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Mother-in-Law–Daughter-in-Law Relationship in the Current Korean Society

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Give the easy task to your daughter and the hard task to your daughter-in-law.

(Korean proverb)

Abstract. One of the prevailing themes in Korean novels and dramas is the fractured relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, caused to a great extent by Confucianism, which preaches submissiveness of women to their parents, husbands, and in-laws. Given the tremendous economic, technological, and cultural development of South Korea in the last fifty years, the question that arises is whether family ties have undergone an equal progress. This study aims at identifying whether the matriarch in the Korean household, i.e. the mother-in-law, still holds the reins or whether there is a shift towards more freedom and independence of the daughters-in-law. The data employed to this aim are Cho Nam-Joo's (2018) novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which follows the life of a married woman in her thirties and a K-drama titled *Marriage Clinic: Love and War* that depicts the problems of married couples, among which the bad treatment daughters-in-law receive from their husbands' mothers. The theoretical framework for the analysis is a combination of critical discourse analysis (Wodak & Mayer 2001, Fairclough 2010), which is employed for "investigating language in relation to power and ideology" (Wodak 2001: 2) and Foucault's (1983) theory related to power and the subject. The findings indicate various manners in which Korean mothers-in-law in twenty-first-century South Korea exercise power over their daughters-in-law and also ingenious ways in which the latter manage to counteract this dominance.

Keywords: power, literature, K-drama, Confucianism, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The Korean society has changed radically in the past century, moving from a predominantly agrarian country to a highly industrialized one, nowadays the Republic of Korea (ROK) standing out as "one of the wealthiest, high-tech, industrialized nations of Asia, one of the 'Four Asian Tigers' (next to Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong)" (Rahm 2020: 5). These economic changes brought along social changes, especially in the sphere of the family, in that the family size decreased (with the decrease of the birth rate among Korean women) and the traditional patterns of cohabitation have also changed, nowadays more and more couples preferring the nuclear family over the extended one. Higher levels of education, especially among women, also favoured these changes. Nevertheless, even if nowadays South Korea boasts with highly educated and skilled female workers, the society does not fully accept working women, and this seems to be related to the century-old traditional Confucian practices, which have had a strong impact on the development of the people's mindsets and lifestyles. Park (2006: 33), quoting Moon (1998), states, "[i]n contemporary Korea, the family-centred Confucian ideology has done more to obscure women's identity and development of self-consciousness than any other system of thought". Despite the introduction of Christianity in the peninsula at the end of the nineteenth century, which tried to enlighten Korean women and give them more rights, Confucianism continues to be the single most influential force that shapes family structure, gender roles, and marital relations. Thus, Korean women, in particular, are the victims of the clash between Confucian tradition and modernization, as nowadays they perform more roles in society than ever before.

The conflicts between work and family commitments seem to have affected the lives of many married women. According to Kim (1996) and Cho (2002) (cited in Nelson & Cho 2016: 1274), "married women were expected to perform the principle caretaking roles for their husbands' parents, including frequent telephone contacts and visits, preparation of foods, and arranging for health care". Even at present, many young married women have to struggle with expectations coming from various directions: they have to look after their in-laws (be they the elderly parents or the younger siblings of their spouses), to care for their own parents, to ensure a peaceful environment at home so that their husbands could be freed of any concerns in their work, to bring up children and to supervise their education, as well as to succeed in their own workplaces should they choose to work after marriage. Having so many tasks that are both time-consuming and demanding, it comes as no surprise that many mothers-in-law relentlessly torment their daughters-in-law on grounds of their lack of homemaking skills but would not say a word of praise or encouragement with respect to their daughters-in-law's accomplishments in the workplace. On the other hand, they might not

recognize their sons' spouses as daughters-in-law until they produce a son/male heir even if the couple has been married for a long time (Pak, 2006), not to mention that very often they look down on or even humiliate the parents of their daughters-in-law, as "[u]nder traditional family structure, the wife's family was considered much less important than the husband's" (Tudor 2012: 228 epub).

The relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law is not perfect in any culture, but in the South Korean one, even at present, many mothers-in-law try to make the lives of their son's spouses as difficult as possible, sometimes even with the risk of having the son's family destroyed. They make recourse to all kinds of mean scenarios, lies, and devilish acts only to show who holds the reins in the family and to benefit from various favours. Thus, living under the same roof with such a person who treats daughter(s)-in-law as their slave(s) is not something to be happy about.

The goal of this study is to seek an in-depth understanding of the mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationships in the current South Korean society. To this aim, I have employed fragments from a contemporary novel and a couple of episodes from a cinematographic production, "for literature and cinema are cultural products of particular socio-cultural circumstances inextricably linked to history" (Jeong 2011: 6). Thus, I have tried to connect my analysis with the social and cultural context of the past three decades in South Korea's history, when the country experienced more than ever modernity and changing notions of masculinity, gender and family relations. This endeavour is based on a qualitative approach. The roadmap of the paper is as follows: section two presents the research procedure employed to conduct the study. The first part touches upon the case study as a research method. The second part will focus on highlighting the relevance of the *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough 2010, Wodak and Meyer 2001) and of Foucault's (1983) stance on power as analytical frameworks. In part three, I will include a short presentation of the book and the K-drama episodes that have been used as data. Section two also comprises the hypothesis and research questions that guided the study. The major part of the paper (section 3) is dedicated to the analysis of the fragments excerpted from Cho Nam-Joo's *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* and from three episodes of the K-drama *Marriage Clinic: Love and War*. This is followed by conclusions.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Case study

As mentioned previously, the goal of the current study is to seek an understanding of a phenomenon anchored in real-life situations. Thus, I have opted for a

qualitative approach; more specifically, I have used the case study method to examine human relationships in four mother-/daughter-in-law dyads. The rationale behind this choice is that "the case study method (…) offers an in-depth way to examine the context and complexity of the phenomena under investigation" (Pak 2006: 44). This approach can be employed when the researcher wants to gain a better understanding of a certain problem and when s/he has access to cases rich in information. As Patton (1990) (quoted in Pak 2006: 44) contends, "a *case* is considered rich when a great deal can be learned from a few exemplars of the phenomenon in questions" (emphasis in the original). Thus, the number of informants is less important when the amount of data the researcher has access to is quite rich.

The case study, unlike other qualitative research methods, aims at a thorough description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 1998). It presupposes collecting "information about particular persons, social setting, events in which they interact, in order to permit the researcher to effectively understand" how the subjects operate or function (Berg 1998: 225). A major benefit of this research method is its generalizability or replicability: if the research is undertaken properly, its results should not only fit the specific subjects or relation studied but should provide a general understanding about similar individuals, relations, or events. Consequently, as in my research I investigate the relationship between two members of Korean families in different settings (at home, at a restaurant, at hospital, etc.) on the basis of a consistent database, I believe that this study could be representative for a large majority of the Korean female population who experience injustices and humiliations from their mothers-in-law.

2.2. Critical discourse analysis and Foucault's theory on power

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged as a theoretical framework aiming at the study of "the relation between language and power" (Wodak 2001: 2). More specifically, "CDA may be defined as fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)" (Wodak 2001: 2).

This framework seems to have stemmed out of the need to compensate the lack of any tools for studying power relations, as expressed by Foucault (1983).

Unlike Wodak, for whom discourse is equated to language use, Fairclough (2010: 6) opines that the concept of *discourse* should be extended to also "include semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photography and non-verbal (e.g. gestural) communication". For both scholars, "language use as

discourse (...) is a form of social practice" (ibid.), and both are in agreement with respect to three concepts that represent the basis of CDA, i.e. *power* (discourse reflects dominance), *history* (any discourse is produced in a particular spatial and temporal context), and *ideology* ("dominance structures are legitimated by ideologies of powerful groups" – Wodak 2001: 3). And, to my knowledge, the power exercised verbally and nonverbally by Korean mothers-in-law over their daughters-in-law is legitimized by the Confucian ideology, as I will show in section 3 of the paper.

As mentioned previously, Fairclough (1989: 22) considers discourse to be social practice. This means "first, that language is a part of society (…). Secondly, that language is a social process. And thirdly, that language is a socially conditioned process, conditioned, that is, by other (non-linguistic) parts of society." Thus, the verbal (and non-verbal) exchanges between Korean mothers- and daughters-in-law are legitimized by the Confucian ideology, which preaches total submissiveness of young women to their in-laws and gives mothers-in-law free hand to treat and speak to their daughters-in-law whichever way they like. It seems that there is a strong connection between language and ideology, these, together, serving the process of power building. Thus, the "main task of CDA is to untangle the relationship between language, ideology, and power" (Fairclough 1989: 22).

On the other hand, Foucault (1983) is of the opinion that power relationships can be identified within social institutions, including the family. He also put forward the idea that power is exerted on human subjects through action and that power relations could be understood only if one would also consider the forms of resistance.

While CDA has been employed especially in the analysis of "police interviews, courtroom exchanges, and political speeches" (O'Regan & Betzel 2016: 282), so far, to my knowledge, it has not been applied in investigating the asymmetrical power relations in the Korean family institution. Consequently, by combining some elements of CDA with Foucault's theory related to power, I hope to be able to offer some explanations related to the behaviours of both mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in the current Korean society.

2.3. The data

In order to offer a comprehensive picture of the strained mother-in-law–daughter-in-law relationship in current South Korea, I have selected three episodes from a K-drama entitled *Marriage Clinic: Love and War*, a drama created by reconstructing the problems married couples are confronted with. This KBS production had two seasons: Season 1 (479 episodes, broadcast between 1999 and 2009) and Season 2 (124 episodes, aired between November 2011 and August 2014) (according to https://wiki.d-addicts.com/Couple_Clinic:_Love_and_War

and https://mydramalist.com/8134-the-clinic-for-married-couples-love-and-war-2). The episodes I have employed are available on YouTube and focus exactly on the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship: *The gigolo husband*, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and *I'm the mother-in-law.* Each episode ends with a panel of "experts" in family problems, who judge the problem presented and provide advice that should help couples rediscover the meaning of marriage. The second data source is represented by Cho Nam-Joo's (2018) novel *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982*, which offers an insight into women's lives in current South Korea. It is a conventional narrative of womanhood that many women are expected to follow in a country characterized by deep-rooted gender inequality. Only the beginning of the novel has been used in this study, the part in which in the autumn of 2015, Kim Jiyoung, aged 33, a stay-at-home mother, starts showing signs of abnormal behaviour, mimicking other women (dead or alive) she knows. It is exactly in this part of the book that we find out something about her relationship with her mother-in-law.

From these two types of data, I have extracted the fragments depicting the interactions between mothers- and daughters-in-law and their attitude towards each other in order to find out how power is exerted and by whom.

2.4. Hypothesis and research questions

The hypothesis at the basis of this research study is that the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship is a complicated one in many cultures, including the Korean one, which requires a lot of effort, understanding, patience, and determination on the part of the daughter-in-law and the support of her husband to make it work. Derived from it, the following research questions have been formulated:

(1) By what means do Korean mothers-in-law exercise power over their daughters-in-law?
(2) How do modern women react to their mothers-in-law's treatment?
(3) Could Korean men mitigate the fractured relationship between their mothers and wives? / Who do Korean husbands side with?
(4) Is there any chance for a shift to a horizontal relation between mother- and daughter-in-law, rather than a hierarchical one, based on dominance?

3. Data analysis

The aim of my analysis is to show how Korean mothers-in-law in contemporary South Korea exercise power over their daughters-in-law and if the latter attempt to resist this exertion of power or counteract it, as "in order to understand what

power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance" (Foucault 1983: 329). The analysis will start by setting the *ideological background* against which this power relation is depicted in both the novel and the K-drama selected as data.

According to Fairclough (2010: 46), ideology "involves the representation of 'the world' from the perspective of a particular interest (…)". And the ethical interests/ideals of Confucianism, one of the prevailing ideologies in current South Korea, are social and age hierarchy (in various institutions) and order. All relationships were hierarchical, which involved the existence of a higher (powerful) and a lower (subject) partner. Thus, dyads such as king–subjects, parents–children, and husband–wife emerged, which perpetuated the dominance of males over females on the one hand and of the old over the young on the other hand. From this perspective, it seems that Confucianism, despite its original tenet of treating everyone in a humane way, came to be associated with a "tool" of female oppression throughout many Asian countries, including Korea. The current Korean society is still very much hierarchically structured, which makes mothers-in-law feel entitled to request full subordination and obedience of their daughters-in-law, even nowadays, when the country claims to be a modern one. As Lee (2006: 24) points out, "the Confucian tradition has often stood in opposition to the movement towards modern forms and institutions", the family institution making no exception.

The second important element of CDA is *historical context*, for "we need a historical awareness for our present circumstance", as highlighted by Foucault (1983: 327). The historical context chosen as a background for the current investigation is represented by the period following the turn of the millennium, i.e. the beginning of the twenty-first century, a period in which many Korean women, unlike their mothers, try to juggle a lot of responsibilities: jobs, nuclear families, parents, and in-laws. If in the early 1980s many women, especially those working in the industrial sector, chose to leave their jobs on marriage (according to Kim (1997: 79), 90% of married women decided to quit their jobs and dedicate their lives to being good wives and good mothers), twenty years later the trend changed, in that more and more women, especially those who had received higher education, want to have a job, even after marriage and even if they are aware of the wage gap between men and women. According to the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS – https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do), at the beginning of 2024, the labour force participation by gender was 63.2% for women aged between 20 and 29 and 67.2% for those between 30 and 39 years of age, while the percentages for men, for the same age intervals were 59.5% and 89.3% respectively. At the same time, labour force participation for women with a university degree or beyond was 69.1%, while for men it was 85.8%. These figures indicated that more and more educated women want to have a job besides a family.

The third important category in CDA is *power*. According to Fairclough (2010) and Foucault (1983), power occurs within social institutions, the family being one of them. In his terms, "we may regard an institution as a sort of 'speech community', with its own repertoire of speech events, describable in terms of the sorts of 'components' (…) – settings, participants (their identities and relationships), goals, topics, etc." (Fairclough 2010: 40). Within this social institution (i.e. family), one may encounter status-symmetrical and status-asymmetrical interactions, an example of the latter being those between mother- and daughter-in-law, the status asymmetry being determined by the Confucian ideology. Let us now take a look at some ways in which mothers-in-law exercise their power over their daughters-in-law both by means of discourse (Fairclough 2010) and by means of actions[1] (Foucault 1983).

One way in which mothers-in-law "exploit" their daughters-in-law is to turn them into "slaves" for the important holidays of the year such as *Chuseok* and *Seollal*.[2] According to tradition, the wife of the eldest son of a Korean family is supposed to give a helping hand to her mother-in-law in preparing the dishes, but frequently she is left on her own to do the entire cooking. In Cho's novel, the heroine, Jiyoung, was requested by her mother-in-law to help her with the shopping of the ingredients for the dishes and also with the cooking for Chuseok despite the fact that the young woman was exhausted after a long drive (from Seoul to Busan,[3] where her in-laws resided). When Jiyoung's sister-in-law mentions that her mother should not have cooked so much food, especially because they were not holding ancestral rites any longer and also because she is too old and weak, which means an additional effort on Jiyoung's part, the old lady turns to her daughter-in-law and asks sarcastically:

(1) *Was it too much for you?* (Cho 2018: 9)

Jiyoung, who had lately been suffering from a post-partum depression enhanced by a number of other traumas in her life (such as her parents' favouring her brother when they were children, giving up the job she so much loved in order to raise her daughter, or her husband's not keeping his promise to help her with the house chores and be involved in his child's rearing), replies:

1 Foucault was of the opinion that "power exists only as exercised by some on others, only when it is put into action" (1983: 340).

2 *Chuseok* is the harvest celebration (similar to the American *Thanksgiving*), which takes place sometime in mid- to end of September. This is accompanied by a memorial to the deceased. *Seollal* is the Lunar New Year, celebrated not only in South Korea but also in other Asian countries.

3 Busan (also Romanized *Pusan*) is the second largest city in South Korea, situated in the southern part of the peninsula.

(2) *Oh, Mrs. Jung. To tell you the truth, my poor Jiyoung gets sick from exhaustion every holiday!* (Cho 2018: 9)

By impersonating her own mother, Jiyoung indirectly pointed out to her mother-in-law that every visit to Busan drains all energy out of her. In the guise of a different person, she gathers the courage to reveal what to her seems unfair in modern Korea – to exhaust yourself to the point of not being able to enjoy spending quality time with your family. Such a retort on Jiyoung's behalf is a slap in the face of filial piety, which takes her in-laws by surprise.

(3) "*What is this nonsense?" Daehyun's*[4] *father thundered. "Is this how you behave in front of your elders?"* (Cho 2018: 10)

In twenty-first century Korea, one would expect Confucian subordination of women to have lost its power, but apparently it still has a strong hold, as in the reply Jiyoung provides to her father-in-law, sensing that she had somewhat pushed her luck, she prefaces it with the syntagm "with all due respect", indicating that she is trying to be submissive. But once again, mimicking her mother, Jiyoung's intervention highlights another inequality in the Korean society.

(4) "Mr. Jung, ***with all due respect****, I must say my piece," Jiyoung said in a cool tone (…). "As you know, the holidays are a time for families to gather. But they're not just for your family. They're for my family, too. Everyone's so busy nowadays and it's hard for my children to get together, too, if not for the holidays. You should at least let our daughter come home when your daughter comes to visit you."* (Cho 2018: 11; my emphasis)

The fragment reveals the different importance attributed to the husband's and the wife's families, in that the husband's one is considered to be more important (or higher up in the social hierarchy) than the wife's. What Jiyoung would like is to equally divide the little spare time she and her husband have with both her in-laws and her own family, if not to reserve it for her husband and daughter. She is trying to navigate her life path through meeting the expectations of both pairs of parents, as well as to have a life of her own. Under normal circumstances, she would not have had the courage to express her desire so bluntly, but all the gender and social inequalities she had experienced since childhood and which had been bottled up so far burst open. In Jiyoung's case, resistance to the power dominance of her in-laws takes the form of retorting under the guise of another person or of "insanity". According to Foucault, power is exercised by the dominant member of a family for various reasons, in the case of the Korean in-laws in the novel this

4 Daehyun is Jiyoung's husband.

being "the exercise of statutory authority" (Foucault 1983: 344). On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that resistance to domination is an essential element of power relations, where the subject upon whom power is exercised can react or respond in many ways.

If Jiyoung, the main character in Cho's novel, was a modern woman, in the sense that she lived with her nuclear family, far away from her husband's parents, the daughters-in-law in the K-drama *Marriage Clinic* live under the same roof with their mothers-in-law, being constantly watched by them and having to please them all the time, even if their demands are sometimes absurd. As Ableman (2002: 45) describes the situation, "[i]f she (i.e. the mother-in-law) says an apple is rotten and you taste it and find it isn't, you still have to declare the apple rotten". All three mothers-in-law that appear in the investigated episodes of the above-mentioned K-drama share the desire for their daughters-in-law to be slaving them. Despite the fact that the young wives have a job and a husband to take care of, they are ordered to do the laundry (sometimes by hand), to cook all the meals for their mothers-in-law, and to clean their premises. Additionally, these elderly women feel entitled to impose pregnancy on their daughters-in-law and scold or even deny their status as wives of their sons if they happen to give birth to a daughter. But when daughters-in-law become pregnant, mothers-in-law have the nerve to accuse them of wanting to have a stronger grip on their husbands.

Figure 1. *Mother-in-law exercising power over daughter-in-law (Episode 57:* I'm the mother-in-law*)*

In episode 57/Season 2 of the drama, entitled *I'm the mother-in-law*, the treatments the oldest daughter-in-law has received while living under the same roof with her mother-in-law will be the cause of her stomach cancer. In order to survive, she decides to divorce her husband, a move that could be interpreted as a form of rebellion, since as a divorcee she is not supposed to comply with her mother-in-law's demands any longer. But this makes the mother-in-law move

with her other son and his wife. On one occasion, when the two sisters-in-law meet, the oldest one tells the youngest:

(5) *I couldn't live with mother*[5] *even if I was dead, so I had to leave*. (min. 6:36)

On this occasion, she also tells her younger sister-in-law (named Yoonju) that she had stage 4 stomach cancer. When the younger daughter-in-law returns home, she finds an outraged mother-in-law.

(6) M.I.L.[6] (shouting): *Are you going to let your mother-in-law starve to death? What were you doing to come home that late?* (min. 6:36). Yoonju: *Sister-in-law has cancer. Do you know why she got cancer?*
M.I.L.: *She's got cancer because she is going to die. How should I know that?*
Yoonju: *She's got cancer because of you!* (min. 11:13–34)

The dialogue shows that the matriarch, who does not do anything in the house but watches TV all day long, expects to have food prepared and served to her by the young woman who went to work and afterwards dared spend a couple of minutes with her sister-in-law. On the other hand, it also reveals the lack of sympathy of mother-in-law for her oldest daughter in-law. She only cares about herself. By throwing into her mother-in-law's face the fact that her sister-in-law became ill because the former had made the latter's life a living hell, Yoonju starts showing the first signs of resistance against the matriarch. But not long after the mother-in-law gets established into her younger son's house, Yoonju faints at the office and is rushed to hospital, where she is diagnosed with thyroid cancer. On arriving home, after being discharged from hospital, she is received by her mother-in-law, who was watching TV, her favourite time-pass, as follows:

(7) M.I.L. *Is your act of being sick all healed now? I'm hungry. Prepare the meal!*
Yoonju: *Get out of this house! (to her husband) Why do I have to be treated like a maid by her and get sick?*
M.I.L. *(ironically) Thyroid cancer? It's not even a disease. All my friends are alive and well after surgery.*
Yoonju (shouting): *Please stop! Please! Are you going to kill me, too?*
M.I.L. *How dare you scream at me?* (min. 16:12–40)

5 Koreans address their in-laws with "mother" and "father".
6 M.I.L. stands for "mother-in-law". This abbreviation will be used for the sake of simplicity in all examples.

This fragment reinforces the mother-in-law's lack of sympathy for other persons' suffering and her desire to be the centre of the universe in her son's house by no means. Not even when her ailing daughter-in-law returns from hospital does she spare her from preparing the food for her. Moreover, she treats with contempt her illness, by saying that it was only an act, but when she realizes that it is genuine, she tries to downplay its seriousness by saying that thyroid cancer is not even a disease. This time, Yoonju does not care about filial piety any longer and shouts at her mother-in-law to leave their house. As Fairclough (2010: 44) points out, "it is quite possible for a social subject to occupy (…) a subject position which is incompatible with her (…) social beliefs and affiliations without being aware of any contradiction". What this means is that in Yoonju's situation, she is not aware that her desire to lead a life without the constant supervision of her mother-in-law is incompatible with the matriarch's opinion fed by long years of tradition.

The mother-in-law is taken aback for a couple of seconds by Yoonju's lack of manners when addressing her and attacks her anew:

(8) M.I.L. *She can't even get pregnant, so* ***she*** *should leave the house*. (min. 17:05)

This evil woman tries to take advantage of the fact that Yoonju cannot get pregnant because of her thyroid cancer and kick her out of the house. What confers the matriarch the power in this respect is the Confucian ideology, according to which young women are supposed to give birth to sons who should carry the family lineage. Failure to produce a son may constitute a reason for the wife to be divorced or expelled from home (Lee 1995). At the same time, she also tries to turn her son against his wife, an attitude encountered in another episode of the K-drama, titled *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*. But while in *I am the mother-in-law* the matriarch pulled the strings of power very bluntly, by shouting orders at her daughter-in-law, in the latter episode, the mother-in-law is an extremely sly fox, who exercises her power indirectly, through sugar-coated utterances, soft voice, and lies.

The episode opens with a proposal the mother-in-law makes to her daughter-in-law, named Misuk:

(9) M.I.L.: *Misuk, let's not be like other mothers and daughters-in-law. I think of you as my own daughter*. (min. 0:12)

But immediately her tone changes when she starts ordering Misuk:

(10) M.I.L.: *Wash the blankets! Wash them by hand to get the dirt out. Do not use the washing machine! And cook some bean paste soup with clams for dinner!* (min. 0:22–29)

In such a technologically advanced country like South Korea, every family owns a washing machine that is big enough to wash blankets, too, so the mother-in-law's request that the family blankets should be washed by hand might look absurd. But considering that the matriarch's request is actually an order by which she exercises her power over Misuk, the latter complies with it. When dinner is served, Misuk is very eager to find out if her mother-in-law (i.e. Lady Vengeance – henceforth as L. V.) appreciates her cooking effort, but the latter starts coughing and making a whole fuss about the soup, as she is (apparently) allergic to clam. Her son is worried she might die and shouts at Misuk, not knowing that she has actually followed the order of her mother-in-law. The sly woman manipulates her son by telling him:

(11) L. V.: *Don't be harsh to your wife! I told her I was allergic to clams, but I guess she heard me wrong.* (min. 0:45)

When Misuk swore to her husband that it was his mother who ordered her to cook clam, he would not believe her. Instead, he believed his mother. And this was not the only incident when Lady Vengeance plotted against Misuk. When Misuk and her husband went to visit her father, Lady Vengeance felt jealous and faked an accident that led to a leg injury. This meant that from that moment onwards all the house chores were Misuk's responsibility. But one evening, as Misuk went into the kitchen to fetch a glass of water, she found her mother-in-law walking without crutches or a limp. Surprised, she asks her:

(12) Misuk: *Didn't you hurt your leg?*
L. V.: *Why? Do you wish that I'd be disabled?*
Misuk: *You don't like me?*
L. V.: *Ha, ha, ha! It took you so long to figure out? So, just do as I say, if you want to stay married to him.* (min. 2:40–48)

The double-faced mother-in-law is not only mocking Misuk but also lets her know that she does not like her (despite the confession she made at the beginning of the episode that she considered her like her own daughter) and blackmails her to show her who the most powerful person in the house is. The goal of her blackmail as a form of power is to maintain her privileges (Foucault 1983) as the matriarch.

Like in the previous episode, the problem of babies is also brought into discussion. In this episode, Misuk is pregnant, and probably this is the reason why she is not considering the option of divorce as a way of getting out of the sphere of dominance of her mother-in-law. Misuk's condition does not stop Lady Vengeance from spitting venom when she tells her daughter-in-law that "being pregnant isn't anything special" (min. 3:48). Consequently, she asks Misuk to replace a bulb that has burnt out. While complying with Lady Vengeance's order, Misuk loses balance, falls, and suffers a miscarriage. When her husband and mother-in-law visit her at the hospital, the latter plays the role of a bereaved grandmother:

(13) L. V.: *Oh, my poor grandchild (crying)* (min. 4:07)

Misuk's first sign of rebellion is to accuse her mother-in-law of the death of her baby. In doing this, she hopes to be supported by her sister-in-law, who witnessed the mishap, but blood is thicker than water: the latter says that there is some misunderstanding and that her mother is one of the nicest persons in the world. Her act of confronting the mother-in-law comes as a result of the latter's verbal action of making Misuk change the burnt-out bulb, which eventually led to her miscarriage. The power relationship between the two women is a mode of action upon action, as described by Foucault (1983). But Misuk's action is the first in a series of reactions to everything she has endured from her domineering mother-in-law.

Being discharged from hospital, Misuk is visited by her father, who was worried about her condition. When he reaches his daughter's place, he is talked down to by Lady Vengeance, an additional proof that the wife's family is considered to be of less value than that of the husband:

(14) L. V.: *Since you had your daughter married off without teaching her properly at home, you must be worried about her. After having a miscarriage that was her own fault, she blamed the death of the baby on me. Is that even possible? She talks back to me all the time.* (min. 4:51–5:02)

Lady Vengeance's words were a strong offence brought to the elderly father: she accuses him of not having brought up Misuk properly and because of lack of education she misbehaves when she interacts with her mother-in-law. This time, Lady Vengeance exercises her power on the poor man, who feels guilty for what happened to his daughter and for the fact that her conduct brings shame upon him, making him lose face. What he, as the subject on whom power is exercised, does is to apologize continuously. The traditional difference of status permits Lady Vengeance to exercise her power over Misuk's father, and she does so by

the effect of her insulting words. This leads to loss of face, which the old parent could not stand, and which, eventually, leads to his death.

The death of Misuk's father determines a change in her attitude and tactics when it comes to her mother-in-law. What she does is to treat Lady Vengeance the same way she has treated her. The first step was to cook the meals she enjoyed, not those preferred by her mother-in-law:

(15) L. V.: *Does she expect me to eat this?*
Misuk: *It suits my taste.*
L. V.: *Ah, you're very evil.*
Misuk: *Mother, I am having a hard time because of you.*
L. V.: *Why don't you leave?*
Misuk: ***I want to be like a real daughter to you*** (my emphasis). (min. 5:43–57)

Just like in the previously analysed episode of the drama, here again we witness the power that mothers-in-law have to ask their daughters-in-law to leave the house (which sometimes may have been partially bought with money contributed to by the daughter-in-law or gifted by her parents). But Misuk is not willing to give her mother-in-law any satisfaction by leaving; instead, she pretends to want to be a good daughter, as Lady Vengeance promised to treat her at the beginning of the episode.

Not only did Misuk ignore her mother-in-law's food preferences, but she also started eating alone, before the latter joined the meals, this being another gesture of insubordination, as in the Korean culture young people are not supposed to eat before their elderly relatives:

(16) L. V.: *Are you eating alone without asking me to join you?*
Misuk: (cleaning the table and taking away the food, which she throws in the bin; she responds very calmly). *You can make your own dish!*
L. V.: *Are you forgetting who I am?* (min. 6:20–25)

The mother-in-law feels offended by Misuk's behaviour and reminds her that she should be respected because she has a privileged position in the family (a domineering matriarch), but apparently Misuk is so determined to take her revenge on her that she does not feel threatened by Lady Vengeance at all. Moreover, she adopts the same tactics like her, namely playing innocent in front of her husband. When Songgyu, Misuk's husband returns home, Lady Vengeance complains about not having been given any food, as her daughter-in-law threw it to the bin. When Misuk is confronted on this topic by her husband, who, of course, believed his mother, she replies:

(17) Misuk: (to her husband) *Mother didn't like my side dishes.* (to her mother-in-law): *It's ok to scold me, but don't throw the food away.* (min. 6:56–7:06)

All these fragments show Misuk's insubordination to her mother-in-law. As Foucault (1983: 346) put it, "at the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy. (…) There is no relationship of power without the means of escape or possible flight."

Seeing that she loses ground, Lady Vengeance physically attacks Misuk, pulls at her hair and tries to knock her down, only that Songgyu (Misuk's husband) jumps to her aid. As Lady Vengeance realizes that her son does care for his wife and that she cannot separate them, and also because she has no other place to go to, she seeks a way to a compromise with her daughter-in-law:

(18) L. V.: *I'm just sick of fighting. Let's just be frank and talk. When Songgyu is around, you are the nicest daughter-in-law. But when he is gone, you don't even* ***cook for me, you don't do laundry, or clean my room.*** (my emphasis)*. How long will this continue?*
Misuk: *There is an order for things to be compromised.*
L. V.: *Is it an apology that you want to hear?*
Misuk: *I want you to apologise to my dead child and father.* (min. 8:33–53)

One way of counteracting her mother-in-law's power is to refuse to do the menial things for her like cooking, cleaning, and washing the clothes. But more important than that is that she wants her to admit that Misuk lost her baby and her father because of Lady Vengeance: had she not asked Misuk to replace the bulb, the latter would not have suffered the miscarriage; and if Lady Vengeance had not offended Misuk's father, he would have still been alive. But probably Misuk's grief is too deep to be erased by a mere apology.

In the third episode subjected to analysis, *The gigolo husband*, everything revolved around a large sum of money that a hard-working wife, Jinhee, has inherited from her father, who owned some land. At the time of the good news, she was sharing the house with her husband (Jungi), mother-in-law, and sister-in-law (Minji), who all made plans about how they were going to spend Jinhee's money. As life with the in-laws, as we have seen, is not very pleasant, Jinhee decides to buy a house for her nuclear family, so she and her husband move out. But Jungi, without informing Jinhee, buys his mother a new house out of his wife's inheritance money. When she moves into the new house, his mother wanted an ornamental wall made with mother of pearl, which was also bought from the same source of money. Moreover, Jinhee was also asked to invest money in a hospital built by the parents of the boy Minji was supposed to marry. When

Jinhee opposed this investment, her mother-in-law accused her of compromising her daughter's future:

(19) M.I.L.: *Are you going to be so stingy on this?*
Jinhee: *Why must I pay for Minji's dowry?*
M.I.L.: *We are one family: your money is our money. If this marriage does not happen, I will not forgive you.* (min. 3:02–13)

According to the Korean Civil Code (1977) – Provisions for Family Law, any unclear title of property acquired after marriage is considered to be the property of the husband; in case of divorce, it is divided equally between the spouses (Putnam Epstein, 2007). It is on the basis of this law that Jungi, his mother, and sister felt entitled to spend Jinhee's inheritance without consulting her in advance. The goal of the mother-in-law in exercising power over her daughter-in-law in this case was both "maintenance of privileges and accumulation of profits" (Foucault 1983: 344), as neither she nor any of her children had any means of earning money.

Like many Korean men who have money (in this particular case from the wife's inheritance) and a lot of spare time, Jungi finds himself a mistress, who is easily accepted by his mother. As Jinhee finds out about her husband's mistress, she kicks him out of the newly bought house. And where should the good-for-nothing Jungi go but to his mother's place, also bought with his wife's inheritance money. When Jinhee confronts her mother-in-law about her husband's adventure, she retorts:

(20) M.I.L. *If you had been a good wife, he wouldn't have cheated on You.* (min. 5:15)

Spending most of her money on her husband and in-laws, running a clothes shop to earn money for the family, doing everything her mother-in-law ordered her was not enough to be considered a good wife. Encouraged by his mistress and mother, who kept instilling in the young man's mind that he was not respected by his wife, Jungi asks for a divorce, which eventually Jinhee agrees with. But after the divorce is pronounced, Jungi finds out that inherited wealth cannot be divided upon divorce, as it was not "unclear title of property": Jinhee inherited the money from her father, and as such, upon divorce, she was entitled to the whole amount. When Jungi realized that without his wife's money he cannot survive and neither can his mother, he decided to go back to Jinhee and beg her to forgive him and his mother, telling her that he would not cheat on her again. Meanwhile, Jungi's dumped mistress informs Jinhee why her husband returned to her: he could not have half of her assets at the divorce, as he had expected.

This is the moment when Jinhee starts planning her revenge on her husband and his family. She sends them on a short holiday, to celebrate the reconciliation. On their departure, she pretends that all her money was in deposits and asks her husband to pay for the vacation from his bank account, to be reimbursed upon his return.

While her family is away, Jinhee sells both her mother-in-law's house and her own. And when Jungi, his mother, and his sister return from the short but luxurious holiday, they suffer a shock seeing that they have no place to go to. When Jinhee meets them, she tells her mother-in-law:

(21) Jinhee: *Just think of the recent past as a great dream. You can go back to your old house and support your spendthrift son by going frugal.* (min. 9:42)

In this episode, like in the other two, what happens is that the exercise of power is reversed: if originally mothers-in-law considered themselves entitled to treat their daughters-in-law as dirt, humiliating them and their parents, by becoming less and less submissive, daughters-in-law managed to escape their dominance and to become more powerful than the matriarchs.

4. Conclusions

Despite the economic, technological, and cultural progress made by South Korea, it seems that there is still a long way to go before the women in this country manage to step away from the attitudes the society as a whole and their upbringing have instilled in them. From an early age, they face gender injustices (being rejected at birth, suffering discrimination first in the family, then at school, and later in the work place) to which the dominance of their mothers-in-law adds up, providing an image of what it means to be a woman in South Korea nowadays. As Fairclough (2010: 40) contends, "social institutions are determined by social formation, and social action is determined by social institutions". The Korean family as a social institution is determined by the stage of the development of the Korean state in the twenty-first century, and the interactions (verbal or physical) that take place between people are determined by factors that pertain to the family institution. What this means is that the Korean social structures allow such behaviours/actions on the part of mothers-in-law without condemning them. Moreover, we have to be aware of the fact that the interactions presented in the analysis should not be interpreted as having a local significance only, but they could reflect a general trend in South Korea or contribute "to the reproduction of 'macro' structures" (Fairclough 2010: 38).

It is true that, compared to the previous generations of women, whose roles were solely to clean, cook, look after their children, and having to deal with the constant demands of their mothers-in-law, who depended financially on their husbands and, later on, on their sons, wives in current South Korea are better off in the sense that if they have a job, at least they spend less time under the direct surveillance and dominance of their mothers-in-law. Tudor (2012: 228 epub) points out, "[t]hese days, most Korean wives only have to spend *Chuseok* and *Seollal* slaving away for their in-laws. Those who go away on holiday do not even have to do that. Korean women may not yet have equality, but they have a much better deal than their mothers and grandmothers ever did."

As we have seen, even in the twenty-first century, mothers-in-law seem to have a domineering attitude towards their daughters-in-law despite the fact that many of the latter have a much higher degree of education and also jobs. Still, they are commanded by the matriarch to prepare food for and serve them, to clean their homes, to wash the dishes and clothes, and to provide them with monthly allowances. Very often, mothers-in-law make recourse to blackmail ("Just do as I say if you want to stay married to him.") and trick their sons into believing that their wives are evil, disrespectful, and mean to them. Sometimes mothers-in-law can attack their daughters-in-law even physically if they feel their privileges are in danger.

The answer to the second research question is that modern Korean women prove to be more and more insubordinate, counteracting the power exercised by their mothers-in-law. Their resistance takes many forms: disclosing perceived injustice in the guise of another person, as was the case of Jiyoung, Cho Nam-Joo's heroine, or by bluntly refusing to cook, clean, do the laundry for their mothers-in-law, as was expected. Moreover, Misuk, the daughter-in-law in *Lady Vengeance*, adopted the same behaviour to her mother-in-law as that the latter used towards her, i.e. she cooked and ate only what she liked and before her mother-in-law (which is an indication of lack of filial piety), and she also adopted a double-faced behaviour: she was polite to her mother-in-law when her husband was at home, but when the two women were on their own, Misuk did not spare the matriarch. The power balance turned 180 degrees in the case of Jinhee, the heroine of the episode *The gigolo husband*, who under the mask of forgiveness and generosity sends her husband with his mother and sister on a trip, and while they are having their dream holiday (which they assumed was paid for by Jinhee), she recuperates the inheritance from her father, leaving the ones who had humiliated her homeless and penniless. As Foucault pointed out, "[t]he victory over the adversary replaces the exercise of power" (1983: 347).

As regards research question number three, the answer would be that Korean mothers still have a strong hold on their sons and manipulate them in their own interests. Consequently, sons are expected to show their loyalty first to their

mothers. In the four families that made the object of this analysis, two husbands sided with their mothers (Jungi and Songgyu), while the other two (Daehyun's and Yoonju's husband) seem to be torn between the loyalty to their mothers and that to their wives. Such husbands "call themselves the 'sandwich generation'" (Cho 2002: 174). At the end of episode 57 of the K-drama, when both the wife and the mother ask the head of the family to decide which of the women should leave the house, he utters, "**I**'ll leave! **I**'ll just leave!" (min. 17:40, stress on the pronoun). Probably, if more husbands realized that once they are married, it is their wives that would take care of them and not their mothers, if they came to appreciate more their wives' hard work both at home and in their work place, and if they were to be on their wives' side in the conflicts these have with their mothers, then probably the Korean mothers-in-law's grip on their daughters-in-law would weaken and the atmosphere in the family would be more pleasant. But given the century-old ideology governing the Korean society, it will take some time until "wifely power gains a foothold over motherly power" (Cho 2002: 174).

As far as the last research question is concerned, i.e. whether the hierarchical relationship between mother- and daughter-in-law based on dominance has any chance to change into a horizontal one, based on cooperation, the answer depends very much on a number of factors. First, the men's attitude seems to be of great importance: if they side with their wives in domestic conflicts, they will diminish in this way the power exerted by their mothers. At the same time, if they also accept to become more involved in family life, to share the house chores and the child rearing with their wives, then these will feel more equal to their spouses. Secondly, a milder adherence to the Confucian ideology will also liberate young women from many constraints. Thirdly, the Korean society should also become more open-minded with respect to women who want to have both a family and a job by increasing the number of childcare facilities and by providing women with better working conditions (Kim Choe 2006). But to my mind, the most important factor in this respect is the level of education of the daughters-in-law. Quite often, many young, educated Korean wives do not show the same respect as before towards their uneducated mothers-in-law, not to mention the fact that some even refuse to live with them under the same roof for fear that the latter's ignorance might have a negative impact on the children's education. According to Cho (2002: 174), "concern for children's well-being is a weapon that these modern women frequently wield".

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