think, 'I would do that,' or 'My mother would do that.' I needed the universality to be there, despite the extremity of the situations" (Soares 2010).

Mother chooses amnesia as the only alternative to once again entering a pattern of redemption for the past. Mother's choice to use her son's *gift* to forget and effectively erase her sins acts as a fitting tool to break her cycle of *selfless* violence. This drastic choice to forget, however, is not exactly a solution and actually perpetuates her immorality. Perhaps the director presents his audience with this ending not only because it is narratively convenient, but also because it is the only end that will actually put a stop to Mother's repetition of guilt and sacrifice. In a radical attempt to make her look forward, rather than behind, the film presents the audience with the only conclusion still in play.

Ultimately, this is why the audience is left with a bitter taste in its mouth. Not only have we lost our familiar moral pillar, but we have been denied a conclusive ending. While the filmic Mother can choose amnesia, we do not possess a magic needle. Like Mother, we are anxious and ill at ease, but at the same time, unlike Mother, we become contemplative, giving way for introspection to take the place of retrospection. This is how transgression identifies the threshold and works to surpass it. Bong Joon-ho himself states, "You can learn a lot about a person by pushing them to the limit" (Chang 2017).[17] And so, the film takes its audience to the breaking point. Known identities are shattered and practiced moral horizons are expanded. The retrospective bind is identified and comfort zones, within history and memory, are displaced in order to make room for the unknown. And while the unknown is uncomfortable indeed, at least now, the future, rather than the past, is finally in contention.

17. This comment was made by Bong in reference to both Mother and his next film, *Snowpiercer* (2014).

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