

Korean melodrama shinpa essay examples

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In Korean films, the term shinpa pertains to second-class melodramas. Shinpa originated in Japan and the shinpa casts headed by Im Sung-ku, Kim Do-san and Lee Ki-se created versions of Japanese plays. These shinpa casts started film making in colonial Korea with kino-dramas which combined stage plays with filmed scenes (Lee 37). Japanese melodramas led Koreans to find out Korean cultural emotions. The genre became widespread that in the 1980s it was nearly impossible to come across a director who did not make any shinpa-style melodramas. Other genres of Korean films also used melodrama and also applied the pattern of feminism and the return of patriarchy (Chung 3-5).

Since shinpa (plays and theatre acts) became a major culture approach in colonial Korea, it has always been included in the cinema culture of South Korea. But shinpa has never been recognized as a legal cultural form therefore, it was considered as a mere shadow of Korean modernity. Since this dim existence of shinpa has barely been brought to the limelight of Korean cinema, there is a little possibility of getting a sense of modernity for Korean films and culture (Cho 1). During the early period of Korean cinema existence, performances of shinpa play seek social clarification but their pattern quickly changed into a melodrama shedding flood of tears to its viewers. This change was greatly caused by the suppression of the Japanese colonial government which prohibited the creation of cultural text that conveyed political agendas which is against to the government. Korean shinpa plays and novels show elements of western melodrama: the conflict between good and evil, the oppression of female protagonists, and tough emotionalism. These elements are joined together to deliver representations

of the colonized state, where good but weak Korean women are abused by Japanese male landlords. Shinpa has been under criticisms, stating that it was a way of destruction which sets a primary hindrance to the construction of an autonomous, modern nation (Cho 24).

Throughout the restoration period after the war, Korean cinema nurtured rapidly. In this period, stage actors rushed to the movie scene in search of viewers. Many actors, producers, and directors had theatre backgrounds and sufficient knowledge. Cinema stories were adapted from theatrical performances and filmed using theatrical expertise. In other words, the popularity of 1950s shinpa was the result of theatrical performers shifting into the film industry (Lee 41). Family melodrama and youth films took over the typical genres from shinpa. Due to intense popularity, shinpa could not even go back to the theatrical stage. As a result, shinpa stayed as only as a portion of melodrama style during that time. The remaining concern was to what degree does shinpa style was used in any melodrama film because film critics severely denounced shinpa style as low-class and outdated (Lee 42).

Shinpa-type of melodrama still dominates the period of 1960s and it was also considered as an indication of reflective conservatism stated by the groups of people which were marginalized in the modernization plan of the government. This perspective about shinpa during that period still copies the structure of the mode of shinpa as opposed to the modern style of drama, but nevertheless shinpa served as a medium for the expression of public opinions on social incidents (Cho 29-30). The small-level company-based mode of film production and the outline of individual-based financing which

is the source of local film expenditure were the main reasons of the on-going existence of shinpa style film. These factors were interconnected for a modern style cinema aiming the city viewers and brought forward the boundary between the shinpaesque and modern melodrama in postwar South Korean cinema. Even though shinpaesque and modern melodrama were created against the culture of colonial Korea, they were combined in shaping postwar South Korean cinematic modernity. The surfacing of South Korean melodramas in the 1950s informatively explain the meaning of “modern” mainly in the context of cinema of that period (Cho 99-100).

As long as shinpa was accepted as new genre of Korean films as opposed to old theatrical performances, shinpa reveals the modern schemes that had entered the colonized Korea. Early films and plays which show patterns of family plans concerning a scholar who studied overseas show modernism in kino-dramas (Lee 39). A master’s thesis with a topic about Korean melodrama explains that antimony is the central characteristic of shinpa. Antimony, pertaining to contradiction between two values, explains the misunderstandings of the public regarding outdated pre-modern and new modern values. In other words, shinpa is a form of melodrama which demonstrates the collision of the modern and pre-modern aspects with emotionalism in colonized Korea (Lee 39).

Among the decisive characteristics of shinpa films such as sense of time, associations to the stage, pessimism, and extreme emotionalism, the last is the only element of shinpa being recognized by today’s viewers as shinpa. Thus, critics find the shinpa style of extreme emotionalism in 1997

melodramas as well as the most up-to-date melodrama films such as *A Moment to Remember* (John H. Lee, 2004), *Please Look After Mom* (Shin Kyung-Sook, 2008) and *Christmas in August* (Hur Jin-Ho, 1998). The common aspects on the plots of the three melodramas mentioned are being family-oriented, tear-jerking dramas and the protagonists have an illness.

A Moment to Remember is about the theme of discovery in a relationship and the weight of loss caused by Alzheimer's disease. *Please Look After Mom* is about an uneducated South Korean peasant who lived half of her life in scarcity but saw her children rise to wealth and success. Mom has gone missing at a Seoul subway station. The novel discovers the family relationships as it looks on the efforts of her family to find their mother. It also discloses mom's past that was unknown to her children and shows how little the children recognized their mom's complex character. *Christmas in August* is about a photographer, Jung-won and his developing romance with a parking representative, Da-rim. Their romance did not have a chance to blossom because Jung-won soon learns that he is suffering from an unnamed illness and has accepted fate with his looming death.

According to Linda Williams' essay which is entitled *Melodrama Revised*, there are five elements found in current melodramas that have still remained significant in Korean films. Melodrama starts and desires to end with a sense of purity; melodrama also focuses on victim-heroes; melodrama emerges as a modern style by using realism but realism also gives enthusiasm and accomplishment; melodrama has a balance enthusiasm and accomplishment; and melodrama shows protagonists and antagonists with

supernatural roles and disagreements between good and evil. The three melodramas mentioned in the paper do not integrate all of the elements. However, excluding out the fifth element, the remaining four had become frequent elements of shinpa melodrama since the 1990s. This was because South Korea's government which supports moral structures in film through suppression had crumpled. From 1980s, filmmakers created their masterpieces to look more modern by excluding the conflict between good and evil.

In conclusion, although Korean films are rich of different genres such as tears, screams, violence and laughter even before shinpa melodramas were introduced by Japan; shinpa is considered the foundation of bringing the sense of modernity to Korean cinema and culture.

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