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**Two 33-Year-Old Women:
Minka Stoeva and Kim Jiyoung Across Space and Time**

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Abstract: Comparative analysis is conducted between the Bulgarian film “A 33-Year-Old Woman” (1982) and the Korean film “Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982” (2019), as well as the Korean novel (2016) on which it was based. The focus is on the parallels and the differences between the artistic realizations of the protagonists which share the same age, the same gender, the same parent status (mothers of daughters). I explore how images were constructed which claim common validity for certain social and historical conditions. The aim is to identify the common and the specific phenomena and processes depicted in two different and distant cultures in two different historical periods in two completely different sociopolitical systems (Bulgaria in 1981/1982 and South Korea in 2015/2016) through works of narrative art that have provoked exceptionally broad social response and debate. Intercultural issues are seen through the prism of feminist discourse in two different periods. The tumultuous public reactions to the three works of art prove their artistic relevance and their high historical value as documents of their own time.

Keywords: comparative analysis, contemporary Korean literature, Bulgarian cinema, Korean cinema

Introduction

In October 2016 a Korean novel was published that became a bestseller and was generally praised by literary critics. It quickly became one of several of Korean books in the first two decades of the 21st century that were considered not just good literature but also sparked wide public debates. These books were eventually translated in foreign languages and received wide international recognition across the world. Virtually all these Korean books were written by women writers. In most of the cases they were translated into English by women translators; the translators often being of ethnic Korean origin as well. Two leading examples of such books were “Please Look After Mom” (2009) by Shin Kyung-

sook, which sold more than a million copies in its first ten months, and “The Vegetarian” (2007) by Han Kang, which eventually was translated in many languages, including Bulgarian [1] and became a huge international sensation. The English translation of “Please Look After Mom” by Kim Chi-young won the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize. The English translation of “The Vegetarian” by British translator Deborah Smith won the 2016 Man Booker International Prize and later became probably the most discussed and analyzed English translation of a Korean literary work in Korea, both academically and popularly.

The 2016 novel was written by Cho Nam-Joo and its English translation “Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982” by Jamie Chang, a leading Korean female translator, was published in 2020. The novel became the first Korean novel after “Please Look After Mom” that sold more than a million copies. The commercial success of the novel was indicative of the growing awareness of gender issues in South Korea. It also demonstrated that the interest in socially engaged works of art is growing. The critics praised the candid and unapologetic way in which everyday struggles by contemporary Korean women were portrayed, including their confrontation with microaggressions and daily sexism, as well as the numerous challenges which young mothers face in the extremely competitive and stratified South Korean society in the 2010s. The relatable language used and the impactful style of writing were also widely praised. But the book was discussed not only for its artistic merits. The novel was a powerful addition to the already ongoing heated public debate on gender equality and women’s rights in South Korea. There were sections of the conservative South Korean society which hated the novel and did not spare their criticism and indignation at the “shameless” (in their opinion) portrayal of a character that did not adhere to the most traditional norms of the Confucian tradition for a wife and mother. There were also angry voices about how gender inequality was presented.

The title of the novel attracted my attention. I thought about what could be an adequate translation of the title in Bulgarian. Suddenly, after doing some math, I realized that the title basically sends me to a specific Bulgarian film, “A 33-Year-Old-Woman” (“Една жена на 33”), a film that was released in Bulgaria in 1982 which also portrayed the struggles of a young woman, a mother, in a society which was supposed to be egalitarian and socialist, but in which a woman had to struggle in order to live a fulfilling life and be happy. The film was initially praised by the critics until the organ of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the *Rabotnicheskо Delo* daily newspaper, published a damning review which prompted the virtual disappearance of the film for the rest of the socialist period in Bulgaria (until 1989). Gradually, I realized that the parallels between the two works were too many to ignore, despite the numerous differences and the enormous distance in both space and time between the two protagonists.

In October 2019, three years after the publication of the novel a film adaptation directed by a female director, Kim Do-young, and starring Jung Yu-mi, an actress known and appreciated for her versatile talent, as Kim Jiyoung, was released in cinemas, rekindling the debate about the novel. The film could be compared to the Bulgarian film even more readily since they were using the medium of the same art: cinema.

I decided to attempt a general comparison between the two stories and the three works of narrative art and see where that leads me. I am providing contextual and comparative analysis of the narrative art works. There are some elements of autoethnography since I am describing my own reactions and I am using my knowledge and personal life experience as a high-school student in the beginning of the 1980s in communist-controlled Bulgaria and a university teacher and part-time cultural observer in the 2010s in dynamically changing South Korea where tradition, modernity, and postmodernity co-exist and occasionally clash almost on a daily basis. Since the Korean novel and the Korean film are recognized as feminist works, while the Bulgarian film could be viewed as exploring feminist issues as well, I approach the analysis from a feminist perspective as well. The 2019 film follows conscious developments in South Korean cinema that lead to the appearance of complex female characters as central protagonists. As Park (2020: 93) points out: “From a perspective of the cultural politics, the 1990s saw a turning point in the history of Korean film production, as cultural diversification allowed for various types of female subjects to appear on screen.” That means that the old clichés of the good wife and mother and the seductress have been abandoned for realistic portrayals of contemporary women. Even though the writer and the director of the Bulgarian film are not women, there are women in the staff and in the cast of the film and the film could be analyzed from such a perspective. As Cobb and Tasker (2016) state, “motivated by an understanding of inequality and an interest in cinema, feminist film criticism offers a political as well as aesthetic response to visual culture.”

The authors

One major contrast between the Bulgarian film and the Korean book and film is the authorship. Both the writer and the director of the Bulgarian film are men, well established filmmakers in Bulgarian cinema. Both of them have received their cinema art education in the Soviet Union, namely in Moscow. The screenplay was written by Boyan Papazov, who had already written several successful films, including the most celebrated Bulgarian romantic film of the 20th century, “Everything is Love” („Всичко е любов“, 1979).

The director was Hristo Hristov, who had already directed several well-received projects, including a much-awarded film about the Bulgarian Communist leader Georgi Dimitrov.

The film “A 33-Year-Old-Woman” is not unique in its critical stance towards the contemporary socialist society. In the 1970s and the 1980s, along with a lot of epic historical dramas celebrating the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state in 1981, the ruling Communist party encouraged critical films which were liked by the general public because they could see their everyday joys and problems recreated on the screen by favourite actors. Without proclaiming a feminist agenda, the authors of this film depict the personal everyday struggles of their protagonist, who in this story happens to be a woman. The role is played by the charismatic actress Lilyana Kovacheva who portrays the different psychological states of the character convincingly. All actors contribute to the artistic recreation of a recognizable piece of everyday reality.

When the film was released in the cinemas in April 1982, it was perceived as just another Bulgarian film. It shows the reality critically but there is not a single scene that could be described as more critical than the films that were released around that time. We could even see some references to Soviet cinema, which is always a safe thing in socialist films. For example, the scene where an alarm clock awakes a working single mother mirrors a famous scene from the 1980 Soviet film “Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears” which won an Oscar, an Academy Award for best foreign-language film, in 1981, and which was praised in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Contrastingly, the author of the Korean novel is a woman, Cho Nam-Joo. As already described, she is one of numerous women writers who write powerful literature in the 21st century in South Korea. She is part of a large trend. The authors of the Korean film were mainly women as well. The screen writer, Yoo Young-ah, and the director, Kim Do-young, are women. This is not as typical in Korean cinema as it has become in Korean literature but we could say that there are tendencies for more women to be engaged as filmmakers, especially compared with just two or three decades ago. However, it should be noted that the topic of gender equality, women’s rights and the relations between men and women have been hot topics in South Korean society since the beginning of the 21st century. One of the peaks was in 2017 and 2018, when the #MeToo movement was especially strong in South Korea and several leading male figures were “canceled” because of accusation from women. That included the film director Kim Ki-duk, who later died in Latvia during the COVID pandemic. [2] Kim Ki-duk was probably the most famous Korean film director, especially in some European countries, including Bulgaria. Today hardly anyone talks about him in Korea.

We could say that the female authorship and the social context in the 2010s are extremely relevant for the perception of both the novel and the film as not just works of art whose protagonist happens to be a woman but as works with a specific feminist agenda. That is easily seen from the reactions and the criticism

in different social networks and chat groups online where not the portrayal of the reality in general, but the portrayal of the relations between men and women is the main target of criticism, ridicule, indignation, outrage, etc.

Parallelism in the titles: names

The original Korean title of the 2016 Korean novel and the 2019 film adaptation is “82nyensayng Kim Ciyeng”. [3] The official English title of the book translation is “Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982”. [4] The film and sometimes the novel are also quoted as “Kim Ji-young, Born 1982” (with a hyphen in the personal name of the character). This is more or less a literal translation. However, the Korean title has a more bureaucratic and even military flavour since the chosen vocabulary is of Sino-Korean origin and not the more conversational native Korean word for ‘born’. That means that if we are to translate the first vocabulary item in Bulgarian functionally, rather than „родена през 1982 г.“, we should probably use „82-ри набор“.

From the publicity in the Korean media that surrounded the launch of the book and the film it became clear that the author chose the name because, according to official state statistics, Kim Jiyoung was the most common name given to newborn girls in the year 1982. The first and the last chapter which frame the novel are titled “Autumn, 2015” and “2016” respectively. That makes the protagonist, who was born on April 1, 1982, exactly 33 years of age during this relevant period of time. The novel itself was published in October 2016.

The name of the protagonist is significant. Kim is the surname (in Korean order the surname comes first). Kim is not just the most common Korean surname, it covers – depending on the source – between 21% and 23% of all people in South Korea. The proportion among all ethnic Koreans will be similar. Koreans have the shortest list of family names in the world (when written with the Korean alphabet Hankul, not with Chinese characters, the list is around 200 surnames spelt differently with Hankul). On top of that, the top five family names cover around 54% or 55% of the population. A family name is forever. Children inherit their father’s family name. Wives do not change their family name; a woman will keep her father’s family name even after marriage. The family name is typically one syllable. There are several family names that are two syllables. The personal names are typically two syllables, which corresponds to two morphemes, almost all of them borrowed from Classical Chinese. In the case of Kim Jiyoung the two morphemes are ‘ji’ and ‘young’, each one of them could be written with one of several Chinese characters. They correspond to morphemes that have meanings but are not used separately as words, just like the name Sophia is not used as an everyday word meaning “wisdom”, although a lot of people know that it comes from a Greek word meaning “wisdom”.

Despite the strict orthographic rules governing spelling with Hankul, people have freedom in choosing how to spell their names with the Latin alphabet (Romanization) in their passports, documents, online chats, etc. There is also a wide variation in using hyphens and capital letters. It is not rare two brothers to spell their family name differently with Latin letters in their official documents despite using the same spelling with Hankul and the same Chinese character(s).

In the name Jiyoung the morpheme “ji” (“ci” in Yale Romanization) could mean “wisdom”, “intellect”, “knowledge”, “will”, “ambition”, “perception”. In fact, some Korean women who have this morpheme in their personal name, often adopt the name “Sophia” when they want to “translate” their name. The morpheme “young” (in fact “yeng” in the Yale Romanization, but almost always spelt “young” by people when Romanized because of the desired association with the English word) could mean “eternity” or “bravery” among other things, but not “young”. Although both “ji” and “young” could be encountered in male and female names, Jiyoung today is most often perceived as a typical girl’s name. Most people in Korea would know at least one person whose name is Jiyoung, a common and non-conspicuous name. [5]

The name of the Bulgarian protagonist is also “common” but with different connotations. In Bulgaria since the start of urbanization and modernization in the 19th century female names that have the suffix -ka are perceived as somewhat infantile or not urban or modern enough, or too traditional. The corresponding names without the element -k- are perceived as more fitting a mature woman and consequently increasingly preferred for newborn girls in urban settings. One name that is often given as an example in the urban public discourse in Bulgaria is exactly Minka – Mina, which since the early decades of the 20th century is associated, at least in the context of Bulgarian intellectual life, with the name of the famous Bulgarian poet Peyo Yavorov’s paramour, Mina Todorova, a young woman with a tragic fate, who died at age 20 in 1910. A best-selling novel about the love story between the two immortalized the version Mina, as opposed to Minka. [6] Thus, choosing the name Minka for the protagonist in the 1982 film, the authors emphasize her origin from a patriarchal or a humble family. We also learn that her father was an active anti-fascist who did not seek privileges after the establishment of the socialist regime and who died while performing his duties as a conscientious worker.

Parallelism in the titles: age

It already became clear that from a certain point of view the title of the Korean novel when it was published could very well be translated functionally into “A 33-Year-Old Woman”, i.e. the title of the Bulgarian film.

As if that coincidence was not enough, the protagonist of the Korean novel and the film was born exactly in April 1982, i.e. the same month when the Bulgarian film is released in cinemas in Bulgaria. [7] However, there was one small problem if we were to claim that the titles were virtually the same. The very first sentence of the novel reads: “Kim Ciyeng ssi nun wuri nai lo selun ney sal ita”, i.e. “Ms. Kim Ji-young is 34 years of age according to our [style of counting] age” (my literal translation). Koreans use a traditional age-counting method that they prefer in their everyday life and only occasionally, for example when speaking to foreigners, they might recalculate their age for precision. In the traditional age-counting method, when a baby is born, it is already one-year-old. The period in the mother’s womb counts for the first year. Then at New Year’s Day (today for most people that is January 1st of the civil calendar; traditionally that was the Lunar New Year, i.e. a new moon in the second half in January or the first three weeks in February) all the babies that were born during the year turn two. At the next New Year’s Day they turn three and so on. All people born in the same year become officially a year older on New Year’s Day. [8] That means that a baby that was born on December 30th, for example, will become two years old on its third day! There have been attempts recently to change this tradition and streamline age counting with the rest of the world [9], [10], but nowadays there is significant resistance against such moves among older Koreans.

So, admittedly, I was frustrated by this first sentence. It did not fit my thesis that the titles are functionally the same because the first sentence of the Korean novel is undermining it. I had to “explain” a lot in order to make my case. However, in April 2020, when the official English translation was published in the UK and the USA, I felt exonerated. The first sentence in Jamie Chang’s translation reads simply “Kim Ji-young is thirty-three years old, or thirty-four in Korean age”. [11]

There is one more association that is not directly referenced in the narrative works but is strong especially in the Bulgarian contexts. The age of 33 is considered by the Christian church to be “Christ’s age” (“Христова възраст” in Bulgarian). This association is especially popular in Bulgarian popular usage (Bulgaria is a predominantly Eastern Orthodox country) but is not alien among South Koreans, where Christianity (especially Protestantism and Catholicism) has been extremely popular since the Liberation in 1945. Almost 28% of the population is Christian according to statistics (Hahn et al. 2024). [12] So, the emphasis on the age of the female protagonist could be interpreted as a “feminist” provocation towards Christianity. The age provocation is unambiguously present in the Bulgarian title but one could argue that it is more or less present in the Korean title as well.

Immediate family circumstances

There is a significant difference in the marital status of the two protagonists. Minka Stoeva is divorced and a single mother. The financial support that she gets from her former husband Acho, shown as a womanizing and irresponsible man who drinks too much alcohol, is obviously insufficient to cover the daily needs of the small family which consists of her and her child. A lot of the issues that Minka has to deal with have their origin in the complicated family and financial situation she is in. At one point she admits to her daughter “We do not have any money”. Minka also has educational aspirations. She has started her higher education as a part-time student, a form of education that was quite common in socialist countries. The so-called “zadочно (in absentia) obrazovanie” („задочно образование“), unlike the “regular” one, required students to be present for a limited number of hours that were grouped within two or three weeks per semester with a degree of flexibility in the exam-taking and the period of time required to complete the degree. Single mothers were one of the categories attracted to such a format of higher education. Minka also lives in a cheap students’ dormitory that is close to the institute. That saves her money and time to commute from the village she is from to the city where the institute is. However, as we understand from the dialogue in the film, she does not have the right to live in that dormitory because it is only for “regular” students. It is implied that maybe she used her job as a personal assistant to the director of the institute to acquire the place at the dormitory with “connections”, i.e. by bending the rules. Later in the film she admits to one of the other characters that she used a fake certificate that she was enrolled as a regular student in order to claim a place at the dormitory. For viewers familiar with the socialist reality in the 1980s it is clear that a lot of people were pushed by circumstances to tell small lies or to bend rules a little in order to cope with the difficult and restrictive surroundings. It was a constant struggle to make or not to make small moral compromises. The authors seem to sympathize with the character in this case, or at least they seem not to judge her harshly.

Jiyoung, on the other hand, is married to a gentle and caring husband who works diligently at a modern company. He tries to make enough money to support his wife who has chosen to give up her job in order to raise their child. However, that does not necessarily make Jiyoung happy because she left her job where she had shown promise in order to give birth to the child and take care of the infant daughter in the initial stages of her life. As an educated young woman (she has a BA degree in Korean literature) she feels unfulfilled and she is looking for opportunities for realization, for example to find a part-time job, to find a part-time babysitter, or to return to a job similar to the job she had before the birth of the baby. Despite her attempts these possibilities do not materialize for different rea-

sons. She also has a strong aspiration to become a writer, a dream that she has had for a long time.

There is one interesting parallel in the family circumstances of Minka Stoeva and Kim Jiyoung. Both of them are young mothers. Each of them has a daughter. Both in the Bulgarian film and in the Korean novel there is depiction of women from the generation of the protagonist's mother who contrast in their attitudes with the protagonist's attitudes. The presence of a daughter in both cases adds another dimension to female characters. We have three generations of women who are shown to have different life stories and attitudes to society. In the case of the daughters this is given as potentially different.

Minka Stoeva's daughter is a teenager, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old. We deduce her age from the mentioning of the fact that she might apply to a language high school, i.e. she must be in the seventh grade of a Bulgarian school. Her name is Hristina and she is portrayed as a sensitive but outspoken and feisty teenager who is prone to nervous outbursts. As the mother of a teenager Minka is trying to be responsive to her daughter's needs but the difficult circumstances of her own life of a single mother hinder her efforts to a great extent.

Jiyoung's daughter is a two-year-old baby who is relatively calm and quiet. She is taken care of by both her parents.

The difference in the age of the daughters is significant. It shows not just the differences between the two societies but also the individual characteristics of the two protagonists. Although in the 1980s there was a strong tendency for Bulgarian women (and men) to marry later than their mothers and fathers (maybe in their late 20s), they still married younger than Korean women (and men) in the 2010s, when the typical age of marriage is early 30s. In the case of Minka Stoeva, though, as the character explains herself, she did not want to abort her child when she got pregnant. That is also indicative of the trend in the 1970s and 1980s in Bulgaria (and in Europe) for young people to start having sex somewhat earlier than the generation of their parents. That age would have been younger compared to the respective age of young Koreans in the 2010s who typically grow up in conservative Confucian families that would discourage premarital sex or would choose to hide it and not speak openly about it. As a result of societal and individual differences the two protagonists who are the same age have daughters whose age difference is eleven or twelve years. That circumstance adds additional burden in the life of Minka Stoeva who has to deal with a teenager at home and as well as the other complicated issues at work.

Despite the differences both protagonists seem to be sincere in their aspirations to lead a happier life, be good mothers and create a bright future for their daughters. Jiyoung is married to a man who seems to be ready to make sacrifices as well in order to achieve happiness and harmony for his family.

Minka has had some negative experience with marriage and divorce but there is some hope that she would find family happiness later in life.

Social network (relatives and friends)

There are significant differences in the social interactions of the characters. To a great extent the differences are due to the very different societies in which the two women have to function.

In the case of Jiyoung, both her mother's family and her in-laws are more or less typical South Korean families of their generation. They adhere to traditional, mostly Confucian, values. Korea is easily the most Confucianist country in the world. The dynasty which ruled Korea for more than five centuries, between 1392 and 1910, accepted the Neo-Confucianist ideology, which originated in China, as guiding principles in every aspect of the political, social and cultural life of the country. It is something deeply embedded in modern Korean society. Even after that collapse of the dynasty and the period of Japanese rule there was nothing that could challenge Confucianism significantly, at least in South Korea. [13] All interpersonal relations are subject to all-encompassing hierarchy that should be known and should be respected at all times. [14]

One detail that non-Korean viewers of Korean film in general might not notice is that characters very rarely address each other with their names. When they communicate with each other family members address each other with the word for their relation to the particular person. Korean words are very specific. Apart from the words for “father” and “mother” there are specific words for siblings. For example, Jiyoung addresses her older sister with “enni”, the word for an older sister of a girl. Jiyoung's younger brother addresses Jiyoung with “nuna”, the word for an older sister of a boy. The English translation uses “sis” without making the distinction. Some younger people today break away from tradition. This is the case between Jiyoung's sister and Jiyoung's brother but that could be interpreted as an in-joke between siblings as well. The deviations from the norm are still exceptions even in contemporary Korean society.

There are small details in Jiyoung's family which point to the internalized Confucian ideology. Jiyoung's mother had to endure her mother-in-law's harassment because her first two children are girls. The third child is a son which used to be typical for a lot of families in Korea and China until recently: they keep having children until they have at least one son. Jiyoung's father favours his son without even thinking that he is being unfair to his daughters.

At work, each employee is addressed with their job title, for example “team chief”. Even if there is not a big difference between positions, the hierarchy and the nomenclature should be respected to the last detail.

This specific usage of language is quite visible when Jiyoung starts speaking as if she is “possessed” by a different person. This is not always easy to

be expressed in the translation, especially if the translator relies only on subtitles. In the beginning of the film there is a powerful scene where Jiyoung suddenly adopts her mother's "language" when addressing her mother-in-law as if she is her in-law, Jiyoung's mother. It is immediately shocking for Korean viewers while for non-Korean viewers it might take some time before they realize what is happening.

We discussed Jiyoung's name in a section above but it should be noted that very often in Korea people might not know or could not remember the names of their neighbours, especially if they are married women with children. The most common way to address such a woman is with the name of her child, usually her oldest son or daughter. In the film we could hear other mothers addressing Jiyoung as "Ayengi emma", literally "Ayoung's mother" [15] (the subtitles read "Ji-young?", which is not the literal translation). That will be the normal way not only to address her but also when they talk about her. So, they do not need to know her personal name.

Another peculiarity is that Koreans also use the words for "uncle", "aunt", "older brother" and "older sister" to people who are not their immediate family. This is simply a way to express the age hierarchy. That has led to a peculiar phenomenon in the last thirty or so years. Since today it is common for two people to know each other for some time before they get married (that was not possible in strict Confucian society), and also because traditionally women are married to men who are a bit older than them, women call their future husbands "older brother". It could be that when they met for the first time, e.g. in school or university, they did not even know that they could end up married. Many of these couples continue this practice after marriage. So, there are now two or three generations of women who often call their husbands "older brother" instead of the traditional appellation between husband and wife. This is the case with Jiyoung as well. She calls her husband "oppa", "older brother of a girl". The subtitles give "honey" as a translation but that is another misleading rendition.

The social pressures that Jiyoung experiences are from family members, from colleagues at work (before she quits work in order to become a full-time mum), and from the other mothers whom she knows. She is also acutely sensitive to what she hears constantly from strangers, who do not know her, talking about her (perceiving her in the role of a full-time mum) without caring if she could hear them or not.

When she has a job before deciding to have a baby, she is overlooked for promotion. The reason, it is hinted to her, is that men are preferred to young women because young women who do not have children are perceived as liabilities since they could become pregnant and take a maternity leave at any time. In the film we also witness a scene where Team Chief Kim, who is a woman, is harassed by the company director in front of other employees. Talking about her

son with no apparent reason he says “Kids who aren’t raised by their moms tend to be more rebellious.” Chief Team Kim is forced to assume a defensive position as the director continues to harass her personally. The authors imply that there are women who advance in business and other “men’s” spheres in Korean society but they have to endure almost mindless harassment and humiliation.

When Jiyoung finds a part-time job while taking care of the baby, she cannot find a baby-sitter for a short period of time daily. She decides not to pursue the part-time job path anymore.

When she is offered a full-time job by her former team chief, who starts her own new company, Jiyoung’s husband suggests himself that he takes a paternity leave. However, his mother calls Jiyoung and blames her for ruining her son’s career. At the end Jiyoung decides not to take the job.

When the mothers of the kindergarten children get together for a coffee at the house of one of them, it becomes clear that most of them are well educated. One of them has an engineering degree from Seoul National University. The women joke about this. One of the women tells the woman with the engineering degree that she has studied so much in order to teach multiplication to her child. This is a way to cope with their situation.

At the end of the film Jiyoung manages to start writing and her writings are published online. She is on track to realize her life-long dream of becoming a writer.

One insult that is heard from strangers that particularly irritates Jiyoung is the word “mamchwung”, literally “insect mother.” This is a new slang word that has become popular in South Korea. The online Naver encyclopedia, perhaps the most widely used online encyclopedia in Korea, defines it as a term mocking (mainly full-time) mothers for using their social position as “mothers” as a privilege to override other people’s rights or to cause harm to people and society as whole. In a powerful scene towards the end of the movie, set at a coffee shop, Jiyoung spills a cup of coffee while attending to her baby. Two men and a woman, visibly company employees, talk between themselves loudly enough about Jiyoung using the word “mamchwung” several times. In the subtitles the word is translated as “vermin-like mom” and then as “shameless”. In the original Korean this is the well-recognized demeaning new slang word. Unlike her behaviour in an earlier scene at a park, where Jiyoung hears similar insults about mothers with children and just leaves the scene hurriedly, this time (this is after her session with the psychiatrist) she stands her ground and challenges verbally the people who know nothing about her but still dare characterize her and criticize her. They are taken aback and leave the coffee shop promptly.

The social environment in which Minka lives is slightly different. Her mother seems to be non-judgmental but also not very involved in her daughter’s life. Her colleagues are kind but there must have been a lot of hypocrisy because

someone has written an anonymous report denouncing her personality, claiming that she lives in the students' dormitory without having the right to live there because she is the lover of the director of the institute. There are such rumours as well and the director's wife believes them. At the same time, Minka has an affair with one of her colleagues whose wife works at the institute as well. The two colleagues are revealed to be secretly divorced and having separate personal lives but pretending to be a couple.

Minka regularly received anonymous letters that say "dirty whore", which contribute to her anxiety and intense inner life. It is never revealed who is the author of the anonymous report or of the letters although several characters speculate that it must be a female colleague who envies Minka. This sounds almost ridiculous today because the situation in which Minka exists is hardly enviable.

Another source of Minka's harassment is her former husband with whom she maintains communication because he brings the financial support that he has to give her and their daughter. His unruly behaviour is also disliked by their daughter Hristina who expresses her dislike openly.

Another colleague of Minka's, presenting himself as a "technical secretary", pretends that he investigates the anonymous report about her but abuses his position and blackmails Minka into having sex with him. All these details complete a picture of hypocrisy and moral degradation that rules not only the institute but all of the socialist society during this period. This artistic realism is the main reason the film was criticized and even aggressively attacked in the main Bulgarian daily newspaper at the time, *Rabotnichesko Delo*, which led to the film's ban.

At the end of the film we see a series of scenes where her earlier tormentors beg her for leniency and support. Her former husband begs her on his knees to withdraw her complaint with the police of his harassment against her. Minka has submitted a written report against him asking for his deportation from their city (a measure that was applied during socialism). In another scene the "technical secretary" begs her to talk to the director of institute with whom he seems to be falling out of favour. We know that Minka has already threatened the director that she could expose his machinations. The director of the institute himself talks to her sheepishly and gives her his recommendation (letter of sponsorship) for her party membership. She refuses it saying that her mother thinks that people like the director are not dignified enough to write her recommendations. These scenes parallel the scene in which Jiyoung confronts the strangers in the coffee shop who called her "mamchwung". The protagonists both have regained their pride back at the end of the films.

Mental health and spiritual guidance

Both in the Bulgarian film and in the Korean film there is an interesting moment where the protagonists accept that they need to address their own mental health and seek external help.

In the beginning of the Bulgarian film Minka drinks a cup of coffee and turns it over in a typical gesture preparing the cup for tasseography (reading the coffee residue), a type of divination that has been particularly popular in Bulgaria for many decades. Also, Minka asks a colleague at work to help her arrange a session with a fortune-teller. In socialist Bulgaria the activities of fortune-tellers and clairvoyants were not regulated and regarded as somewhat illegal. Towards the end of the film Minka sees a fortune-teller, who is an elderly woman (which is also typical), who seems to be able to tell her all the facts and truths we already know about Minka. She also encourages her to trust her daughter Hristina because her daughter has the powers of a medium. Minka seems to believe the fortune-teller and asks her daughter later to say yes or no to questions that Minka keeps in her mind but does not pronounce. Minka seems to accept Hristina's answers without questioning them, trusting almost blindly the fortune-teller. The session with the fortune-teller plays a liminal role in the whole story. After the session Minka becomes more confident and self-assertive and readily embraces the changes in her life. She also confronts the director of the institute quite boldly telling him that she could expose him for his corrupt practices. She demands in a blackmailing manner that he write her a recommendation for membership in the Communist party. At the very end of the film Minka leaves her job for a new similar job, keeps the place in the dormitory and looks forward to the spring when, as the fortune-teller who seems to know everything tells her, she is going to meet the man she is going to marry and be happy with. She also talks to the party secretary of the institute, an older woman she has already met several times, and applies to join the Bulgarian Communist Party, which means that her standing in society will improve significantly.

On the other hand, Jiyoung's husband is shown looking online for information on possession. In Korean culture there is a common belief that people could be possessed by spirits, including by the spirits of deceased people. In traditional Korean religion shamanistic figures, called mudang, most of them female, could be possessed by spirits and could communicate with supernatural beings. In fact, Koreans often visit such mudang to consult them for almost any bigger or smaller undertaking or change in their lives. Women who are destined to become mudang usually start with a strange illness which is somewhat reminiscent of Jiyoung's condition.

Jiyoung's husband finally decides to meet a psychiatrist. In the film it is a female psychiatrist. The psychiatrist tells him that she is ready to help but she must meet with Jiyoung herself. Jiyoung's husband manages to convince Jiyoung

to go and see the psychiatrist. At the session with the psychiatrist Jiyoung shows confidence and assertiveness. She is looking forward to her future as a happy wife and mother.

There is an interesting juxtaposition here. In socialist Bulgaria, ruled by a Marxist party, a Communist hopeful believes in tasseography and fortune-tellers and seemingly makes life-changing decisions following a clairvoyant's advice. In the conservative and deeply influenced by traditions South Korean society a woman going through what seems to be a severe post-partum depression decides to accept the guidance of a clinical psychiatrist (and not a traditional shaman) in order to achieve personal harmony and happiness.

In both cases, though, the external help coming in the form of advice and guidance by a person (in both cases an older woman) who specializes in such activities seems to lead to resolution and positive developments for the protagonist. The difference is that the specialist in Jiyoung's case is a certified psychiatrist in a bright and modern office, while in Minka's case it is an elderly fortune-teller whose place is a dark apartment and whose practice is not within legal frames.

Public reaction

The Bulgarian film is released as any other Bulgarian film in the early 1980s. The interest towards the film is typical for the interest in Bulgarian films of similar genre at the time. The reviews published in the specialized publications like "Narodna kultura", "Filmovi novini", "Kinospektar", etc. are positive. The good qualities of the film and the achievement of the creators are widely praised. Aleksandar Grozev in "Kinoizkustvo" [16] analyzes the cinematographic qualities of the film emphasizing its strengths. He notes the work of the director of photography who does not use artificial lighting and positions the camera as if from the viewpoint of a person who is in the room with the characters. Grozev summarizes: "The film is a success for its creators, who in a talented way and without any civic compromises provoke an open conversation about the morality of the contemporary person, disturb our thoughts with the analysis of phenomena that we sometimes easily ignored" (my translation). At the background of such positive reviews the attack that the official organ of the Communist party launches is even more shocking.

Something unprecedented happens a couple of weeks after the release of the film. On May 7, 1982, the organ of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the *Rabotnichesko Delo* daily newspaper, publishes a big review of the film that takes around two thirds of the third page of the broadsheet, i.e. two thirds of an A2 page. [17] The author of the review is a respected theatre critic and theatre studies professor, Vladimir Karakashev. The review is unmissakenly negative. The film is mercilessly attacked from different angles: that it is

artistically poor and bad, that ideologically it presents the socialist reality in a crooked manner, that the protagonist is psychologically unconvincing and that her actions are amoral and harmful to society, that the film presents the social system in Bulgaria as corrupt and morally bankrupt and that obviously does not correspond to the objective reality. The author claims that the creators of the film “create a schematized, deformed, artificially constructed negative picture of our socialist reality” (my translation). Karakashev is angry with the critics who write positive reviews and attacks them as well. He quotes them and ridicules them, showing unmotivated intolerance towards their opinions. He insists that the film as well as the positive reviews of it ultimately contradict the directives of the communist party.

As a result of this review the film is removed from cinemas almost immediately, never shown again for years until the fall of communism in 1989. At the same time the interest towards it grows, the number of people who want to see it grows. The film gains the reputation of a “banned” film. Karakashev and *Rabotnicheskoto delo* have turned the film into a legend. Some of the people who had not seen it in the cinemas in 1982 had such high expectations of it that, when they finally got the chance to see it in the 1990s, they were surprised that the film was not the anti-communist legend they expected to see.

The Korean novel and the film also created a controversy, albeit from a different point of view. Some critics, but mainly readers writing their opinions online in social networks and chat groups and Internet forums, express their dissatisfaction and accused the novel of promoting a one-sided view of gender relations and presenting men in what they perceive as negative light. As one journalist put it, “The book was hailed by some as one of the most important feminist novels in Korean - but led to an outcry from anti-feminists in the country... Although South Korea is economically one of the most advanced countries in Asia, it remains socially conservative. So much so, that female singers and actresses who said they read the book were attacked and bullied online. Those who criticise the book say it presents distorted views, is highly subjective, and makes negative, sexist generalisations against men. The male characters, they say, are portrayed as either actively or passively endorsing a culture of discrimination against women. Critics also argue it aggravates gender conflicts. When the movie was first announced, those tensions were stoked again. Actress Jung Yumi, who was cast as the lead, got thousands of hate comments on her Instagram in just a day; there was a petition asking the president not to allow the release of the movie; and people flocked to web portals to give bad ratings, even before the film was released”. [18]

There are some differences between the novel and the film, which we cannot discuss here because of the scope of this article. It seems that some of the changes are dictated by a desire to soften the tone of the novel, including the

presentation of male characters, and concentrate on the inner life of the main protagonist.

Both the novel and the film struck a chord with South Korean society, in which the relations between men and women have been rising to the top of the social agenda since the 2010s. During the presidential elections in 2022 that was one of the most keenly discussed topics by the key candidates for president of the republic.

There is a difference between the centralized censorship in socialist Bulgaria and the online hate mobs in contemporary Korea. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this issue. Both aim to attack verbally the people who think differently. They also aim to install fear and to warn against possible similar phenomena in the future. In 1980s Bulgaria (i.e. the late “mature” socialism), though, they make the authors dissidents, almost heroes in the eyes of some people. Although the director loses an administrative position in a professional organization, both he and the writer continue, after a short hiatus, to create other works of art, seemingly without compromising their artistic integrity. In 2010s South Korea online hate mobs and forums seem to be more menacing because of their perceived anonymity and the lack of information about how representative they are for the whole society. They contribute to the toxic atmosphere that is created in the public discussion of almost every social or political issue in today’s world dominated by virtual social networks, fake news and non-truths.

Cultural impact and conclusions

The Bulgarian film “A 33-Year-Old Woman” and the Korean film “Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982”, based on the novel of the same name, are works of art that tell the stories of two women, Minka Stoeva and Kim Jiyoung, a Bulgarian woman who is 33 in socialist Bulgaria in the early 1980s and a Korean woman who is 33 in South Korea in the mid-2010s. They are two women separated by time and space, set 33 years and more than 8000 km apart, who strive to be good mothers, strive to use their intellectual capacity and realize their potential and who want to be happy and create a bright future for their daughters.

The Bulgarian film uses a film language which emphasizes the ordinariness of the character. She is not exceptional. She could be someone we know. The dialogues are everyday language. It sounds like something we might have already heard somewhere.

The Korean film is visually similar to the Bulgarian film in the camera viewpoint, i.e. the camera assumes the viewpoint of someone who is in the same room with the characters. One difference is the lighting. The Bulgarian film is significantly darker. The rooms are darker (the director of photography does not use artificial lighting); a lot of the events happen during the darker period of the

day. In the Korean film the lighting is rich and is used as an additional means to supplement the inner feelings of the character.

The Bulgarian film and the Korean novel and film have significant cultural impact. The Bulgarian film gets banned and its absence for more than seven years has a cultural impact on Bulgarian filmmaking. Bulgarian filmmakers have been warned about social criticism and that has had effect on the films produced in the next seven years, including self-censorship. The film becomes a legend and more people have heard about it than would have heard if the film was not banned. That influences other aspects of art and public life as well. The unpredictability and the fear are thus installed by the communist party as leverages of power.

Both the Bulgarian film and the Korean novel and film become subjects of a hateful negative campaign. In the Bulgarian case the film is attacked by the main newspaper in a totalitarian one-party system where a newspaper can influence the life of an individual, as well as the life of a work of art. The main daily of the communist state “kills” a film and makes it an immortal legend.

In the Korean case, the impact also goes beyond the spheres of literature and cinema. The novel and the film help bring gender issues to the forefront of public discourse and stimulate further conversation and activism. They also strengthen the feminist movement in this East Asian country.

Ultimately, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, both socialist Bulgaria and modern South Korea delivered on a promise of a catch-up economic development. In the case of Bulgaria the emancipation of women was supposed to happen because of the egalitarian element in the communist ideology, while in South Korea modernization and Westernization, embraced unquestioningly for a very long time, brought about changes in society and in the legal system that emphasized the equality of sexes that had to override the traditional Confucianist matrix. In both countries these were bumpy roads and these works of art reflect critically the complex reality.

Thanks to the explosion of the K-wave, the increasing popularity of Korean pop culture around the world, Korean films and books reach more and more consumers worldwide. The Korean book has already been translated. The Korean film has also been made available on the Internet with subtitles in many languages. The story of Kim Jiyoung has already reached many people on this planet.

The Bulgarian film remains relatively unknown, a Bulgarian legend that is gradually being forgotten even in Bulgaria. The film is not distributed on the Internet officially and even if one finds a dark bad-quality copy somewhere, it will be available only in Bulgarian, without any translation.

Still, the stories of Minka Stoeva and Kim Jiyoung remain equally important as historical documents of their respective societies in their respective time periods.

Notes

The Korean writer Han Kang, author of the novel *The Vegetarian* (already mentioned above), won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2024, the first time for a Korean writer. That is an important international acknowledgement of the tremendous significance of this new wave of South Korean female writers and their contribution to world literature. The Swedish Academy motivates the prize in this way: “for her intense poetic prose that confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life.”

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- [3] I have chosen to use the Yale Romanization system for the transliteration of Korean names, words and sentences in the English text in this article. I also used the already established Romanization for persons' names, published books, etc.
- [4] Cho Nam-Joo (2020). *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*. (Translated by Jamie Chang). London: Scribner.
- [5] A curious fact would be to point out that we have already mentioned one woman with the same name. In the Introduction I mentioned the English translator of “Please Look After Mom” Kim Chi-young. Despite the slightly different Romanization, her name in Korean with Hankul coincides completely with the name of the protagonist in the Korean novel and film examined here. Also, in the names of the director and the screen writer of “Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982” the morpheme “young” is the same morpheme as in Kim Jiyoung, exemplifying the extreme popularity of this morpheme in female personal names.
- [6] For discussions on the name see e.g. Миланова, Р. (2020). Мина на Яворов към най-добрата си приятелка: Ще си отида от тази любов, не ме мисли за развалено момиче. 168 часа, 11.01.2020 [Milanova R. (2020). Mina na Yavorov kam nay-dobrata si priyatelka: Shte si otida ot тази lyubov, ne me misli za razvaleno momiche. 168 chasa. 11.01.2020], <https://www.168chasa.bg/article/8048894>. Retrieved on 01.09.2024.
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- [13] In North Korea the situation is different because of the syncretism of Confucianism and Communism that has emerged as a result of the Communist takeover there after the Second World War.
- [14] The only interpersonal relations that could be construed as non-hierarchical in the Confucianist ideology are friendships but only between people of the same age and the same sex. All other relations are strictly hierarchical. Even twin brothers should be distinguished between “older brother” and “younger brother.”
- [15] In the film *Jiyoung*’s daughter’s name is *Ayoung*.
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