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Embracing Precarity:

Attending to Vulnerability and Negative Affects in E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady*.

A Master's Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

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This thesis attends to vulnerability and precarity within visual representation by analysing the negative affects bound to the experience of social exclusion. The study explores what it might mean to embrace and not overcome 'bad feelings' like shame and alienation using the visual example of an elderly prostitute—a 'Bacchus Lady'—in E J-yong's 2016 film *The Bacchus Lady*. Investigating the utility of 'bad feelings' is informed by and draws upon the work of queer theorist Heather Love as a way to acknowledge and value more complex experiences like failure, shame and unhappiness. By considering how the cultural representation of 'Bacchus Ladies' addresses feelings of precarity and vulnerability in relation to themes of economic oppression and objectification this thesis aims to examine and think more broadly about the negative effects of inequality. The study attends to aspects of the film that might be commonly regarded as beyond a narrative of progress, the bodily and psychic reality of a subject living in poverty. Departing from previous scholarly work that has attended to the protagonist in *The Bacchus Lady* as a figure who represents forms of queer agency, my own analysis has, to the contrary provided a framework in which to analyse the protagonist's restricted agency in relation to multiple themes of oppression. By going beyond neoliberal narratives of happiness, success, and self-fulfilment, this thesis argues that embracing and addressing more adverse feelings can be used to develop a critical understanding of the utility of 'bad feelings' as a form of transformative criticism and allow one to consider more broadly the use of negative affects as a potential strategy for repair.

Keywords

Precarity, vulnerability, Bacchus Ladies, negative affects, shame, 'bad feelings'

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	II
Abstract	III
List of figures.....	V
Glossary	VI
Aim and Research Questions	3
Background and Relevance.....	6
Empirical Material and delimitation	7
Theory.....	8
Method	11
Previous Research	12
Thesis Outline	15
Chapter 1 -Precarious existence and social vulnerability: Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon	16
<i>Preface – The visual representation of Bacchus Ladies</i>	32
Chapter 2 –Embracing precarity: Attending to Vulnerability and Negative Affects in <i>The Bacchus Lady</i>	34
<i>Concluding remarks and reflections</i>	52
<i>Bibliography</i>	1

List of figures

Figure. 1: So-young relaying her symptoms to a doctor during a gynaecology appointment. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 2: So-young cursing a client when she is diagnosed with an STD. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 3: So-young soliciting in the park. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 4: So-young and her elderly client discussing his expectations. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 5: So-young massaging her elderly client's penis. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 6: So-young and the 'gossiping woman' arguing in the park. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady* dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 7: The 'gossiping woman' cursing So-young as she raises her fist. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 8: So-young being chastised by the 'gossiping woman.' Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 9: The young filmmaker and So-young when he announces he is making a documentary about Bacchus Ladies. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 10: The filmmaker explains South Korea's problem of elderly poverty to So-young. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Figure. 11: So-young tells the filmmaker not to refer to her as 'Granny'. Still frame from *The Bacchus Lady*, dir. E J-yong, South Korea, Korean Academy of Film Arts, 2016, [DVD].

Glossary

Bacchus (Bagkaseu)

A South Korean energy drink that was first launched in 1963. The drink was originally sold in pharmacies as an 'herbal medicine' to cure hangovers and prevent colds.

Bacchus Ladies (bagkaseu halmeoni)

The Bacchus Ladies are elderly South Korean women, typically between the ages of 50 and 80, who have turned to prostitution in order to support themselves. Their name derives from the popular energy drink Bacchus-D that they offer as a pretext for cheap by-the-hour sex.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ancient Chinese belief system and philosophy focused on the importance of morality and ethics. As part of China's cultural influence, Confucianism also emerged and developed in South Korea and is sometimes referred to specifically as Korean Confucianism.

Soju

An alcoholic spirit from South Korea that is known as its national beverage.

Introduction

Around Jongmyo Park, in Seoul, dozens of elderly South Korean women sit at makeshift tables made from bottle crates or stand patiently as if they're waiting for someone to arrive; the elderly men playing chess under the shade of the trees occasionally stroll over to them to talk and buy small bottles of 'Bacchus', a popular South Korean energy drink.

I first encountered the so-called 'Bacchus Ladies' (*Bagkaseu Halmeoni*) while living and working in South Korea in 2011. Although initially disconcerting, I did not find it surprising to see elderly women trying to sell their wares since it is common to see older South Koreans working beyond retirement. I learned only later that many of the women I had seen in the park were not only selling Bacchus but also soliciting sex.¹ The women, known as 'Bacchus Ladies' are elderly South Korean prostitutes who sell the energy drink as a pretext to offer 'sexual services.'² In light of this direct personal experience, I have continued to question what this social phenomenon signifies. Is it a symptom of a crisis within South Korea? Is it a consequence of modernity? What has changed the social fabric of South Korean society?

Although I am interested in Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon the objective of this study is not to examine the reality of Bacchus Ladies, but rather to analyse how they are culturally represented in E J-yong's fictional feature, *The Bacchus Lady* (2016). This particular film has been selected for analysis since it is the only fictional film to date that addresses the topic of Bacchus Ladies, a phenomenon with much societal relevance. Representation allows us to obtain and express insight into the nature of things and also shapes our understanding of reality.³ Thus, as a portrayal of a real social phenomenon, *The Bacchus Lady* creates a form of cultural understanding that allows one to consider how the portrayal of Bacchus Ladies addresses a critical social issue.

The Bacchus Lady is a fictional Korean drama set in contemporary Seoul. The film centres around the life of an elderly prostitute named So-young (Youn Yuh-jung).⁴ In order to

¹ The women are commonly aged between 50-80 years old.

² 'Bacchus' has a long history in South Korea and is marketed for its health benefits. As prominent as Bacchus may be as an energy drink it has acquired a meaning apart, one associated with elderly sex work and the stigma that surrounds it.

³ Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, Jen Webb, suggests that 'It is not 'reality' that is brought into presence through representation; rather, it is 'meaning' that is brought to light.' J. Webb, *Understanding Representation*, London, SAGE Publications, 2009, p. 30.

⁴ So-young was born just before the start of the Korean War and in the 1960s worked as a housemaid and factory girl before becoming a 'camptown' prostitute in the 1970s. In the 1940s and 1950s, US military bases in South Korea started to develop 'camptowns' that were used for regulated prostitution. Women from rural and urban backgrounds tended to be trafficked into 'camptown' prostitution by gangsters or 'employment agencies' enticing them with high-paying jobs.

make a living, So-young sells the energy drink 'Bacchus' as a pretext for cheap by-the-hour sex. The film develops a framework through which Bacchus ladies are presented, through positions of vulnerability and precarity, but also through relationships of queer kinship and caregiving. My own emotional responses while watching the film were dominated by feelings of hopelessness and anguish, especially regarding the protagonist who struck me as a rather tragic and despairing character. To then read more celebratory interpretations of the film was somewhat surprising.

Previous scholarly research has positioned *The Bacchus Lady* within a wave of recent queer Korean cinema, a movement that questions the efficacy of normative family structures and critiques ideas of heteronormative and homosexual assimilation to mainstream society.⁵ While this perspective provides a valuable mode of critique regarding dominant ideas of homogeneity perhaps its celebration of 'queer possibilities', I will argue, lessens the vulnerable position that the protagonist occupies and diminishes the vigour of inequality.⁶

With regard to my own study, I intend to examine the film in relation to what occurs when one lingers on ideas of precarity and vulnerability within the representation and to consider what it means not to overlook them. My approach when analysing the film has been influenced by professor of English and Gender Studies Heather Love and her conception of 'feeling backward'⁷ To 'feel backward,' as Love suggests, means to turn toward, rather than away from the difficult history of the queer past and acknowledge and embrace the shame, fear, and loneliness we might encounter there.⁸ As Love defines it, 'Backwardness means many things here: shyness, ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness, regression, victimhood, heartbreak, antimodernism, immaturity, self-hatred, despair, shame.'⁹ While this

B U Today, [website], 2007, <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2007/south-koreas-camptown-stories/#:~:text=Initially%2C%20camptown%20women%20were%20daughters,promise%20of%20well%2Dpaying%20jobs>, (accessed 6 May 2022).

⁵ *The Bacchus Lady* has not commonly been considered a queer film since the main focus of the narrative is not on LGBT characters. However, Assistant Professor of Asian Cinema at the University of Michigan, Ungsan Kim suggests that when viewed through the prism of non-normative social relations and a critique of the transience of human progress *The Bacchus Lady* has a disruptive quality.

U. Kim, 'The Critical Social Turn of Queer Korean Cinema: The Hospitality and the Temporal Economy of Queer Kinship in *The Bacchus Lady* (2016)', *Korea Journal*, vol. 58, no. 2, 2018, <https://kj.accesson.kr/assets/pdf/8450/journal-58-2-88.pdf>, (accessed 10 February 2022).

⁶ Of course, placing the film in any tradition causes one to see certain aspects above others.

⁷ Love analyses iconic literary texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Texts that she argues are 'marked by queer suffering' and form significant points in a tradition of queer experience and representation that she terms 'feeling backward.'

H. Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 4 & p. 104.

⁸ In their study of modernist literature and the challenges of history, Love asks readers to consider how early 20th-century moments once labelled troubling and evil can continue to have an affect in the present.

H. Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 21.

⁹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 146.

thesis does not look at queries specifically bound to queer subjectivities in the same sense that Love does it will draw from her theories regarding engaging with ‘bad feelings’ as a way to address the psychic and corporeal effects of social exclusion and apply these to an analysis of the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies in *The Bacchus Lady*.

Use of the term representation

The term ‘representation’ will be used throughout this thesis drawing on cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s theory of representation as something with no ‘true’ fixed meaning but a process that generates multiple meanings and engages audiences in the process of creating meaning.¹⁰ Hall proposes that the term ‘fiction’ implies a separation from everyday life, offering a markedly different experience from what one would have in everyday life or when engaging with media that focuses on the real world.¹¹ Hence, as a work of fiction, there is no verifiable truth in *The Bacchus Lady*, regardless of whether its intention is to portray social reality. However, the depiction can be used to emphasize the status of Bacchus Ladies in visual representation and call attention to a significant cultural issue.¹²

Aim and Research Questions

This thesis seeks to attend to precariousness and vulnerability within visual representation by addressing the negative affects tied to the experience of social exclusion. By engaging with darker aspects of representation I hope to extend a critical understanding of the value of negative emotions as a form of political usefulness. To explore what it might mean to embrace negative feelings like shame and alienation associated with the representation of a stigmatized identity, I turn to the portrayal of an elderly prostitute in the fictional feature *The Bacchus Lady* (2016). By addressing the contradictory and negative feelings that influence the experiences of marginalization portrayed, my analysis focuses on aspects of the film that might commonly be regarded as beyond a narrative of progress. While more challenging,

¹⁰ Hall articulates the representation of meaning using three theoretical approaches: ‘reflective’ (reflecting on already existing meaning), ‘intentional’ (expressing the creator’s personally intended meaning) and ‘constructionist’ (construction of meaning through producer, audience and society). S. Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, London, Sage, 1997 p. 1 & pp. 24-25.

¹¹ Hall, *Representation*, p. 340.

¹² S. Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists; Mulvey, Silverman, de Lauretis, Creed*, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2006, p. 23.

resisting and positive rhetoric approaches have received greater attention as an effective critical strategy to bring about a political change, perhaps such approaches, this thesis asks, negate and obscure adverse emotions that might reveal more about how oppression impacts lives. By attending to precarity and vulnerability within representation, one might be able to envision how such ‘bad feelings’ can be used as a political strategy for repair. This thesis is guided by two main research questions:

How does the cultural representation of an elderly prostitute in *The Bacchus Lady* attend to feelings of precarity and vulnerability? How can this be used to think more broadly about the ‘negative affects’ of oppression and inequality?

Clarification of terms – ‘prostitute’ and ‘sex worker’

As analysed through predominantly feminist theoretical lenses, prostitution has been examined in light of the subjective position of women that reinforces questions about social relations and the division of labour.¹³ The term ‘prostitute’ is most commonly used to refer to a person who engages in ‘sexual activity’ in exchange for payment.¹⁴ The term ‘sex worker’¹⁵ is widely regarded as recognizing that ‘sex work is work’ and has been used to avoid invoking the stigma associated with prostitution and its historical connotations of immorality and criminality.¹⁶ As a descriptor ‘sex worker’ is principally used to refer to a person who

¹³As professor of History Elizabeth Clements suggests, though prostitution may seem simple to define, it is entangled in a complex web of economic, cultural, and moral systems. It is therefore critical to address the different perspectives used when discussing sex work as it plays a significant role in discussions about social equality and societal attitudes. The way sex work is discussed is far from neutral, it communicates meaning and influences how people understand its nature, reflecting a diversity of histories, regional differences, and self-identification.

E. Clement, ‘Prostitution’, in H.G. Cocks and M. Houlbrook (ed.), *The Modern History of Sexuality*, Hampshire, United Kingdom, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 207.

¹⁴ ‘Sexual activity’ can be used to refer to a variety of interactions including sexual intercourse, non-penetrative sex, and oral sex.

¹⁵ The term ‘sex worker’ usually connotes a more liberal attitude towards the sex industry and is widely referred to as recognising that sex work is work and is often preferred by those who sell sexual services. Many sex workers’ rights groups including *The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)* have campaigned to replace the term ‘prostitute’ with ‘sex worker’.

Nswp: Global Network of Sex Work Projects, ‘Sex Workers Speak Out’, <http://nswp.org/sex-workers-speak-out>, (accessed 2 March 2022).

¹⁶ Author and activist against sexual inequality, Kat Banyard, argues against the use of the term ‘sex worker’ and suggests that prostitution is a form of sexual exploitation. She states that the rebranding of prostitution as ‘sex work’ could create a myth that adds to the normalization of the use of women’s bodies as a commodity. K. Banyard, ‘The dangers of rebranding prostitution as ‘sex work’’, *The Guardian*, [website], 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jun/06/prostitution-sex-work-pimp-state-kat-banyard-decriminalisation>, (accessed 1 March 2022).

receives money or other benefits in exchange for consensual sexual services.¹⁷ Although there are numerous feminist voices participating in debates regarding prostitution, the dominant feminist positions can be found within 'radical feminism' and 'sex-positive feminism.'¹⁸ Radical feminist analyses of prostitution are characterised by an understanding of prostitution as violence against women, not only in the practice of prostitution but also in the nature of 'buying sex' in its relation to male power.¹⁹ The radical feminist and legal scholar Catherine A. Mackinnon argues that '[...] the stigma of prostitution is the stigma of sexuality is the stigma of female gender [...]'²⁰ The sex-positive feminism movement, in contrast, emphasises that sexual freedom is a crucial element of equality and liberation and is a crucial component of women's freedom.²¹ Sex-worker, activist and artist Carol Leigh (aka 'The Scarlet Harlot') who coined the term 'sex worker' offered opposition to the view of prostitution as the oppression of women claiming, 'Sexual control is part of social control.'²²

The term 'prostitute' in the context of this thesis will be used to refer to a person who engages in sexual activity and receives payment for it.²³ Following French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault's approach regarding the theory of power and sexual discourse and its effects upon the body²⁴ this thesis will not engage in a moral or ethical discussion regarding the phenomenon of Bacchus Ladies, but rather the function of sex work and how sexuality is enacted in contemporary society.

¹⁷ The term 'sex work' itself is often used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of activities, including phone-sex operators, strippers and adult models and actors.

Open Society Foundations, [website], 2019, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society>, (accessed 14 May 2022).

¹⁸ K. Sutherland, 'Work, Sex, and Sex-Work: Competing Feminist Discourses on the International Sex Trade', *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, Vol. 42, no. 1, 2004, pp. 140-141, <http://digitalcommons.osgoode.yorku.ca/ohlj>, (accessed 15 May 2022).

¹⁹ J. Scoular, 'The 'Subject' of prostitution: Interpreting the discursive, symbolic and material position of sex/work in feminist theory', *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 5, 2004, p. 343. Available from: Sage Publications, (accessed 12 May 2022).

Radical feminist insights are characterized by the writings of Carole Pateman (1983, 1988), Catherine Mackinnon (1987, 1989) and Andrea Dworkin (1987, 1989) to name a few.

²⁰ Viewed in this way, whether prostitution is legal or illegal, as long as men and women continue to be unequal, then Mackinnon claims inequality will be sexualised

C. A. Mackinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 68.

²¹ For further reading see key works by Gayle Rubin (1984), Carole Vance (1984), Carol Queen (1997).

²² Leigh's aim was to shift the focus from the abolition of sex-work to the human rights of sex workers to ultimately destigmatize and broaden understanding of sex work in all its forms

C. Leigh, *Unrepentant Whore: Collected Works of Scarlet Harlot*, San Francisco, Last Gasp, 2004, p. 29.

²³ The term 'Prostitute' is not used to stigmatize or victimize, but rather to avoid any ambiguity throughout my discussion of the subject.

²⁴ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley, New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, first published 1976, pp. 36-49.

Background and Relevance

While the Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon play an integral role in this thesis, the background and historical context of elderly prostitution in South Korea will be analysed and discussed in detail in chapter one.

This thesis can be said to follow in the tradition of a large body of theoretical work investigating the utility of ‘negative affects’ and is particularly inspired by queer theorists including Heather Love, Sara Ahmed and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who have turned to ‘bad feelings’ predominantly in literary works as a source of understanding the past, conflict, trauma and desire. By considering the ‘use’ of ‘bad feelings’ such as shame as politically relevant, this study follows Love and Ahmed’s approach of refuting narratives of psychological and political progress as a means of addressing instances of injustice. By working within a theoretical framework that attends to precarity and vulnerability as a way to acknowledge and consider issues of inequality, this thesis goes beyond addressing the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies to reflect on the broader issue of acknowledging and attending to violence and exclusion as a form of transformative criticism.

One might ask why it is important or necessary to address these negative or painful feelings; central to the approach of ‘queer negativity’ is a fundamental concern with refuting dominant neoliberal narratives of happiness, success, and self-fulfilment in order to acknowledge and value more complex experiences like failure, shame, unhappiness and isolation. This advocacy of queer negativity is a position I take throughout this study as a means of countering the emphasis on success, achievement, performance, and self-actualization at the core of neoliberal society and its hold over the ‘[...] bodily and psychic lives of its subjects.’²⁵ The questions I ask within this thesis additionally speak to Sedgwick’s concept of the affective political potential of shame as a strategy for repair to further consider what lingering with ‘bad feelings’ can or could be ‘useful’ for. Moreover, the thesis advances a broader discussion of how ‘bad feelings’ and encounters with vulnerability and precarity do not only operate within literary works, but within visual representations, and ultimately allow one to examine how ‘bad feelings’ augment and persist across a range of non-normative and minority experiences.

²⁵ M. Ruti, *The Ethics of Opting out: Queer Theory’s Defiant Subjects*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 2 and p. 7.

Empirical Material and delimitation

The primary empirical material for this thesis is the 2016 fictional feature *The Bacchus Lady* by Korean director E J-yong.²⁶ This particular film has been selected because it points to the conflict that I address; though it depicts the bodily and psychic reality of a subject living in poverty due to the neoliberal culture of self-reliance that has created precarious lives for some at the advancement of others, it has primarily been analysed in terms of queer frameworks that attend to themes of resistance and subversion. In accordance with the aim of this thesis, I examine *The Bacchus Lady* by focusing on aspects of the film that might commonly be regarded as beyond a more progressive narrative, aspects that attend to the negative affects tied to the experience of a marginalised identity.

This study will not undertake a comprehensive analysis of *The Bacchus Lady*; however, a brief summary of its synopsis will be provided at the end of chapter one to help guide readers. For the purpose of this thesis, the analysis will be delimited to a study of four scenes from the film. Each scene depicts the protagonist in relation to one other character and were chosen for the way that they argue they depict layers of vulnerability, precarity and shame in relation to themes of economic oppression, objectification, and the relationship between the subject and the institution.

Among the scenes selected for analysis, one portrays an elderly client interacting with the protagonist; another scene depicts a dispute between the protagonist and another Bacchus Lady. By turning to one film for analysis in this study, I acknowledge that this is a single interpretation of the phenomenon, however as it is the only fictional representation to address the phenomenon of Bacchus Ladies, no other empirical material is currently available to compare and contrast it with. Additionally, the film's writer and director, E J-yong is male which could be regarded as problematic if one considers feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'Male Gaze'.²⁷ The 'male gaze' as Mulvey defines it, refers to a sexualised way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. As a result, one might argue that the director may have created a mode of looking in *The Bacchus Lady* that is sexual, voyeuristic, and associated with a heterosexual male's point of view. However, the focus of this thesis will not be to examine the film within the framework of the 'male gaze'.

²⁶ The original South Korean title of the film is *Jugyeojuneun Yeoja* which translates as *The Killer Woman*. While Bacchus Ladies are explicitly mentioned in the English title as a motif and reference to the socio-cultural phenomenon, the South Korean title alludes to an aspect of the film's narrative. The differences in film titles across international markets could be explained by several factors, including literal translations not conveying a particular meaning in other languages, cultural references not being understood, or marketing strategies used to target a larger audience.

²⁷ L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, Vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

As the only fictional portrayal that attends to the real and pressing issue of elderly prostitution in South Korea, I would argue that *The Bacchus Lady* presents a notable opportunity to examine the cultural representation of Bacchus Ladies in a much more detailed and nuanced manner. Moreover, the film has the potential to provide greater insight into the phenomena and ones understanding of it.

The discussion of Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon in chapter one will draw upon a variety of sources, including books, newspaper articles, scholarly articles, websites and videos. A key text for this chapter is ‘Virtuous Rights: On Prostitution Exceptionalism in South Korea’²⁸ written by anthropologist Sealing Cheng and feminist philosopher Ae- Ryung Kim. The article analyses the development of the criminal apparatus surrounding prostitution in South Korea and the legal changes that have regulated sexuality from the 1990s to the present against the backdrop of neoliberalism. This is relevant to my discussion since it is during this period that Bacchus Ladies are said to have appeared.

Theory

The central theoretical foundation of this thesis lies, as implied above, in queer theorist Heather Love’s notion of the value of acknowledging and valuing ‘bad feelings’ or negative affects as a form of politics that is attentive to social exclusion. In her seminal work, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Love argues that backward feelings, like shame, depression and regret linger and are an essential part of any analysis that ‘[...] serve as an index to the ruined state of the social world; and they show up the inadequacy of queer narratives of progress.’²⁹ Instead of celebrating negativity for its own sake, or lauding it as a valiant counterhegemonic stance, I think of Love’s attention to ‘bad feelings’ as a way to consider the role of ‘negative affect’ as an essential form of political criticism.³⁰ ‘Feeling backward’ is concerned with a refusal to disavow negativity, a call for a deeper engagement with feelings that may be dismissed as too bleak or disturbing to be useful

²⁸ S. Cheng and A-R Kim, ‘Virtuous Rights: On Prostitution Exceptionalism in South Korea’, in A.M. Miller and M.J. Roseman, *Beyond Virtue and Vice: Rethinking Human Rights and Criminal Law*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

²⁹ Love’s focus lies in returning to early-twentieth-century queer novels that are often labelled as ‘depressing’ or ‘naïve’ by critics to consider the ways that the dark emotions present there can be valued and reclaimed. Love holds that no matter how much queer subjects try to repress the traumatizing aspects of queer histories, these aspects will always infiltrate the present, despite the political efforts to transcend the pain. The past will always be part of the present, and any attempt to deny this reality will only strengthen it.
Love, p. 27

³⁰ A key purpose of Love’s undertaking is not to overcome a difficult past but to develop a theoretical political practice of looking at the effects of the past on the present.

in political criticism and will be the approach I adopt predominantly in my analysis of *The Bacchus Lady* in chapter two as a way of considering how valuing and reclaiming dark feelings within representation could be used to understand more about the persistent power of hardship. As Love argues to dismiss such dark ideas and emotions could be to dismiss their ‘[...] affective power and their capacity to form a more comprehensive and truthful understanding of the experiences of those who do not fit into a narrative of progress.’³¹ In light of Love's approach, attending to vulnerability and precarity could be considered a fetishization of ‘bad feelings’ that results in no transformative affect; or it could be perceived as a means of distracting from political solutions through depoliticization. However, I would argue that Love does not outright reject the politics of affirmation but rather suggests that instead of dismissing 'bad feelings' as irrelevant or looking for resistance by turning ‘bad feelings’ into ‘good feelings’, one could consider embracing ‘bad feelings’ as a means to notice institutionalised habits and to consider their potential political use in discussions of reparation.³²

As a theoretical approach that aims to understand how power functions in the context of social inequality as well as how cultural practices shape identities, social practices, and institutional arrangements the concept of intersectionality as elucidated by social theorist Patricia Hill Collins and professor of sociology Sirma Bilge will be used to analyse *Bacchus Ladies* as a cultural phenomenon in chapter one.³³ As a framework that is used to explain how social divisions of race, gender and age among others position people differently in the world, intersectionality is a relevant theoretical approach for a discussion of power relations in connection to social inequality in South Korean society.³⁴ As Collins and Bilge argue,

³¹ Love, *Feeling Backward*, p. 1.

³² Love is sceptical of modes of queer criticism that seek to overcome difficult histories by transforming ‘[...] the base materials of social abjection into the gold of political agency.’ Love, p. 18.

³³ The term, ‘Intersectionality’ was introduced in black feminist scholarship by civil rights activist and scholar of critical race theory, Kimberlé W. Crenshaw as a way to connect multiple and overlapping axes of oppression and identity with gender. In Crenshaw's 1989 paper, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex’ she describes how multiple systems of power have an inseparable effect on the lives of black women; she also asserts that the injustices that characterise black women’s lives cannot be challenged if such injustices are only considered through the lens of a race-only framework or a gender-only framework. Ultimately all women’s lives are shaped by multiple identities that position them differently in the structure of complex social inequalities. Crenshaw argues that intersectionality is about being open to understanding the ways in which systems perpetuate and reproduce inequalities.

K. Crenshaw, ‘Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989: 1, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ulf>, (accessed 11 April 2022).

³⁴ Many of the core ideas of intersectionality that emerged in the twentieth century, including social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice, developed from social movements that grappled with the challenges of their time: colonialism, racism, sexism, militarism, and capitalism.

intersectionality is an approach that acknowledges layers of social division within a society at a given time, and it recognises that these factors are not mutually exclusive but build on each other and combine to create systems of oppression.³⁵ Thus, intersectionality facilitates rethinking social inequality by addressing a wide variety of issues and social problems. By emphasizing the complexity of human experience, an intersectional perspective offers insight into human behaviour that is rooted in the experiences of vulnerability and can be used to approach social institutions, practices, and problems related to social inequality from a new perspective.³⁶ Intersectionality as a concept can take many forms and is a theory constantly under construction; it has been conceptualised as a perspective, a type of analysis, a research paradigm, a methodological approach and more.³⁷ As such, I do not suggest that intersectionality is a complete, straightforward framework that can simply be applied to my topic.³⁸ However, as an analytical tool that encompasses intersecting categories of social division, intersectionality can arguably be utilised to offer an insight into where power comes from, where it interlocks and intersects, and how it manifests.

Regarding precarity and vulnerability I will draw theoretical insight from philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's concept of 'precarious life.'³⁹ Butler argues that all social existence is characterized by vulnerability and that precarity is a fundamental feature of human nature due to the vulnerability of all lives to injury and destruction. Thus, according to Butler, all human existence is precarious in the way that all lives are '[...] in some sense in the hands of the other [...]' creating a dependency and '[...] exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know [...]'⁴⁰ However, Butler makes a distinction between *precarity* as a 'politically induced condition' that refers to a state of living without security that might impair an individual's well-being and *precariousness* as a concept signifying a primary vulnerability ascribed to our embodied existence.⁴¹ I will lean on Butler's theory of precarity

P H. Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019, p. 1 & p. 64.

³⁵ In their introduction to *Intersectionality*, Patricia Hill-Collins and Sirma Bilge argue that power relations should be analysed via their intersections, for example of racism and sexism, as well as across domains of power, namely structural, disciplinary, cultural and interpersonal. They talk about several core ideas that appear and reappear when people use intersectionality as an analytical tool, including inequality, power, social context and complexity.

P H. Collins and S. Bilge, *Intersectionality*, Cambridge, England and Malden, USA, Polity Press, 2016, p. 4.

³⁶ P H. Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', *The Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol.41: 1-20, 2015, p. 3, <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>, (accessed 11 April 2022).

³⁷ P H. Collins, 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', p. 13

³⁸ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, p. 31.

³⁹ J. Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London; New York, Verso, 2010, p. 25.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 25.

and precariousness as intersecting concepts that can be used to attend to themes of economic oppression and objectification in the analysis of *The Bacchus Lady* in chapter two.

Considering the relationship between negative affects such as shame and alienation and repair I turn to scholar of gender studies and queer theory Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and their theory of the political potential of shame. Building on psychologist Silvan Tomkins theory of affect, Sedgwick connects shame to visibility, spectacle, and performance, underscoring that shame is both profoundly personal and highly social and something which one absorbs and acts out as a result of the affects of others.⁴² As a means of performance as Sedgwick argues, shame can provide us innovative ways of considering identity and gender politics and expose social expectations and stigmas. Thus, the dynamics of shame may enable one to comprehend more thoroughly the politics of other affects.

Method

Chapter one of this thesis provides a background to the issues of Bacchus Ladies as a contemporary South Korean phenomenon and the second chapter analyses the cultural representation of Bacchus Ladies in *The Bacchus Lady* (2016). Although this thesis primarily discusses the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies, as presented in the film *The Bacchus Lady*, it will also partly connect this discussion to a mapping of Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon. Importantly, this is not done in order to conflate the representation of Bacchus Ladies with the social reality of prostitutes in South Korea. Rather, my reason for doing this is to provide the reader with the social and political framework from which I contemplate the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies in the film.

As an analytical framework that identifies and critiques the experience of oppression, the concept of intersectionality, as interpreted by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge will be utilised in chapter one to examine how modes of advantage and disadvantage are influenced by aspects of social and political identities in South Korea. As a method of relating personal experiences and structural analyses of interlocking oppression, intersectionality is chosen as a method of examining and reflecting on how race, gender, age, and other divisions position people differently in Korean society.⁴³ Chapter two revisits *The Bacchus Lady* and analyses four scenes from the film that I suggest speak to precarity and vulnerability most powerfully. Love's concept of attending to negative affects that result from the experience of social

⁴² E. K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 36-37.

⁴³ Collins and Bilge, p. 76-77.

exclusion will be used as a method to consider ‘bad feelings’ such as shame and alienation within the narrative; narratives that may get overlooked if one only seeks accounts of resistance. As Love proposes, ‘Although we cannot do away with the notion of progress, I want to attend more closely to what remains unthought in the turn toward the future.’⁴⁴

In *Poetics of Cinema* film theorist David Bordwell argues that one can only access the chronological sequence of events in a narrative by means of narration; the interaction between the re-presentation of events and the stylistic patterning of the film is the essential element that brings the sequence to life.⁴⁵ As a method of inquiry Bordwell suggests that instead of regarding film’s narrative as a message to be deciphered one looks at it as ‘[...] a representation that offers the occasion for inferential elaboration.’⁴⁶ I will rely on Bordwell’s conception of narration as a way to traverse the narrative in *The Bacchus Lady*, considering narration as the access point, moment by moment, through which events unfold. Utilising narrative analysis, I will concentrate on the function of the protagonist in the narrative, the significance of the order of scenes, how one learns about the protagonist’s life and what is revealed about her throughout the film. Bordwell emphasizes the centrality of a film’s form as encompassing everything that is working together to create an overall effect.⁴⁷ As I analyse the scenes, I will consider the choice of setting, how the protagonist is positioned in the environment and if there are similarities and layers of content between scenes; for example, if they all portray the protagonist in relation to another individual. By identifying scenes where vulnerability and precarity are highlighted in relation to the theme of shame, I also perform a categorical content analysis, which examines both the content—what is being said—and how it is portrayed in different ways.

Previous Research

In *Global Cinema, Prostitution and sex work in global cinema: New takes on fallen women*, Professor of Italian Studies and Film, Danielle Hipkins, and Professor of East Asian Cinema, Kate Taylor-Jones propose that cinematic representations of female prostitutes and sex workers have often failed to depict the complexity and diversity encountered by those

⁴⁴ Love, p. 28.

⁴⁵ D. Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 12-14.

⁴⁶ Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, J. Smith, *Film Art: An Introduction, Eleventh Edition*, New York, McGraw Hill Education, 2017, pp. 51-52.

working in the sex industry.⁴⁸ This assertion is supported by Taylor-Jones's citation of *The Bacchus Lady* and its portrayal of elderly prostitution in South Korea as a rare representation in film. Based on her analysis of the film, Taylor-Jones asserts that the director '[...] uses the prostitute figure to imagine the marginalised subject speaking back from the margins to the centre' by focusing on the protagonist's relationship with her 'disenfranchised' friends as a way to oppose dominant ideas about Korean homogeneity.⁴⁹ A similar argument is advanced by Assistant Professor of Asian Cinema Ungsan Kim who proposes that *The Bacchus Lady* depicts a form of 'queer kinship' that questions Korea's 'heteronormative nation-state.'⁵⁰ While I agree that these types of interpretations of *The Bacchus Lady*, wherein the film's protagonist is described as a figure of resistance to heteronormativity or to normative notions of Korean homogeneity have a certain value and importance, I wonder, inspired by Love, Sedgwick, and Ahmed, in its inclusion of diverse social issues and foregrounding of marginalised societal groups, perhaps, these two types of celebrations of anti-normativity might negate some of the friction and difficulty of the protagonist's life and obscure adverse emotions that might reveal more about how oppression impacts lives.

A less optimistic approach to the film's themes can be found in Assistant Professor of Asian Literature, Seunghei Clara Hong's analysis of *The Bacchus Lady*.⁵¹ Hong argues that the film offers a more critical interpretation of those who are unable to conform to neoliberal rationality, highlighting a range of social issues such as senior poverty and exclusionary methods of the state. Furthermore, Hong examines how the protagonist is depicted as a mother figure, thus complicating the portrayal of the character. The problem with such a binary portrayal of 'Mother/Whore' as Hong argues, is that the film could be perceived as presenting the protagonist's work as a form of feminine 'sacrifice' that plays into roles and tropes of women in cinema marked by common stereotypes such as the 'self-sacrificing

⁴⁸ The book aims to demonstrate that the term 'prostitute' and narratives of female prostitution encompass a variety of experiences and representations and thus show that there is no definitive portrayal of the prostitute figure in visual culture.

D. Hipkins and K T-Jones, *Prostitution and Sex Work in Global Cinema: New Takes on Fallen Women*, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 288.

⁴⁹ Hipkins and T-Jones, *Prostitution and Sex Work*, p. 281.

This anti-normative stance that positions the protagonist, So-young as a transgressive character operating outside the 'moral codes' of conservative South Korean society is perhaps a deliberate choice by the director to portray the traditional Korean family in contemporary South Korea as an antiquated institution. As such it could provide relevant analysis of how South Korean cultural and social structures force the protagonist and her friends to adjust to a constantly changing urban environment.

⁵⁰ Kim, 'The Critical Social Turn,' p. 110.

⁵¹ S C. Hong, 'Mother/Whore: Prostituting Motherly Care in Neoliberal South Korea', *Situations*, Vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, p. 65. <http://situations.yonsei.ac.kr/product/data/item/1538233659/detail/49fe572706.pdf>, (accessed 20 March 2022).

mother.’⁵² Is the protagonist portrayed in this way because motherhood is seen as a ‘respectable’ form of femininity? This is not a question this thesis will try to answer; however, Hong’s analysis raises critical questions about why the director chose to portray the protagonist as both a prostitute and a mother figure, and if such a portrayal ultimately perpetuates women ‘performing’⁵³ femininity through nurturing and care-giving roles.

Through my own analysis of the film’s depiction of *Bacchus Ladies*, I will depart from previous research’s emphasis on how the film’s narrative can be interpreted in terms of political narratives of progress and resistance, but also add an additional perspective by specifically attending to how ‘bad feelings’ are conveyed in the film’s portrayal of elderly prostitution.⁵⁴ By focusing on darker themes and emotions within the representation, the study draws on Love’s method of embracing and acknowledging negative feelings such as shame, loneliness, and alienation as a way of considering what they might bring to light about the experience of social exclusion and marginalisation. As Love suggests it is harder to account for these darker feelings and experiences because they do not fit into what she argues is a narrowly defined sense of political utility.⁵⁵ In this regard Love proposes that rather than only looking toward the positive, resisting aspects of such representations, one should value feelings of ‘backwardness’ and consider how negative affects and emotions bound to the experience of violence and exclusion can help us ‘see structures of inequality in the present.’⁵⁶

Although it may seem unnecessary to acknowledge or dwell on the dark or difficult emotions that accompany suffering and marginalisation without knowing how they might be used for positive political purposes, if we move on, what might we leave behind or overlook in our quest for integration and assimilation? As feminist writer and scholar, Sara Ahmed suggests, ‘We might need to attend to bad feelings, not in order to overcome them but *to learn*

⁵² While the protagonist may fulfil the role expected of her gender by taking care of other characters in the film, her status as a prostitute complicates her identity in relation to social norms and longstanding gender ideals for women, exposing multiple contradictions of what it means to live as she does.

Hong, ‘Prostituting Motherly Care’, p. 69.

⁵³ Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler proposed that gender is performative and gender identity is formed through a set of acts. The notion of gender being performative for Butler implies that gender is unstable as she argues, ‘Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.’

J. Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1988, p. 527. Available from: JSTOR, (accessed 9 May 2022).

⁵⁴ Just as previous analyses have examined *The Bacchus Lady* through a particular lens to highlight certain elements, I acknowledge that I will also emphasize certain aspects at the expense of others; however, I intend to stress those aspects of the film that I argue highlight the problematic nature of inequality. Further, it is important to note that as little as the previous authors know about the reality of the *Bacchus Ladies*, I understand that I am not in a position to claim to know it.

⁵⁵ Chinn, ‘Queer Feelings’, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Love, p. 30

by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource.’⁵⁷

Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of two chapters. In chapter one I analyse the social and political milieu of South Korea to provide a background to Bacchus Ladies as a contemporary phenomenon. The main theoretical and methodological framework for this chapter will be grounded in Collins and Bilge's concept of intersectionality and Butler's concept of precarity; these concepts will be used to create a structure of vulnerability and precarity surrounding the real Bacchus Ladies that will support my arguments in chapter two. Following chapter one, I provide a brief prologue that introduces readers to the film. The second chapter of the thesis focuses on the cultural representation of Bacchus Ladies in E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady*. The analysis will centre on four scenes from the film; however, additional scenes will also be referred to throughout to point to recurrent themes and provide additional context if required.⁵⁸ Each scene will be analysed from the perspective of what occurs when one lingers with feelings of precarity, vulnerability, and shame within the representation in relation to the theme of economic oppression, objectification, and the relationship between subject and institution. The end of this chapter will present the thesis objectives and research questions based on observations made during the analysis of *The Bacchus Lady* and will further serve as a summary discussion for concluding remarks.

⁵⁷ S. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 216.

⁵⁸ *The Bacchus Lady* has been viewed in Korean with English subtitles therefore I acknowledge that some nuance may have been missed.

Chapter 1 -Precarious existence and social vulnerability: Bacchus Ladies as a social phenomenon

This chapter provides a background to the issues of Bacchus Ladies as a contemporary phenomenon by examining the political and social environment of South Korea. Throughout the discussion, I will also draw connections to my main empirical source, *The Bacchus Lady*. The overall aim of the chapter is to establish a framework of vulnerability and precarity upon which I will build my arguments in chapter two.

Although prostitution among elderly women is not unique to South Korea the Bacchus Ladies are a phenomenon specifically associated with the country and as a burgeoning phenomenon are arguably symptomatic of a crisis in Korean society.⁵⁹ It is therefore crucial to consider the Korean context as social inequalities take various forms across national frameworks and factors such as race, class, gender, and age do not have equal significance. As sociologist Beverley Skeggs argues, '[...] we are positioned through locations such as history, nation, gender, sexuality, class, 'race', [and] age.'⁶⁰ It is therefore important to underline that my own social positioning and perspective as someone who grew up in the West will undoubtedly play a role in any attempt to comprehend the Bacchus Ladies' reality.

As a theory that addresses culturally specific dynamics, the concept of intersectionality as elucidated by professors of sociology Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge will be used as the main theoretical framework throughout this chapter. Selected for its focus on analysing the multiplicity of an individual subject's social and political positioning, intersectionality will be used as a means to analyse interconnecting types of discriminations and/or disadvantages within conditions of precarity; it will also provide a framework to analyse the economic and social implications of certain positionalities in Korean society such as age, social class, and gender as well as how multiple, overlapping structures of identity shape lives in particular ways.⁶¹ As Collins and Bilge exemplify,

The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as only shaped by one factor [...] When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organisation of power in a given society are better

⁵⁹ It is important to underline that while Bacchus Ladies may be associated with prostitution this thesis does not claim that all Bacchus Ladies sell sex.

⁶⁰ B. Skeggs, *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 6.

⁶¹ Collins and Bilge, p. 15.

understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race, gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.⁶²

The concept of precarious life advanced by philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler will also serve as a critical perspective throughout chapter one. As Butler suggests, precarity pushes one away from a liveable life and has come to name ‘[...] that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.’⁶³ Based on the fundamental vulnerability endemic to all social existence, Butler argues that precariousness is an enduring part of human nature, arising from the reality that every individual is vulnerable to injury and destruction.⁶⁴ However, Butler does not see precariousness as a solely existential problem, but as a social condition too.⁶⁵ In the same way that Butler highlights the importance of attending to political decisions and social practices that contribute to the perception of precariousness, I will apply the concept of precarity as a way to attend to social positions of insecurity throughout my analysis.

The first chapter is divided into six subsections and begins by examining the rise of neoliberalism in South Korea and the collapse of traditional values marking a significant change in social and cultural values. Following this, I will discuss prostitution and sexual practices in South Korea from the mid-1990s until the 2000s, a period of significant legal changes in the country governing sexuality and the time when Bacchus Ladies are thought to have emerged. Elderly prostitution and the ageing body will be analysed with an emphasis on social identity and normative expectations in part 1.3 which will lead to a discussion on changes in sexual behaviour among the elderly and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in part 1.4. Part 1.5 will focus on the notion of chastity as a feminine virtue in light of Korean traditional values rooted in Confucian philosophy and the perpetuation of social hierarchies, female ideals, and views on prostitution as a moral issue. Part 1.6 examines inequality, poverty and the social problems associated with an ageing population in South Korea. The chapter concludes by reflecting on what has been discussed before introducing the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies in *The Bacchus Lady* in chapter two.

⁶² Collins and Bilge, p. 2.

⁶³ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 25-27.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 6

1.1 Transformation of South Korean society, the rise of neoliberalism, and the collapse of traditional values.

South Korea's economy experienced rapid growth in the mid 1960s and its subsequent state-led industrialization resulted in a dramatic transformation of its industrial landscape. Its economic modernization has been among the fastest ever accomplished, transforming South Korea from an underdeveloped country to one of the most developed countries in East Asia.⁶⁶ While South Korean society has greatly altered in terms of material conditions, behavioural changes have occurred slowly, and certain social and cultural values have been justified and maintained through tradition. For example, inequities in women's opportunities have been maintained through a patriarchal structure rooted in and rationalized by Confucian customs.⁶⁷

South Korea's high-growth path took a significant blow following the 1997 Asian financial crisis;⁶⁸ unemployment levels rose, inequality and poverty grew, and the financial turmoil caused particularly hard times for low-income workers and the elderly.⁶⁹ According to Professor of sociology at Chung-Ang University in Seoul, Kwang-Yeong Shin, 'The mass layoff of older workers after the financial crisis in 1997 and the underdevelopment of the welfare system for the elderly led to the rapid growth of the poverty rate among the elderly [...].'⁷⁰ As a consequence, South Korea underwent a neoliberal transition that saw economic proficiency and optimal productivity as the threshold of normativity granting some of its citizens a degree of autonomy and responsibility under the concept of self-managed and self-advancing subjects.⁷¹ These socioeconomic changes also led to a trend towards flexible employment but weakened labour rights forcing many into precarious lives of

⁶⁶ This period has become known as 'The Miracle on the Han River'.

Korean Cultural Centre UK, [website] <https://kccuk.org.uk/en/about-korea/economy/the-korean-economy-the-miracle-on-the-hangang-river/> (accessed 20 March 2022).

⁶⁷ M. Lief Palley, 'Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and change', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 20, No. 12, 1990, p. 1136, <https://www.jstor-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/stable/42956240?seq=1>, (accessed 11 April 2022).

⁶⁸ Commonly known as the IMF (International Monetary Fund). South Korea was one of the hardest-hit countries by the economic crisis and received the biggest bailout in IMF history - \$55 billion.

S.Cheng and A R. Kim, 'Virtuous Rights', p. 95.

⁶⁹ As a result of the financial crisis the government's welfare reforms accelerated the transition from the pre-crisis 'developmental state' to the 'democratic-welfare-capitalist state' shaping social welfare as South Korea entered the global century.

H S. Yoon, 'Korea: Balancing Economic Growth and Social Protection for Older Adults', *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2013. p. 361

⁷⁰ K Y. Shin, 'Neo-Liberal Economic Reform, Social Change, and inequality in the Post-Crisis Period in South Korea', *Asiatische Studien - Asian Studies*, Vol. 73, no. 1, 2019, p. 98.

https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/202063/1/10.1515_asia-2018-0038.pdf, (accessed 17 March 2022). https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/202063/1/10.1515_asia-2018-0038.pdf, (accessed 17 March 2022).

⁷¹ Shin, 'Neo-Liberal Economic Reform', p. 90.

underemployment or unemployment, particularly the elderly and those from lower socio-economic groups.⁷²

As Seunghei Clara Hong claims regarding the aftermath of the financial Crisis, ‘Certain lives became increasingly identified as “disqualified” by the state and were then abandoned as “disposable.”⁷³ This echoes Collins and Bilge's discussion regarding the neoliberal logic of scaling back or eliminating social welfare policies and increasing privatization of government services that ultimately results in a lack of government safety nets particularly for the disabled, the unemployed, and the elderly.⁷⁴ A growing middle class preoccupied with getting ahead also led to the collapse of certain cultural values and traditions rooted in Confucianism which customarily placed great emphasis on respect and care for its elders; as a result, the older generation who had always considered themselves to be taken care of by their kin or the state found themselves struggling to find alternative means of providing for themselves leading to an increase in unpredictable and contingent forms of living.⁷⁵

Collins and Bilge argue that rising social inequality occurs when nation-state policies shift from philosophies of social welfare to neoliberalism, which emphasises how structural factors are always at work in relation to the causes of social inequality.⁷⁶ As Collins and Bilge suggest neoliberalism is essentially an individualistic approach that rejects the notion of a collective good, instead, it formulates solutions to social problems by relying on an individual's own abilities deeming some lives valuable and others expendable.⁷⁷ In essence neo-liberal economic reforms in the post-crisis period in South Korea drastically affected income distribution generating a working poor and large marginalised social groups.⁷⁸ South Korea now has one of the world's fastest-ageing populations and the country's gradual economic downturn since 2010 has exacerbated a limited pension and welfare system. Almost half of South Korea's elderly population live in relative poverty, notably women,⁷⁹ who in

⁷² H-J Kim, ‘Elderly prostitutes reveal dark side of South Korea's rise’, *AP News*, [website], 2015, <https://apnews.com/9328748790094825a3d72c849318913f/elderly-prostitutes-reveal-dark-side-south-koreas-rise>, (accessed March 10).

⁷³ Shin, p. 63.

⁷⁴ Collins and Bilge, p. 17.

⁷⁵ In South Korea's fast-paced, highly competitive society, attitudes and living standards have changed quickly, and young people now say they cannot afford to support both themselves and their parents.

L. Williamson, ‘The Korean Grandmothers Who Sell Sex’, *BBC News*, [website], 2014, para.18 and 19. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27189951> (accessed 10 February).

⁷⁶ Collins and Bilge, p. 189

⁷⁷ Collins and Bilge, pp. 16-17.

⁷⁸ Shin, ‘Neo-Liberal Economic Reform’, p. 89.

⁷⁹ J. Lee and D. Phillips, ‘Income and Poverty among Older Koreans: Relative Contributions of and Relationship between Public and Family Transfers’, *RAND*, 2011, p. 11. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2011/RAND_WR852.pdf, (accessed 11 February).

South Korea's traditionally patriarchal societal structure have not received the same access to opportunities in education and employment in their youth leaving them at a considerable social disadvantage in later life.⁸⁰

While E J-yong does not directly address the scarcity of state welfare in the depiction of South Korean society in *The Bacchus Lady*, there are moments in the film where this is arguably implied. In one particular scene in the film the protagonist remarks that prison is a better alternative to a retirement home because it is free.

1.2 Prostitution and sex work in South Korea under neoliberal governance

This thesis is not able to cover South Korea's lengthy and complex history of prostitution; thus, the discussion of prostitution in this chapter will be limited to the regulation of sexual behaviour and the expansion of criminal frameworks involving prostitution from the 1990s to the 2000s. This particular time frame has been chosen for analysis since it is believed that Bacchus Ladies emerged as a phenomenon during this period. Professor Lee Ho-Sun of South Korea's Soongsil Cyber University in Seoul, who has been studying Bacchus ladies for a number of years suggests that it is not clear exactly when Bacchus Ladies appeared but many of the women were neglected during the currency crisis in 1997 leading to precarious living situations.⁸¹ Taking into account South Korea's economic downturn and limited welfare assistance Lee argues that prostitution has become a way to making a living for many of the country's elderly female population.⁸² In this regard, as political theorist Isabell Lorey argues, precarization does not simply refer to vulnerable working conditions and insecure living, it includes the whole of existence, the body and subjective experience.⁸³

Although the law differs symbolically and functionally between nations, with different legal systems, cultures, protocols and views on what constitutes criminal behaviour prostitution laws are strictly imposed in South Korea and the buying and selling of sex are illegal.⁸⁴ In spite of the gender-and equality-inclusive statements of a new social movement in the 1990s that decriminalised most private sexual relations between consenting adults and changed laws that recognized women's right to sexual autonomy, the liberal understanding of

⁸⁰ Kim, 'Elderly prostitutes'.

⁸¹ D. Ng, 'Granny prostitutes reflect South Korea's problem of elderly poverty', *CNA*, [website], 2017, para. 18, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/granny-prostitutes-reflect-south-koreas-problem-elderly-poverty-1030531>, (accessed 29 March 2022).

⁸² Kim, 'Elderly prostitutes'.

⁸³ I. Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, London; New York, Verso, 2015, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Cocks and Houlbrook, *The Modern History of Sexuality*, p. 66.

sexual autonomy that was spearheaded by the burgeoning women's movement does not apply to sex work.⁸⁵ According to social anthropologist, Sealing Cheng and feminist philosopher Ae-Ryung Kim, the stigma associated with selling sex and the sexual limits of neoliberalism suggest that 'In a neoliberal economy in which every citizen is encouraged to be an entrepreneur of and for oneself (*homo economicus*)⁸⁶ sex has been constructed as the last private domain for the realization of self and must steer clear of economic transactions.'⁸⁷ This points to the sexual limits of neoliberalism and suggests a marked distinction between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' sexuality.⁸⁸

Since 2004, the extent of criminalizing prostitution has increased in the name of combating trafficking, preventing exploitation, and protecting human rights, with anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution laws being passed to eradicate prostitution and businesses that facilitate it.⁸⁹ The new law has been regarded as less biased, whereas the previous law 'Prostitution Prevention Act' was suggested to indicate the moral corruption of the woman.⁹⁰ The 'Anti-Sex Trade Law' was successful in raising awareness about the abuse and exploitation of women in the sex industry, and a number of positive changes were made to the previous law; for example, removing clauses in the 'Prostitution Prevention Act' that discriminated against prostitutes and introducing provisions that addressed the transactional aspects that occur in prostitution.⁹¹ However, the new ruling emphasises the law's disregard of sex work as an act of self-determination and views transactional sex –the receiving of

⁸⁵ Cheng and Kim, p. 93.

⁸⁶ *Homo economicus*, or "economic man," man is described as a rational being who seeks wealth to serve his own self-interest. The term was proposed in the 19th century by the English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill.

R. C. Wilson, 'What is Homo Economicus', *Investopedia*, [website], 2018, para. 1,

<https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/homo-economicus.asp#:~:text=Homo%20economicus%20is%20a%20model,essay%20about%20the%20political%20economy>, (accessed 9 May 2022).

⁸⁷ Cheng and Kim, p. 113.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113.

⁸⁹ The 'Anti-Sex Trade Law' introduced in 2004 replaced the 'Prostitution Prevention Act', a law whose purpose was to prevent 'morally depraved' acts and the committing of adultery. The 'Anti-Sex Trade Law' focuses on eliminating prostitution, targeting and eliminating the economic transaction of buying and selling sex. Under the new law, the term 'prostitution' was replaced with 'sex acts' and the law's purpose aimed to abolish sexual trafficking and protect the rights of victims of exploitation and sexual violence.

KLT: Korea Law Translation Center, [website],

https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=22187&type=part&key=9, (accessed 16 March 2022).

⁹⁰ The Ministry of Gender Equality praised the 'Anti-Sex Trade Law' as a momentous achievement in the prevention of violence against women, stating that 'With the implementation of the law, punishment of sex procurers has been strengthened and the concept of victims of sex trafficking has been introduced. As a result, female victims of prostitution have been exempted from punishment [...]'

J. Hajin, 'The 39th Session of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women', *UN Women*, [website], 2007,

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw39/introstatements/korea.pdf>

⁹¹ J-H. Kim, 'Korea's New Prostitution Policy', p. 508.

monetary rewards or other material benefits—as inherently exploitative.⁹² The legislation has also been heavily criticised by law scholar Ji Hye Kim who suggests that the legislation fails to achieve its goals because it does not adequately address the breadth and depth of prostitution’s impact on Korean men and women and thus the legislation ‘[...] retains a discriminatory attitude towards prostituting women and still criminalises them unless they can prove their victim status.’⁹³ As Kim posits the law seems to imply a distinction between victims and those who are voluntarily selling sex as one of protection and punishment, dividing women into ‘good women that deserve help’ and ‘bad women that deserve punishment’, ultimately perpetuating the stigmatization of women who are selling sex.

While women forced into prostitution such as victims of trafficking and exploitation are exempt from the law, those who determine their right to be prostitutes - many of them opposing the law – or those forced into prostitution through economic hardship must abide by it and face its penalties if found in violation of these laws.⁹⁴ Despite facing substantial fines or imprisonment⁹⁵ many women claim they have no other choice than to continue to sell sex.⁹⁶ In 2016, the same year *The Bacchus Lady* -a film dealing with the issue of elderly prostitution in South Korea -was released in cinemas, a review of South Korea’s ban on the sex trade was rejected by the Korean Constitutional Court. According to the court, prostitution should not be protected by law since it violates human dignity; furthermore, the decriminalization of prostitution would only encourage the sex industry and 'further degrade sexual morality.'⁹⁷ Opponents of the anti-prostitution law claim that punishing sex workers does little to curb the sex trade and only forces more sex workers to go ‘underground’, leading to lower salaries, poorer working conditions, and an increase in violence.⁹⁸

⁹² *Research Project Korea* [website], <https://researchprojectkorea.wordpress.com/2014/01/10/ineffective-and-in-dire-need-of-reform-south-koreas-anti-sex-trade-law/>, (accessed 15 February 2022).

⁹³ J-H. Kim, ‘Korea’s New Prostitution Policy: Overcoming Challenges to Effectuate the Legislature’s Intent to Protect Prostitutes from Abuse’, *Washington International Law Journal*, Vol. 16, no. 2, 2007, p. 493. <https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1465&context=wilj> (accessed 6 April 2022).

⁹⁴ Opposition to the law led to public outrage and continuing campaigning by women's rights activists for legal reforms.

C. Lee, ‘Court reviews anti-prostitution law’, *The Korea Herald*, [website], 2015, para. 2, (<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150409001158>), (accessed 16 March 2022).

⁹⁵ Cheng and Kim, p. 93.

⁹⁶ *South Korea's Granny Prostitutes* | Get Real | CNA Insider’, [online video], CAN Insider, January 29, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G-TxKz6iww&feature=youtu.be&ab_channel=CNAInsider (accessed 1 April 2022).

⁹⁷ C S. Hun, ‘South Korean Court Upholds Ban on Prostitution’, *New York Times*, [website], 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/asia/south-korea-upholds-prostitution-ban.html#:~:text=Prostitution%20has%20always%20been%20illegal,fire%2C%20trapped%20in%20their%20rooms>, accessed 15 March 2022).

⁹⁸ Lehmann, ‘South Korea: sex workers fighting the law’, para 6.

Professor Kim Hye-sook, from Ewha Women's University, however, argues that until South Korea is a more just and fair society, the current law should be upheld, and prostitution should remain illegal. Sook states, 'We need to examine what pushes the women into prostitution first before considering giving them the freedom to choose sex work as their job.'⁹⁹ While I agree that it is critical to understand the circumstances that lead women to prostitution, I disagree with Kim's contention that keeping prostitution illegal and denying women the right to choose will adequately protect women from inequality and violence. Collins and Bilge illustrate the limitations of non-intersectional thinking when they argue that inequality and violence against women cannot be seen solely through one lens, such as that of gender or class, stating that, 'Solutions cannot be found by imagining women as one homogeneous mass, or by painting men as perpetrators, or by focusing exclusively on individuals or state power as sites of violence.'¹⁰⁰ If we see violence against women and inequality only from a single perspective of gender, age, or class, then solutions are unlikely. As Bilge and Collins suggest here, too often interconnected oppressions that affect people's lives and positions are ignored and therefore need to be addressed in a broader sense.

The criminal code challenges and the rise of the women's movement in the 1990s resulted in significant changes in the liberalization of sexuality in South Korea; however, criminalization of sex work has also increased significantly and South Korea has maintained an active 'underground' sex trade.¹⁰¹ The criminalisation of sex work has been proposed as protecting women's rights and reducing human trafficking but has also resulted in the continued instrumentalization of women's sexuality and the introduction of 'prostituted women' as victims in order to support the expansion of state power. Thus, the operation of the law on the direction of lives is highlighted as women who fall outside of the laws protecting 'prostituted women' and living outside the norm of chastity – 'prostitutes' - are beyond the protection of the state and subject to its disciplinary powers.

⁹⁹ Cheng and Kim, p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ Collins and Bilge, p. 49.

¹⁰¹ Y. Kang, 'South Korea's Sex Industry Thrives Underground a Decade After Crackdown', *The Wall Street Journal* [website], 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-KRTB-7048>, (accessed 15 March 2022).

1.3 Elderly prostitution and the ageing body – social identity and normative expectations.

South Korea's social welfare system is considered one of the weakest in Asia and has left many of South Korea's elderly struggling to make ends meet.¹⁰² As Seoul continues to develop into a prosperous metropolis the so-called Bacchus Ladies roam between tourist hotspots such as Jongmyo Park selling the energy drink Bacchus as a coded way to offer sexual services.¹⁰³ Increasing old-age poverty and declining health, particularly among women has resulted in a rise in the number of older women selling sex.¹⁰⁴ As political theorist Isabell Lorey argues in *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, since the formation of capitalist relations of production there have been many for whom freedom of labour-power has not been a guarantee against existential vulnerabilities.¹⁰⁵

The Bacchus Lady does not explicitly state the protagonist's path to becoming a Bacchus Lady, but one could argue that the director utilizes the protagonist's plight as a way to critique the limited welfare options available to the elderly; the portrayal of a Bacchus Lady could also serve as a means to highlight a disenfranchised segment of South Korean society who have been denied the ability to fend for themselves but must now do so at a time when they would benefit from society's assistance the most.

In *The Bacchus Lady* one of the scenes features the protagonist being interviewed by a filmmaker who is conducting research for a documentary about Bacchus Ladies. In a poignant moment where the protagonist alludes to her current work as a Bacchus Lady and to her past experience as an escort for American GIs, she says, 'I must have been a sinner in my past life. I've worked serving others my entire life.' She continues by saying that she is not ashamed of her job because it allows her to earn a living; however, she reveals her vulnerability in a later scene when she meets an old friend who was also an escort, running away before she can be asked what she does for a living now. Perhaps this is E's way of underscoring the difficulty in trying to break free from impoverished circumstances or a way to critique a history of deep, complex social problems in South Korea.

¹⁰² In 2015 OECD data revealed that approximately 45.7% of South Koreans over the age of 65 lived in poverty, the highest of any member state including Japan.

J. Kim, 'No country for old Koreans: Moon faces senior poverty crisis', *NIKKEI Asia*, [website], 2019, para.7, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/No-country-for-old-Koreans-Moon-faces-senior-poverty-crisis>, (accessed 31 March 2022).

¹⁰³ Most of the elderly men that frequent these parks are poor, widowed, and divorced.

¹⁰⁴ Williamson, para. 23.

¹⁰⁵ I. Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, London, New York, Verso, 2015, p. 20.

In 2017 *Channel NewsAsia* interviewed ‘Madam Park’, a 78-year-old Bacchus Lady who states that she became a prostitute in her early 70s. ‘Madam Park’ explains her struggle to find employment due to a painful nerve condition that has left her unable to walk properly.¹⁰⁶ She also describes a lack of state welfare that has left her struggling to eat and buy medication, her words highlighting the disparity between societal health and economics in Korea.¹⁰⁷ ‘Madam Park’ further discloses that she is more afraid and ashamed about people finding out that she is a prostitute than being arrested for soliciting. Queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick distinctively links shame to visibility, spectacle and performance, underscoring the affect as both personal and social. She argues that ‘shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is: one therefore is *something*, in experiencing shame.’¹⁰⁸ ‘Madam Park’s’ remark could conceivably highlight a form of conflict between this form of sexual practice and ‘respectability’.

The fear of being uncovered as a Bacchus Lady that ‘Madam Park’ expresses arguably speaks to the stigma attached to prostitution in South Korea. Stigma, according to sociologist Erving Goffman, is a mark of discredit that reduces a person from being ‘whole’ and ‘usual’ ‘to a tainted, discounted one.’¹⁰⁹ As defined by Goffman, stigma occurs when society attaches a negative social meaning to an individual, categorizing the individual as a member of a group perceived as possessing a spoiled identity. The public criticism or scorn ‘Madam Park’ apprehends could also be said to resonate with the stigma of being a ‘fallen woman’¹¹⁰ an indication that prostitution is often fraught with consequences and social stigma. In light of this reflection, one might argue that Bacchus Ladies are both victims of their socio-economic vulnerability and also the stigma associated with being regarded as ‘fallen women’.

Although fines and imprisonment remain a threat Bacchus Ladies continue to solicit sex and are punishable under Korean law because prostitution violates human dignity and

¹⁰⁶ Women like ‘Madam Park’ and many other older women in poor health suggest they spend up to ten hours a day looking for clients, charging as little as 10,000 won (\$8) for sex. It is likely that Bacchus Ladies’ low earnings are attributable to the clientele they engage with—predominantly equally poor men who are either divorced, widowed, or just lonely
H-J. Kim, ‘Elderly prostitutes reveal dark side of South Korea’s rise’, *AP NEWS*, [website], 2015, para.19, <https://apnews.com/9328748790094825a3d72c849318913f/elderly-prostitutes-reveal-dark-side-south-koreas-rise>, (accessed 1 March 2022).

¹⁰⁷ D. Ng, ‘Granny prostitutes’, para. 6,

¹⁰⁸ E. K. Sedgwick, ‘Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*’, *GLQ: A journal of Lesbian and Gay studies*, Vol. 1, no. 1, p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J Prentice-Hall, 1963, p. 3

¹¹⁰ Historically, the term ‘fallen woman’ was used to describe a woman who had lost her innocence and fallen from godliness. Her ‘fallen’ state is associated with a loss of sexual purity.

diminishes morality,¹¹¹ but, arguably it is the threat to survival that actually damages human dignity the most. At such an elderly age, one might suggest that in the words of journalist Desmond Ng, South Korean's elderly citizens such as 'Madam Park' [...] should be at home, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Instead, she stands on the streets for at least six hours a day, waiting for customers.'¹¹² While I do not disagree with Ng's comment, it is important to highlight that this comment is illustrative of commonly held preconceptions regarding the elderly as to what is considered appropriate social behaviour with respect to older people. Normative expectations attached to particular roles of social identities are illuminated by Goffman; as he observed, all societies create social distinctions between groups and establish hierarchies, defining what is considered natural and normal among those categories.¹¹³ These normative expectations could affect how 'Madam Park' speaks about her occupation in public.

My own 'reading' of this interview can of course be affected by my own background and preconceived notions about the elderly; it might lead me to believe that Bacchus Ladies like 'Madam Park' would prefer to rest and retire but it is impossible to know her reality for certain. Furthermore, it is important to consider the various layers of an interview, as well as the relationship between interviewers and interviewees. In some cases, interviewees might not answer truthfully, and 'Madam Park' could express shame if she feels pressured to behave in a certain way. While it would be misleading to portray Bacchus women like 'Madam Park' as archetypal victims, I would argue that this response indicates that prostitution as 'Madam Park' describes, is a job dictated by necessity and not by choice.

1.4 A change in sexual behaviour among the elderly and the spread of STDs

In 2017, South Korea became an 'aged society', and is expected to become a 'super-aged society' by 2026.¹¹⁴ Due to the extending life expectancy of South Korea's citizens, the

¹¹¹ S H. Choe, 'South Korean Court Upholds Ban on Prostitution', *The New York Times*, [website], 2016, para. 4 and 11, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/01/world/asia/south-korea-upholds-prostitution-ban.html>, (accessed 31 March 2022).

¹¹² Ng, 'Granny prostitutes', para. 4.

¹¹³ Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ According to an OECD and World Health Organization report published in 2020, an 'ageing society' is defined as one where the share of people 65 and older is between 7 and 14% of the total population and a 'super-aged society' as one where the share is greater than 21%.

OECDiLibrary, [website], 2020, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1ad1c42a-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/1ad1c42a-en#:~:text=In%20this%20report%2C%20we%20qualify,share%20is%2021%25%20or%20higher>, (accessed 30 March 2022).

number and proportion of elderly individuals who are sexually active has increased and is expected to increase in the future.¹¹⁵ The rise in men looking for prostitutes and the continuing prevalence of Bacchus Ladies in South Korea can be partly attributed to the fact that elderly men without spouses are seemingly turning to women in prostitution to stimulate their desire for sex and intimacy. Consequently, this has also contributed to a rising number of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among the elderly due to weakened immune systems and a greater likelihood of unprotected sexual activity.¹¹⁶ The problem of STDs among South Korea's elderly population is expressly highlighted by E in *The Bacchus Lady* as the audience learn in the opening scene of the film that the protagonist has Gonorrhoea and is seeking medical assistance.

While elderly South Koreans have broken from stereotypes and taboos to have an active sex life, compared to other countries South Korea's older generation have a lower level of sexual knowledge due to a lack of sex education in South Korea in the 1950s; in combination with an inability to recognize the symptoms this has increased the elderly's risk and vulnerability of contracting an STD.¹¹⁷ Kang Dong-woo, director of the Korean Institute for Sexual and Couple's Health suggests that 'They [elderly South Korean men] think sex is something that can be easily bought with money, and they don't use condoms because the risk of pregnancy is low.'¹¹⁸ Due to a lack of government response to this issue and limited access to sex education, South Korea's older generation are statistically more at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.¹¹⁹ In addition to health challenges, Bacchus Ladies also face the social stigma attached to sexually transmitted diseases since they are often associated with illicit or promiscuous behaviours.¹²⁰ In *The Bacchus Lady*, the protagonist is repeatedly sexually shamed by another Bacchus Lady after being diagnosed with an STD and chastised

¹¹⁵ H.Y. Kim et al., 'Sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted infection in the elderly population of South Korea', *Investig Clin Urol*. Vol. 60, no. 3, 2019, p. 202, <https://icurology.org/DOIx.php?id=10.4111/icu.2019.60.3.202>, (accessed 7 April 2022).

¹¹⁶ Kim et al. 'Sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted infection', p. 203.

¹¹⁷ J-H. Jeong and E-J. Kim, 'STDs among people over 60 up almost 30 percent', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, [website], 2017, para.4, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2017/10/30/socialAffairs/STDs-among-people-over-60-up-almost-30-percent/3040101.html>, (accessed 28 March 2022).

¹¹⁸ Jeong and Kim, 'STDs among people', para. 5.

¹¹⁹ As well as producing great social and economic burdens, sexually transmitted diseases impose significant health risks. The number of elderly Korean women who contracted STDs increased significantly between 2010 and 2014 as life expectancy continued to rise. Using government data collected from STD patients who sought treatment at medical institutions over this five-year period researchers at the private think tank *Pharmscore* found that the number of patients who were women stood at 73.9 per cent; while the majority of those women were in their 30s those aged 80 or older who were treated for an STD had increased by approximately 21.6 per cent each year.

'More elderly women in South Korea catching sexually transmitted diseases', *The Straits Times*, [website], 2016, para.3, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/more-elderly-women-in-south-korea-catching-sexually-transmitted-diseases>, (accessed 28 March 2022).

¹²⁰ B S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Third Edition*, Cornwall, England, SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008, p. 186.

as having a ‘dirty disease.’ This echoes Cheng and Kim’s argument that in current ‘renegotiations’ of sexuality in South Korea, women are still defined by their sexual purity which emphasises that the prostitute as a cultural figure is still constructed as a sign of society’s moral decay.¹²¹

1.5 Confucianism and the ‘chaste woman’

When one attempts to grasp the status of women in South Korean society, it is useful to examine some of the basic assumptions of Confucianism– the purported ‘backbone’ of South Korean culture– which is commonly used to justify the roles and positions of women. Chastity as a feminine virtue has its roots in Confucianist structure, a belief system that distinguished the private from the public sphere and subordinated the female to the male creating separate and unequal roles. Under a Confucianist structure women were expected to observe ‘The Three Obediences,’ which are derived from Confucian ideals of harmony and order. These ‘Obediences’ define the ‘proper’ role of a woman and were traditionally used to clearly define all aspects of her life. According to these tenets a woman must obey her father and older brothers while she is still in her youth; when she marries, she must obey her husband; and as a widow, she must obey her son.¹²²

As scholar Eunjung Koo suggests in her article on women’s subordination in Confucian culture, ‘Correspondingly, women’s subordination to men reflects the lower socio-economic and political status of the former, as a result of the gendered division of labour, implying economic dependency of women upon men.’¹²³ In order to maintain the lineage system-which was the cornerstone of social hierarchy-a chaste woman also had to remain sexually accessible only to her husband so that the male bloodline would remain pure.¹²⁴ Hence, chastity was considered the highest of women's virtues and, due to society's distinctions in gender roles and expectations, a culture developed that held women and men subject to different moral standards. These standards stressed female virginity and sexual

¹²¹ Turner, *The Body and Society*, p. 93.

¹²² N. Dass, ‘Three Obediences and the Four Virtues’, *China Connect University*, [website], <https://chinaconnectu.com/2012/01/23/three-obediences-and-the-four-virtues-sancong-side-%E4%B8%89%E4%BB%8E%E5%9B%9B%E5%BE%B7sancong-side-%E4%B8%89%E4%BB%8E%E5%9B%9B%E5%BE%B7-three-obediences-and-the-four-virtues/>, (accessed 12 March 2022).

¹²³ E. Koo, ‘Women’s subordination in Confucian Culture: Shifting breadwinner practices’, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, Vol. 25, no. 3, 2019, p. 417.

¹²⁴ Kim, ‘Korea’s New Prostitution Policy’ p. 497.

fidelity, while men had the freedom to seek sexual pleasure from their wives and prostitutes.¹²⁵

Post-war South Korea continued to hold up the ideal of the good mother and virtuous wife as the feminine ideal and ultimate goal for all women. In the face of these ideals, the experiences of women whose chastity was questionable, such as women who experienced sexual slavery or women in prostitution were left silenced under the 1961 Act to Prevent Immoral Behaviour.¹²⁶ Prior to the penal reforms of June 2013, that removed the term ‘women with no habitual debauchery’ from the criminal code female chastity had been a cornerstone of the South Korean legal system.¹²⁷ Whether the law posits the sex worker as having failed to live a chaste life and become a ‘debauched’ woman or as a ‘prostitute’ who willingly debauches herself as a polar opposite to a ‘prostituted woman’, both as the protected or penalized individual, ‘[...] one becomes a subject of and to state discipline.’¹²⁸

Paradoxically there is evidence to suggest that there is still a huge demand for sexual services in South Korea. In 2017 *The Korean Herald* published an article with the headline, ‘Half of all Korean men pay for sex’.¹²⁹ The article discusses the results of a government report by the ‘Ministry of Gender Equality and Family’ that states that 50.7 percent of men polled in the survey had purchased sex.¹³⁰ While one in four men who bought sex said they did so out of curiosity, a survey of women selling sex taken at the same time, showed that the majority of women worked for eight to twelve hours on average, had poor health and were involved in sex work because they were heavily in debt.¹³¹

1.6 Senior-age poverty and ageing as a source of oppression

Despite its economic standing, as one of the most developed countries in East Asia, South Korea has the highest senior-age poverty rate and one of the most limited welfare systems for elderly people among OECD countries.¹³² Although the rate of life expectancy has continued to rise, the pace of ageing has been so rapid that the majority of South Korea’s elderly citizens

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 497.

¹²⁶ Cheng and Kim, p. 97.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 112.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 112.

¹²⁹ H J. Ock, ‘Half of all Korean men pay for sex: report’, *The Korea Herald*, [website], 2017, para. 1, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170501000589>, (accessed 3 April 2022).

¹³⁰ Ock, ‘Half of all Korean men’, para. 2.

¹³¹ Ock, para. 8.

¹³² J-H. Lee, ‘S. Korea ranks worst in OECD for poverty in old age’, *Hankyoreh*, [website], 2021, para. 8, [https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1013419.html#:~:text=South%20Korea's%20elderly%20poverty%20rate,%2C%20and%20Mexico%20\(26.6%25](https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1013419.html#:~:text=South%20Korea's%20elderly%20poverty%20rate,%2C%20and%20Mexico%20(26.6%25), (accessed 28 March 2022).

have been left poverty-stricken mainly due to a limited welfare state unable to cope with a rapidly ageing society.¹³³ In *Age Matters: Realigning Feminist Thinking* professors of sociology Kathleen F. Slevin and Toni M. Calsanti examine the ways in which age relations interact with other social inequalities, such as gender and place being old and ageing at the centre of their analysis. Selvin and Calsanti argue that, ‘Old age not only exacerbates other inequalities but is also a social location in its own right, conferring a loss of power for all those designated as ‘old’ regardless of their advantages in other hierarchies.’¹³⁴ The decline of incomes, the erosion of pensions, and socialist reforms in South Korea have left older people unable to earn money in their later years, forcing them to rely on family, or the state.¹³⁵ Political theorist, Isabell Lorey, argues that since the formation of capitalist relations, freedom of labour has not provided any guarantee against ‘existential vulnerabilities’ and theorises this state of insecurity as ‘the government of the precarious’.¹³⁶

In *The Bacchus Lady*, the protagonist gazes with a sense of sadness at a frail old woman arduously pushing a wooden trolley piled high with cardboard and paper. It is almost as if she is trying to figure out who has hit the lowest ebb. The protagonist remarks that she became a Bacchus Lady because she ‘hated more than anything to become an old junk collector.’ Through this sadly telling detail, the director arguably reveals the only other job the protagonist might have had if she had not become a Bacchus Lady, and while she is not destitute, she is arguably portrayed as only just making ends meet.

The South Korean state’s welfare system appeals to the Confucian legacy of family values for support of the elderly and poor which further amplifies the problem of elderly poverty. According to Confucian ideals, it is the responsibility of children to respect and cherish their parents;¹³⁷ however, the modernisation of South Korea and subsequent economic hardships have affected family structures and spread the neoliberal ideology of individuals, arguably resulting in a country negotiating between tradition and modernity. Consequently, the idea of the nuclear family and its hierarchy are no longer as firmly established as they once were in South Korea creating what has been dubbed a ‘forgotten generation’, left out of society’s comfort zone to fend for themselves.¹³⁸

¹³³ J. McCurry, ‘South Korea’s inequality paradox: long life, good health and poverty’, *The Guardian*, [website], 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/aug/02/south-koreas-inequality-paradox-long-life-good-health-and-poverty>, (accessed 28 March 2022).

¹³⁴ T M. Calsanti and K F. Slevin, *Age Matters: Realigning Feminist Thinking*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p.5.

¹³⁵ Yoon, ‘Korea: Balancing Economic Growth and Social Protection for Older Adults’, p.361

¹³⁶ Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, p. 5.

¹³⁷ Traditionally elderly people were taken care of by their immediate family members, meaning there was less need for a social safety net for older people.

¹³⁸ E. Hu, ‘A forgotten Generation: Half of South Korea’s Elderly Live in Poverty’, *NPR*, [website], 2015, para. 1, <https://text.npr.org/398498496>, (accessed 1 April 2022).

Closing Remarks

In this chapter, I examined South Korea's socioeconomic environment in order to provide a context for the issue of Bacchus Ladies as a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, this has helped to provide a social and political context from which to contemplate the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies in chapter two. The chapter has utilised intersectionality as a theoretical framework in its analysis of practices, policies, and structures that have arguably increased the risk of inequality and vulnerability in South Korea. Throughout the chapter, the female subject has been predominantly discussed within the context of neo-colonial politics and global capitalism. Within this framework I have argued that a society of the precarious has emerged due to the restructuring of the welfare state and the growing influence of neoliberal state apparatuses; this has emphasised that cultural and social structures and dynamics such as age, class, gender and race all contribute to creating systems of disadvantage for certain groups in South Korean society. Thus, I argue that Bacchus Ladies can be viewed as a symbol of vulnerability within a capitalist society; this can be evidenced in South Korea's underdeveloped welfare system and rising inequality; the older generation, especially women—who historically did not have access to education in their youth—have been left poverty-stricken and had to resort to menial or precarious work, such as prostitution in order to survive.¹³⁹

In addition, this chapter has highlighted the complexities of power relations and the profound demographic challenges facing a rapidly ageing South Korean population.¹⁴⁰ When one becomes dependent on institutionalized forms of recognition and infrastructure that form our place in society as these systems of care and support are fractured by the uneven effects of capitalism and global forms of exploitation, precarity can be said to emerge as a severe manifestation of precariousness. As Lorey argues, precarity is '[...] not a marginal phenomenon. If we fail to understand precarization, then we understand neither the politics nor the economy of the present.'¹⁴¹ The framework of vulnerability and precarity that has

¹³⁹ J. A. Song and E. White, 'South Korea shatters national debt taboo to tackle inequality', *Financial Times*, [website], 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/3858dde1-9482-4641-939b-7a26df31ad14>, (accessed 17 March 2022).

¹⁴⁰ K. Buseong and B. Harris, 'South Korea's penniless pensioners face final years in crisis', *Financial Times*, [website], 2017, para. 3, <https://www.ft.com/content/cf73149a-6542-11e7-9a66-93fb352ba1fe>, (accessed 6 March 2022).

¹⁴¹ Lorey, p. 1.

been established in this chapter will now form the basis of the analysis of the cultural portrayal of Bacchus Ladies in chapter two.

Preface – The visual representation of Bacchus Ladies

As a preface to the analysis of the cultural representation of Bacchus Ladies in *The Bacchus Lady* in chapter two, I will begin by providing some background information about the film's release and reception as well as a brief summary of the narrative.

E J-yong's *The Bacchus Lady* was released in South Korean cinemas in October 2016.¹⁴² E is known for his films exploring contemporary South Korean issues and 'scandalous' topics such as debauchery, sex addiction and deviance and his films often feature leading actresses as the main protagonist regardless of their style or genre.¹⁴³ Due to its inclusion of taboo social issues, such as elderly prostitution, enforced motherhood, male fantasy, and sexual violence, *The Bacchus Lady* has caused a number of controversies in South Korea since its release.¹⁴⁴ E makes explicit his intention for the protagonist to represent the attitudes of the Korean public towards the elderly who make a living as Bacchus Ladies as well as the lack of measures to address the critical needs of an ageing society. In its focus on one of South Korea's most underrepresented demographics, E states that the depiction of a Bacchus Lady is a way for him to '[...] talk about people living on the other side of the country's economic progress, [...] minorities and people who live in poverty.'¹⁴⁵

The *Bacchus Lady* portrays the experiences of So-young, an elderly prostitute whose viewpoint guides the film. It is set in contemporary Seoul, in the parks and low-income neighbourhoods where So-young lives with her unconventional friends, transvestite landlady Ti-na (An A-Zu) and one-legged model maker Do-Hoon (Yoon Kye-Sang). As a means of supporting herself, So-young offers sexual services to elderly men under the pretence of selling them the energy drink Bacchus. While going about her daily routine as a so-called

¹⁴² *The Bacchus Lady* premiered in Berlin as part of the Panorama section at the 66th Berlin International Film Festival in February 2016 before its release in South Korea.

Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin, [website], 2016, https://www.berlinale.de/en/archive/jahresarchive/2016/02_programm_2016/02_filmdatenblatt_2016_20160993_7.html#tab=filmStills, (accessed 24 March 2022).

¹⁴³ In his 2009 film *Actresses*, E collaborated with some of South Korea's most highly regarded female thespians, including Youn Yuh-Jung, who plays So-young in *The Bacchus Lady*.

¹⁴⁴ Kim, 'The Critical Social Turn,' p. 96

¹⁴⁵ Garden and Sanwei, 'The Bacchus Lady - Interview with E J-Yong, Yoon Yeo Jeong & Yoon Kye Sang', *YESASIA: Yumcha*, [website], 2016, para. 5, <https://www.yesasia.com/global/yumcha/the-bacchus-lady-interview-with-e-j-yong-yoon-yeo-jeong-yoon-kye-sang/0-0-0-arid.571-en/featured-article.html>, (accessed 1 April 2022).

Bacchus Lady, So-young becomes an unexpected caregiver to a young boy abandoned by his father, and several elderly men abandoned by their families and the state. As she begins to see her ageing clients falling ill, losing sexual function, and dying, So-young, ever the compassionate and pragmatic provider begins to offer a more macabre kind of service to her clientele.

Beyond the issue of senior prostitution, *The Bacchus Lady* presents manifold themes, including senior poverty, death, euthanasia, and irregular workers.¹⁴⁶ Although all of these issues are deserving of further reflection, the purpose of this thesis is to analyse scenes that specifically depict the bodily and psychic reality of the protagonist as a subject living in vulnerable and precarious circumstances.

¹⁴⁶ Throughout the film, E explores this issue of Euthanasia and its legal and moral implications through So-young's character who decides to assist some of her helpless patrons to end their lives.

Chapter 2 –Embracing Precarity: Attending to Vulnerability and Negative Affects in *The Bacchus Lady* (2016).

‘What remains unthought in the turn toward the future?’¹⁴⁷

— Heather Love

By attending to feelings such as shame and alienation; feelings that as Heather Love suggests could be ‘[...] tied to the experience of social exclusion,’¹⁴⁸ the purpose of this chapter is to investigate how layers of vulnerability and precarity are portrayed within four different scenes from E J-yong’s *The Bacchus Lady* (2016) in relation to the themes of economic oppression, objectification, and the relationship between the subject and the institution. Embracing Love’s call for a fuller engagement with negative affects as a way to better understand and attend to social injustice, the aim of this chapter is to address the ‘dark’ or ‘irrelevant’ aspects of the representation that may not be traditionally viewed as useful as a form of political progress.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly the chapter will respond to the following research questions: How does the cultural representation of an elderly prostitute in *The Bacchus Lady* attend to feelings of precarity and vulnerability? How can this be used to think more broadly about the ‘negative affects’ of oppression and inequality?

Previous research regarding the representation of Bacchus Ladies in *The Bacchus Lady* has raised aspects such as queer kinship as a form of transformative criticism; while I agree that this is a valuable aspect of the film to highlight, I would argue that it does not adequately address the position of the protagonist as one bound to oppression and social exclusion which is equally important to attend to. As Love argues, ‘[...] registering our protest against social exclusion should not keep us from thinking through its effects.’¹⁵⁰ According to Love, one need not deny affirmation or acts of resistance, but rather one needs to think about what might get left behind in quests for perpetual narratives of progress. Perhaps by embracing and not turning away from the precarity and vulnerability present in the film rather than the affiliations the protagonist has, one can see more clearly traces of capitalism and negative affects that may not have been discernible in more celebratory or politically affirmative interpretations of the film. While I do not suggest that the protagonist's

¹⁴⁷ Love, p. 28.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid p. 4.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

position can necessarily be turned into a form of subversion or resistance, if one stays with the pain, vulnerability and precarity shown, it might be possible to find ways to repair from or gain an understanding of the very complex and myriad relationships between the subject and the social system. It is not my intention to discount strength, defiance, or resilience within the representation when adopting this approach, rather to keep both good *and* bad feelings in critical circulation. This chapter seeks to add an additional perspective to earlier scholarly work about the film *The Bacchus Lady* by specifically attending to precarity and vulnerability as a way to consider how embracing ‘bad feelings’ could allow for a deepened recognition of what it is like to, in Love’s terms, ‘[...] bear a disqualified’ identity [...]’¹⁵¹

2.1 ‘It’s *Gonorrhoea isn’t it?*’

The Bacchus Lady's opening scene is crucial because it positions the protagonist—So-young—as a sexually active older woman within the context of a societal institution. From the very first moment the audience meet So-young in the film her body is portrayed as subject to probing and questioning as she visits a clinic for Sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing; this not only alludes to her position as a prostitute but establishes her as a ‘shamed’ subject within an institutional framework.

The establishing shot positions the protagonist opposite a doctor in a small, sanitary medical room. Throughout the consultation, the focus is primarily on So-young's facial expressions and her closed body language as the doctor asks, ‘When did the symptoms start?’. So-young responds timidly, ‘A few days ago.’ As the questions become more personal the doctor makes scant eye contact with So-young and focuses predominantly on the computer screen in front of him. So-young appears visibly disconcerted as she humbly explains her symptoms, glancing up at the doctor with almost childlike innocence as she states, ‘It itches and aches when I pee.’ (Fig. 1)

¹⁵¹ Love, p. 4.



Figure 1. Still frame of So-young relaying her symptoms to a doctor during a gynaecology appointment.

In response to a question concerning the last time she had sexual intercourse, So-young's expression and body language body suggest one of discomfort and unease in sharing such private information; she looks down and averts her head almost as if in a remark of apology. So-young's cautious answer could also reflect a sense of shame related to long-held hierarchical dynamics in South Korea where the ideal gender role for women has long been that of the wise mother and the good wife.¹⁵² This points to the relationship between the ageing body and the institution as well as how older bodies are framed within social structures. Additionally, So-Young's predicament could be interpreted as negatively framing older bodies and constructing poor health as the result of 'moral laxity'.¹⁵³

Regarding the effects of shame, psychologist Silvan Tomkins characterises the physical movements and facial expressions that accompany the 'shame response'.¹⁵⁴ For Tomkins the 'shame response' occurs when positive affect is diminished and is an action that reduces communication, resulting in the impulse to hide the face. 'By dropping [their] eyes, [their] eyelids, [their] head and sometimes the whole upper part of [their] body, the individual calls a halt to looking at another person, particularly the other person's face, and to the other

¹⁵² H. Choi, 'Wise Mother, Good Wife: A Transcultural Discursive Construct in Modern Korea', *The Journal of Korean Studies*, vol.14, no.1, 2009, pp. 1-33. Available from: JSTOR, (accessed 14 May 2022).

¹⁵³ L. H. Clarke, 'Gender, (in) equality and the body in later life', in S. Westwood (ed.), *Ageing, Diversity and Equality: Social Justice Perspectives*, London, Routledge, 2018, p. 37.

¹⁵⁴ S. S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*, New York, Springer Publishing Company, 2008, p. 352.

person' looking at [them].'¹⁵⁵ As Tomkins describes shame, So-young could arguably be exhibiting a 'shame response' in her act of hiding and reducing rather than totally refusing to communicate. The idea that affects are transmissible has been taken up by a number of scholars. Queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick builds on Tomkins concept of shame positing shame as a form of performance in which one absorbs and enacts other people's affects (the shame attributed to oneself by others) but where that absorption is form of internalisation.¹⁵⁶ If viewed in this way So-young may not necessarily feel shame, because she according to her own moral standards, believes that she has done something wrong; rather, shame occurs as an internalised response to how shame is attributed on to her.

One may also consider how So-young 'performs' as if she is ashamed without experiencing shame because she is positioned within a clinically regulated space. In this regard, one might interpret the scene as having biopolitical implications with the clinic symbolizing institutional authority and control over social hygiene and sexual practice. According to Foucault the term 'biopower' refers both to dominant systems of social control and to the administration and regulation of human life both on a population and individual level.¹⁵⁷ Foucault writes that biopower regulates our bodies through our self-disciplinary practices, and so subjugates us.¹⁵⁸ Foucault's notion of biopower is relevant to this discussion since the concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of the subject and institution and links identity to power illustrating the way in which social categories can be used to enact state control.

So-young does not directly reply to the doctor's question concerning intercourse, instead, she asks quite unexpectedly, 'It's Gonorrhoea isn't it?' So-young may be implying that this is an 'occupational hazard', highlighting the health risks associated with the nature of her job as a prostitute. It is important to point out that at this stage in the narrative the audience has not been made explicitly aware that So-young is in fact a Bacchus Lady. It may have been the director's intention to withhold this information to incite curiosity or to evoke compassion towards So-young from the beginning. So-young lowers her head after hearing that it is highly likely that she has an STD and berates herself as she utters, 'Damn fucker. Should've used a condom.' (Fig. 2)

¹⁵⁵ Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, p. 352.

¹⁵⁶ E K. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 36-37.

¹⁵⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 139.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 140.



Figure 2. Still frame of So-young cursing a client when she is diagnosed with an STD.

So-young's response might indicate that she did not know the person with whom she had sex well, that she was forced to do something that she did not want to, or that she is angry at herself for being negligent. Though the details are not revealed, So-young's ability to recall how she acquired the infection suggests a lifestyle associated with sexual activity. Despite her somewhat reconciled acceptance of the doctor's diagnosis So-young looks up at the doctor with a sense of urgency as she utters, 'I don't have time for this'. In this moment it could be argued that So-young betrays a sense of vulnerability; her appeal to obtain treatment as quickly as possible is not only motivated by a desire to recover but also by a fear of losing her job, as one later discovers.

The ageing body is manifest within the theme of shame in the majority of scenes featuring So-young indicating the 'negative affects' of her precarious circumstances and the physical and emotional ramifications of poverty. The rise of precarity is arguably associated with the rise of neoliberal forms of regulation and a political logic which encourages extreme individuality, self-reliance, and independence, under neo-liberal logic, therefore, So-young's quandary could be viewed as an example of her own moral failure. However, as Lorey argues, '[...] neoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability.'¹⁵⁹ Thus the scene could arguably be said to highlight the 'negative affects' associated with So-young's 'failure' to assimilate into her social environment.

¹⁵⁹ Lorey, p. 2.

In a later scene, So-young remarks to her landlady that the 'product' is out of order after the doctor's visit, referring to her inability to provide sex to clients; she refers to her body essentially as a commodity and jokes that its 'defectiveness' is now threatening her income. This resonates with the Marxist idea of reproductive labour elaborated by Isabell Lorey who suggests that the body itself has become a commodity, highlighting the relation between body, commodity and labour-power. Lorey argues that '[...] the modern 'free' individual is forced to participate in reproducing him or herself through powerful self-relations, making a good sale of their labour-power in order to be able to live [...] in order to reduce precariousness.'¹⁶⁰

2.2 *'You better be good!'*

The following two scenes explicitly establish So-young's role as a prostitute and depict the physical nature of her job for the first time. Despite prostitution being illegal in South Korea So-young is seen frequenting public parks for business highlighting her position as a marginal figure in Korean society.

Among the lush trees of a busy park in autumn an elderly gentleman strolls past a group of mature women. One of the women looks up demurely and pushes her dark curly hair to the side as she politely asks the elderly man, 'Would you like a bottle of Bacchus? I'll show you a good time'. The man does not respond and leaves her standing alone and aggrieved. At this point in the film, the viewer is made aware that the women in the park are prostitutes soliciting sex, and that the energy drink Bacchus is associated with this sexual transaction. The elderly man proceeds to walk toward So-young, who is standing alone in the distance; her embellished clothing, bold make-up and russet-coloured hair exuding a tacky charm that sets her apart from the other women in the park. (Fig. 3)

¹⁶⁰ Lorey, pp. 27-28.



Figure 3. Still frame showing So-young soliciting in the park.

The elderly man asks So-Young if she is the 'famous' Bacchus Lady he has heard of which suggests that So-Young is well known by the elderly men who frequent the park. So-young does not respond to his question, in fact, she does not address the elderly man at all; instead, she begins to walk away, only to turn around a few moments later and beckon the man to follow her. There are frequent narrative shifts in the film depicting So-young's life as a prostitute as she moves between public and private spheres.

During the connecting scene that follows, So-young and the elderly man from the park are depicted in a shabby motel room, dimly lit by a red light. The director has arguably used the colour red in the scene to symbolise So-young's status as a prostitute; a colour that has historically been associated with prostitution from the 'red-light district'¹⁶¹ to the 'scarlet woman'.¹⁶² The motel room is small and seedy with only a bed, a dresser, and a mirror hanging on the wall. So -young stands fully dressed by the mirror, drinking from a bottle of 'Soju'.¹⁶³ So-young does this repeatedly throughout the film when she is alone with clients. It is possible that So-young follows this routine to be able to relax and do her job or uses it as a

¹⁶¹ Merriam-Webster defines 'red-light district' as 'a district in which houses of prostitution are frequent.' *Merriam-Webster*, [website], <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/red-light%20district>, (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁶² *Collins English Dictionary* defines a 'scarlet woman' as, 'a sexually promiscuous woman, esp. a prostitute or a woman who commits adultery.' *Collins*, [website], <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/scarlet-woman>, (accessed 18 May 2022).

¹⁶³ 'Soju' is an alcoholic spirit made in South Korea.

way to cope; one might argue that in this situation, So-young may feel like she doesn't have much control over what will happen, so she tries to take some control back. As he waits for So-young to finish preparing for their 'date', the client sits on the edge of the bed in only a t-shirt and briefs, sipping from a bottle of Bacchus. (Bacchus is a repeated visual motif throughout the film alluding to its association with elderly prostitution.) Later, as So-young approaches the client, she assumes a sorrowful slightly bowed pose as she tells him she cannot have sex because she is on her period. With the cunning genteelism of 'I have some issues', So-young frames her recently diagnosed sexually transmitted infection with a pragmatic approach. When the client becomes annoyed that he won't get what he expected, So-young can only apologize and suggests they 'try something new.' With her hands almost together in prayer, So-young says she is sorry she didn't say anything to the client sooner. These self-reproachful gestures can be said to echo some of the same mannerisms So-young exhibited in the previous scene with the doctor where she appeared to exhibit a shameful response to her surroundings.

So-young's reputation as a 'famous' Bacchus Lady is reiterated in the client's final words to her before the sexual act takes place, 'You better be good. My expectations are high.' In the scenario presented, the client's final comment about So-Young is arguably indicative of his objectification of her. (Fig. 4)



Figure 4. Still frame of So-young and her elderly client discussing his expectations.

So-young promises her elderly client that she will not disappoint him as she lights a candle and turns down the light until the room is immersed in a deep red glow. She takes a bottle of lotion from the dresser and kneels down in front of the client; after gently removing his briefs, she begins to methodically massage his penis. (Fig. 5)



Figure 5. Still frame of So-young massaging her elderly client's penis.

While E does not dwell endlessly on the physical aspects of their encounter it is long enough for one to see that So-young's sexual engagement is portrayed as seemingly emotionless and monotonous. Moreover, by concluding the scene with a shot of So-young on her knees, I would argue that E reaffirms the power imbalance and oppressive tone manifest in the scene.

So-young's behaviour as portrayed in this scene is certainly deceitful, however, she cannot be truthful with her client because they do not have a mutual relationship. While she has been able to fool him, the client is still very much in control because he has the option to reject So-young when he discovers she has not been 'honest' with him. The scene is also illustrative of the 'adjustments' So-young must make not only to prevent the transmission of gonorrhoea but also to ensure she can continue to make money. It is evident that despite So-young having an STD, she is depicted as desperate enough to keep working by lying and putting herself in an intimate situation where she does not know how her client will react, emphasising the precarious nature of So-young's position under economic pressures and her

vulnerability to harm. While all ‘Lives are by definition precarious’¹⁶⁴ according to Butler, ‘Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury [...]’¹⁶⁵ Although Butler suggests that all life is precarious in the sense that its persistence is uncertain, this does not imply that all lives are equally precarious. Instead, it appears that social norms, political organizations, and other institutions have been shaped by power relations in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize it for others. So-young is arguably a character who is represented as internalizing the logics of late capitalism, which perceives poverty as a consequence of one's own moral failings rather than the result of exploitation and perpetuity of precarity.

2.3 ‘*bony old bitch*’

The following scene narrates an altercation between So-young and a fellow Bacchus Lady. The confrontation depicted speaks of a complex, ever-changing environment the Bacchus Ladies must navigate and touches upon the theme of economic vulnerability discussed in the previous scene.

As So-young enters Seoul’s Tagpol park, she is met by several elderly Bacchus Ladies who gossip about her inability to have sex because she has gonorrhoea. So-Young approaches the source of the gossip and confronts her; she seems unsurprised to have stumbled upon this scenario and there is a sense of familiarity and mutual disapproval between the two women as they exchange scowls. Having revealed publicly that So-young has an STD, the ‘gossiping woman’ highlights the shame and social stigma attached to sexually transmitted diseases and her behaviour could be interpreted as an attempt to ‘spoil’ So-young and eliminate competition. Certainly, one can think of this as a survival strategy when faced with a precarious living situation in the sense that if you have no power, you may try to take away your competition to survive. As professor of Women's and Gender Studies Tamara Shefer and feminist academic, Sally R Munt argue, ‘Shame and shaming are [...] bound up with social inequality, both reflecting and serving to reinforce, reinstate and legitimise social injustice.’¹⁶⁶ There is a palpable sense of anger between So-young and the ‘gossiping woman’ as they push against one another and raise their fists. Meanwhile, a small group of elderly men and women

¹⁶⁴ Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 25

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 25.

¹⁶⁶ S R. Munt and T. Shefer, ‘A feminist politics of shame: Shame and its contested possibilities’, *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol. 29, no. 2, 2019, p. 146.

have gathered, appearing to watch and listen with amusement as the women hurl insults at each other: ‘chatty slut’, ‘bony bitch’ ‘son of a bitch slut.’ (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7).



Figure 6. Still frame of So-young and the ‘gossiping woman’ arguing in the park.



Figure 7. Still frame of the ‘gossiping woman’ cursing So-young as she raises her fist.

The animosity between the women is arguably rooted in their struggle to earn a living as prostitutes, and the park they frequent is, in all probability a contested territory in which

Bacchus Ladies compete for clients. So-young is portrayed as being continually sexually shamed throughout the scene by the 'gossiping woman', who says to So-young, 'No use being a good fuck if you have a dirty disease.' This comment not only serves to shame and stigmatize So-young in front of the gathered crowd but also implies that So-young has a reputation for offering a high-quality 'service' and that the 'gossiping woman' is perhaps resentful of her for this reason. This insult could also suggest a level of internalised shame; by accusing So-young of having an STD the 'gossiping woman' could arguably be placing her own feelings of shame on to So-young. In view of Sedgwick's argument that affects like shame can be contagious, one can argue that the affects of shame are plausibly being 'performed' by both women in this scene.¹⁶⁷ Additionally, the use of shame to uphold the ideal of 'respectable' femininity could also be a way of interpreting the scenario and would thus illustrate how shame is entangled with intersectional inequalities.¹⁶⁸ According to social psychologist Beverley Skeggs, 'respectability' is often the concern of those who feel they lack it and struggle to obtain it.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, So-young can be positioned in this context as a way to explore a struggle for respectability, one that is entangled with class, gender, and sexuality.

The 'gossiping woman' accuses So-young of thinking she is better than the other Bacchus Ladies, when in fact she is just 'another old pussy' (Fig. 8) and moments later insinuates in a seething manner, 'We all know you spread your legs for Yankee soldiers.' looking So-young up and down in disgust as she admonishes her. This comment alludes to So-young's past, something we learn more about later in the film when she reveals that she was once an escort for American GI's stationed at US military bases in Korea in the 1970s. The inclusion of this detail that reoccurs throughout the film is perhaps E's way of commenting on layers of Korean history through So-young's ageing body. By shaming So-young in this way the 'gossiping woman' could be said to attempt to connect So-young's STD to sex with non-natives branding her with an earlier experience of shame as a way to further defame her.

¹⁶⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 39.

¹⁶⁸ S R. Munt and T. Shefer, 'A feminist politics of shame: Shame and its contested possibilities', *Feminism & Psychology*, Vol.29, no.2, 2019, p. 146.

¹⁶⁹ B. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*, Manchester, England, Sage, 1997, p. 1.



Figure 8. Still frame of So-young being chastised by the ‘gossiping woman.’

The scene raises notable questions regarding why the women cannot be friends and why the director does not portray them as friends. Feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that within much western feminist discourse, there is a tendency to assume that the term ‘women’ is a cross-cultural, universal category when analysing non-western women. That women are a homogenous group category, defined by homogenous oppression and that women are bound together in the ‘[...] “sameness” of their oppression.’¹⁷⁰ In light of Mohanty’s argument, So-young and the ‘gossiping woman’ are arguably not portrayed by E as united in their plight even though one might assume them to be because they both operate outside the margins of mainstream society as elderly prostitutes. Perhaps this is more indicative of the violent nature of capitalism in not being able to make alliances with others in similar situations. Of course, this is a representation, and I cannot be sure if there are alliances or friendships among Bacchus Ladies in reality; however, the portrayal points to the economic vulnerability of the women and could be a strategy used by the director to point to the violence of capitalism. As Lorey argues regarding states of insecurity [...] living bodies can never be completely protected, specifically because they are permanently exposed to social and political conditions, under which life remains precarious.’¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ C T. Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses, *boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1984, p. 337.

¹⁷¹ Lorey, p. 20

A considerable crowd has gathered during the course of So-young's argument with the 'gossiping woman', as indicated by the camera switching focus between the women and their attentive spectators. Nonetheless, the women's confrontation comes to a sudden halt when they both notice two police officers approaching, at which point they quickly part ways. The presence of institutional power portrayed in the scene could be viewed as a way of emphasising that So-young's vulnerability and shaming are presented in relation to not only economic oppression but the relationship between the subject and the institution. As a prostitute, So-young lives outside of social norms in the eyes of Korean law and thus state authority has the capacity to discipline her as a non-conforming subject. While it is important not to conclude that everyone of a particular occupation shares the same experience or that there is a shared experience of prostitution, I would argue that this scene suggests that So-young's societal position is one bound to capitalism. In fact, one could argue that the depiction suggests that poverty has penalized So-young to such an extent that her ageing body has taken on the burden of these changes.

2.4 'Don't call me granny. My vagina is still young!'

In the following scene, E uses the subplot of a 'politically conscious' filmmaker producing an undercover report in order to create a quasi-documentary-like quality that points to the reality of the phenomenon of Bacchus Ladies.

The filmmaker initially meets So-young as she is soliciting on a suburban street in Seoul. Upon arriving at a shabby motel room, the filmmaker deceptively hides a camera on a table next to the bed when So-young leaves to use the bathroom. It is through the hidden camera's voyeuristic gaze that most of the scene unfolds, which creates a sense of violation and exploitation that I propose highlights So-young's vulnerability throughout. The filmmaker sits on the bed close to where the camera is positioned. He proceeds to ask So-young a series of personal questions, such as 'How did you get into this?', 'How much do you earn a day?'. Somewhat surprisingly considering they have just met So-young rather pragmatically explains that she works to send money to her son studying in America. However, one discovers that this is not true when in a later scene So-young reveals that during her time as an escort she had a son with a black American GI but faced with the stigma of her relationship and her poor financial situation she put her baby up for adoption.

As the film progresses, the director continues to allude to and gradually reveal parts of So-young's past that arguably create further vulnerabilities within her character. As So-young delivers more brief answers to the filmmaker she is standing by the window, drinking Soju

while she lights a candle; these apparent routine behaviours were also present in the earlier scene in the motel room with the elderly client. So-young's actions could be said to draw comparisons to compulsive behaviours or 'magical thinking' (the belief that one's actions or thoughts can influence the course of events in the material world). Based on this interpretation, one could conclude that this is her way of taking control in a situation where she feels powerless.

So-young proceeds to join the filmmaker on the bed; she takes his hand and begins to stroke it and talk to him almost as if he is a child that needs soothing. Perhaps because the filmmaker is much younger than most of her clients, the director portrays So-young as being more maternal in her demeanour in this scenario. Before things get too intimate, the filmmaker interrupts So-young saying, 'Wait, wait. I have something to say,' after which he reveals that he met with her, not for sex, but to interview her for a documentary about Bacchus Ladies. (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Still frame of the young filmmaker and So-young when he announces he is making a documentary about Bacchus Ladies.

So-young's demeanour appears to change immediately upon realizing she has been duped and she moves away from the filmmaker until they are sitting at opposite ends of the bed. Her body language is closed, and she looks at him in disbelief. The filmmaker appears to sense that she is becoming angry as he urges her, 'Hear me out, Granny' and he proceeds to tell her his motivations for making the documentary. He explains that even though South Korea ranks

11th on the economic scale it has one of the worst senior poverty rates among OECD countries and in his opinion, it is not right that so many elderly people are ‘[...] suffering in the shadows of society.’ (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Still frame of the filmmaker explaining South Korea’s problem of elderly poverty to So-young.

While one cannot be certain if this information is necessarily true, the incorporation of this detail in the film is telling nonetheless because it appears to make deliberate comments alluding to its context and is highly suggestive of a critique of South Korea’s issues of social mobility, rising inequalities and the circumstances that may have come to necessitate prostitution. In *Feeling Backward* Love argues that ‘The idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness.’¹⁷² Essentially, Love argues that progress is profoundly linked with decline in that it relies on the exclusion and abandonment of some for the advancement of others. As Love further suggests, if one is trying to address situations of injustice, it is imperative to understand how experiences are structured by inequality by considering the resulting negative affects.¹⁷³

¹⁷² Love, p. 5.

¹⁷³ S E. Chinn, ‘Queer Feelings/Feeling Queer: A conversation with Heather Love about Politics, Teaching, and the “Dark, Tender, Thrills” of Affect’, *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, Vol.23, no.2, 2012. Available from: Humanities Commons, (accessed 14 May 2022).

So-young leans away from the filmmaker with her hands on her hips as he continues to explain himself; she scoffs to herself and rolls her eyes in a way that may be construed as portraying feelings of frustration, anger, upset, and disbelief. So-young's disgruntlement could therefore be interpreted in numerous ways. Perhaps she does not want to hear the 'so-called' reality of her situation, or maybe she is resigned to the fact that this is her position in society and doesn't hold out hope for change. Having briefly heard the filmmaker out, So-young gets up and begins to pack away her things, loudly cramming objects into her bag as she remarks what a 'son of a bitch' he is for lying. As she stands by the motel room door ready to leave, she says 'And don't call me Granny, my vagina is still young.'



Figure 11. Still frame of So-young telling the filmmaker not to refer to her as 'Granny'.

So-young's comment about her vagina is one of many references the film makes more broadly in relation to the materiality of the lived body, whether it is made by others or by So-young herself. It is also significant to consider that So-young does not say that her body is young but specifically her vagina. In this case, So-young may want to stress her vagina as an asset and the reason why she can make money or interpreted in another way she could be defending herself against a remark that she perceives as ageist on the part of the filmmaker. However, as I interpret So-young's comment, and also the one earlier in the film where she refers to her vagina as a product that is 'out of order' So-young appears to speak of her physical body almost as if it is detached from her, creating a kind of separation between her body and her mind. Swedish writer Kajsa Ekis Ekman argues that the 'story' of the prostitute, or 'sex

worker' is based on the Cartesian concept of *the split self*, creating the being, and the one who is being bought for sex, 'One is the real Self and the other is the prostituted Self.'¹⁷⁴ Applying Ekman's interpretation to So-young's behaviour in this context, one could argue that this is another way for her to cope with a vulnerable and precarious form of living.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter analyses the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies as depicted in the film *The Bacchus Lady*. Within the chapter I focus on the way shame, precarity and vulnerability are represented in response to the themes of economic oppression, objectification, and the relationship between the subject and the institution. Specifically, I investigate how Bacchus Ladies are culturally represented in *The Bacchus Lady* by analysing four scenes from the film that I argue highlight the vulnerability and precarity of the protagonist as an elderly prostitute and as a subject bound to oppression and social exclusion. I consider the darker aspects of representation that may be viewed as being beyond the narrative of progress by drawing upon Heather Love's concept of attending to the negative affects of social exclusion as a way to consider how 'bad feelings' like shame can be used to think more broadly about oppression and inequality. I draw upon Sedgwick's notion of shame as a form of performance throughout the analysis as a way to emphasize that shame can be both deeply personal and highly social, and that one can absorb and act on the effects of others. From an allegorical perspective, *The Bacchus Lady* arguably imparts a critique of contemporary South Korean social issues and life under capitalism signalling a lack of social mobility and class inequality that has increased elderly poverty and precarious forms of living. Thus, resulting in forms of life vulnerable to risk, disease and uncertainty as characterized by the portrayal of the protagonist's plight in *The Bacchus Lady*. As I argue, the film builds on a sense of oppression that lingers in its portrayal of the protagonist as a subject with limited social mobility and, therefore, can be seen as a critique of what it means to live in precarious and vulnerable circumstances. Despite the fact that the film depicts a subject in a culturally specific setting, by foregrounding of issues such as poverty, invisible labour, precarity, and vulnerability the narrative can arguably be said to cross boundaries in the sense that it speaks to an issue larger than one narrative.

¹⁷⁴ The 'Cartesian Self' is a concept developed by René Descartes within Mind-Body dualism. This is the idea that the self can be viewed as just the mind that is separate from both the body and the outside world. K. E. Ekman, *Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self*, Melbourne, Australia, Spinifex Press, 2013, p. 98

Conclusion and reflections

This thesis focuses on how vulnerability, precarity, and shame are represented in relation to themes of oppression by analysing the cultural representation of Bacchus Ladies in E J Yong's *The Bacchus Lady* (2016). It was not the aim of the study to examine the actual reality of Bacchus Ladies, but rather to analyse how they are portrayed in the only film to address the social phenomena. Although there is no empiric truth in *The Bacchus Lady*, the thesis emphasized that the depiction might be utilized to illuminate Bacchus Ladies' status in visual representation and call attention to a significant cultural issue. As a theoretical foundation to analyse the visual representation of Bacchus Ladies and develop the thesis' arguments in chapter two, the first chapter provided a background to Bacchus Ladies as a South Korean phenomenon using Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's elaborations on intersectionality theory. As a concept that seeks to understand the depths of inequalities and the relationships among them in any given context intersectionality was utilised to examine how systems of inequality based on interconnecting types of discrimination such as gender, class and age intersect and overlap creating compounding experiences of injustice. Judith Butler's concept of precarious life was also used as a critical perspective to analyse social practices and political decisions that contribute to the perception of precariousness. In addition to foregrounding the complexity of power relations and the profound demographic challenges facing South Korea's ageing population, the chapter revealed that cultural and social structures and dynamics, including gender, age, and class, have the potential to create multiple systems of disadvantage for certain groups within Korean society.

By attending to negative affects such as pain and shame tied to the experience of social exclusion the second chapter sought to extend a critical understanding of the utility of 'bad feelings' as a form of political importance by using *The Bacchus Lady* as a case study. The analysis of the film drew on a body of theoretical work exploring the utility of negative affects, particularly that of queer theorists like Heather Love, Sara Ahmed, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who turn to 'bad feelings' as a source of understanding the past, conflict, and trauma. As a theoretical framework and position throughout the study, 'queer negativity' was used to counteract neoliberal narratives of happiness, success, and self-fulfilment to acknowledge and value more complex experiences, such as shame, vulnerability, and precarity. Drawing on Heather Love's notion of engaging with 'bad feelings' as a way to address the psychic and corporeal effects of social exclusion the second chapter explored

aspects of the film's narrative that might typically be considered outside of a narrative of progress to embrace more painful feelings that might not easily be confined to the past or left behind. To, as Heather Love suggests risk '[...] opening [oneself] to social and psychic realities we would rather forget.'¹⁷⁵ Though I do not reject the idea that challenging or resisting approaches can be used as significant strategies for political change this thesis has argued that such affirmative rhetorical strategies might negate and diminish the vulnerability of the protagonist and the experience of inequality. As such, turning towards adverse emotions rather than away from them may reveal more about how oppression impacts lives. As Love argues, criticism can function as a way to '[...] gesture towards alternative trajectories for the future [...]' but it also '[...] lays bare the conditions of exclusion and inequality [...]'¹⁷⁶ Departing from previous scholars who have paid particular attention to the protagonist in *The Bacchus Lady* as a figure who represents forms of queer agency, my own analysis has, to the contrary provided a framework in which to analyse the protagonist's restricted agency in relation to multiple themes of oppression. As Sara Ahmed argues, one of the problems with progressive narratives is that they fail to pay attention to certain forms of suffering, as Ahmed suggests, 'The affirmative turn creates a distinction between good and bad feelings that presumes bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive'¹⁷⁷

The thesis considers, therefore, what can be gained by not trying to overcome 'bad feelings' but rather using them as a form of transformative criticism that can be utilized to address injustice more broadly and to have looked at aspects within the film that might be ignored or fall to the side of utility. Feelings that might not be considered as having productive political potential. The engagement with precariousness as an ineradicable condition of life directs attention to the conditions that maintain life, which either enhances or reduces its precariousness and, as Ahmed advocates, we might need to embrace these bad feelings, acknowledge and unpack them, not to overcome them or disavow them '[...] but to notice what causes hurt.'¹⁷⁸ While the notion of dwelling on dark or difficult emotions may seem unwarranted unless one knows how they might be used for positive political purpose, if one only searches for positive or resisting narratives within visual representations what might be left behind in our quest for integration and assimilation? As an argument for what lingering with pain can be considered 'useful' for, the thesis has raised questions that can connect to

¹⁷⁵ Love, p. 29.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 29.

¹⁷⁷ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 216.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 216.

Sedgwick's conception of the political potential of shame as a form of counterstrategy to a strategy of resistance. Therefore, one can consider how the 'use' of 'bad feelings' or negative affects such as shame can be used as a strategy for repair. If we cannot go outside of the violence of the social order, perhaps we can repair from it by attending to it and unpacking it but first, we must consider what it is we are repairing from.

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