

Recreated Reality by Female Bonds: A Comparative Study on *Fingersmith*(2005) and *The Handmaiden*(2016)*

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Lee, Jeonghwa. Recreated Reality by Female Bonds: A Comparative Study on *Fingersmith*(2005) and *The Handmaiden*(2016). *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 69 (2018): 165-183. This study aims to do a comparative study on *Fingersmith*(2005) and *The Handmaiden*(2016). *Fingersmith*, broadcasted on BBC Channel, was made based on Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith*(2002) and it was reproduced by Korean Director Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden*. Both of the two works mainly reveal women's desire to escape from men's oppression. The line of flight the women in the two works try to choose originates from men's obsessive-compulsive neurosis and perversion and from the society where the social self of women was oppressed. While there exists a lot of criticism regarding lesbian relationship the women share, the two works have significant importance in shedding light on the whole processes of female bonds through which the women find their own desires and they are reborn as new subjects with social self. (Dongguk University)

Key words: *Fingersmith*, *The Handmaiden*, female bonds, queer relationship, Sarah Waters

I. Introduction

According to Gilles Deleuze, cinema is “a new practice of images and signs, whose theory philosophy must produce as conceptual practice” (*Cinema 2* 280). In 2016, Korean film director Park Chan-wook presented his own style of film *The Handmaiden*(also entitled as *Ahgassi*

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with Korean pronunciation 2016)¹ toward the international viewers. The peculiar narrative and the backgrounds of time and space of the film became a hot issue among a lot of viewers who had longed to see Park's another creative work. As many people know, *The Handmaiden* was adapted from Sarah Water's novel *Fingersmith*(2002)², which was broadcasted on BBC channel in 2005. Even though *The Handmaiden* adapts the plot and story of *Fingersmith*, it differentiates backgrounds of time and space, characters, and the ending. First of all, *The Handmaiden* changes the time background(the Victorian era) of *Fingersmith* into the Japanese colonial period in the 1930's and the geographic background (London) into *Chosun*. For example, there appear two ethnicities of Korean and Japan in *The Handmaiden* unlike *Fingersmith*. In addition, the problems of social class and gender are dealt with more in *The Handmaiden* than *Fingersmith*.

Both of the works commonly deal with lesbian relationship and reveal the desire to become free women, so they contribute to attracting the worldwide viewers to lesbian love story. Even in the multicultural world, some male directors have been seriously criticized from their representations of lesbian stories from a man's perspective. Waters, as a lesbian, has produced a lot of lesbian novels and used very interesting

¹ *The Handmaiden* was screened in 120 countries and officially invited to the competition section of the 69th Cannes Film Festival. As such, the new worldwide interest in Director Park's new film has been also proven through American Film Market, European Film Market, and Hong Kong Film Market.

² Waters' Neo Victorian trilogy is *Tipping the Velvet*(1998), *Affinity*(1999), and *Fingersmith*. *Fingersmith* has been nominated for Britain's Booker Prize in 2002 and received the Historical Novels Prize by the British Mystery Writers Association and was most often mentioned in 2002 as The Book of the Year. The Victorian time has been a creative time-space for Waters as a kind of 'gift' that unfolds various imaginations. *Fingersmith* on BBC Channel was produced by Peter Ransley and became more popular than the original novel through the special adaptation of Ransley in its complicated structure and tense story development.

storytelling. In addition, *Fingersmith* deals with such universal themes as love, desire for money, and betrayal during the Victorian period. Not only Waters, but also many writers at the time used to publish a variety of works that resisted the era. Lee comments on the writers by saying that “these authors made it possible the role of a critic more important than ever, and stressed mutual interaction between the reader and the text and the critic determining the meaning of the text, not the text itself nor the author’s intention(186).”

Using the main themes of Water as the central framework of *The Handmaiden*, Director Park tried to write the screenplay of *The Handmaiden* with his female collaborators and screened all the processes of the film with them for a long time. The other thing that two works share in common is that they are paying attention to women’s lives, which had to live in oppressive and male-centered times. Sherber criticizes the female protagonists in *Fingersmith* by expressing that “the two women struggle against pervasive repression and societal limits”(19).

To give a little more detail about the purpose of this study in this introduction chapter, a brief introduction of the original novel writer Waters is necessary. Waters is a British writer and unfamiliar to Koreans so researches on her have not been frequently done. *The Handmaiden* released in 2016 also has not been studied so far, so this study has significant research purpose and is suitable for the time demands of research. This paper will do a comparative study on BBC channel’s *Fingersmith* and Park’s *The Handmaiden* in the following chapters. Through this comparative literary study of the two works, this study will delve into the process of social self-formation through the solidarity of women in the two works and the aspect of escaping from the male-centered society through female bonds.

II. Desire to Find Lesbian Love in *Fingersmith*

II. 1. Lesbian Passion in the Victorian Era and the Escape

Fingersmith is the third work of Waters and one of the most widely known lesbian historical thriller novels in the UK. *Fingersmith* on BBC channel became more popular than its original novels for its careful and specific adaptations and portrayals. As an inverted thriller drama depicting the secret romance of two women, the beginning of the movie begins with the childhood of two protagonists in London, 1862. The term 'Fingersmith' literally means a pickpocket or a midwife in the slang of the Victorian era and it also implies innuendo. Creating the atmosphere of Charles Dickens' novel, *Fingersmith* leads audiences into the lives of London's underprivileged.

In the Victorian London village, Sue(Sally Hawkins), an orphan raised under a band of thieves, lives a poor life under her nanny, Mrs Sucksby(Imelda Staunton), and gets hired by Richard Rivers(Rupert Evans) who is a fraud but called as Gentleman. Mrs Sucksby makes her living by raising and selling orphans and she pretends to be a dedicated person. The two characters living a double life constantly make the subject of *Fingersmith* obscure.

The other female protagonist Maud(Elaine Cassidy) also lives alone like an orphan because of her mother's death. Even though Maud is the only heiress from her rich family, the young Maud has been kept in the psychosis. At this time, a rich and noble uncle appears in the mental hospital and adopts Maud. Maud assists her uncle by arranging his huge collection of pornography and grows up as a noble lady in a mansion house. Maud is to inherit a large amount of fortune when she marries. Then one day Gentleman comes to Maud's house and plans to seduce Maud. Gentleman decides to use Sue to intercept Maud's property and

sends Sue to make her Maud's maid. Through the help of Sue, Gentleman plans to imprison Maud in a mental hospital and to steal her inheritance. Gentleman persuades Sue to be close to Maud by becoming her loyal maid and he pretends to play the role of loving Maud. The role plays planned by Sue and Gentleman keep the stories captivating and make the viewers eagerly expect the next scene.

The new maid Sue has come to new pleasure and happiness to Maud, who lived an isolated life at her uncle's house. However, Sue comes to find that Maud has a sweet character and thinks that Maud can become a trustworthy friend. Elaine Cassidy, the actor who played the role of Maud, explained she felt that "Maud was raised in a mental asylum"(Cassidy 20). As Cassidy felt, Sue feels sympathy and compassion for Maud. Raising protection instincts and sympathy, Maud naturally lets Sue take on the same role as a man, so they fall in love with each other.



Pic. 1: Maud and Sue looking in the mirror and feeling mirror image to each other

At first, the two women were unfamiliar and alerted each other, but their experiences of lonely life make them open the door of their hearts. However, they inevitably start to undergo inner conflicts. First, Maud protects herself from Sue as she listens to Gentleman's saying that Sue was aiming for her property. Second, Sue goes through other internal conflicts in her relationship with Maud. To keep a promise with Gentleman, she has to deceive Maud. Gentleman comes close to Maud as an art teacher and tries to get Maud's heart every day. Maud rarely

gives him a heart but she tries to think about escaping her uncle by escaping London with Sue and Gentleman.

Eventually Maud decides to marry Gentlemen and the three characters leave uncle's house. Gentleman wears a wagon in Maud, but the place where the carriage heads is a mental hospital, and the movie suddenly reverses the story here. In other words, it is Sue that is brought into the mental hospital, not Maud. Embarrassed, Sue gets caught in a mental hospital, gets misunderstood as Maud and gets all the insults and abuses. Meanwhile, Gentleman brings Maud to the house of Mrs. Sucksby and the secrets of many hidden stories begin to come out. The secret is that the real daughter of Mrs. Sucksby was Maud. All the plans were made by Mrs Sucksby, which was a plot to get her daughter and money at once.

There's something subversive and wonderful about creating a narrative about women who weren't supposed to be aggressive or assertive because that has nothing to do with the Victorian ideal of womanhood. It's almost like we're creating a theater that didn't exist during the time. (Goodwin 30)

As Goodwin says, there are layers and layers of enormous forces among the characters. After a devastating effort, Sue escapes from the mental hospital and begins to search Mrs Sucksby.



Pic. 2: Combination of Maud and Sue and figure of isolated Gentleman

In the end, Gentlemen dies at the hands of Maud and Mrs Sucksby sacrifices herself for her real daughter. After everything is done, Maud and Sue fall in love each other as if nothing had happened.

II. 2. Intricate Plotting and Startling Revelation

As Sherber summarizes “shifting identities are at the heart of *Fingersmith*”(19), two women resist the Victorian convention that women should be obedient and innocent. For example, the story starts from Sue and then continues to Maud and their point of view makes the audience look at the same events differently.

When love creeps into the story, layer upon subtext builds up, creating an amazingly rich story. Love makes everything trickier. There is no point at which either the characters or the viewers can relax. It's never as simple as it looks because they're all playing a game. (Rampton 10-11)

As Duncker says “the fracturing of the tale into several first-person narratives that transform and contradict one another is characteristic of 19th-century fiction”(New Statesman 04 Mar. 2002), the twisted story and shifting identities play an important role. Thomas also says “putting all these elements together makes them a new story”(155). Many fragmented stories reveal changing subjectivities and they are developed through each different view and voice.

III. Desire to Escape from Men and Japanese-dominated Time and Space in *The Handmaiden*

Since Director Park became a worldwide director through *Old Boy*(2003), a story of a man held captive for a long time and trying to

revenge for his confinement, he has produced his own peculiar movies that pursue diversity, resistance, subversion, and various mise-en-scene effects. Park's works have been called 'B movie' and have paid attention to an individual's strong desire to escape from their own worlds. *The Handmaiden* also sheds light on delicate emotion factors and chooses special backgrounds of time and space. *The Handmaiden* does not give an important topic in terms of amusement that most Korean audiences might like such as the conflicts between good and evil, and the winding elements of it. On the contrary, *The Handmaiden* gives the Korean audience a screen full of unfamiliar elements and 'unpleasant emotions.' Although beautiful women appear, they do not fall in love with male protagonists. They choose to seek revenge against the men and get rid of them to find their true lesbian love. Although *The Handmaiden* also has such strange traits, it was officially invited to the Cannes Film Festival. For example, its own specific narrative of resistance and subversion enables the female characters become newly born in the period of the Japanese colonial period. Their solidarity and resistance to existing social order are their subjective decisions they choose to create a new reality. By doing so, the heroines in *The Handmaiden* are transformed into active selves and free subjects from the many constraints imposed by social regulation.

III. 1. Between Japan and Chosun in the 1930s

The main setting of *The Handmaiden* is a well trimmed Japanese garden and there appear just a few characters. Even though the green color of the garden creates a fascinating atmosphere vividly, it collides with the contrasting images followed by the dark interior of the mansion. A lot of portraits are hung on the wall and the lights of the interior are hardly lit, which creates a horrifying atmosphere. The contrast between the

green garden and the dark interior of the mansion makes a montage effect by their own different but strong contrasting effects.

On the surface, the tension of the movie signifies the dark and gloomy Japanese colonial period, but the dramatic suspense and the tension of the movie, which seem to have the gaze of the out-of-screen monitor strongly affects the viewers. At first, Hideko(Min-hee Kim), who grows up in the hands of his aunt and uncle Kozuki(Jin-woong Jo), appears on the screen and suffers from the emotional oppression during her growth.



Pic. 3



Pic. 4

Pic. 3 & Pic. 4 represent Kouzuki's desire to become a complete Japanese.

Through her strict aunt and Kozuki, Hideko spends a sad early childhood. Especially, Kozuki, suffering obsessive-compulsive neurosis and perversion, objectifies Hideko and tries to confine Hideko in his inner world. Hideko is severely trained to read men's favorite folk novels and Kozuki uses a bead-shaped paperback for the discipline of Hideko. The repetitive scenes of Kozuki's discipline of Hideko imply his depressive paranoia. Hideko's rigorous training by Kouzki suggests that under Japanese imperialism, women's sexuality exists solely for the pleasure of men and that all the women of the *Chosun* era might have been disciplined like Hideko.

Kozuki has a divided desire to become a Japanese by marrying a Japanese woman. He is caught in a fetish desire and thoroughly blocks emotional engagement as a Korean. Kouzki's desire to be a perfect

Japanese represents his inferior identity, which is manifested as an obsessive-compulsive symptom. On the other hand, Count(Jung-woo Ha), who tries to marry Hideko so that he can take on the mighty wealth, is also trying to capture Hideko's heart through Hideko's maid Suk-Hee(Tae-ri Kim).

The maid, Suk-Hee, is orphaned and lives with a very humble status, but her voice is strong and criticizes other characters. As Picture 5 shows, Suk-Hee is peeking at Hideko and Count in secret.



Pic. 5: Sook-Hee's off-screen gaze toward Hideko and Count

Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire. (Foucault 59)

As Foucault says that the power and the power of gaze are together, Suk-Hee's visibility tells the power of Suk-Hee. Thus, the portrayal of Suk-Hee is quite different from the typical era of women at that time and represents a very multi-layered and complex new femininity. In the first part about explaining the main characters, the film focuses on the voice and gaze of Suk-Hee.

In the second part, following the sight of Suk-Hee, the story unfolds with the development of Hideko. Hideko usually sits on a public reading

hall alone and reads lascivious novels toward male viewers. The reading lecture represents the customs performed during the Japanese colonial era in which beautiful women read novels only written for males' pleasure for male audiences. As the male is the audience and the female reader(Hideko) is the target of the male gaze, Hideko is represented as a fixed subject by the male viewers, and she has to reproduce herself as men want and imagine.



Pic. 6



Pic. 7

- Pic. 6: Hideko is the subject of the fetish desires of the male audience with a fixed posture and is represented like a doll.
- Pic. 7: Men enjoy the beauty of women at the grandstand from the status as a spectator.

Picture 6 and 7 show cross-editing and compare the reader's space with the viewer's space. Hideko's body and voice as a reader are fixed by men's gaze, which means her body is commercialized and confiscated. In other words, her stage is a space for displaying traditional femininity to men. Men look upon Hideko, a doll that lies in front of their eyes, as if they are in much higher position than her and have the illusion that Hideko's image is the subject of their desires and feel privileged through Hideko's subservient acting. They also indulge in their sexual fantasy while listening to the story of folk novels read by Hideko. The sexual perversion of the men make Hideko like the heroines of pornography. Although Hideko's readings always get a good response from the male audience, Hideko cannot express her own desires and Jung points that "the

recitation that is presumably made for male pleasure is a problem”(79).

As Hideko has been disciplined through Kozuki since childhood, her body has been tamed for the pleasure of Japanese men. Kozuki shows Hideko the object with the shape of a snake when she breaks his command and he wants to tame her body. Most female bodies are always projected as a symbol of power for men in *The Handmaiden* and the film shows the women who had to endure everything as obedient women and had to live a life dependent on patriarchal centered *Chosun* society.

III. 2. An Omniscient Viewpoint of ‘Hers’ and Their Escape

Then, why does *The Handmaiden* divide the first and second parts and present a double spiral plot? Although most of their stories are the same story, their viewpoints are differently adapted to different chapters. This plays a role in driving females to escape from the confined history by providing them with opportunities to change their subjectivities. As a result, the space of a movie gradually moves from indoor to outdoor, which means Hideko and Suk-Hee’s space becomes more open to new imaginary spaces and their desire is more freely discharged. The film portrays each moment to look at the way in which Hideko and Suk-Hee’s desires become practiced. First, Suk-Hee goes to Hideko with Count, who hypnotizes himself for the desire to get money. In this way, Suk-Hee also gets obsessed with despotic desires to gain wealth she desires, and approaches Hideko so that Hideko can feel love for Count. Count’s intention to make Hideko believe him also enables Suk-Hee to play the ‘intended’ role more and more. These various scenes show that Suk-Hee is not a foolish maid who simply submits to her master’s words, but a person with a role schema that makes good use of her situation. Suk-Hee apparently seems like a maid loyal to Hideko unconditionally, but she simultaneously ridicules Hideko that seems ignorant. Thus, it is possible

to say that Suk-Hee is a wise person who recognizes that she has the power to control Hideko.



Pic. 8: Hideko and Suk-Hee's long-take scene acts as a potential for various changes that take place inside Suk-Hee and Hideko.

Picture 8 shows the relationship between Suk-Hee and Hideko, which gradually get into each other. The tabooed love of lesbian relationship strengthens the solidarity between them. Jung summarizes “amplifying the importance of female erotic pleasure between the two protagonists subsequently brings the alteration to the synopsis”(75). The two women’s bonding finally results in the separation of Hideko and Count.



Pic. 9: Count and Hideko have different gazing directions.

As Picture 9 implies, Hideko’s marriage with Count is not easily fulfilled and Suk-Hee, located between them, reassures Count by making a foolish act so that he can not notice her trick. Hideko is also acting like a mad woman with schizophrenia, leading Count not to notice her relationship with Suk-Hee. This imitation is close to the

“mimesis-mimicry”(58) of Elin Diamond, which exaggerates the male-centered discourse, rather than mocking the thoughts of male discourse.



Pic. 10: Suk-Hee's resisting Count's words in the bush

The bush in Picture 10 plays another role in strengthening the voice of Suk-Hee and the space of the wilderness symbolizes Suk-Hee's resistance. With Suk-Hee's subjectivity reaching its peak in Chapter 2 and 3, Chapter 3 looks back on the whole chapters at an omniscient viewpoint. Chapter 3 is an answer to the overall film theme that dominates the whole movie. In other words, the story of Suk-Hee in Chapter 1 and the story of Hideko in Chapter 2 make new subjects built and form a solidarity between them.

In the end, Count is thoroughly trounced by the mockery and the deceit of Suk-Hee and Hideko. Count is caught in a trap the two women prepared for. This is a way of Suk-Hee and Hideko's resisting Count and they achieved their mutual aim of deceiving Count. Suk-Hee and Hideko actively participate in the demands of men and but they just pretend to obey them. In the end, all of their acts were 'fake' to deceive men, and Suk-Hee and Hideko are challenged to break out of their quest for 'real.' In this context, the narrative that their actions pursue is a “the crystal of time”(Cinema 2 54), which means indistinguishable existence of time.

Hideko removes Kozuki from the symbolic order through the boldness

of eliminating the books that depicted women in folk novels. The naked female bodies in the text that existed as men's textbooks are dismissed by the two women by their authenticity and authority. The practice of commodifying women's sexuality at that time prevailed to meet men's gaze and voyeurism. Men who quantify female bodies represent a symbol of the men's desire and the power of gaze to exercise power over women as a strategy of constitutional power and to record women as the 'inferior' object. In this sense, the act of removing these books by Hideko and Suk-Hee becomes a symbolic proposal to liberate the signs of oppression toward women, and the meaning of the arbitrary signs Man(superior)/ Women(Inferior) is dismantled. Books written about the bodies of hundreds of women in Kozuki's secret room were the only medium to stimulate Kozuki's compulsive psychology to become a perfect Japanese. Now his secret room is threatened with conflicts from a lot of patriarchal discourses. The solidarity between two women erases 'fiction that existed as the truth' and remakes female community which enables the females to escape from men's space.

After judging Count and Kouzki, Hideko and Suk-Hee lock them forever in a closed basement to prevent them from coming out to the world. This shows that all the thoughts of the men who tried to control Hideko and Suk-Hee from the standpoint of superior were just fantasy. Finally after the revenge, Hideko and Suk-Hee go to the sailing ship to wash their old female identity of *Chosun* society. They freely wear both men's and women's clothes and celebrate their 'victory' by being able to 'end' the relationship with Kozuki and Count who oppressed them. In the end, the two women enjoy their freedom in their own space and look at each other as the objects of love, not as the objects of commercialized bodies. The beads that Kozuki used to discipline Hideko are transformed into devices that encourage their pleasures. This signifies that Hideko's past trauma is healed with pleasure.

III. 3. Enjoyment of Jouissance through Escape and New Creation

As Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the importance of “a counter-current flow of non-deterministic or non-discriminatory flow against the organless body against the symbolic system of social network” (Anti-oedipus 9), the two women’s resistance to the closed social system aims to find newly created open system. The first half of the film shows a confrontational situation in which unreliable conflicting situations are layered but in the latter part a new phase of ‘utopian happy ending’ makes the two protagonists overcome many difficulties and regain mutual camaraderie.

Just as Deleuze and Guattari also say in *The Thousand Plateau* that “struggle not only occurs in the group but also through the inner or individual subjects of the group or through the control between the self and the superego within the subject” (276-77), the last scene shows the two women’s free moments together in a hotel room. The full shot of their naked bodies means the absence of any intervention or interference. They face a new world out of the Japanese colonial period and men’s control. The final ending shows “women can pursue their desires without fear of getting punished in the form of insatiability or masochism”(Jung 78) and that there are no more troubles in the space. Their victory can be said to be a challenge for creating a new history in which they listen to ‘inner voice’ and are able to speak for themselves as their language.

IV. Conclusion

In the present era of transnationalism, films gradually have been moving away the fixed genre characteristics and the specific time and space. The heroines appearing in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* also escape themselves from the order of the existing symbolic system through

the process of liberation and escape. In addition, they have liberated themselves from the structural duties imposed by history and institution. Their processes of liberation are a challenge to the symbolically semiotic system and they overturn the position of the subject and the other. Expanding this further, the whole processes signify challenges to the arbitrary provision of signs and exposures.

Thus, these ultimate attempts beyond the symbolic system show that a particular stereotype, or dichotomy, is broken through the changed mutual movement of female gaze. In addition, as the two films relocate the positions of subject and the other, the conventional visions created by history are also 'recreated' as visual texts that are transmitted through practice of subversive performance.

In the case of *The Handmaiden*, it shows the process of escaping from the historical space and oppression in Japanese Colonial Period by forming a women's community beyond the patriarchal gaze of the escape. At the beginning of the film, the distinction between masculinity and femininity, masters and servants were standardized and stereotyped. However, as the film evolves, their positions and boundaries get broken down and overturned. The upper and lower structure based on dichotomy, master/servant and male/female finally become reversed as the fixed stereotype can be disguised or performed. In addition, the flow of latent resistance serves as a suspense component to dramatic development. The female languages, therefore, are not a one-to-one correspondence but rather multi-layered and complex communication. Thus, the escape of these women who wanted to escape from the fixed traditions and customs acted as the driving force to lead them to a totally different subjects by breaking down all the compulsive and oppressive frames of time and space. These are also the practices allowing viewers to participate in the process of change as part of a kind of "Micro Politics"(A *Thousand Plateaus* 159).

In conclusion, these processes are the textual avant-garde itself, which is the creative production of the audience that constantly communicates and creates in the 'live' text. Calling for the signification in creating a new social dimension by dismantling the sign of social discourse, the new search done by female bonds through the escaping moments and the indefinite time space in the two films 'rewrites' the new history through their own narratives.

In such re-written cultural alternatives which keep breaking any boundary and closing interspace, the women who had to remain as passive beings by men gain new subjectivities and the traditional positions of men(high)/women(low) get reversed. Their 'story' is not over yet because they keep resisting to traditional semiotics for creating a new history.

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