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LGBT representations in South Korea: an analysis through film and fiction

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*LGBT representations in South Korea:
an analysis through film and fiction*



Universiteit Leiden

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Master of Asian Studies: Politics, Society and Economy

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Abstract

While multiculturalism is increasingly normalized in Korea, and traditionally marginalized groups such as immigrants have increasingly seen an improvement in their rights and representation; the LGBT community remains invisible. Studies on queer issues are scarce and they lack representation in the media. This thesis aims to analyze the different LGBT representations both in Korean movies and novels to develop an outline of the discourse that is used in the country to address LGBT issues.

To be able to describe such discourse as accurately as possible, the characters and themes discussed in two novels and three films, all of which presented queer characters and themes associated with homosexuality, have been analyzed. Using the discourse analysis methodology, novels and films have been examined to search for commonalities in Korean discourse. The results show us a clear stereotyping of homosexual men as opposed to women, and a series of problems related to queerness, both on a personal and cultural level. Homophobia both, internally and socially, is a theme that is repeated throughout all the works, and we can conclude that the representation of LGBT characters in Korea is pessimistic.

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Chapter I. Introduction

1. Background of this study and research questions

Academic studies related to the LGBT community have increased in recent decades, especially in European countries and the United States. However, in countries like South Korea, it is still a taboo subject, and articles on queer topics are rare. Homosexuality in South Korea is not considered illegal, but same-sex marriage is not recognized, and even though measures such as conversion therapy - considered a violation of human rights - are condemned theoretically, there are still religious facilities profiting on this type of “therapies”, according to the OGILAW Annual Report of Human Rights situation of LGBT in South Korea.¹ Although the Human Rights Committee recommended that public buildings should not be used for conversion therapy purposes, seminars and other events have continued to be held in the National Assembly building.² Furthermore, since homosexual marriage is not yet protected by law, homosexual couples are not allowed to adopt children either. This is due to adoption being only allowed to married couples, making it extremely difficult for single people to have children. In terms of protection laws, South Korea's anti-discrimination law does not include any article regarding discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity. Over the years, particularly in 2007 and 2013, there have been societal efforts to legislate anti-discrimination protections for LGBT but no success due to the continuous opposition from conservative political parties. Moreover, the administration of President Moon Jae-in and the ruling Democratic Party, both regarded as progressive, have failed to state any official position on the matter, even though some members of the Democratic Party have been attending the LGBT parade for the last few years. Nonetheless, opposition comes mainly from the Christian sectors of South Korean society.

It is not only the lack of studies related to the LGBT community that has prompted me to write this thesis on the representation of the Korean LGBT community in fiction and movies. The fact that differentiates Korea from other countries with homophobic tendencies - such as China - is that Korea has been exporting its cultural products in recent years, due to the expansion of the "Korean wave" or Hallyu in Western countries. Korean cinema is receiving rave reviews, as we could see last year when a Korean movie like [*Parasite*] (2019, Bong Joon-ho) won the 2020 Oscar for Best Picture, and this year actress Youn Yuh Jung won the Best Supporting Actress award for her role in [*Minari*] (2020, Lee Isaac Chung). Books written by Korean authors are being translated into foreign languages and gaining more international fame, as can be appreciated in the case of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007, Changbi Publishers). Although Korea has exported an increased volume of cultural products, it is little known how they reflect changing dynamics in Korean society, particularly concerning the LGBT community. Focusing

¹ Human Rights Situation of LGBTI in South Korea 2015, SOGILAW Annual Report. Retrieved from http://annual.sogilaw.org/review/download_en/1706

² “Human Rights Violations on the Basis of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and HIV Status in the Republic of Korea” submitted by Rainbow Action against Sexual Minority Discrimination in 2017. Retrieved from https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/KOR/INT_CAT_CSS_KOR_27029_E.pdf

on the growing efforts for diversity and inclusivity, this thesis examines the portrayal of LGBT people in Korea's media.

This thesis aims to understand which kind of discourse South Korean society engages in when talking about LGBT matters. It does so through the analysis of various representations of LGBT in the literature and cinema. More specifically, the thesis addresses two main research questions: how does Korean society view the LGBT community; and what is the dominant discourse Korean society engages in when talking about LGBT affairs? The data for the analysis will be drawn on cultural manifestations such as literature and other more popular forms of culture like movies on the premise that the audiences of Korean cinema have increased dramatically, as well as the Korean queer literature in recent years.

2. Significance, scope, and limitations of this study

In general, there are few studies carried out on queer representation in Korea. Even when there are studies done from a social and legal point of view, there is not a large number from the perspective of the analysis of its literature or its films. There are several studies - although scarce - of the content analysis of certain movies and dramas, but not from a discourse analysis point of view. It is my objective with this research to contribute to academia related to queer studies and give a voice to the LGBT community in an underrepresented country like Korea.

In this study, I will cover both literary and film productions, which although they are part of this cultural export that is Hallyu, are not an essential part of pop culture as dramas or K-pop. I have limited myself to analyzing works that are generally read by Koreans and films, of various genres, that have been seen at film festivals held in Korea and released in Korean cinemas. This thesis's focus will remain solely on South Korea, thus excluding North Korean cultural productions, due to the lack of information about it and the tremendous difference existing between discourses that would prevent the investigation of one of them in depth. In terms of time, the focus will be on the current period exclusively, that is, since the 2000s, as it is when South Korea, being already a full democracy, began to open up to the world and started to receive Western influences.

3. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, two particular types of media – fiction and film - produced by queer and non-queer are selected to bring to light the kind of discourse used by South Korean society concerning queer issues. The selected fiction and films are distinguished along the line of the sexual orientation of the authors in order to compare the potential shift in discourse. Through the discourse analysis methodology, the thesis focuses on the analysis of the characters' traits and the themes that each work deals with concerning the queer community, intending to find common ground and discern through them what is the vision of the LGBT community in Korea.

First, in the category of fiction, two books, one that deals with gay characters and the other that deals with lesbian characters are selected. One of the authors, Park Sang Young, is openly gay, while the other, Kim Hye Jin, has not commented on her sexuality. The difference in themes, characters, and between the authors' personalities would lead me to various discourses within Korean queer literature. These books, published in Korean, do not yet have an official translation in English, so their entire audience is exclusively Korean or fluent speakers of the language. When analyzing these texts, as I have said previously, I will use the discourse analysis methodology, that is to say, I will analyze how the characters express themselves around their sexuality, and how other characters define them in the novels. In Kim Hye Jin's novel, the narrator is not the queer character herself, while in Park's novel, the narrator is the homosexual main character. I will try to discern the differences that this may offer in the treatment of discourse. Moreover, I will extract the topics covered in each novel and analyze how they are treated, what tone is used in the novel in general, and why the choice of certain words over others to refer to queer issues or characters.

Second, in the category of movies, three films, which are different from each other in terms of the genre, main theme, and director, are selected to shed light on the diversity of LGBT narratives. The first film will be *Yõnaedam* [Our love story], directed by Lee Hyun Ju, an openly lesbian, included in the indie genre. This film deals with the relationship of two queer women, and the obstacles they must face as women and lesbians in Korea. The second film will be a comedy directed by Kim Jho Kwang Soo, an openly homosexual director, called *Tu põnũ kyõrhonshikkwa han põnũ changnyeshik* [Two weddings and a funeral]. In this film, male and female characters are portrayed, all belonging to the LGBT community, and it deals with the issue of homosexual marriage, not yet legalized in Korea. Finally, I will analyze a thriller directed by a heterosexual man, Yang Yun Ho, called *Kamyõn* [Rainbow eyes], with male characters almost exclusively, and that deals with cruder themes such as violence against homosexuals in the army. The same method will be followed as in the analysis of the books: first, an analysis of the queer characters, how they are defined and portrayed; then, an analysis of the theme, how queer issues are treated by the directors, and the general tone of the film.

It is worth mentioning that these analyzes will not be isolated studies of each book or film, but rather that, as they are carried out, they will be compared with the previous analysis to be able to recognize the differences - if they exist - in the discourse of the LGBT community depending on the author/director, the genre of the work, representation of characters, conflicts, etc. This study aims to be a cross-sectional investigation of LGBT representation through Korean literature and cinema, so it is convenient to make a comparison between them.

4. Literature review

4.1. Media studies

In the first place, it is convenient to analyze the studies carried out under the framework of media analysis, because although they do not follow the same methodology as this thesis, they do fall within the

same purpose, which is to find out how LGBT characters are portrayed in Korean productions such as movies or dramas. Some studies that analyze them include the one carried out by Glynn and Kim in 2016 on the drama [*Life is Beautiful*]³, which featured a homosexual couple as the main characters; and the research conducted by Kim in 2007, analyzing the indie film [*Stateless things*].⁴ Both follow the content analysis methodology and come to a similar conclusion: although the existence of these - rare - displays of LGBT representations are very beneficial to the LGBT community in Korea, they are still tremendously flawed.

Glynn and Kim's study argues that realistic depictions of homosexuality are virtually non-existent and that, in general, homosexual characters are a source of pity and tragedy. In their analysis of the drama [*Life is Beautiful*], they praise the accurate representation of homophobia and emphasize the importance of the role that the family plays in the acceptance of homosexuality. However, they criticize that the homosexual couple seems to be the only homosexuals in the entire drama. Kim, on the other hand, debates that even though the various queer-themed indie films have diversified, there is still a lot to do in terms of a positive discourse towards the LGBT community. Naaranoja (2016) claims in her thesis that the LGBT community is "underrepresented, misrepresented and stereotyped" in Korean media.⁵

Concerning the representation of the LGBT community in the literary field, there are not many studies in this regard. There is an investigation conducted by Choe in 2018, in which, through the discourse analysis methodology, he studies three experimental stories with a queer theme.⁶ He highlights the enhancement of queer literature in the 2010s – without explaining the causes of such increase – and concludes that the LGBT discourse in literature focuses on the very existence of the queer character, the tone used in all three stories is nostalgic and existential. He does not mention the homophobia-related themes that can be dealt with in the stories, and Choe's three objects of analysis have a narrator/character who does not suffer any type of internal conflict when accepting their sexual identity. It is also convenient to mention this study because it provides an annex with queer Korean novels and stories, a list that we have used to choose our literary productions to analyze.

The literature in this category makes an important contribution in starting to create an academic body that studies the different LGBT narratives in Korean film and television but is also limited in the literary field. Despite the increase in literature with queer themes in this last decade, as Choe emphasizes, there is a lack of studies that analyze the type of discourse used, the analysis of the characters, etcetera.

³ Glynn, Basil & Kim, Jeongmee: "*Life is Beautiful: Gay Representation, Moral Panics, and South Korean Television Drama Beyond Hallyu*", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 34:4 (2017) 333-347, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2016.1241615

⁴ Kim, Ungsan: *Queer Korean cinema, national others, and making of queer space in Stateless Things (2011)*, *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* (2017).

⁵ Naaranoja, Kata: *South Korean University Students' Attitudes toward Homosexuality and LGBT Issues*, 2016

⁶ Choe, Hyonhui: *Queer Experimental Writing in Korean Literature of the 2010s*, *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies*, 31: 2 (2018), 235-258

4.2. Cultural studies

The second group of studies about the discourse used to speak of the LGBT community in Korea falls within the discipline of cultural studies. Following different methodologies, one of them, discourse analysis, they try to answer the question of how certain philosophies - Confucianism - or certain religions with a strong presence in Korea - Evangelism - shape this discourse around queer issues. As they form the discourse, this is reflected in the representation of the LGBT community.

Unlike those focused on media analysis, these articles are more common when studying LGBT representation, the most recent of the year 2020. Jung conducted a study that same year in which he analyzed the discourse of Protestant women Evangelists to check what role religion plays when it comes to representing sexual minorities.⁷ It concludes that Evangelism plays a very important part in lobbying certain proposals for laws to represent the LGBT community on a legal level, so we could argue that religion in Korea has a detrimental part in queer representation. Rich also carried out an investigation in 2016 in which he concluded that Protestants had a more negative general opinion than people of other religions such as Catholicism or Buddhism.⁸

While there is a consensus in the academy regarding queer representation by the religious community, there is no general opinion regarding Confucianism. Some argue that Confucianism does not present an explicit opposition to same-sex relationships⁹, while others argue that, since Confucianism prioritizes social harmony over individuality, it does not support pro-queer positions.¹⁰ Bai's 2020 study illustrates the two positions defended in Confucianism regarding same-sex marriage, currently not legalized in Korea.¹¹ Regarding representation in the legal sphere, all studies acknowledge the lack of representation both in terms of parliamentary representation and in the absence of laws to protect queer people from discrimination.

Cultural studies contribute more to the study of the LGBT community, partly due to the number of them, and provides a very detailed and specific view of certain religious communities and groups in Korean society. These studies help us to understand the reasons behind the representation of certain themes in the analysis of the works that we will carry out later. However, despite the existence of studies on it, there is still no agreement in academia about the Confucian view on queer issues.

⁷ Jung, Gowoon. *Evangelical Protestant Women's Views on Homosexuality and LGBT Rights in Korea: The Role of Confucianism and Nationalism in Heteronormative Ideology*, Journal of Homosexuality (2020)

⁸ Rich, Timothy S. *Religion and Public Perceptions of Gays and Lesbians in South Korea*, PhD, Journal of Homosexuality (2016)

⁹ Hinsch, Bret. *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press (1992)

¹⁰ Adamczyk, Amy, Cheng, Yen-Hsin Alice. *Explaining attitudes about homosexuality in Confucian and non-Confucian nations: Is there a 'cultural' influence?* Social Sci. Res (2014)

¹¹ Bai, Tongdong. "Confucianism and Same-Sex Marriage." *Politics and Religion* 14, no. 1 (2014): 132–58. doi:10.1017/S1755048320000139.

4.3. Other studies regarding LGBT representation in South Korea

In the last group, I wanted to encompass an amalgam of studies with different methodologies and different perspectives, but which have the common point of focusing on the queer movement on the social plane and its integration into Korean society. These studies have served to understand the social position of the LGBT community in Korea, and thanks to this, to understand much better the representation made of them in both books and movies. Bong (2008) claims in his study that “the political visibility of the gay and lesbian population in Korea remains minimal”¹² while other human rights issues have gained acceptance and political changes have been made, such as could be feminism or multiculturalism. He argues that feminist organizations do not want to accept the lesbian discourse as a part of the feminist discourse, therefore the collaboration between lesbian organizations and feminist ones is practically non-existent. Hence, the human rights movement in Korea is deprived of a representation of the queer community.

In a more recent study, published by Philips and Yi in 2015, we can see a change in this narrative, since it seems that recently, the LGBT community has been included in the discourses of social movements in favor of human rights.¹³ However, the two researchers agree with the conclusions of past studies and criticize the lack of queer representation. One of the reasons that Kim considers for this lack of discourse favoring the queer community in Korea is that, for a long time, queer was considered something coming from the West, which led to a lack of homosexual familiarity and institutions.¹⁴ The representation of the LGBT community in Korea on a social and legal level is summarized by Dongjin in his 2001 study:

“In Korea, homosexuality does not have any social existence. That is to say, in public discourse aimed at forming the laws and regulations governing Korean society, homosexuality is not mentioned.”¹⁵

Studies in this category have contributed greatly to establish a timeline in the acceptance of LGBT rights within the human rights framework in Korea. The fact that queer rights are included within the general framework of the defense of human rights can help us understand the reason for the increase in queer literature in the last decade, and also the raise in studies carried out on LGBT issues. However, the lack of studies remains an issue.

4.4. State of the discourse on LGBT representation in South Korea

The question that remains for us is whether there is academic consensus regarding the representation of the LGBT community in Korea. If so, what discourse is used to refer to them? In general, there is a consensus that all studies focused on the same methodology or perspective agree in their

¹² Bong, Youngshik D. *The Gay Rights Movement in Democratizing Korea*. Korean Studies 32, (2008): 86-103. doi:10.1353/ks.0.0013

¹³ Philips, Yi. *Paths of Integration for Sexual Minorities in Korea*. Pacific Affairs, 88: 1 (2015), 123-134

¹⁴ Kim, Jonathan. *Korean LGBT: Trial, Error, and Success*. Cornell International Affairs Review, 5: 2 (2012), 79-86

¹⁵ Seo Dong-Jin. *Mapping the Vicissitudes of Homosexual Identities in South Korea*, Journal of Homosexuality, 40:3-4 (2001), 65-78.

conclusion, however, there are many perspectives that have not been studied, and the academy regarding queer issues in Korea is not very developed.

In general, the LGBT community in Korea suffers from a tremendous lack of representation in all areas: legal, social, and cultural. The causes of this situation, although there have not been studies focusing on them, have been attributed to the nature of Confucianism and the harmful discourse that religious groups - especially Evangelists - use to refer to LGBT issues. Regarding representation in the media, even though it is increasing in movies and dramas, it is still very scarce and tremendously stereotyped. Representation in literature is very isolated, although we can find a boom in queer literature starting in the 2010s. We can see that studies on the LGBT community in Korea have begun to emerge but remain scarce and focused on very specific issues. What is needed is an overview of queer representation, which is what this thesis, focused on fiction and film, intends to do.

5. Works' synopsis

5.1. *[About my daughter]* by Kim Hye-jin¹⁶

Written from a mother's perspective, her grown-up daughter comes back to her house, due to financial problems. Tension between the mother-daughter starts when she moves with another female. The mother works as a nurse aid at private nursing home, and takes special care of an elder woman suffering from dementia and dying alone without any family. Living with the stranger and her daughter who feels stranger than a stranger, the mother finds herself attached to the elderly she is caring for. The mother is starting to see herself and her daughter, who will never have children, in the ill-treated elderly woman. Meanwhile, the daughter is struggling on her own as she leads demonstrations against university that fired a couple of temporary lecturers based on their sexual orientation.

Tension escalates as the daughter fights against the university (and a group of people who do not want LGBT teaching at the university) and the mother fights against the private nursing home ill-treating the elderly woman. The daughter's fight becomes violent and the mother's fight results in threats of losing her job. But as the mother stands firm in her own fight, she starts to see something in her daughter; how their own fights are similar. The mother admits that she may not be able to understand the relationship between her daughter and the female, but she starts to see they are inevitably becoming a family.

5.2. *[Tears of an unknown artist or Zaytun Pasta]* by Park Sang-yeong

In Park's novella, part of his collection published with the same title, we are introduced to our main character, a failed director which happens to meet his nemesis in the movie industry. They are both queer film directors, but the lead is not successful with his films, while his colleague, a straight person whose movies - according to our narrator - are full of stereotypes, receive good reviews and are successful at the box office. Through flashbacks, we learn about the narrator's experience in the army, where he

¹⁶ Extracted from: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/36324129> Accessed June 2021

meets a man who changes his life, and the relationship he maintains with him, Wang Xia, during his stay in Iran and in the present.

Although the representation of the queer characters is quite similar to that of Kim's novel, the tone is tremendously different. While Kim's novel was tragic and hopeless in nature, this novel is characterized by a much more comical and sarcastic tone, and the stereotypes shown in this story have a certain satirical point. However, eventually, both stories reach a similar conclusion.

5.3. *[Our love story] by Lee Hyun-ju*¹⁷

30 years-old Yoonju is a brilliant student of fine arts, while her personal life is at a standstill, since she does not show any will to date, and not even herself can explain why. The answer emerges one day, when she runs into Jisoo. Without knowing why, she finds herself wanting to meet the woman. She realizes that she has feelings for Jisoo and when Jisoo proves that the feeling is mutual, the two of them become a couple.

However, the innocent Yoonju becomes infatuated with the more experienced Jisoo, a fact that results in her putting her studies to the side, in a series of actions that infuriates her friends and colleagues, and her teacher. Furthermore, Jisoo has to move away to her father's house, a man who pressures her to get married with a man. The relationship is destined for failure due to pressure from Jisoo's father, while Yoonju realizes that not all of her friends support her when they discover that she is a lesbian.

5.4. *[Two weddings and a funeral] by Kim Jho Kwang-soo*

A gay man, Minsoo, and a lesbian woman, Hyojin arrange a fake marriage. They are both co-workers in a quite prestigious hospital. Hyojin wants to adopt a child, but adopting for lesbian couples is not possible, and for single women, much more complicated. He, Minsoo, does not want to have to confess to his parents that he likes men. He plans to help her adopt the child and then emigrate to France, where he can be free to be who he is. For Minsoo, the fact that there is no right to gay marriage in Korea is demonstrative of the lack of freedom in the country. He feels that he has to hide from his family, from his co-workers, and that he can only be himself when he is in the gay club that he frequents with his homosexual friends, also living this double life.

Everything gets complicated for Minsoo when he meets Suk, who will become his partner. Unlike him, Suk wants to live his life in Korea without caring what people think. This clash of ideas, coupled with the continuous meddling of Minsoo's parents will cause the marriage to become more complicated than it might at first appear.

5.5. *[Rainbow eyes] by Yang Yun-ho*

Kyungyoon and Eunju investigate two grisly murders whose victims seem to be unrelated but were killed in the same way. When they investigate into their backgrounds, they discover that both victims

¹⁷ Extracted from: <https://letterboxd.com/film/our-love-story/> Accessed June 2021.

were stationed at the same military base many years ago, but they were transferred a month prior to their discharge with a third man. Their investigation only leads them to Kyungyoon's old friend, Yoonsuh, who was stationed in the same base and shot himself.

Yoonsuh was gentle and effeminate, and for that was bullied everyday in school. Kyungyoon was his protector until he got into a fight and ended beat up himself. From that moment on, they stopped being friends and Kyungyoon never heard about Yoonsuh again. Investigating his old friend's past, he discovers that Yoonsuh was repeatedly abused and rape by both victims along with the third man.

With the investigation coming to an end, Kyungyoon is surprised to discover that the identity of the killer turns out to be his girlfriend, who he was going to marry. He confronts her and she confesses that she is Yoonsuh, who had a sex-change operation. It is revealed that Kyungyoon was in love with Yoonsuh, but they could not be together because of the same he felt. They both escape together from the police, being together at last.

Chapter II. Analysis and discussion

This chapter examines the representations of LGBT in Korean society drawing on the analysis of five cultural productions – two fiction and three films. Each work is analyzed on two levels: the first one focusing on the analysis of the characters, their characteristics and how they are perceived by themselves and around them; the second level consists of a more in-depth analysis of the issues and conflicts that each work deals with, and how they relate to LGBT existence.

1. “Ttare taehayō” [About my daughter] by Kim Hye Jin (2017, Minūmsa Ch'ulp'an'gūrup)

1.1. *The narrator: the mother*

The most innovative element that we can find in this book is that the narrator, the mother, is in charge of defining the discourse that will be used about the LGBT community throughout the work. The queer representation is clouded by the mother's vision, her prejudices and her opinions make this subjective narrator show an image of LGBT characters that is not objective either. In essence, she is not a reliable narrator. Throughout the novel we can see how she denies her daughter's homosexuality and feels ashamed and a failure as a mother. An illustration of this is the moment she hears the word “homosexual”, she feels hurt hearing that word and does not want her daughter associated with the term.

“Homosexual, that word comes straight into my ear without asking my permission and goes through my head. [...] My daughter is not that kind of person.”¹⁸

She feels that she has failed as a mother when she sees that her daughter has lost her job and lives with another woman, instead of being married to “the right man” and with children. She thinks her

¹⁸ Kim, Hye-Jin. *Ttare taehayō [About my daughter]*. (Seoul: Minūmsa Ch'ulp'an'gūrup, 2017) 103
Own translations.

daughter is unhappy because of it, and in the book, there are several confrontations about this. For the narrator, the life her daughter will lead will be full of obstacles, she will never be happy, and above all, she will die alone as the patient she has to care for. The elder woman she takes care of in the hospital, Jen, is a representation of the narrator's greatest fear, seeing her girl suffer alone, without family, in a hospital; and she fears that this is how her daughter's future will be. This destiny seems unavoidable: she cannot marry her girlfriend, and neither can they have children, so that sad and bleak fate is what awaits her. The narrator despairs because her daughter does not understand these arguments, telling her that "she is not alone". However, the mother does not believe those claims, and strongly believes her daughter's life will end like Jen unless she has a good husband and children who accompany her in her death.

1.2. Depiction of LGBT characters

1.2.1. The daughter: a person destined to suffer

We know little about the daughter that is not related to her homosexuality. We do not know her real name, only that her girlfriend calls her Green, and that the narrator hates that nickname because it makes her feel even more removed from her daughter's life. We know that her job was already precarious (she was a college lecturer, but she did not have a stable position) and that she was recently fired. She has lost everything, and her last resort is to move in with her mother temporarily. For the narrator, this makes her feel ashamed and a failure as a mother, because she has not managed to make her daughter a successful person in society, despite her studies and education. At home, they have several arguments regarding her girlfriend, and the daughter always defends her situation, even though her mother does not understand her. On several occasions, she explicitly says that Lane is not "her friend" and that to her she is like "a husband".

*"She's not my friend. To me, she's a husband, a wife, a child."*¹⁹

The most significant trait with which we can describe Green is that she is a defender of queer rights. This fact is the cause of her suffering throughout the entire book, at least in the eyes of the narrator. Firstly, she loses her job; secondly, her relationship with her mother, the only family member she has left, worsens. Lastly, she suffers a very important homophobic assault that leaves her in hospital for days. This attack takes place in protests in which she participates against her former workplace, the university, where they had fired several people for homosexual content in their lectures. Although the police is present at these protests, they do nothing to prevent these attacks and she, along with a friend of hers, end up in the hospital with very serious injuries.

This homophobic aggression her daughter suffers makes the narrator change her mind a little. She does not understand it but does respect that her daughter fights for a dignified life. Besides, the mother relates to her as she is also fighting for Jen to have deserving living conditions. The homophobic aggression suffered by the daughter is a key moment in the book, which redefines the relationship with her

¹⁹ Kim, About daughter, 140.

mother. However, the LGBT representation's discourse remains stable in the sense that it shows us a character who suffers, suffered, and is still destined to suffer in the future.

1.2.2. Daughter's girlfriend: "just that kid"

First of all, it is very important to note that the narrator never calls this character by name, and always refers to her as "that kid." She does not even specify if it is a man or a woman, it is just a kid. In terms of representation, it is very interesting how this character has better attributes than the daughter. She is very polite to the narrator and is the one who helps Jen the most when her mother takes care of her. With the use of a flashback, the narrator admits that she took care of her husband when he was in the hospital, but she refused her help, not accepting that she was part of the family.

However, despite being an important part of the lives of the two main characters, nothing happens to her throughout the book. She is a character who simply supports the mother's development, from the initial rejection ("*I can't let a kid like that into my house*"²⁰) to the resignation to the fact that her daughter is a lesbian, and she cannot do anything to change it ("*After sleeping, I'll have the energy to accept the life that is waiting for me*"²¹).

This character helps the LGBT representation in the mere fact of existing since in its simple existence it denies the stereotype of queer people not being able to have a stable partner and addicted to sex. This character through her presence throughout the story, both in the present of the novel and in the flashbacks, shows the healthy relationship between her and the daughter.

1.3. Discourse on LGBT themes: the struggles of queer existence

This book focuses primarily on the difficulties in the lives of queer characters and how this affects their family. We can see that, according to the narrator, her daughter is destined to loneliness: without a husband, without continuation of the family, with a lonely death. In addition to that, during the course of the novel, the daughter loses her job and suffers a tremendous aggression when she is defending LGBT rights in a protest. Although we do not know how this character feels, in her mother's eyes she is a sad person who is struggling to have a full life, which she will never achieve. This representation of the LGBT community through the eyes of the mother, a person who has a lot of trouble accepting the queerness of her daughter, can be a metaphor for how Korean society views queer people.

The discourse of this novel matches with the words of Glynn and Kim when in their study in 2016²² claimed that queer characters "*are presented as a wretched state of being and worthy of pity, like an affliction*". Although they were referring specifically to the case of Korean dramas, we can see how this analysis shows that it is also the case of this novel. The narrator learns to live with the fact that her

²⁰ Kim, *About daughter*, 50

²¹ Kim, *About daughter*, 265

²² Glynn, Basil & Kim, Jeongmee: "Life is Beautiful: Gay Representation, Moral Panics, and South Korean Television Drama Beyond Hallyu", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 34:4 (2017) 333-347, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2016.1241615

daughter has a girl partner, and that from now on that is her family, but she continues to feel ashamed to tell her friends publicly. Being queer is not something to be proud of, on the contrary, it is a pity.

2. “Allyōjiji anūn yesulgaūi nunmulgwa chait'un p'asūt'a” [Tears of an unknown artist, or Zaytun pasta] by Park Sang-Yeong (2018, Munhaktongne)

2.1. Depiction of LGBT characters

2.1.1 The narrator

From the beginning of the story, we learn that the main character is homosexual, as the novel begins by describing this character watching and editing a gay porn movie. However, despite the fact that the narrator has no problem accepting his identity in his internal dialogue, only two of his friends know that he is homosexual. His colleagues and other film critics think he is heterosexual, and during his time in the Zaytun division, he does not share this information about him with his co-workers. In fact, he explains that while his partners shared sexual anecdotes, he did too, but changing the pronouns of the people he was talking about.²³ Our narrator is aware of the LGBT situation in Korean society and hides it to avoid problems.

Paradoxically, the fact that he is not openly homosexual creates problems for him when his job is judged. We know that the narrator's motivation to study film was to be able to make a queer-themed film that correctly represented homosexual people, without stereotypes. However, his film does not win any awards at the film festival, and critics explain that it lacks "the essence" queer, which coincidentally is the tragic element of these characters. Another film director, Daniel Oh, on the other hand, receives good reviews and wins the award, despite the fact that our main character can see that he is a heterosexual who takes advantage of the “queer trend” to make a name of himself in the film industry.

The manner in which he narrates his relationship with Wang Xia is also indicative of how this character lives his sexuality. Since he meets him, he is struck by the way in which Wang Xia is obsessed with his personal image and his smell, and his most notable characteristic is the amount of Channel cologne he puts on. When the narrator asks why Wang Xia replies that "Channel is Channel." This answer makes the narrator consider the homosexuality of his friend since he believes that it was a gay answer. He even adds to his thoughts saying that “there a lot of straights that like that but his point seems gay”. We can see here how the narrator himself falls into stereotypes when judging other characters, although in this case, it seems that it is a satire that basically criticizes the stereotypes used in other queer novels and films.

*“Suddenly, I got a hunch. It occurred to me that Wang Xia was a man on our side.
There's a lot of nostalgia-obsessed heterosexuals, but his point felt oddly gay.”²⁴*

²³ Park, Sang-yeong. *Allyōjiji anūn yesulgaūi nunmulgwa chait'un p'asūt'a* [Tears of an unknown artist or Zaytun pasta]. (Seoul: Munhaktongne, 2018), 198

²⁴ Park, *Zaytun Pasta*, 207

2.1.2. *Internal homophobia: narrator vs. Wang Xia*

In this novella not only the narrator is a queer character but also his friend Wang Xia represents the community, and there exists a strong dichotomy between how they both assume their sexuality. The narrator accepts that he is homosexual without any type of identity conflict on his part, whereas Wang Xia denies his queer identity until the end of the story, the moment that he apologizes to the narrator acknowledging that "It was hard to accept myself, so I made it harder for you".

On the other hand, perhaps it is easier for the narrator to accept himself as homosexual since he does not fulfill any gay "stereotype" and it is easy for him to appear heterosexual. Wang Xia, however, draws the narrator's attention from the beginning for his obsession with grooming and Chanel's perfume. Another aspect that makes the narrator suspect his friend's sexuality is the fact that he had studied contemporary dance before joining the army. The life of Wang Xia, as it is shown throughout history, has not been an easy life, and it is full of those tragic aspects that characterize the LGBT discourse in the films, as the narrator says at different points in the novel. His career as a dancer ended soon as he could not pass the entrance exams of the dance academy, he was abandoned by his father and, in debt, he had no choice but to enlist. It is explained that in the past he suffered anorexia and throughout the whole novella, he suffers several suicide attempts. At the time of the events of the novel, Wang Xia is unemployed and has no prospect of working soon.

One could argue that Wang Xia is a prototypical homosexual character: a failed person with a life filled with tragedies, and with an identity conflict regarding his sexuality, making him feel such internalized homophobia that results in the main conflict of his personality. The first time he and the narrator have sex, he excuses himself immediately after claiming that "he is not that kind of person", a statement the narrator does not even understand.

"- I am not that kind of person.

- What kind of person is that?"²⁵

Wang tries to repress himself to the point that, trying to justify his actions, he mentions that he has had girlfriends in the past, therefore he cannot be homosexual. Interestingly, his girlfriend is only mentioned by him after or before having sex with the narrator.

2.1.3. *"About my daughter" vs. "Zaytun Pasta"*

When comparing this novel with the one written by Kim Hye Jin, we can observe certain similarities between the two main characters. The first and most significant, as it sums up the representation of these queer people, is the fact that they consider themselves to be unsuccessful. Although in this case, it is the same character who feels that he has failed at work, since he has not managed to make a queer film that has had some impact, in Kim's novel it is the mother who sees her daughter as a failure in all areas of life, both professionally and sentimentally. It does not matter that she has a partner as she is

²⁵ Park, *Zaytun Pasta*, 220

going to die alone. In addition, both characters are LGBT rights activists in a certain way: the woman with clear activism and participating in protests, the man with much more subtle activism, which is based on creating a better representation of the community, more accurate and without stereotypes.

On the other hand, you can also see some differences in the characters. The main one is that the daughter in Kim's novel not only has a partner but also has a group of queer friends. In other words, there is an LGBT space in addition to that of the individual himself. That's something we don't see in Park's novel. The main character is completely alone, and he only has Wang Xia, who struggles to accept his identity as a homosexual. This narrator is not openly homosexual because he does not have a support group.

2.2. Representation of LGBT struggles

In the analysis of Park's novel, it was concluded that queer representation is characterized by a tragic life. In this case, it could be argued that this novel represents continuity with that discourse. Although the characters do not suffer direct attacks, as in Kim's novel, tragic events that have marked their lives are mentioned - such as Wang's suicide attempts. The two men at the end of the novel, conclude that they have not managed to be "not even a small point in this world." They have not achieved their goals in life; therefore, they are failed people.

However, whereas in Kim's novel, the mother associated her daughter's failure with the life she chose to lead - as a lesbian -, the narrator of Park's novel does not attribute his failures to his homosexuality. Indeed, they are the result of homophobia, but his unsuccessful attempt to make a queer film in which the characters are not stereotyped is the fault of these prejudices that Korean society has towards homosexuals. It could be argued, therefore, that this novel has a much more positive discourse regarding the LGBT community considering that it describes the difficulties that queer people suffer to live integrated as gays in Korean society without it being a source of misfortune per se.

This novel, in addition, broadens its range of diversity in terms of queer characters, as it shows us two opposites: a non-stereotyped character who does not suffer any conflict and accepted his homosexuality, and on the other hand, a man who suffers internal homophobia due to his lack of acceptance of their sexuality, and that also does present certain homosexual stereotypes. The author thus shows that there is no "queer type" of character, but that, the same as when writing about a heterosexual character, there are many characteristics that can be applied to them. It also shows that a character does not have to fall into stereotypes to be a well-written homosexual character, with depth in his story and consistent with a pro-LGBT discourse. However, despite the fact that the novel has a much lighter and more positive tone than the previous one, the conflicts they suffer remain the same: internalized homophobia, inability to be oneself publicly before society or family, and even discrimination at work, in the case of the narrator, whose film will never succeed because, according to critics, "it does not represent what homosexual love is like in an accurate way".

3. Yōnaedam [Our love story] by Lee Hyunju (2016, KAFA)

3.1. Analysis of LGBT characters

3.1.1. Yoonju: the innocence

In this film, directed by Lee Hyun-ju, a love story unfolds between two opposing women. The first, Yoonju, is an art student and a very innocent person, who has never had any sexual experiences - at least with women - and who seems oblivious to the existence of homophobia. From the beginning of the movie, we see that she is pressured by her roommate to date. She does not understand how her friend feels about her boyfriend and does not seem to understand why, despite their arguing, they are still together. Her friend jokes that "there is something else that attracts her about him", and when Yoonju explains that she does not understand it, her partner reassures her saying "it's because you haven't met a good lover yet." At various times her friends try to set her up with another man on a blind date, but she is disinterested and too shy.

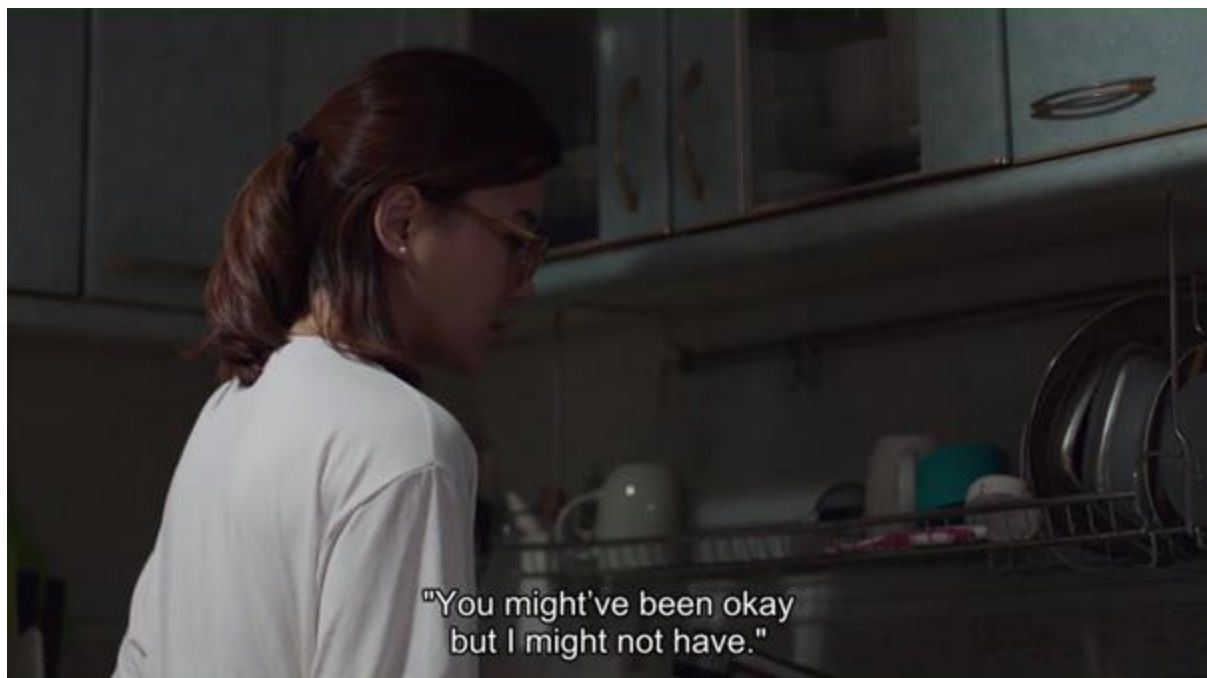
Everything changes when she meets Jisoo, who, despite being younger, has much more experience in the sexual field. Although at first, she does not know how she feels when she kisses her, she does not show any kind of internal conflict and accepts that she likes women naturally. In fact, she quickly confesses it to one of her friends. When he comes to visit her, he quickly realizes that his friend is in love, and trying to elicit who that person is, he asks her questions. All those questions are explicitly referring to a man: "뭐 한 남자? 키 크 남자? 돈 많 남자?" which in English are translated to "What does this guy do? Is this guy tall? Is this guy rich?" noticing that he puts emphasis in the word "guy" and repeats it in every question. To this, she, half angry, answers "Do you have to end every sentence with "guy"?" - in Korean, 남자 -.



When she confesses that it is a woman, his friend tries to justify her lesbianism by saying that either it is just a phase of exploring or this is happening because she is an artist, as if there should be a justification for this kind of behavior. Yoonju did not seem to realize that her "confession" could attract negative consequences, and when she proudly tells Jisoo, she reprimands him saying that she could lose friends because of it. As we can see, Jisoo is aware of the homophobia in Korean society, but Yoonju continues to ignore it.

Another key moment in Yoonju's character development and relationship with Jisoo is when she meets Jisoo's father by chance. Of course, the father thinks that Yoonju is just a friend of his daughter, and Jisoo does not allow Yoonju to answer any questions, fearing that they will be discovered. Faced with the discomfort of the situation, when the father asks Yoonju if she has a boyfriend, she answers that she does, although this will cause more estrangement for the couple.

Towards the end of the film, the relationship goes through a bump that they cannot overcome, and Yoonju returns home alone and sad. Her roommate notices that something is wrong, but she does not know anything about the relationship that Yoonju had, much less that it was with a woman. She, feeling vulnerable, confesses everything, looking for a friend she can lean on in a moment of rupture, but finds a friend angry at her for not having told her before. Yoonju, confused, excuses herself by saying that she did not know she had to tell it, to which her friend tells her that she is not comfortable living with a lesbian in her house. At this exact moment, their friendship comes to an end and from that point on the roommate decides to ignore her, forcing Yoonju to move in somewhere else, after a final confrontation in which she screams "What have I done that was so wrong?", without getting a response from her old friend.



Feeling at her lowest point, she goes in need of her only friend who understands her, the first friend to whom she confessed that she liked women. Her friend is attentive and understanding and she

kisses him, trying with all her might to like men. However, she is simply not like that and ends up returning home regretful and crying. At the end of the film, the Yoonju that is portrayed has nothing to do with the innocent image that was shown to us at the beginning: she is a hurt person, more aware that she must live a much more “reserved” existence as a lesbian and focusing on her work as an artist.

3.1.2. *Jisoo: the conflict*

Yoonju's love interest, Jisoo, is totally the opposite of her in terms of experience. We do not know how many partners she has had before, but we do know that there is at least one, so she is more experienced than Yoonju. Moreover, she has made a “coming out” in Seoul a few years ago. From the beginning of the film, we can tell she is much more aware of the homophobia and the danger that not being discreet in her relationship can pose. For example, as we have mentioned before, she warns Yoonju that she may lose friends due to her homosexuality, hinting that perhaps she has already experienced that loss herself.



A very important piece of information to help us understand the character of Jisoo is the fact that she was raised Christian, as her father is a devoted religious person. When she and Yoonju meet, she is about to move back to her father's house as he had lost his wife a few months ago. While in Seoul, Jisoo is an outgoing and carefree person, and she always takes the first step in her relationship with Yoonju, while living with her father in Incheon, her attitude is completely different. For Jisoo's father, marriage is very important, and he repeats several times that "she needs to find a boyfriend", as she has little left to become “too old to get married”. She has no choice but to agree to several dates with a man her father sets her up with. Even he tells Yoonju his worries about finding a husband for her daughter when she visits her, oblivious to the fact that they are a couple. It is evident that Jisoo feels an internal conflict between the love and respect that she feels towards her father and the way she was raised, and her homosexuality, and it

unfolds into two different people - one in Seoul, free from restrictions and pressures of marriage, and another in Incheon, a good and obedient daughter.

3.2. Discourse on LGBT relations

This film, directed by an openly lesbian woman, depicts a relationship between two women in a quite natural way. It could simply be summarized in that two people know each other, like each other and start a relationship, but after several bumps, the relationship does not end well. It is true that the difficulties that the characters suffer as a couple and individually are related to the rejection of homosexuality in Korean society. It could even be argued that this film is an evening criticism of Confucian society and, more specifically, of the virtue of filial piety. Jisoo lives in a contradiction, because he wants to please his father, but his father wants his daughter to marry and give him a grandson, something that Jisoo cannot do. The disappointment this would bring to him makes her lie to him and lie to herself. On the other hand, she also lies to herself when trying to make the relationship with the man her father wants for her to work, because, as it happens in Yoonju's case, even if she tries to like men, she simply cannot.

The movie depicts the queer characters as people with many other characteristics besides their lesbianism, with a job and successful in her studies respectively, without financial problems and, one could argue, happy and satisfied. This representation differs greatly from the one that appeared in the two books previously analyzed. Quoting the narrator of Park Sang Yeong's story, we could say that this "is not a queer movie, but a love movie". Despite this, homophobia is an element always present during the film, and is shown both depicted in Korean society - Yoonju's roommate and Jisoo's father- and internally, with Jisoo's internal conflicts and Yoonju's character development.

4. Tu pŏnŭi kyŏrhonshikkwa han pŏnŭi changnyeshik [Two weddings and a funeral] by Kim Jho Kwang Soo (2012, Generation Blue Films)

4.1. Representation of LGBT characters

4.1.1 Minsoo and his friends

Minsoo does not have any stereotypes typically associated with homosexual people, but we cannot assure that is because he feels the need to hide his homosexuality or because his personality is just like that. On the other hand, all the other homosexual characters in this movie do present different stereotypes: effeminate speech, loudness and always talking about sex. They are part of a singing club where they are preparing a gay-themed musical, and they call each other "ŏnni", the term that women use to call other women older than themselves. Their emasculate manners reach ridiculous situations, for example, in a scene showing a fight between two of Minsoo's friends, one slaps the other person on the butt. Minsoo seems to be ashamed of his friends in public: he does not invite them to his wedding and does not admit to his mother that they know those people.

4.1.2 Tina: gay or transgender representation?

Among Minsoo's friends, there is a character who draws attention because he is the most stereotyped and feminine of all, a man who calls himself Tina. He comes from a small rural town, where no one knows his homosexuality, not even his family. In Seoul, on the other hand, he lives without hiding. He is the most emasculated character, and he is interested in Minsoo from the beginning of the movie, asking him several times to have sex. Despite his offers being rejected, Tina doesn't seem to know how to respect boundaries. Even when Minsoo gets a partner more similar to him - as he also shows no display of femininity - Tina always tries to have some kind of relationship with Minsoo.

It could be argued that Tina's character is a representation of someone transgender. However, despite calling herself Tina, she always defines herself as a homosexual man, not as a woman. Perhaps the closest concept we can relate this character to is drag queens: men dressed up as women. Still, Tina does not change her appearance to look like a woman, but she does dress very flashy and extravagantly, uses a very high and sharp tone of voice, and presents very effeminate manners.

4.1.3 Lesbian characters

Although the existence of Hyojin, Minsoo's lesbian wife, is very important to the development of the film's plot, as a character she is not developed at all. We do not know anything about her, and her only motivation throughout the film is wanting to adopt a child. She has had the same partner for 10 years, another woman named Seoyoung. While Hyojin appears straight, and no one suspects her, there are rumors about Seoyoung's homosexuality existing since college, which causes her relationship with Hyojin to be discovered in the end. In terms of how they are represented, they do not show as many stereotypes associated with lesbians nor are they masculinized women, but Seoyoung indeed has a much more masculine appearance than Hyojin. The latter has a more feminine appearance and typical qualities associated with women, such as the desire for motherhood. Nevertheless, they are characters that are simply present in the movie to support the development of the male characters, more specifically, that of Minsoo.

4.2. LGBT struggles:

4.2.1 "Coming out" in South Korea

One of the biggest conflicts that are presented in this film is the impossibility for the main character to "come out of the closet" publicly, especially to his family. He agrees to marry Hyojin just to deceive his parents. Throughout the movie he is very reluctant to open up to them, first telling his friends that he is not doing it because he simply "does not want to be cruel to them." To this, one of his friends, publicly homosexual, angrily replies "You got fake marriage out of love or your parents? So I came out because I am a ruthless prick?". For Minsoo, coming out of the closet is unnecessary damage to his parents.

Later, he meets Suk, an American Korean boy to whom he feels immediately attracted, and with whom he ends up having a relationship. Despite his love for Suk, he is still unable to be with him publicly - only at the club and at home. Suk, who had escaped from Australia after undergoing conversion therapy,

forced by his father, totally disagrees with Minsoo: he wants to live freely in Korea and believes that he can, despite not being able to marry. This leads to a major conflict with the main character, whose only purpose is to escape to Europe. He thinks Suk has a lot of "courage" for being able to come out of the closet.

Minsoo and Suk have a great argument about this issue, in which Minsoo confesses that, although he knows that he can live in Korea as a homosexual, he is not willing to suffer the homophobia he would suffer living in the country, and that he does not want to hurt his parents, as he knows that they would be disappointed if they heard the news and wants to spare them the suffering.

Minsoo pities himself over and over, not only with Suk but with Tina as well, and regrets being the way he is. For him, it is not an easy existence, and he does not believe he dares to confess his homosexuality to his family or his co-workers. His attitude makes a radical change after witnessing Tina's death as a result of a homophobic assault. Seeing that the man who had murdered him - the taxi driver who had taken them home the night before - was going to get away with it, he decides to confess to the police that both he and his friend were gay and that the taxi driver had met Tina and had unleashed his fury on him, causing his death. It takes a lot of trauma - in this case, witnessing his friend's death - for Minsoo to gain the courage to come out of the closet.



4.2.2 Representation of homophobia

As well as in the movie [*Yōnaedam*], homophobia is present in the lives of these characters. However, although in [*Yōnaedam*] homophobia was much more discreet, and was characterized by the loss of close friends, in this film it is shown in a much more brutal and aggressive way throughout the entire film.

In a scene in which Minsoo's friends are in the pool, they are commenting on how a lady has insulted two of them, who were kissing, to which a friend replies, "you were showing off" and excuses the homophobia arguing that it could disturb the children who were around. For one of the offended, it is a very insulting argument because "heteros do that too".



Other moments in which homophobia can be recognized are the scenes where Suk's brother appears, who openly rejects him for being homosexual, and accuses him of being selfish since he could ruin his family because of that "homosexual trend".



However, the most important moment, and the one that gives the film its name, is the aggression towards Tina by the taxi driver. It all starts the night before when Tina takes a drunk Minsoo home. Tina shows a great deal of affection towards him on the way back, and the taxi driver utters various insults. The

next morning, when Tina runs to return Minsoo's cell phone, he meets the taxi driver again, who, angry and for no reason, starts beating him furiously. It is a tremendously visual, violent aggression that is born out of pure hatred towards homosexuals, a simple act of homophobia. The beating that Tina suffers causes his death, and even so, the taxi driver believes he can have justification for it and tries to lie to be able to get rid of the charges. At the hospital, Minsoo, who had witnessed everything, collapses, because while Tina was being beaten, he was asking for forgiveness, as if there had been some reason why he had angered the taxi driver. There was not. The only reason was his unmanly manners, which annoyed the homophobic driver. It was his way of being, his homosexuality, that killed him.

4.3. Discourse towards LGBT people

In general, we could say that this movie depicts an accurate representation of the LGBT community by being directed and written by a homosexual man. However, it could be argued that stereotypes are used excessively when representing gay men and that the representation of lesbians is not fully developed. What we can declare is that it is consistent with the line of discourse that we have seen so far: homosexual people are destined to suffer.

This discourse can be noticed perfectly in the homophobic aggressions that exist throughout the film, and with which it reaches its climax: the death of Tina. Only in another of the works that we have analyzed does the homosexual character suffer publicly aggression of this type²⁶: in Kim Hye Jin's book [*About my daughter*]. However, in the case of the novel, the main character had not suffered a specifically targeted aggression towards her but had been the victim of the violence that had occurred in a protest in favor of LGBT rights. In the film [*Yŏnaedam*], also starring lesbians, women are not victims of homophobic attacks, although they do suffer homophobic attitudes from friends. This makes us wonder if the existence of homosexual women in Korea is easier than that of Korean homosexual men, who in addition to suffering discrimination due to their sexual orientation, suffer it due to the obligation to comply with the canons of masculinity that are imposed on them. If one uses this movie to answer the question, the answer is positive: the female pair have been a couple for 10 years, and there is no indication of any type of aggression towards them, even when the rumors that Hyojin is lesbian come to her workplace.

5. Kamyŏn [Rainbow eyes] by Yang Yun Ho (2007, Lotte Entertainment)

5.1. Depiction of LGBT characters

5.1.1. Kyung Joon: internalized homophobia or bisexual representation?

The main character of this film has a unique characteristic compared to the other characters analyzed: his attraction to both men and women. We could say that, like Wang Xia in Park's novel, he is suffering from internal conflict because he does not accept his identity as a homosexual. That could be true if we examine the flashbacks that show the life of Kyong Joon in high school: always defending Yoon Suh.

²⁶ The attacks against homosexual men will also be analyzed in the next section, the analysis of the film [*Rainbow eyes*], but it will be violence specifically targeted at men in the army.

After kissing him and seeing that Yoon Suh falls in love, he rejects him, as he also starts to get harassed. Yet, as an adult, he meets Sue, a woman, he falls in love with her. At the end of the movie we are given to understand that he only fell in love with Sue because, deep down, and unknowingly, she reminded him of Yoon Suh, the man who fell in love with unwillingly.

The film's director, Yang Yun Ho portrays Kyung Joon as a character who denies his homosexuality until the final moment, in which he accepts that Sue is really his former love and runs away with her. However, the director seems to forget a great detail to keep in mind: that when Kyung Joon accepts that he loves Sue, she is already a woman. Yoon Suh undergoes a sex change operation and Kyung Joon has relationships with her multiple times, not knowing that she was Yoon Suh before. Hence, could it be argued that Kyung Joon is bisexual? If so, he is the only bisexual character that we have encountered in all the objects of analysis.

On the other hand, the film does not show us any other time when Kyung Joon has fallen in love with another man or another woman, and neither of them seems to interest him. His co-worker tells him that she did not expect him to like women. Therefore, we can assume that although Kyung Joon's identity is closer to that of bisexual, the director did not build that character with that intention, but rather intended it to be a gay man suffering from a great internal conflict due to his own rejection and guilt for abandoning Yoon Suh.

5.1.2. *Yoon Suh: LGBT as victims*



The LGBT representation in this film shows us the two opposite sides of a scale: on the aggressive side there are the rapists, who later will become victims. On the sensitive side, and close to the stereotypes associated with gay people, is Yoon Suh. The narrative that follows in this character's development is more similar to that of the character of Tina in the film directed by Kim. Homophobia is a topic that has been addressed in all the objects of analysis, but it is the aggressiveness that characterizes Yoon Suh's life:

he was first bullied at school and abandoned by his first love, Kyung Joo, who did not accept having fallen in love with him.

Trying to “be a man”, as Kyung Joo had reproached him for, he enlists in the army, where he is repeatedly raped by three men, leading him to attempt suicide. When other policemen and characters in the film refer to him, they use a tone of pity and sadness, because he has become a poor man suffering from schizophrenia. For Yoon Suh, his identity as a gay man has only caused him suffering. Perhaps that is why he decides to change his sex and begins his revenge.

5.1.3 Transgender representation?

After his suicide attempt, Yoon Suh ends up disfigured. That is the reason for his sex change and his name change to Sue. In addition to not wanting to be recognized by his attackers and future victims. Later, when Sue confesses her true identity to Kang Joon, we discover that another reason she changed her sex was due to her desire to be with Kang Joon without him feeling conflicted about his homosexuality. Sue explains that she understood Joon’s reluctance to be with a man, and she became a woman so he had not to suffer.



Therefore, even though it may appear that Yoon Suh / Sue's character is a sample of transgender representation, it could be argued that not only is this not the case, but that it is also detrimental to transgender people. At no point in the film we are told that Yoon Suh felt like a woman before his sex change, and he referred to himself as a man. Her only motivation to change her sex was to be able to be with a man who could not accept that he was homosexual, as well as to be able to murder his rapists without being recognized. We could consider that this justification - for love and revenge, not for feeling identified with the female gender - makes the transgender cause appear as a banal subject and an issue of fiction.

5.2. Discourse on LGBT issues

5.2.1. Sexual violence and homophobia in the army: LGBT as aggressors

In this film, we are shown the homophobia suffered in Korea in a very specific context: that of men in the military. The killer, Yoon Suh, is finding his victims to take revenge on them for what they did to him during his time in the military. The three victims, higher in rank than Yoon Suh, and much stronger, repeatedly gang-raped him. Yoon Suh, a physically much weaker person, and portrayed with stereotypes associated with homosexual people (femininity, sensitivity, fragility), tries to commit suicide, and when that attempt fails, he resolves to murder them years later. Although it can be assumed that all the victims were also homosexuals, it seems that this is not the case, as the second one confirms when being interrogated for the murder of the first victim. After discovering that this second victim has also been an accomplice and perpetrator of the rapes, we assume that he is not a reliable witness, so one might wonder if the three victims were also homosexuals or only raped Yoon Suh in a show of force and out of sheer homophobia. If anything, the three men do it as an indication of power, and they do it to Yoon Suh because he is the visibly weakest person.



This representation of discrimination against homosexuals in the military is very different from what we saw in Park's novel, [*Tears of an Unknown Artist, or Zaytun Pasta*]. In it, although we know that the main character does not want to confess that he is gay in front of his colleagues, as it would be "crazy", we see that Wang Xia, more like Yoon Suh in terms of his feminine ways, does not suffer the same aggressiveness as it is portrayed in this movie. In addition, the fact that it is homosexual characters who rape another character shows us a discourse on homosexual men as aggressive characters, sex-driven, and even violent. If one character does not associate with these characteristics, he goes directly to the other side of the spectrum, in which he is effeminate, weak, and surely a victim of aggression. In Park's novel,

perhaps because the author is a homosexual man, the representation of homosexual men is much more positive.

5.2.2. *A detrimental image of LGBT*

In this film, directed by a heterosexual man, we can see two types of homosexual representation: that of the aggressive and rapist man, and that of the effeminate man, victim and subject to pity. This dichotomy is reversed when the effeminate man becomes the murderer and the rapists, the victims. In addition, we find a homosexual character - the main character- with such internalized homophobia that he ends up falling in love with his first love in his female body. When it comes to portraying a transgender character, there are too many flaws that result in stereotypical and offensive misrepresentation for the transgender community. Besides, characters who are portrayed as "good", and who are members of the police and friends of the main character, show continuous homophobia without being criticized. As an example we can refer to the scene in which the policeman interrogates a gay man, referring to him as a "freak". In short, this film uses the LGBT community as the guiding element of the plot, but without worrying that a problematic discourse is maintained throughout it.

Chapter III. Conclusion

Concerned about the little improvement in LGBT rights in Korean society, the thesis has tried to understand various discourses about the LGBT community in Korea by examining queer representations in the media. The main two questions that the research has tried to find answers are: how does Korean society view the LGBT community; and what is the dominant discourse Korean society engages in when talking about LGBT affairs? In other words, how queer people are represented and what are the struggles covered in Korean fiction and movies regarding queer characters. Through the analysis of two fiction and three films, despite being so different in style, genre, and even format, we can reach several common conclusions that show us how queer issues are portrayed in Korea. This discourse could be divided into two parts: the first concerning the treatment of LGBT characters and the stereotypes that are used; and secondly, the main issues that could be classified as "queer struggles", that is, the problems that these works address.

1.1. *Discourse on LGBT characters*

First, we note that a typical theme associated with the LGBT community is tragedies and misfortunes. The fate of any queer character is either to suffer or to live an empty and failed existence. We can see it in *[Rainbow eyes]*, where LGBT characters are the target of aggression, as in *[Two weddings and a funeral]*, which despite being a comedy, represents homophobic aggression. In Kim Hye Jin's book *[About daughter]*, the main character not only suffers an attack but is also left without a job and home, being forced to return to live with her mother. In Park's novel *[Tears of an unknown artist or Zaytun Pasta]*, the narrator feels like a failure at work. It seems to be a sine-qua-non condition that queer characters suffer at some point in their lives in order to be considered queer.

Secondly, another stereotype that has been observed in the analysis is the femininity of male queer characters. Both in Park's [*Tears of an unknown artist or Zaytun Pasta*] and in the two films - [*Two weddings and a funeral*] and [*Rainbow eyes*] - in which homosexual males are portrayed as main characters, there is always one of them who presents a high level of femininity, and it is precisely this type of characters that suffer the most tragedies throughout the works. Wang Xia, a man concerned about his physical appearance, a trait mostly associated with women and gay men, has suffered from severe depression that has led to several suicide attempts. Tina is murdered due to her emasculated ways and her public displays of affection towards Minsoo, and Yoonsuh is repeatedly raped and abused in the military to the point where he also attempts suicide. On the other hand, the representation of lesbian women is not as stereotyped as that of homosexual men. In both Kim's [*About my daughter*] and the film [*Our love story*], none of the women are described as especially masculine. Another aspect that does not appear in the case of women but is common in the case of men is internalized homophobia and the internal conflict that the characters have when accepting their sexuality. Kyungjoon in [*Rainbow eyes*] or Wang Xia in [*Zaytun Pasta*] suffer from this inability to accept themselves. Women, on the other hand, either have known for a long time that they are homosexual or accept their identity without any conflict.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the discourse when dealing with queer characters is riddled with negative stereotypes. If we had to define all these characters in one word, this would be "failure". Furthermore, it should be added that homosexual men fare worse from these stereotypes than lesbian women and that the fact that the authors of these works are queer or not does not affect the representation of these characters in any way. Kim Jho Kwang Soo, an openly homosexual director, is perhaps the one who most accentuates the stereotypes of femininity in his homosexual characters. The causes of this stereotyping of homosexual men have not been delved into, so the feasibility of carrying out studies on this topic remains open. Regarding the better treatment of women as opposed to men, it is also worth considering the possibility of further studies that investigate the differences between the queer existence of men versus women in Korea.

On one last note, it is important to bring to our attention that, although the objective of this thesis was to analyze the representation of LGBT characters, we have only found homosexual characters in these productions. Bisexual characters are non-existent, and transgender representation is very problematic since the only transgender character that appears in all these productions uses his transition as a tool to get to be with the man he loves. We can also see several examples of discrimination against transgender people in Kim Jho's movie, in which nurses joke that dressing in women's clothes is the same as being trans. We could, hence, conclude that queer representation in Korea is very limited to gay men and women and that transgender and bisexual people are still invisible.

1.2. Discourse on LGBT struggles

Other aspects that we have analyzed throughout this thesis are the issues that are dealt with when telling queer stories. The general discourse that these works follow is that being LGBT will pose certain

struggles, which we can classify into three: personal, cultural, and relational. In the first place, personal conflict is something that we have already discussed previously, and it is based on the difficulty to accept oneself. Generally, this theme is associated with the internalized homophobia suffered by queer characters themselves. Internalized homophobia seems to be an essential part of queer Korean discourse, as we can see in the main character of *[Rainbow eyes]* or in the character of Wang Xia in Park's novel *[Tears of an unknown artist or Zaytun Pasta]*. This internalized homophobia is shown only in the case of men, and in no production analyzed in this study have we found signs of internal conflict of lesbian women when accepting their sexuality, perhaps also because it is easier for them to integrate into society.

In terms of cultural struggles the greatest example that can be observed is that of the homophobia suffered by these characters. This type of conflict is not exclusive to men or women, and all the characters suffer some homophobic aggression, whether physical or not, at some point in the works analyzed. The daughter in Kim's *[About daughter]* suffers a strong attack for defending the rights of other LGBT colleagues, the main character in Park's novel *[Zaytun Pasta]* suffers discrimination in his work, because his films are not considered a "good representation of homosexual men." In the movies, we can see that Yoonju is rejected by her roommate because of her homosexuality, and Tina and Yoonsuh's assaults are explicitly due to their effeminate conducts. Although explicit homophobia is the topic that most clearly addresses the difficulties suffered by LGBT characters, it is not the only aspect that is discussed. Job failure, another aspect associated with the conflict between queer existence and Korean society, is present in both the female characters - the daughter in *[About daughter]* - and the male - Wang Xia in *[Zaytun Pasta]*.

Finally, the last struggle portrayed in these works is the relational conflicts that arise from being LGBT in Korea. Family and environment acceptance is a primary theme of LGBT discourse in Korea. For Confucian societies, the family is the most important unit, from which all the power relations in which society is classified arise. That is why the role of parents in accepting homosexuality is very important and widely represented both in movies and in books. Not only do we see that Kim Hye Jin's novel *[About daughter]* has as its central conflict the mother's acceptance process in the face of her daughter's lesbianism, but we also see how in the film *[Two weddings and a funeral]*, the conflict arises as a result of the incapacity of Minsoo to come out of the closet with his parents. The relationships between the characters are strongly influenced by this relational conflict, and are often affected by it, as we can see in the case of *[Our love story]*, in which the relationship fails because Jisoo's father wants her to marry a man, and Jisoo's strong feeling of filial piety prevents her from disobeying him.

In conclusion, we could say that the discourse on the LGBT community in Korea is based mainly on the conflicts that these people have when developing in society, both on a personal, social, and familiar level. Generally, a negative tone is used in order to condemn this type of situations, regardless of whether the author is queer or not. In addition, it does not matter the author's sexuality when choosing the conflicts to be portrayed.

1.3. Final remarks

Although this thesis has contributed to publicize the different LGBT representations in Korean literature and cinema, it is only a small part of the studies that can be carried out. As we have mentioned previously, we have been able to observe that there are differences when it comes to representing LGBT female and male characters. It could be discussed what are the causes of this, and if they have a historical or cultural origin. Another aspect that we have tried to address in this thesis was the comparison between queer and non-queer authors when referring to LGBT issues. We can conclude that there is no substantial difference, and that both queer and non-queer authors used the same stereotypes when representing the characters and portrayed the same conflicts.

In general, the LGBT community is not demonized in these works, except perhaps the movie [*Rainbow eyes*], in which both the victims and the aggressors are LGBT. The director, Yang Yunho is not queer, and perhaps a more in-depth study could be done on this film and the very negative and violent image of gay men. Nonetheless, I only consider that this work represents the LGBT community in a damaging and negative light, while the rest of the productions show an accurate image, although the conflicts only surround sexuality. A sound queer representation is the movie [*Our love story*], in which, as I discussed earlier, its characters have other features besides being gay.

We quoted Naaranoja's 2016 study previously, as she had stated that the LGBT community was underrepresented, misrepresented, and stereotyped in Korean media.²⁷ We could argue that this declaration could still apply, however, we have seen improvements in the representation of the LGBT community. Queer representation in Korean literature and movies remains rare, and stereotypes of gay men abound. What Korea lacks the most is the representation of queer characters that are not defined for being queer but instead being homosexual is only a part of their personality.

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²⁷ Naaranoja, Kata: *South Korean University Students' Attitudes toward Homosexuality and LGBT Issues*, 2016

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