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Emancipation During a Zombie Apocalypse:  
A Feminist Reading of Female Subjectivity in Korean Zombie Dramas

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in East Asian Studies

by

Jenny Fagan

2024

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2024

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Emancipation During a Zombie Apocalypse:  
A Feminist Reading of Female Subjectivity in Korean Zombie Dramas

by

Jenny Fagan

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Hyun Suk Park, Chair

With massive global releases, South Korean zombie dramas *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead* provide exciting new insight into the existing zombie canon. Zombiism as a study relies heavily on Western (primarily white) examples of the genre, however the dominance of South Korean popular culture in recent decades forces a canonical shift, decentering Western issues in favor of global ones. Streaming services available all over the world offer new partnership opportunities for media exports. The recent Netflix dramas contain representations of female characters reacting to the existing societal patriarchy. Utilizing Young-Hee Shim's interpretations of Michel Foucault's concept of subjectivity and Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism, zombie dramas present an opportunity for female characters to assert their independence from the paternalistic, Confucian society around them. Contextualizing the Korean female battle for

equality with a Korean traumatic history of sexual slavery through comfort women, the female characters relate to their gender and femininity uniquely. Despite the different subject matter within the dramas, both address women's subjugation and their battle for equality. Utilizing the zombie apocalypse as a framework for massive social upheaval, women reject the stereotypes and gender roles they are forced into under the Confucian patriarchy. This contributes to the broader zombie genre, revealing that resistance to violent masculinity's oppression exists across the globe.

The thesis of Jenny Fagan is approved.

Stephanie Balkwill

Namhee Lee

Hyun Suk Park, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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## Introduction

As with many children of the late 1990s and early 2000s, my first experience with zombie media came from *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* (1998), a film that canonically diverts from most *Scooby Doo* media through both aging the main cast into adults and introducing the idea that the monsters are not greedy capitalists in masks, but real, viable supernatural threats. In the film, we visit the titular island, Moonscar Island, located near New Orleans, Louisiana, and find a pepper plantation owned by the cat-obsessed Simone Lenoir and her friendly chef, Lena Dupree. The gang soon discover that there's more than meets the eye when night falls and they encounter pirate Morgan Moonscar's zombified corpse haunting the island. Amidst their silly antics, Scooby Doo and the others find that they cannot remove the masks of these zombies, instead accidentally and cartoonishly decapitating one in their attempts to do so. It is ultimately revealed that Simone and Lena settled on the island 200 years ago along with many others who worshipped a cat god. All was well, until Morgan Moonscar and his band of pirates arrived and unleashed mayhem, sending the settlers fleeing for their lives. After praying to their cat god, Simone and Lena became supernaturally strong were-cats and killed Moonscar and the other pirates. The transformation blessed them with immortality, however their immortality relied on them trapping victims every harvest moon in a voodoo ritual cave to drain their life forces. Therefore, the zombies throughout the film scaring Scooby and friends intended to warn them of the duo and frighten them off the island. In the end, the gang subdue the evil doers until the ceremonial time passes and the were-cats drain away, setting free the spirits of their zombie victims.

Though the presentation of zombies strays from the contemporary lore, *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* introduced to many children that sometimes the true villains use the zombies'



monstrosity as a shield to hide behind. Jeffery Jerome Cohen stated that any monster that maintains the public's interest will inevitably enter and remain within three genres: horror, comedy, and children's media.<sup>1</sup> They enter popular children's media through writers expressing and reducing their own fears of monsters into something cute or infantile, enabling us to feel like we outgrew these fears as adults.<sup>2</sup> *Scooby Doo on Zombie Island* doesn't revolutionize the zombie genre, though it introduces an instance of exploitation to a young audience, a zombie theorist fan-favorite interpretation of zombiism. Perhaps most interestingly, the film adheres to an existing feminist framework to look at the character Lena Dupree through, a lens familiar to zombie popular media. Lena Dupree weaponizes her gender identity to lure people to the island and later the ritual cave. Throughout the film prior to the final reveal, Lena plays the damsel-in-distress Southern belle designed specifically to lower people's guards and redirect their suspicion away from her. She meets the team in New Orleans, balancing an overflowing bag of groceries and offering the solution to their "haunted house" (or lack thereof) problem.<sup>3</sup> In another scene, Lena throws herself onto Fred, pretending to be terrified while recounting zombies dragging away Simone.<sup>4</sup> This awards him the chance to step up as a protector-type and lead the way through the secret passageway in her home. Lena weaponizes her positionality to appeal to protector-types, taking advantage of them for her devious plot. This is a familiar character in the zombie apocalypse canon, a female seductress posing a greater threat to the humans than the monstrous zombies. These characters play into problematic stereotypes about female weakness

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, "Undead," 401.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, 401.

<sup>3</sup> Stenstrum, *Scooby Doo*, 00:12:18 – 00:13:03.

<sup>4</sup> Stenstrum, 00:57:12 – 00:58:08.

and passivity, hiding their own active participation in the narrative behind the threat of zombies or other danger.

We transition now to more recent representations of zombies coming now from an international context. From the quintessentially white and American *Scooby Doo*, we move towards South Korea, a rising hub of immensely successful entertainment releases since the 1990s. The *hallyu* wave, or Korean wave, denotes the cultural phenomena of international interest and fanaticism towards South Korean (hereafter Korea) popular culture.<sup>5</sup> In present dialogues, it's impossible to discuss zombie media without mentioning the 2016 Korean film by director Yeon Sang-ho<sup>6</sup> *Train to Busan*. The film rose to international prominence as a standout in the genre, telling the story of cynical Seokwoo, played by famous actor Gong Yoo, and his daughter, Su-an, trapped on a Korea Train Express (KTX) from Seoul to Busan when a zombie outbreak begins both outside and inside the train. Throughout the film, Seokwoo transforms from a distant workaholic to a devoted father who sacrifices himself for the safety of his child. Though, it is somewhat disingenuous to portray Seokwoo as the main character when the events of the film come from his daughter's perspective. Su-an represents hope for a better future. Her innocence makes her a kinder, more compassionate person than most of the adults on the train. Ultimately, her father and the other men die on the train, leaving just her and a pregnant mother to enter the safe zone alone. Yet still the film is hopeful with Su-an's mournful song for her father, *Aloha 'Oe*. Both a 'hello' and a 'goodbye,' a greeting to the new world she and the unborn child could usher in and a farewell to the violence of the train and the old world.

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<sup>5</sup> Kang, "A New Style of K-Drama in Netflix Originals," 171.

<sup>6</sup> Korean names will be written last name first as is customary in Korean. So, Yeon is the surname.

The film's success and uniquely Korean take on the zombie genre brought a wave of Korean zombie media. Just a few years after its release, Netflix and other sites host a trove of Korean zombie shows and movies. This includes *Rampant* (2018), *Kingdom* (season 1 in 2019 and season 2 in 2020), *#Alive* (2020), *Peninsula* (2020), *Kingdom: Ashin of the North* (2021), *All of Us Are Dead* (2021), *Happiness* (2021), and *Gangnam Zombie* (2023). Fans of Korean reality television might enjoy the scripted *Zombieverse: New Blood* (2024), in which celebrities compete in various puzzles during a fictional zombie outbreak. Unlike *The Wailing* (2016), another immensely popular Korean supernatural horror film, *Train to Busan* reintroduces a more classic zombie-style and one imbued with social commentary on the equalizing nature of zombie apocalypses. Traditionally, Korean dramas aired on mainstream networks adhere to strict content guidelines, restricting portrayals of gore, sex, or other 'taboo' subjects.<sup>7</sup> This limitation partially prevented the production of zombie dramas, however in 2020 Netflix partnered with Korean studio AStory to create *Kingdom*, the first Korean Netflix 'original' and a zombie drama.<sup>8</sup> With this development and the show's subsequent success, the drama landscape shifted and zombie works like *All of Us Are Dead* aired to even greater public interest.

Selecting *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead* over more expected examples bring with it both challenges and advantages. First and foremost, the two shows provide a contrasting depiction of both zombies and Korea as they are set in radically different time periods. Interpretations of the shows cannot simply surround Korean nationhood/identity and Korean contemporary issues but must transcend both temporalities. Furthermore, the central characters are in very different positions, with one being a crown prince and the other being a group of

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<sup>7</sup> Kang, 178.

<sup>8</sup> Kang, 181.

regular high school students. As a benefit, this allows for a deeper analysis into the character's actions rather than their statuses. For instance, while the crown prince and a high school student are extremely different, reduced to their core attributes both Lee Chang and Lee Cheongsan are self-sacrificing men who have something or someone to protect at all costs. The next issue with selecting these titles is that they are both, for all intents and purposes, unfinished. Each show ends on a cliffhanger with only one of them promised another season. This complicates complete analysis of character arcs or comprehensive understandings of zombie biology. However, their incompleteness provides opportunities for audience speculation and imaginative interpretations. Both have active fan communities that readily discuss past episodes and what the series could show in the future despite two years passing since the last episode released. These works, however varied, both came as Netflix productions, rather than mainstream Korean network releases. This means that they skirted Korean content guidelines, allowing for more gore and graphic representations of a zombie apocalypse. Beyond that, they present a less sterile version of South Korea than other popular K-dramas have, addressing societal issues explicitly. Additionally, neither includes romance as a primary genre, instead exploring character arcs and political scandal. While zombie media places romance in its own unique role, decentering romance allows for more female individuality separating their motivations from getting the guy to saving lives.

When discussing gendered reading of texts, it is nearly impossible to escape Michel Foucault's overwhelming influence. Rather than simply utilizing his framework to analyze the shows, I elect to place it within the Korean context through working with Korean feminist scholars' reinterpretations of his work to create an understanding that better encapsulates the issues facing Korean feminism. Korean feminist history and feminist dialogue finds itself on

the trauma of sexual violence against Korean women, namely the sexual violence by the Japanese military perpetrated during the colonial period.<sup>9</sup> This system of sexual slavery produced women euphemistically known as “comfort women,” though most were taken when they were still girls. In the postcolonial period, the impact of the perpetuated violence and the subsequent male-led state adoption of Confucian social principles created a unique form of feminist engagement amongst Korean scholarship. Young-hee Shim points to a shift caused by feminist theory amongst other things leading to women’s understanding of themselves as not just sexual objects, but as subjects who have the right to make their own decisions regarding their sexuality and “anything which infringes on that right is a crime.”<sup>10</sup> She deems this “sexual subjectivity,” borrowing from Foucault, to explain the simultaneous assertion of individual agency and acknowledgment of the larger system of subjugation in place. Korean women’s understanding of their own sexual subjectivity allows for a transition in the victim narrative of women as simply survivors of sexual violence. Furthermore, in a later paper, Shim points to Ulrich Beck’s theory of emancipatory catastrophism as a framework to analyze the metamorphosis experienced by many surviving comfort women from victims to activists.<sup>11</sup> These two theories lend themselves to an expansion of the feminist zombiism discourse.

Rather than observing female victimhood as representative of a national suffering, I propose instead to analyze female victimhood as a means of reestablishing them as active participants in their own society. Korean female oppression is steeped in a history of Confucian paternalism and sexual violence. Thus, the women subvert their victimhood through becoming

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<sup>9</sup> Shim, “Metamorphosis,” 252.

<sup>10</sup> Shim, “Feminism,” 144.

<sup>11</sup> Shim, “Metamorphosis,” 254.

weapons themselves. In *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead*, a small cast of female characters reflect a sort of postcolonial sexual trauma, but gain empowerment through a zombie apocalypse. In a paper analyzing *Train to Busan*, Harvey O'Brien notes that the return of the "repressed" depicts the lasting impact of historical sufferings through a present lens, forcing people to confront this past as something still impacting the modern populace.<sup>12</sup> Within both shows, the concept is expanded as women, the 'repressed' people, do not simply seek retribution after their undeads, rather some search for it while alive. In this paper, I argue first that the usage of zombies in *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead* provide a social upheaval through which women are thrust into unprecedented situations, thus giving them opportunities to either maintain or oppose the status quo. Second, I argue that the depictions of women indicate a battle between women's subjectivity and continuing trends of male paternalism rooted in Confucianism. Within each show, I will explore how female characters confront these concepts and through zombiism can assert the necessity of female emancipation and individual agency within the patriarchy.

## **Introduction to Zombie Academic History**

### *A Brief History of the Zombie*

The zombie's ever-changing lore creates a unique host of problems. For instance, zombies come from a fungus, like in *The Last of Us*, unless they come from human experimentation like in *All of Us Are Dead*. Zombies lack a consciousness, such as in *Train to Busan*, unless of course, they are the male lead protagonist of zom-rom-com *Warm Bodies*. Zombies amble listlessly in search of food, unable to move quickly or strategically, as in *The Walking Dead*, unless they are a mother coming to the door of her old house and turning the doorknob like in season one of *The Walking Dead*. Additionally, they're called "zombies," unless

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<sup>12</sup> O'Brien, "Aloha 'Oe," 84.

the source is *Marvel* comics in the 1930s, in which case they are “zuvembies.”<sup>13</sup> Or you are in the world of *The Walking Dead*, an alternative reality where zombie media never existed, thus giving way to group-based creative names like “walkers,” “geeks,” or “biters.” At what point can we then demonstrably draw the line of zombie and non-zombie? Where can we say this is the non-corporeal ghost or spectral spirit versus this is the viscerally corporeal zombie, making the two distinctly unique?

Furthermore, many have watched a zombie movie and come out curious about what the director *really* meant to represent through the zombies. Why zombies? Centuries earned vampires more sex appeal and ghosts may provide more room for deliberate character development. Yet over the past century, zombies endured to create a legacy and their own field of scholarship: zombiism. Zombiism is an interdisciplinary field through which zombie media can pass through to provide a broader understanding of the world we presently live in, pre-apocalypse. The history of zombies in popular media and their respective scholarship cannot be removed from an analysis of how South Korea presents the monsters even in modern day.

The first introduction of zombies into the United States is inextricably bound to a legacy of colonization and white supremacy. Chera Kee, a professor of film and media studies, asserts that the entrance of the zombie into Western awareness was an act of white supremacy to garner fear around Haitian Vodou (later popularized as Voodoo) and therein demonize the newly independent and black governed country.<sup>14</sup> The white people in power feared that Haitian influence could inspire the newly freed black slaves in the United States, especially considering many black Americans traced their cultural roots back to Haiti or other Caribbean nations.

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<sup>13</sup> Kee, “Beware the Zuvembies Comics,” 28.

<sup>14</sup> Kee, “From Cannibalism,” 28.

Following the turbulent 19<sup>th</sup> century in Haiti, a time in which Haitians worked to establish independent governance following the slave revolt that emancipated them from French colonialism, the US occupied Haiti from 1915-1935.<sup>15</sup> During this occupation period, US Marines and other US citizens began publishing fanciful accounts around Haitian people engaging in cannibalism under the name of Vodou Gods, though no concrete proof has ever been found of this occurring.<sup>16</sup> At the tail end of the 1920s, public support for US presence in Haiti waned.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a few years later, the “zombie” entered popular culture, borrowed from an amalgamation of primarily Haitian and Caribbean folklore and religious elements. Haitian culture became associated with this monstrous, non-Christian creature and they threatened the posterity of the white American. Various films emerged with Vodou practitioners as antagonists throughout the occupational period, but the first entry into what became the zombie “canon” came in 1932 with the release of the film *White Zombie*. After years of hearing about the dangerous, foreign Vodou, the film released to an American audience already pre-disposed to distrust and fear the Haitian. The film is set in Haiti and the Haitian people play the zombies, thus establishing them as something undead and unnatural.<sup>18</sup> For years, the relationship between some abstract and black Caribbean Island and zombies was fostered through film and comics, portraying the black other as something corrupting the white mainstream. By the release of *Dawn of the Living Dead* by George A. Romero in 1978, however, zombies no longer existed solely as figures representing an “Indigenous” (meaning ethnic) threat.<sup>19</sup> Instead, zombies

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<sup>15</sup> Kee, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Kee, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Kee, 35.

<sup>18</sup> Kee, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Reyes, “Contemporary Zombies,” 90.



transform into a representation more broadly for exploitation and the suffering of people under oppressive systems, namely capitalism. From there begins the era of zombies we can more readily identify.

### *Zombies as Representations of Power and Exploitation*

The emergence of academic schools of thought engaging with the zombie came at the turn of the century, extending from colonial/postcolonial theory to health sciences. Zombiism as an interdisciplinary study utilizes the metaphor of a zombie as a methodology to analyze our society. Unlike gothic monsters, zombies originate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus limiting their history of academic study. However, at the end of the 1990s, zombie research began to flourish with scholars publishing works connecting the monsters to an imperial history of exploitation. There are three distinct “developmental eras” of the zombie in Western popular media: their introduction from Haitian and Caribbean folklore, the “so-called Romero era” from the late 1960s to 2000, and the “post-Romero era” to present.<sup>20</sup> Each era of zombie contains an inclination towards different schools of theory. First, early zombies in Western popular culture can be analyzed through a colonial and postcolonial lens. Next, Romero era zombies, named after famed zombie-film director George A. Romero, are commonly read as critiques of capitalism and the dangers of over-consumption. Finally, in the post-Romero era, zombies are more attached to posthumanism and eco-horror, a form of horror media that explores the dangers in humanity’s exploitative relationship with the environment.<sup>21</sup> Rather than necessarily always having to study the zombie itself, zombiism provides a “catastrophic destabilization” of society

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<sup>20</sup> Hamilton and Heffneran, *Theorising the Contemporary Zombie*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton and Heffneran, 3.

through which theoretical frameworks can be applied.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, unlike other existential threats to humanity, the zombie wears a human-like face and derives (somehow, somehow) from humans themselves. An outside force does not enter our environment, but instead an insurgency of our own force reenters our space, forcing humanity to confront its past in the present.

The brambling masses of undead began when zombies entered popular culture and in the horde's first depiction, the history of zombies as representations for systematic exploitation began. Early zombie portrayals lend themselves to a racialized colonial critique to explore the concepts of exploitation and power imbalances. The best example comes from Kee's analysis of a scene from the first feature-length zombie film, *White Zombie*. Kee describes the distinct racialization method displayed by the early zombie media through the undead black masses compared to the notable white living characters. In the film, the zombies are black plantation workers under the white master Murder Legendre, though these black zombies are distinct from his "special" zombies played by white actors.<sup>23</sup> The non-special zombies are faceless, unidentifiable beyond their blackness as they work on the sugar mill. A notable scene occurs when one falls into the sugar grinder, subjecting him to a violent death to no response from the other laboring zombies.<sup>24</sup> As Kee remarks, "'life' is cheap on the sugar plantation, especially if it is black."<sup>25</sup> These black zombies serve as an endlessly exploitable workforce, able to work ceaselessly to their white master's benefit. When they die, there's no need to care because another can easily take their faceless place. As an audience, how could we sympathize or even care about them when we don't even know their faces, let alone their names? We sympathize

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<sup>22</sup> Hamilton and Heffner, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Kee, "From Cannibalism," 42.

<sup>24</sup> Kee, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Kee, 42.

instead with the white heroes who save their white family members, a group who fight against their zombification. Viewers see themselves in this determined white American hero who terrifyingly can be turned into a zombie even for a second by the evil Haitian (non-white) supernatural powers.<sup>26</sup> Over the next few decades, more zombies featuring zombies working beneath a puppet-master drawing power from “black” magic emerged. However, a new sort of narrative formulated in the middle of the century.

Scholars read the Romero era of zombies as critiquing specifically capitalism and overconsumption, utilizing zombies to present these as systems of oppression. In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s article “Undead (A Zombie Oriented Ontology),” they state “[c]reatures of pure consumption and drive, zombies are the logical products of capitalism. Relentlessly driven to devour, grasp, extract and expend, the zombie covers just about every signification of the word ‘consumer.’”<sup>27</sup> This excellent summary of the relationship between zombies and capitalism precedes the brief discussions of Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), a film set in a shopping mall during the zombie apocalypse, and Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), set in a farmhouse. Cohen mentions the infamous scene where zombies ride the mall escalators while calming music plays in the background,<sup>28</sup> a humorous scene that echoes the lives of the living. The zombies returned to the mall, not due to an animalistic human driving and enhancing their senses to point them towards the mall survivors, but because while they were alive, they were happy there.<sup>29</sup> It is a critique of the shopping mall, a place where the brainless congregate to overconsume both in life and death. In *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombies surround the

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<sup>26</sup> Kee, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Cohen, 405.

<sup>28</sup> Cohen, 405.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, 405.

farmhouse and eventually penetrate the defenses, seizing it and resembling creditors foreclosing the property, according to Cohen.<sup>30</sup> Succinctly put by Lars Bang Larsen, “[z]ombification is easily applied to the notion that capital eats up the body and the mind of the worker and that the living are exploited through dead labor.”<sup>31</sup> In a context of zombie films portraying zombies as a tireless, consuming work force, this metaphor fits them well. The recent depictions of zombie follow after this endless labor exploitation to the exploitation of the environment, representing the present looming threat of environmental disaster.

Present zombies in the “post-Romero” era typically exist under critiques of the posthuman and a fear of an impending end of the world due to environmental catastrophe. This era enters in a sort of boundaryless or borderless zombie. Other countries began producing their own commercially successful zombie media and through this, portraying their own interpretations of zombiism whether on a global scale or just a national one. Korea’s *Train to Busan* (2016) is emblematic of this shifting dialogue. As mentioned in the introduction, the South Korean film received global attention and ushered in a wave of new Korean zombie popular culture products in the years following. The film itself asserts two things: a fear of environmental collapse caused specifically by human exploitation and a fear of social collapse due to a lack of human compassion. Discussions of the “posthuman” always bring a discussion of what it means to be human, and this film attempts to core to the core of that, arguing that humanity is (or rather, should be) the compassion displayed by Su-an throughout the film. Seokwoo’s selfishness is not always unreasonable, yet the audience view Su-an as a beacon of purity and goodness. She routinely acts kindly and selflessly, assumedly too young to grow jaded and selfish like the adults

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<sup>30</sup> Cohen, 406.

<sup>31</sup> Larsen, “Zombies of Immaterial Labor,” 158.

surrounding her. Additionally, the zombie infection is caused by Seokwoo's own work at a company, the unethical practices leading to the contamination of a natural water source and eventual spread to the human population. This portrays the uneasy relationship humanity shares with the environment now. The outbreak is tied directly to environmental neglect for capitalistic gains, an irresponsible exploitation and a presentation of human anxieties around capitalism and the environment. Yet interestingly, as noted by Harvey O'Brien, there is both an assumption of responsibility and a deference to the systematic through Seokwoo working for the company that caused the outbreak.<sup>32</sup> Independently, Seokwoo (and his assistant who cries over the phone) are not responsible for the outbreak, but on a larger scale, each person who allowed for the unethical behavior to persist could be deemed liable. Thus, we must question hierarchical structures that create situations in which people cannot speak up about unethical or dangerous behaviors that could lead to issues like poisoned water sources, an overall notion that must resonate strongly in Korea's deeply patriarchal and hierarchical structure.

### **Feminism and Zombiism**

Zombies are a foreign import into American popular culture, thus the representations in Korean media are a return of the non-imperial media's portrayal of the monsters. Korea's recent history of colonization provides a unique perspective to the conversation that perhaps American (or British) cinema cannot offer. Furthermore, the unique presentation of feminism this paper utilizes can change the methodology through which feminism and zombiism typically relate to one another.

#### *Undead Feminist Theory*

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<sup>32</sup> O'Brien, 93.

Feminist theory within the sphere of zombiism focuses on the positionality of women within the zombie apocalypse, typically criticizing portrayals of women within the genre as upholding patriarchal systems through their action or inaction. Historically, women in the genre reinforce misogynistic notions of women having a natural inclination towards childcare, emotional thought, and home making, while men in the genre naturally take on leadership roles within the survivor camps. Although many scholars also turn critiques towards dangerous masculinity as well, pointing out how consistently in zombie media the true threat proves to be not the hordes of undead, but men. While the field of feminist zombiism is broad, there are a few avenues scholarship tend to follow that establish the historical methodology in place for this paper.

The first method scholars critique the zombie genre's female characters is through analyzing their action or inaction as adherence to or subversion of existing gender norms, roles, and expectations. This presents clearly through works published on Barbra from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Barbra begins the film frightened by scary stories from her brother while in a cemetery, only for zombies to rise and attack her brother, sending her fleeing to a nearby farmhouse. While there, she becomes catatonic and unhelpful to our male protagonist, Ben. Later, she regains her senses and begs Ben to help her rescue her brother. Ben hits her, knocking her out, and once again rendering her useless. Meanwhile, the other female characters busy themselves taking care of the sick child, Karen, reinforcing stereotypes about women as caretakers, and the male characters make plans of escape. Rebecca Susan Evans notes that the women are relegated to background positions while the more capable men ultimately sort out what to do, though ironically the men's infighting leads to the ultimate demise of the group.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Evans, "Men are from Mars," 556.

The roles of the female characters are pre-set, even in an upending event like a zombie apocalypse, they are predisposed to caretaking roles, leaving the men assert an innate leadership to heroically bring them to safety. Emotions control the women, at times even incapacitating them, but the men are rational leaders, capable of taking charge in these difficult situations. Most disappointedly, even in recent releases within the zombie genre, these dated gender roles continue to be implemented.

Feminist scholars also critique zombie media by focusing on the positionality of the male characters and how they uphold masculinity, often compromising the safety of the survivor group through this behavior. In an analysis of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* 1990 remake written by Romero, Barry Keith Grant investigates the changes made to the character of Barbra (now Barbara) and how these changes exemplify the inadequacy of the male characters surrounding her. Romero worked to rectify the catatonic nuisance Barbra became during the first film, no longer rendering her objectively useless to the team. Throughout the film (and more broadly in Romero's zombie works), masculinity presents in oppressive terms. Grant notes that the group fails to survive all together because the male characters fail to work together.<sup>34</sup> When confronted by society's collapse and rising violence, "masculine power oppressively asserts itself" and the men fight each other to assume control rather than work as a team.<sup>35</sup> In the remake, Barbara alone survives from the farmhouse survivor group because she doesn't allow the territorial play between Ben and Harry to impact her.<sup>36</sup> She notices that the zombies walk slower than the survivors run, so she takes advantage of this and flees the farmhouse. Outside the farmhouse, she

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<sup>34</sup> Grant, "Taking Back the *Night of the Living Dead*," 218.

<sup>35</sup> Grant, 218.

<sup>36</sup> Grant, 218.

encounters male depravity through a paramilitary group's sick game of keeping zombies trapped in a pen to abuse for their entertainment. Once again, she encounters a violent presentation of the patriarchy through these men, and it noticeably disgusts her as something truly monstrous.<sup>37</sup>

While she could kill the zombies coldly earlier in the film, she still sees their former humanity enough to recoil at the blatant sadism engaged in by the paramilitary men. In the remake, Barbara no longer represents women devolving into emotional paralysis in a stressful situation, but a capability for survival removed from oppressive masculinity.

While the intersection of race and gender in zombie media is also a heavily studied area, since both shows contain a monoethnic presentation of race, this discussion is not included within this paper. Simply summarized, zombie media upholds white supremacy through its exoticization of and demonization of the non-white. For black women particularly in zombie media they tend to adhere to racist stereotypes. There still may be room to discuss portrayals of "racial others" within South Korean zombie media, it's beyond the scope of this paper.

#### *South Korean Feminist Theory*

Korean feminism traces back to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when women organized their own anti-colonialization movements to oppose the Japanese occupation of Korea. Prior to this, it is difficult to determine if women created gatherings centering on furthering their rights, however the meetings during the colonial period specifically influenced modern understandings of South Korean feminism. Heisook Kim outlines the history of Korean feminism and feminist scholarship leading up until the article's publication in 2009 and asserts that the anti-colonial meetings provided an opportunity for women to advocate for their own equality.<sup>38</sup> Kim deems

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<sup>37</sup> Grant, 219.

<sup>38</sup> Kim, "Feminist Philosophy," 248.



this “feminist nationalism” and defines it as a form of feminism that utilizes nationalism to “raise women’s consciousness.”<sup>39</sup> Conversations around nationalism and a nation’s right to self-determination often lead to women yearning for their own emancipation from an oppressive patriarchy. During the colonial period, young women and girls from all over Asia, but primarily from the Korean peninsula, were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army.<sup>40</sup> After the war, Japanese government officials actively tried to suppress the information and destroyed all records of the institution, however estimates place the number of girls victimized to be around 200,000.<sup>41</sup> The girls were euphemistically referred to as “comfort women” in English since they worked at “comfort stations” for Japanese soldiers. The comfort women “issue” became a central component to South Korean feminist history, despite the truth not coming out until the 1990s. After the colonial period’s end, feminist nationalism faltered during the establishment of the new government as the male nationalists in charge implemented Confucian, patriarchal values into the social and legal system.<sup>42</sup> In recent discourses surrounding comfort women and their redress movement, the Korean government supports a nationalist interpretation of the issue, placing the blame entirely on Japan.<sup>43</sup> This is objectively undeniable. However, feminists assert that a secondary issue should also be addressed as being involved in silencing survivors for nearly half a century: Korea’s strict patriarchal society.<sup>44</sup> For decades after the war, Korean comfort women were silenced due to trauma caused both during their enslavement and afterwards from social

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<sup>39</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>40</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>41</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>42</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>43</sup> Min, “Korean ‘Comfort Women,’” 939.

<sup>44</sup> Min, 939.

reactions as well as a national sense of shame.<sup>45</sup> Shim attributes these feelings of embarrassment and shame to Korea's patriarchal norms around female chastity, leading to survivors being silenced until 1991 when the atrocity reentered public knowledge with the brave testimony of a survivor.<sup>46</sup> Despite the silencing of the atrocity, Korean feminist advocacy worked to free women from sexual violence particularly after the establishment of the South Korean government, reflecting this trauma even silently.

The next major movements within Korean feminism occurred during the 1970s and 1980s with a focus on protecting women from sexual violence. Doowon Suh and Inn Hea Park in their article underline recognizing gender violence, making it a larger scale issue, and creating solutions to deal with the root cause of it as essential in creating a broader feminist identity and mobilizing people.<sup>47</sup> During this period, Korean feminist groups advocated for and eventually established the Korean Women's Hot Line (KWHL) in 1983 which operated as a resource for women experiencing sexual and/or domestic violence.<sup>48</sup> The group more largely, according to Suh and Park, reframed domestic violence as "violence against women," therein making it analogous to the women's human rights movement.<sup>49</sup> Thus, through present day, the organization aligns themselves with other women-oriented organizations to advocate for women's rights. Academically, the first formalized discussions around feminist philosophy did not occur in Korea until 1993 when a small group of female philosophers gathered to discuss issues around

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<sup>45</sup> Shim, "Metamorphosis," 265.

<sup>46</sup> Shim, 265.

<sup>47</sup> Suh and Park, "Framing Dynamics," 328.

<sup>48</sup> Suh and Park, 328.

<sup>49</sup> Suh and Park, 328.

feminism.<sup>50</sup> They later established a group known as the Korean Association of Feminist Philosophy (KAFP).<sup>51</sup> Although Ewha Women’s University in the 1980s founded the first women’s studies program in Korea and other universities followed suit over the past decades, female Korean philosophers are still in the minority.<sup>52</sup> Female Korean philosophers often poignantly discuss issues regarding Confucianism as shaping their feminist framework, though their interests vary broadly.<sup>53</sup> It should not be ignored how just two years after the first comfort woman survivor came forward, female Korean philosophers began to formally gather with the intention of discussing Confucianism and other female-centered issues. Furthermore, the attention to Confucianism reinforces the centrality of the comfort women trauma to the feminist framework of Korea.

Confucianism brought with it a sort of “paternalism” that informs interactions between women and their male peers, family members, and government at large. South Korea, as with most nations, has a patriarchal system ingrained into its government, laws, and society. This patriarchal and Confucian system also continuously uphold a system of familism in place. Familism is an ideology that promotes the support and preservation of familial roles as the dominant value in a social system.<sup>54</sup> This system positions all people in their related roles within a family unit as a method of understanding how to interact with and govern one another. According to Suh and Park, this ideology promotes the “need to sustain family life [...] to be

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<sup>50</sup> Kim, “Feminist Philosophy,” 247.

<sup>51</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>52</sup> Kim, 248.

<sup>53</sup> Kim, 251.

<sup>54</sup> Suh and Park, 344.

more important than individual rights.”<sup>55</sup> Female chastity and double standards around extra-marital sex fall under the assumed sacrifice of individual rights. Women should remain chaste until marriage and while men could engage in extra-marital affairs, women could not.<sup>56</sup> Under this reading of Korean culture, it can be extrapolated that all men are both fathers and sons and all women are wives and daughters. In the assumption of the protector role, the Korean government and men in general view Korean women as daughters, asexual objects whose sexual proactivity is an affront to their understandings of them. As daughters, Korean women must be guided and raised into subservient wives to the leading male figures. This creates a prevalent paternalism towards Korean women and reinforces problematic stereotypes and gender roles.

For this paper, I borrow Young-Hee Shim’s utilization of Michel Foucault’s concept of subjectivity and Ulrich Beck’s theory of emancipatory catastrophism. Foucault’s concept of “subject,” as needed for this paper, translates more simply into the idea that a person is formed into a *type* of person through historical and cultural contexts as well as a person’s centered experienced created through their agency. Shim in her 2001 paper employs Foucault’s framework more broadly in the analysis of the discourses surrounding sexuality within South Korea. The paper narrows in on the issues of Confucianism and feminism and how these two institutions impact women’s sense of sexuality.<sup>57</sup> Confucianism suppresses female subjectivity in their own sexuality through the assertion that for “moral” women, sex must only serve procreational purposes, particularly for the upright first wife.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, female chastity before marriage must be preserved while male chastity does not really exist institutionally.

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<sup>55</sup> Suh and Park, 344.

<sup>56</sup> Shim, “Feminism,” 138.

<sup>57</sup> Shim, 134.

<sup>58</sup> Shim, 135.

Finally, men may take multiple wives and pursue sexual pleasure, but sex is not an act of pleasure for women.<sup>59</sup> These Confucian ideas became instated in Korean society and law against the wishes of Korean feminists, and they continue to be influential. Shim argues, however, that the recent attention towards feminist issues, such as domestic and sexual violence, allowed for women to assert a sexual subjectivity.<sup>60</sup> Women's limited range in expressing their sexuality led to an increase in violence against them. Since they were encouraged to maintain their "chastity," many would avoid reporting rape or other instances of sexual violence to avoid having to marry their attacker.<sup>61</sup> For decades, the classification of rape as a "crime against chastity" rather than a "violent crime" legislatively asserted the crime as impacting women's reputations rather than their bodily autonomy.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the rise romantic love and its associations with sexual pleasure led to stronger feelings amongst women towards rape and sexual violence.<sup>63</sup> If rape is not a crime against chastity, it is a crime against women's bodily autonomy, and since women are now allowed to choose who to love and be intimate with, violating their bodily autonomy felt more offensive. This leads thus to the ascension to sexual subject, rather than sexual object, for women. It is an active rejection of the inherent paternalism within Confucianism that places a woman's chastity under the government's purview and a movement towards sexual liberation. This informs a historical context through which the media selected for this paper present a battle between female subjectivity and male paternalism. Though not all sexually based, femininity in many ways becomes a weapon to battle against this paternalism.

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<sup>59</sup> Shim, 135.

<sup>60</sup> Shim, 140.

<sup>61</sup> Shim, 139.

<sup>62</sup> Shim, 139.

<sup>63</sup> Shim, 143.

Shim's next theory is her application of Ulrich Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism to comfort women's transition from survivors to activists. Shim defines "emancipatory catastrophism" as "not about the negative side effects of goods but the positive side effects of bads."<sup>64</sup> In other words, within a traumatic "bad" event, the theory focuses on the "good" that emerges from it. Within this framework, there are four stages: an event that violates assumed social norms and order, an anthropological shock in reaction to the event, a social catharsis, and finally action.<sup>65</sup> The more destabilizing and disastrous the event, the stronger the drive for social catharsis. This social catharsis comes in the form of human unity attempting for a "paradigm shift."<sup>66</sup> Shim traces the journeys of Korean comfort women in the application of this theory. Utilizing a butterfly metaphor, Shim reworks the theory to better fit the comfort women case. The caterpillar stage groups the violation of sacred norms and the initial anthropological shock of sexual slavery together as push factors.<sup>67</sup> After the women returned home, they experienced new traumas due to the Korean Confucian patriarchy and thus begin a new stage. These traumas included the lasting physical and mental impact of enduring sexual slavery, family and hometown ostracization, and the inability to live "normal" lives as women.<sup>68</sup> The establishment of the KCWD, Korean Council for Women Drafted for Sexual Slavery by Japan, also served as a pull factor during this period. This stage is called their cocoon stage, as their revictimization pushed them further into their shells. With this organization created, surviving comfort women finally emerged to give reports and testimonies in the 1990s, bringing the issue's

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<sup>64</sup> Shim, "Metamorphosis," 256.

<sup>65</sup> Shim, 257.

<sup>66</sup> Shim, 257.

<sup>67</sup> Shim, 260.

<sup>68</sup> Shim, 260.

full scope to public knowledge. This begins the social catharsis and action stages where the women emerge as “butterflies” and begin their advocacy work.<sup>69</sup> Working with the KCWD half a century after the event, comfort women worked to raise awareness of their plight and to demand redress, though notably not without also criticizing the Korean government and culture’s response to the situation as well.

Through these theories, the zombie apocalypse can serve as a sort of emancipatory catastrophe that on a microscopic character basis gave female characters the opportunity to assert their subjectivity against the status quo, particularly through their femininity and a rejection of paternalism, particularly in *All of Us Are Dead*’s storyline. *Kingdom* poses a different issue through the centering a male protagonist, however it too offers an opportunity to challenge patriarchal norms through the emancipatory catastrophe of the zombie apocalypse. Shim’s transformation and metamorphosis reading align better with this as a character study.

### ***Kingdom: Mothers, Caretakers, and Zombies***

#### *Introduction*

The title sequence that plays before the start of almost every episode may best encapsulate the period horror drama *Kingdom* thematically. Dark lighting, dramatic music, unclear setting, just the outline of a person laying down with incense sticks lining their figure and smoke rising to form a haunting silhouette. The camera pans over the body, now wrapped in neatly folded triangular pieces of white fabric. The camera jumps out to an aerial shot of the body to see the cloths shaped into a fishlike outline, each triangular cloth a scale. An unseen hand removes a singular piece to reveal the symbol of the king: a golden dragon embroidered on red fabric. This is the King of Joseon, a part of the longest lasting dynasty in the world and

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<sup>69</sup> Shim, 261.

preceding the modern Republic of Korea. A golden crown piece reinforces this and then the entirety of the king's body in regal dress appears, though his face and skin remain obscured by shadow. His regal attire has a giant golden dragon on the front. His legs are tied together. The setting shifts and the camera shows two purple flowers, frail and unassuming, carefully picked with tweezers. A tool rolls past the camera which then shows mysterious liquid boiling, suggested to derive from the purple flowers. The music crescendos and a large golden collar locks around the king's throat. A needle pokes the king's forehead, just between his eyebrows. Acupuncture needles twitch on his body and another small incense holder releases smoke into the air. Once again, we see the opening shot of the king's body, but this time the smoke blows away, leaving only darkness. The next shot is the king's open mouth, filled with small pebble-like objects as what seems to be blood drips in from a spoon. The white smoke enters the king's nose. And then suddenly, a monster appears, growling and covered in blood. Just for a moment before we return to the king's clean face. His eyes open, frighteningly cloudy and white, inhuman.

There are multiple possible interpretations of the opening. First, the opening reinforces a core tenet in zombiism: the equalizing nature of death and zombies. Anyone can become a zombie, just as anyone can die at any point. The king's death is not particularly special in this scene, the viewer only realizes he's the king when an unseen force reveals his clothing. Then, there is an implicated shift after the reveal of the flowers, this is not just funeral rights, but the performance of a ceremony. It culminates with the reveal of the zombie growling juxtaposed with the king's zombie eyes opening. The king and the unnamed, insignificant commoner are the same. Both are dead, or more accurately undead, and neither can be considered human anymore. It doesn't matter that one is a king, and one is not. Both are equalized by this after-death force.



Simultaneously, there is a class discourse at play. Notably in that the king is the progenitor of this zombie outbreak, clear from the fact that he undergoes the ceremony. Furthermore, unseen hands dress him regally in death, kept completely clean and blood given delicately using cutlery.

Whereas the commoner zombie wears non-descript clothes and has blood and dirt covering his skin, the king is far removed from the violence of the zombie outbreak.

This opening also depicts the concept of a puppet king. The show utilizes zombiism to create a puppet king where those behind him rule, claiming his inactivity comes from his illness, but their decisions are his decisions. However, the king died, became a zombie through ritual, and hibernates during the day. The opening sequence presents this ‘puppet ruler’ idea through the king’s collar. An unseen force locks the heavy, golden collar around the king’s throat. In the show, this same collar restrains the zombie king from attacking people (unless they are unknowing sacrifices given to him). The Haewon Cho clan, who caused his condition, control him further from behind the scenes, using female servants as his meals and keeping him chained so they can maintain power until the queen delivers her baby. The sequence introduces the ways in which the antagonists of the show violently violate the monarchy’s natural order, through the violation of the king’s body and the leashing of the king. The king is reduced to an idea, kept around for legitimacy, but nothing more than that.

*Kingdom* owns the unique title of Netflix’s first Korean drama with season one airing in 2019 and season two in 2020. Kim Eunhee, creator of another K-drama *Signal*, wrote both the loose inspiration for the show, the webcomic *The Kingdom of the Gods*, and served as the main writer for the live action series. The series begins three years after the end of a major war fought on the Korean peninsula in the 17<sup>th</sup> century against Japanese invaders. While unnamed during the show, this war seems to be the Imjin War. With the country still recovering from the toil of war

and famine, Crown Prince Lee Chang struggles to maintain his position against the threat of father's young pregnant wife giving birth to a boy who would immediately usurp Chang's title. Simultaneously, his father retreated into his bedchambers, sick for smallpox and unwilling to see anyone besides Lord Cho, the conniving patriarch of the Haewon Cho clan. After trying to start an uprising amongst the scholars and then stealing the king's unfinished medical logs, Chang secretly sets off with his trust guard and comic relief, Muyeong, to Jiyulheon, a nearby medical village where his father's physician resides. Little does he know that Physician Lee returned to Jiyulheon with his young partner's dead body to greet dozens of people left sick and injured by the war and famine. Physician Lee, traumatized by what he saw at the palace, locks himself in his chambers. Seobi, a young female physician, takes care of the people in his stead. Though after going to pick with the other physicians, she is horrified to find that a mysterious man cooked the body of the young boy and fed it to the patients. Later that night, the patients turn into cannibalistic, violent monsters, killing Physician Lee and everyone else, while Seobi and the strange man flee. Back at the palace, Queen Consort Cho gathers poor pregnant women to keep in her private residence while her father portrays Chang as a traitor. Through the show's events, Chang transforms from an arrogant, sheltered Crown Prince to a self-sacrificing, righteous man, determined to protect and provide for the people of Joseon.

The show's protagonist is undoubtedly Crown Prince Lee Chang, though he builds a surprising allyship with Seobi, a commoner with no last name. Through a postcolonial lens, we can consider the usage of the few female characters in the show by the powerful male characters as almost parallel to the weaponization of comfort women by the South Korean government against the Japanese government. During the show, women are used to make plays against other male characters, not considering of the trauma this inflicts on them. For instance, the queen being

a pawn for her father to gain power, forced into a marriage with the king, and eventually a pregnancy. Or Seobi being brought into the queen's nursing chambers by Lord Cho despite the risk to her life. The voices of the actual women in the show become somewhat smothered by the louder male voices, empowered by a patriarchal system, reflecting how comfort women for years failed to receive redress from both Japan and South Korea. While not completely related, in the South Korean feminist postcolonial context, it is impossible to overlook the female subjectivity through gendered labor that occurs in this show. While there are few female characters or note, Queen Consort Cho and Seobi provide ample opportunity to understand their actions as representative of a female subjectivity and either a rejection of or a maintenance of the status quo in the perilous time of a zombie apocalypse.

#### *Zombies as Emancipatory Catastrophism*

Through Shim's framework, *Kingdom's* zombie outbreak becomes an instance of emancipatory catastrophism. As dramas are introspective pieces, this restricts the scale of how the framework can apply, however, reworked it does seem to satisfy the stages. First, we must acknowledge that for this show the outbreak alone does not qualify as the violation of sacred norms, rather it is events within the outbreak or prior that act as push factors to form the full scope of the violation. The outbreak alone is a catastrophe, but it alone does not motivate the activism required for Shim's theory. Instead, the context around the outbreak and the actions taken during it led to the anthropological shock required to facilitate activism later. Furthermore, in the case of *Kingdom*, Crown Prince Chang performs the relevant activism, not a female character. Since the show is set during the Joseon dynasty, pre-feminism limits the scope through which women could perform advocate for their rights. Their individual acts can only be

seen through their character studies and not as systematic changes. Instead, the larger scale change comes from Chang.

Since *Kingdom* is pre-modern, information cannot travel quickly and through non-official terminals, thus constraining the public's reaction to the outbreak. Additionally, deliberate efforts by people in power cover up the cause and spread of the infection, limiting reactions even more. A single person holds the power exclusively, who could perform their own systematic changes to support activism. Lee Chang as the Crown Prince and later the only living monarch alone determines what to do with the corrupted system, choosing to act for the people's benefit.

The violation of sacred norms occurs in two events three years apart. At the start of season two's third episode, the first instance of the Resurrection Flower being used to bring the dead back to life occurred, not with the king, but under Lord Cho and Lord Ahn's orders at the end of the Imjin War. At that point, they desperately wanted to end the war but invading Japanese forces severely outnumbered theirs. Lord Cho brought Lord Ahn, the commanding general of the northern forces, the Resurrection Flower and told him that it could bring the dead back to life, creating monsters unkillable by stab wounds and ruthlessly motivated to feast on the flesh and blood of anyone around. Lord Cho convinced Lord Ahn to not kill their men or use the bodies of dead soldiers, but to use the injured people of Sumang Village.<sup>70</sup> In a horrific moment, Lord Ahn says that they should not kill people to save the people and Lord Cho replies, "have you been fighting for lowly commoners?"<sup>71</sup> They decide then and the soldiers rush in to kill every villager and turn them into zombies. Notably, at this point, a zombie can only be created through the Resurrection Flower. It isn't until the events of the show begin in which the flesh of an infected

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<sup>70</sup> Kim, *Kingdom*, "Season 2, Episode 3," 00:02:47 – 00:06:09.

<sup>71</sup> Kim, 00:04:01 – 00:04:41.

person is consumed that zombies gain the ability to turn others through biting. Being bitten by someone with the initial variation causes fever and eventually death, but not infection. Later, after the end of the Imjin War, after the zombie commoners viciously defeated the Japanese invaders, they were all killed and buried in unmarked mounds outside the remains of their poor village.

The second violation of sacred norms occurred when the king is resurrected by the Resurrection Flower three years later. The king contracted smallpox and succumbed to the illness, however Physician Lee resurrected the king under Lord Cho's instruction. Lord Cho and Queen Consort Cho maintained their power until the pregnant queen would deliver her baby, hopefully a boy. They kept the king leashed to his bed, later locking him in a box with shackles to use as little more than an animal, while simultaneously claiming to respect the throne the most. This violates the expectations for how members of the royal family should be treated upon their death. The king was not given the proper rites, and his surviving family could not mourn their loss. He instead became a vicious weapon for the Haewon Cho clan to wield against Lee Chang and anyone else who stood in their way.

Following these violations, a cocooning period occurs in which those in the know keep the truth locked up tightly. During this time, the sheltered Chang has no idea about the terrible atrocities committed in Sumang Village, continuing to look up to Lord Ahn as a mentor. Additionally, once his father disappears, he leaves to search for answers, believing his father may be dead, but completely unaware of the magnitude of the Haewon Cho clan's offenses. He learns first of Lord Ahn and Lord Cho's terrible deed and then seen after about his father, in a cataclysmic moment of anthropological shock. While he previously asserted that he must do everything in his power to not be like the Haewon Cho clan, he becomes motivated to save as

many commoner lives as possible and to rule for them. He no longer idolizes the removed rulership of the governors, instead seeming to grow a respect for more hands-on involvement to protect his people.

Following Chang usurping the throne from Queen Consort Cho, Chang decides to enthrone his “stepbrother” and write in the records that he and his loving parents succumbed to the brutal war. Had he lived, even if he abdicated the throne, his life would be weaponized indefinitely in a war of succession with his brother. Chang decides to end the war before it can begin, rejecting the throne, and making the decision he perceives as best for the people. Furthermore, he decides to find the origins of the Resurrection Flower himself and ensure that the kingdom is safe. This is Chang’s act of activism, rejecting the monarchy for himself so that he can lead from the ground and preventing his life from endangering those in the palace. Throughout the show, he ascends as a benevolent ruler, focused entirely on the condition of the people, regardless of their status. In his determination to serve the people from the ground, he protects the people from a war of succession as well, ensuring that the new king’s focus can be on the people’s suffering in the aftermath of the violent war and zombie outbreak. This becomes his “never again” moment and he emerged as a true leader.

#### *Queen Consort Cho*

Queen Consort Cho enters the show as an obvious antagonist. She demands respect from Crown Prince Chang as his stepmother despite being noticeably younger than him, then draws attention to her pregnant belly. She positions herself immediately as a mother figure, her marriage to the King of Joseon earning her the title of Queen Consort and stepmother to illegitimate Crown Prince, Chang, and her pregnant belly. Yet, she is not pregnant and instead weaponizes her power and “pregnancy” to abuse women in lower social positions than her. She

is representative of a divergence between individual agency and sexual subjectivity, presenting a unique amount of personal agency, but doing so through desexing herself. The zombie outbreak provides opportunity for her to exercise her authority while the patriarchs of her family are distracted and eventually killed, though she does so through aligning herself with a violent masculinity privately while publicly embracing her femininity. I argue that Queen Consort Cho desexes herself through her de-association with women and the gain and maintenance of power through masculine means. These means are traditionally violent. While her initial rise to power came through the “feminine” through her marriage to a king, her murder of her father and the murder of the women and female babies aligns her more with a masculine bloodshed than the quiet maintenance of power to be assumed from her. As the patriarchs of her family are killed off, she begins to exercise more and more power publicly, no longer hiding behind her father and brother.

Queen Consort Cho’s ability to desex herself throughout the show is particularly interesting given her title. On a simplistic level, Queen Consort Cho is never referred to by name. She is referred to by title and title alone. We can relate this to how women in Korea and other cultures often lose their sense of self after having children, never hearing their own names again. From the moment she was crowned, the queen lost her own name, reduced to her relationship with the king. If she bears a son, she may be referred to by the title Queen Mother. She exists in relation only to her production of a child and her marriage to a man. Additionally, as mentioned before, Confucianism promotes the idea of chastity for women until marriage. High ranking women (first wives) should engage in sex only for procreation purposes. Yet, as a Queen Consort, one of her most important jobs is to give birth to a legitimate heir. Her husband, the king, can take concubines to have other children, however only her children are considered

legitimate and could ascend the throne. Therefore, her position threatens Chang's status as the current Crown Prince, associating her femininity with a violent disruption immediately.

Furthermore, throughout the first season, her turbulent relationship with her father highlights the importance of having a child with the king, primarily a male heir. He repeatedly tells her that her only role is to have a male heir, to be grateful he got her such a high position, that she is unimportant overall. She ominously assures him and others that her child will be a boy. Her title implies both a sex and a lack thereof. Her position as married to the king sexes her, but her position as high-ranking desexes her.

Her behavior and eventual plot, however, desex her further. Chang learns that she lost the baby she shared with the king. Upon losing the baby, she begins gathering local, poor women in her residence who had due dates near when hers would have been. She houses and feeds the women, helping them deliver their babies, only to kill them and the female children. Her servants then dispose of the women and infants in shallow graves on the residence. The only male child at the time of the bodies being discovered was stillborn and unlike the other children received a more dignified burial. She utilizes her position as Queen Consort to gather the women. They feel safe since the queen is also pregnant, believing that her pregnancy may have led to generosity. Yet, her ability to order her brother to coldly murder the women aligns her more with a male dominance. Women historically in zombie media are indecisive, motivated through emotion, acting or not acting out of fear. Yet, Queen Consort Cho acts without emotion, oppressing the women below her. She is unique in the zombie apocalypse setting, aligning with the dominant patriarchy and discarding women and girls in favor of men. There are no other women at her level, so she looks down on them all. Her fathers seem to believe that he is above her, so she hides behind him in public and schemes against him in private. It is through her secretive plan



with her brother, a man who does not rank above her, that her true agency becomes clear. Her abandonment of other women to serve her own self-interest points to a masculinization. She aligns with the patriarchy because the patriarchy benefits her.

Even when the zombies make it to the palace, Queen Consort Cho maintains this coldness in her alignment with the patriarchy. This moment could give her the chance to establish herself as Queen Dowager or perhaps as the sole ruler. She, however, positions herself behind whatever man she believes can secure her the most power and protection publicly. When her father discovered her murders, he threatened to kill her for her sins, though ultimately states that she will remain locked in her palace, supposedly mourning for her lost baby.<sup>72</sup> She acted first, poisoning his tea, and using the baby boy as her new shield. She knows that the baby boy was stolen from Muyeong's wife, but since she doesn't view her as someone worthy of respect, that doesn't matter. Women and their uteruses, for Queen Consort Cho, are another tool. Just as her father and other male family members use her for her ability to get pregnant, Queen Consort Cho turns that around on women below her. Interestingly, she could have also gotten pregnant through another person and given the king's state (dead), few people would have been capable of contesting the legitimacy of her child and pregnancy. Instead, she chose to remove pregnancy as an option for herself entirely, reflecting a sexual subjectivity in the rejection of becoming pregnant again. She *chose* to not get pregnant and to instead steal a child. When previously she had been forced into this relationship with the king, decades her senior, she had no choice over her sexual agency. She reclaims this choice through refusing to become pregnant again. Zombie outbreaks causing mass social upheaval could lead to the reassessment of patriarchal systems that subjugate women. However Queen Consort Cho utilizes her power to reinforce and maintain

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<sup>72</sup> Kim, *Kingdom*, "Season 2, Episode 4," 00:26:46 – 00:27:14.

the status quo, viewing her way to power unimaginatively through the terms she was raised to believe she needed to meet.

Queen Consort Cho in relation to Crown Prince Chang represents the abject. Defined by Barbara Creed, the abject “threatens life” and must be expelled from the body, placed beyond the other side of an imagined border.<sup>73</sup> Queen Consort Cho never achieves the status of motherhood explored by Creed in her article. However, it is precisely the attribute that engenders her that positions her as oppositional to Chang. Her ability to have a child, a male one at that, creates a discord between the two. Yet, her twisting of the pregnancy and birth makes her representation of the abject. The scene in which Muyeong’s wife gives birth is juxtaposed by Queen Consort Cho preparing for the delivery of the baby as well. Muyeong’s wife is in the backroom of a rundown hut, bloody and screaming in pain from labor. A few midwives who plan to send in a soldier to kill her after the delivery surround her. This is juxtaposed by the Queen waiting for that same baby to be delivered to her. She sits in the middle of a sort of nest, cold and ceremonial. Her clothes, the nest, the labor ropes hung from the ceiling are all white. When she is given the baby, the blood covering him has been cleaned and his mother (unsuccessfully) disposed of. Queen Consort Cho is the abject in that she is the rejection of what is *traditionally* the abject. Her birthing scene is sterile, her method of killing her father without blood nearly entirely, her death itself hidden by a zombie horde. Chang serves as the patriarchal ruler, beloved for his *direct association* with what is traditionally abject. He is often covered in dirt and blood, he kills the zombies himself, he associates with the common people. In uplifting Chang as this deified ruler, Queen Consort Cho becomes the rejected. When the bodies are fished out of the lake at the end of the show, her hairpin lays amongst the nametags of the commonfolk, her first true encounter

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<sup>73</sup> Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 213.

with them. Interestingly, her abjectness comes not from her femininity, but her violent rejection of it, disrupting the perceived natural order. Her death rectifies a natural order, while simultaneously uprooting it.

Queen Consort Cho's commitment to maintaining the status quo through the patriarchal hereditary monarchy despite it restricting her own power reflects how women oversee maintaining and passing along traditions to children. Queen Consort Cho presents as a perversion of the mother role and the corrupted system a perversion of the tradition she intends to pass along. The cycle breaks by Chang's interference and further breaks by Chang's refusal to take the throne or kill Muyeong's son. He rejects the violence against the lower classes that the queen ruthlessly employed to acquire the baby, instead encouraging those who remain as ministers in the capitol to raise the new king "right." This counters directly a scene from episode three where Lord Cho and Queen Consort Cho watch the zombified king devour a courtesan. Lord Cho tells the queen, "You must teach him what happens to a powerless king," referring to the unborn child.<sup>74</sup> The glaring irony is that the king's powerlessness came from Lord Cho's plotting that eventually reduced the king to a puppet. Furthermore, the truly powerless person in that room is eaten by the king, disregarded entirely by those in power.

### *Seobi*

The female protagonist, Seobi, differentiates herself from almost every other major character in the show by not being a nobleman. Seobi, no last name and no backstory given, begins the story as a physician at Jiyulheon under Physician Lee, who narrowly survives the initial outbreak and then steels herself to do whatever necessary to stop the spread of the plague. She typically arms herself with the farming tool she used to harvest herbs in the

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<sup>74</sup>Kim, *Kingdom*, "Season 1, Episode 3," 00:20:09 – 00:20:19.

mountain and possesses a unique amount of information on the Resurrection Flower, after acquiring Physician Lee's journal after his death. Despite her low status, she exercises her subjectivity through her confidence in rejecting Beompal's romantic advances. Because of the zombie outbreak, she earns both his respect and attention. This level of respect allows her to maintain a distance between them regardless of his obvious flirtation. Unlike in other shows, she continues this through the end of their acquaintance, admonishing his cowardice at every chance she can. She remains unattached to anyone, joining Chang on his journey as a physician. With that said, Seobi singularly follows her goal and often is used as a tool by the noblemen around her, demonstrating an interesting sort of helplessness to her positionality.

When discussing *Night of the Living Dead*, Evans describes the scene in which Tom tells Ben and Harry to stop fighting, saying that "we'd all be a lot better if all three of us were working together," noticeably omitting and ostracizing the four women in the situation.<sup>75</sup> Despite being adults, three of the women in the house are kept from participating in the decision making, relegated instead to caretaker roles. In another section discussing Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, Evans draws attention to heroine, Francine, who does not partake in a scene in which the men kill remaining zombies in the mall, instead sitting with a young zombie boy on the other side of a glass barrier.<sup>76</sup> Despite the capability Francine demonstrates during the film, she is ultimately still aligned with feminine stereotypes as a caretaker. This is the strange positionality that Seobi occupies within the context of *Kingdom*. Yet she stands apart from Romero's characters in that her caretaker qualities come from her background as a physician, rather than exclusively as a

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<sup>75</sup> Evans, "Men are from Mars," 556.

<sup>76</sup> Evans 556.

stereotypical female inclination. Her capabilities earn her respect, but her single-minded focus on her goal relegates her back to an assumed agreement with the male decision-makers.

This idea presents through two scenes: the zombification of Lord Ahn and the second murder of Lord Cho. The first scene comes at the end of episode eight and beginning of episode nine. After Lord Cho locks Chang in a room with the zombie king thereby forcing Chang to behead his own father, Lord Cho feigns that Chang unjustly killed the totally alive king. Lord Ahn when trying to enter the place where Chang and his father were fighting was shot with multiple arrows. In his final moments, he told Chang to bring him back as a zombie to forcefully reveal to the ministers and soldiers the existence of zombies. Lord Cho locks Chang away, declaring him a traitor, but Chang finds a way to convince the guards to let Seobi enter. During this time, he relays Lord Ahn's plan to her. Thus, Seobi is compelled to use the Resurrection Flower to bring Lord Ahn back to life. This would seemingly contradict her primary objective: to stop the spread of the plague. As the only person who knows how to change someone into a zombie, she should have the power to reject this request. However, she willingly does it to serve Chang and reveal the truth. She seems to weigh the creation of a singular zombie as less dangerous than Lord Cho's ascension to power with Chang's imprisonment. She acts as a pawn for Chang, the immediate assumption that she would obey regardless of her previous affiliation with Lord Cho.

The next scene reaffirms Seobi's lowly ranking socially, through a seeming disregard for her survival. Chang requests that she enter the queen's palace and do whatever possible to keep Muyeong's child safe. Beompal appeals to Lord Cho, who decides to bring Seobi in to test the queen's pulse to see if she recently gave birth. The queen initially refuses Seobi's entrance into her palace due to her low birth status, however Lord Cho insists. Ultimately, the queen poisons

and kills her father in front of Seobi, then throws Seobi into a prison beside a cell with two zombies. This quest by both Chang and Lord Cho demonstrates an interesting disregard for Seobi's life, challenged only by Chang's knowledge of her capabilities. Both, however, use her as a political tool to try to undermine the queen, yet neither considers how precarious the situation would be for her. She cannot truly refuse either and wouldn't anyway, thus presenting her agency that seems to be simultaneously elevated due to her unique knowledge but also limited due to her own passivity. Entering the queen's palace as a low-ranking commoner gave her no protection. Lord Cho furthers this lack of protection by confronting his daughter in front of Seobi. The queen locks Seobi into a cell, but very well could've killed her, unknowing of Seobi's specialized knowledge.

Despite this, Seobi demonstrates a unique sexual subjectivity through her rejection of Beompal. Cho Beompal, as magistrate of Dongnae and later head of the Royal Commandery Division, has objectively more power and influence than Seobi, even without mentioning his relation to the Haewon Cho clan. When the infected are brought from Jiyulheon to Dongnae and night falls causing the zombies to awaken, Seobi saves Beompal. After this, Beompal is infatuated with Seobi. He at first restrains himself, though eventually he begins to pursue her through attempting to help her with her work, following her to the Frozen Valley, and pleading her to run away to safety with him when danger is near. Despite this, Seobi stands her ground, telling him firmly that she will stay with Chang because he saved the people Beompal abandoned.<sup>77</sup> Throughout the show, Beompal aligns with both Chang and the Haewon Cho clan, seeming to choose whichever earns him a safe position. By the end, he displays some level of growth in courage, joining Chang to defend the palace against the zombie horde. During the final

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<sup>77</sup> Kim, *Kingdom*, "Season 1, Episode 5," 00:38:59 – 00:39:19.

scenes of the show, he serves as a high-ranking official under the child king, yet he still displays some bitterness when talking to Yeongshin about Seobi leaving with Chang. Subversive to the typical enemies/unlikely allies to lovers romance arc, the affection remains entirely one sided. Because of Seobi's drive to stop the zombie plague, she finds an out of the relationship. There is no way for Beompal to pursue her more formally, her status as a low-ranking commoner puts him in a difficult position already and the respect she's earned from others like Chang means he couldn't take her as a second wife. It is unclear what kind of person Seobi was prior to the outbreak of the infection, though from the first episode viewers can see that she is assertive and firm in her beliefs. The social upheaval the zombie plague caused, however, empowered her to reject a romantic or sexual relationship with someone of a higher status than her.

### ***All of Us Are Dead: Girls and Zombies***

#### *Introduction*

John Krasinski when discussing *A Quiet Place*, the 2018 horror-thriller film he directed and starred in opposite real-life wife Emily Blunt, stated that this film is a love letter to his children.<sup>78</sup> He asserts that the primary theme of the movie is parenthood and during the film, Emily Blunt's character asks, "Who are we if we can't protect our children?"<sup>79</sup> *All of Us Are Dead* is, in many ways, a love letter from parents to children, but more than that, a love letter baring a central apology from the adults in South Korea to high school age South Koreans. Throughout the series, there are moments of parental love displayed by parents and non-parents alike towards the children, yet institutionally, everything prevents the individual from saving them. At every step of the way, there's an acknowledgement that the children are in danger, that

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<sup>78</sup> Travers, "A Quiet Place' Review."

<sup>79</sup> Miller, "John Krasinski's Second Act."

they are the hope and the future, yet there's always a bureaucratic, governmental red line placed just in front of them that stops any adult from saving them. And the few adults that are on the ground, ready to save the children, are almost always killed by a lack of institutional protection while others applaud their simultaneous bravery and stupidity. Furthermore, the safeguards that are put in place to protect some of the high school students only end up being weaponized by high school bullies, who rain terror down relentlessly. And once again, the adults sit back and watch, focused far more on prestige and reputation than protecting any one student. To some extent, we can create a hierarchy of abuse, traveling from the lowest rung to the highest: high school bullying victims, "regular" high school students, high school bullies, teachers, parents, school administrators, police, government officials, "the system." Yet at the end, each individual person makes a choice and sometimes a choice made at the top to save one person, results in the oppression and deaths of a dozen at the bottom.

*All of Us Are Dead* enters the South Korean landscape out of the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, amidst years of rising suicide rates amongst high schoolers, after tragedies like the Sewol Ferry sinking or the Seongsu Bridge collapse. The Korean show title is "*Jigeum Uri Hakyoneun*" or "Now Our School Is" because the high school is a microcosm for the rest of the country. While many praise the title change in English, *All of Us Are Dead* reconveys the pessimistic reality to be shared amongst everyone. There's no hope, the zombies are everywhere, everyone is going to die. "Now Our School Is" centralizes this feeling to the high school. *Our school is...what?* It's frightening, a sentence choked off mid-way. And it's not just *the* school or *a* school. No, this is *our* school. This places the onus on the viewer as a member of this collective "our" who is just as a part of this as Cheongsan and Onjo. Hyosan High School is *our* school and it's a part of our country or our world. When the adults abandon the high schoolers, they are in



many ways, abandoning their own country. Lee Byeongchan, the creator of the Jonas virus, says it best, “ignoring minor violence would result in violence taking over the world.”<sup>80</sup> The bullies are always exonerated, often given positions of power, while the victims either take their own lives or struggle their way through it. When we allow systems of violence to be perpetuated at the smallest levels of our society, the systems always work their way back up.

*All of Us Are Dead* comes from the webtoon of the same name by Joo Dong-geun running from 2009-2011. The show premiered on Netflix in 2022 to immediate, overwhelming success and was renewed for another season that is set to air in 2025. The 12-episode first season centers on the zombie outbreak in the fictional South Korean city of Hyosan, with the initial spread occurring within Hyosan High School. Set in present day, the series is unique in the characters’ acknowledgements of zombie films (*Train to Busan*) and zombie film tropes. Furthermore, it attempts to address the problems facing South Korea presently and specifically. The Jonas virus which led to the outbreak was created by high school science teacher, Lee Byeongchan, after the attempted suicide of his son. Through extracting the hormone produced by mice when desperately attacking a cat, Mr. Lee attempted to empower his son to fight against his bullies. Instead, he begins the zombie outbreak, later trapping one of the school bullies after she’s bitten by an infected mouse and extending the virus outside the school to the rest of the city. The central four characters (Lee Cheongsan, Nam Onjo, Lee Suhyeok, and Choi Namra) and an ever-diminishing group of peers must fight against the bloodthirsty zombies that trap them within the school grounds. However, they soon learn that their main threat may be Yoon Gwi-nam, former gopher of the bullies now ascended to leader, who despite being bitten was not turned into a brainless zombie. Instead, Gwi-nam is the first of the “hambies,” half-zombies half-humans, who

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<sup>80</sup> Chun, *All of Us Are Dead*, “Episode 4,” 00:31:51 – 00:32:01.

retain their human consciousness, but gain the supernatural abilities and hunger for flesh of the zombies. Amongst the few other groups of students we follow, we see the failures of the government's rescue priorities and the flaws in the systems designed to protect people.

Most moving in the show is that people always do seem better together. People who ostracize the team and bully others suffer, too. Nayeon is cast out and eventually brutally killed, while the others bond over a fire on the rooftop. Gwi-nam hides away when the thunder hurts his enhanced hearing while Suhyeok makes earplugs out of his shirt for Namra. Maybe systematically there's no hope, but in one another, we can find it. If the system is broken, it may be okay, because we aren't. The leading characters of the show, primarily the female characters, all provide their own unique perspectives to understand through our analytical lens. We witness almost entirely how the zombie outbreak created an opportunity for the characters to reject the status quo and in some cases, learn to assert their personal subjectivity. For the female characters of the show, this comes through an embrace and empowerment of their femininity and in other cases, the rejection of paternalism.

### *Zombies as Emancipatory Catastrophism*

Shim's framework applies very differently to *All of Us Are Dead*, though once again we must acknowledge that the character-driven focus of popular media means that the result of public anthropological shock is often limited. However, compared to *Kingdom*, the modern era *All of Us Are Dead* takes place in provides a unique look into news spread regarding the outbreak and public reactions are presented very differently. Interestingly, the activism seen in the show at the end serves more as a method of displaying character progression and any potential activism performed by people outside the Hyosan quarantine zone is unclear. Additionally, due to the time skip at the end of the final episode, the results of the discontent by the female characters are

revealed. The activism is also uniquely only present in the female survivors with the few male characters following along.

Unlike *Kingdom*, the outbreak itself could be considered the violation of sacred norms or catastrophic event. On a broader scale, the root cause of the outbreak being a father's attempt to protect his son from severe bullying could serve as a violation of sacred norms. Likely, in the years following the show's timeline, systematic change could occur to prevent another instance of dangerous virus spread from happening. It is also possible that systematic change addressing severe school bullying could also occur, thus rendering the root cause of the outbreak moot. For the purposes of this paper, looking at smaller push factors within the larger violation to better grasp the motivations behind the girl's activism. First, for Min Eunji, the violation of sacred norms came with the release of the topless video taken of her under duress. Due to the zombie outbreak, Cheolsoo was unable to get Gwi-nam the money he demanded and Gwi-nam's phone being unreachable meant that the video would be released on a timer at 9am. The email attached to the video contained Eunji's school name, first name, and that Cheolsoo took the video. Next, for Park Mijin, her failure of the CSAT caused her to roughly give up on life, however the strife she experienced during the zombie outbreak reinvigorated her. Finally, for Nam Onjo, the failure of emergency service workers, the government, and adults in general to rescue them from the school twisted her worldview. This was cemented when special operations soldiers came to the school, extracted Lee Byeongchan's laptop, then refused to take the survivors with them and even threatened to shoot them. Furthermore, with the death of her father, it became clearer that on a systematic level, the adults failed them and abandoned the student survivors, shattering all trust she had in them. These push factors shift into the cocooning period, though that period is stunted due to the erratic nature of the catastrophe.

The anthropological shock occurred to an extent simultaneously with the zombie outbreak, though reactions to each of the affronts experienced by the three girls were not truly projected publicly. For instance, it is unclear what anyone thought of Min Eunji's video, especially considering the circumstances at the time of release. Additionally, the details regarding the outbreak and the events leading to the creation of the Jonas virus may have never been shared with the public. Thus, preventing public reaction. However, the violation Nam Onjo undergoes does seem to have some level of public awareness. Particularly the decision to bomb the city of Hyosan which faces public scrutiny immediately. The military's decision to abandon any potential survivors and to bomb the city called for a hearing within the National Assembly, but it was decided to postpone having the meeting until after the resolution of the epidemic. Whether the public were in favor of the military's decision or not is unclear from the news coverage. There is evidence of the public's immediate response to the epidemic, aligning more with the initial violation of sacred norms, rather than the individual push factors for the girls. First, there are protests by people from neighboring cities, refusing to allow refugees from Hyosan in. Next, there are pranks in major cities done by insensitive influencers for attention that lead to public panic. Finally, donations are sent in bulk to the quarantine zone by regular citizens. Rather than the "never again" sentiment experienced within the Korean comfort women emancipatory catastrophism context, the people came together in a sense of unity. It is likely that public sentiment would shift against emergency responders when the full truth comes out, however that extends beyond the timeline of the show.

Finally, there must be a movement towards activism performed by the survivors. Min Eunji has no true movement to activism, instead she experiences a moment of personal growth where after turning into a hambie, she's able to abandon her frightful and shameful past self. She

becomes more assertive and violent towards opponents, though that is partially due to her being part-zombie. Park Mijin, however, uniquely begins to stage her own miniature protest within the quarantine zone, demanding for free admission to college for Hyosan seniors who experienced the zombie attack. Her demands are played off humorously, with some parents expressing support, but ultimately, she is ignored by the system. For this reason, her character's growth is undermined to comedic relief, rather than invoking actual change or even sympathy from the audience. Finally, Onjo's movement towards activism comes in subtle and outright resistance to the quarantine zone's rules. During their questioning, she refused to provide answers, citing her newfound lack of faith in adults. After being released to the main camp, she begins sneaking out and creates a shrine to memorialize her classmates separate from the existing shrine at the quarantine base. She frequently escapes from the zone at night despite the strict orders against doing so, demonstrating her lack of respect for the camp's authority. This is a big departure from her at the beginning of the show, insistent that emergency services would rescue them and that they should trust the soldiers.

Because of the time skip at the end of the final episode, we are privy to what occurs after the main cast are quarantined. The soldiers killed Eunji after her containment in an observation room. This is a systematic rejection of her newly asserted individualism. Furthermore, this presents the extermination of a young girl after she serves her purpose to the system. Next, Mijin's protests are bypassed by people and widely ignored. Her demands are treated as childish, despite them having some true merit behind them. Finally, Onjo's quiet acts of rebellion are unnoticed by the soldiers at the zone, and she is not compelled to speak during the interrogation. If she were to be noticed sneaking out of the camp, she would likely be sent back to the strict quarantine. On a governmental scale, the martial law in Hyosan was lifted after three months,

however the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency still had not identified the virus, thus they discouraged the ending of the quarantine. Despite this, in a final act of rebellion shown on screen, the remaining survivors sneak out of the quarantine camp in the middle of the night and return to their high school. This gives them the chance to once again grieve the loss of their loved ones and friends as well as reunite with hambie Namra, who reveals that there are others like her who need help, creating a new call to action for the survivors to explore in season two.

### *Min Eunji*

Min Eunji's relationship with her sexual subjectivity provides an excellent case study for the central argument of this paper. Her character explicitly rejects the paternalism of the male characters around her, embracing instead her sexual subjectivity and femininity after being bitten and turning into a hambie. Rather than reject the zombie part of her as something repulsive or inhuman, she embraces it as something empowering. She finally begins to resist the subjugation she previously faced, screaming and fighting back. No longer does she passively accept the abuse or dismissiveness of authority figures. This manifests further through her deliberate engagement with her femininity to represent her empowerment. Her violence towards those who dismissed her, while simultaneously displaying a disturbing sense of paternalism represents a visceral rejection of the coddling and demeaning systems in place against women. After experiencing extreme abuse at the hands of bullies, Eunji considers taking her own life and goes to the rooftop. While Cheolsoo tries to talk her down from the ledge, the zombie outbreak begins, and the pair hide out on the rooftop together. She admonishes him when he confesses his feelings for her, saying that he doesn't act about anything. Later, when she finds out that the video was scheduled to send, she flees down the rooftop despite knowing it would lead to her inevitable death. She is bitten, but her drive to destroy the cell phones turns her into a hambie. Following

this, she exacts revenge on the dean of students who previously dismissed her pleas for help. Ultimately, she is brought to the quarantine zone and attacks Cheolsoo, taking revenge on him for his cowardice. This alerts the soldiers to “asymptomatic” people or hambies. The soldiers then lock her into an observation pod. Unlike other characters, the zombie outbreak was not the sole factor in Eunji’s liberation, but her turning into a hambie. The violence that comes from the transition manifests within Eunji as a unique confidence she carries throughout the rest of the show. She smiles more and asserts her desires for the first time.

Initially, her sexuality is oppressive, her subjectivity stolen from her. Bullies reduce her to a sexual object to gawk at. They abuse her particularly through degrading her as seen through Gwi-nam writing “I’m *Jol* Sexy” on the back of her shirt during class. Her objectification is met with no resistance from herself or others. The other students laugh at her humiliation and even Mr. Lee doesn’t stop the abuse. When Cheolsoo confesses to her, she laughs at the thought of them being together since they’re both “losers.” She never states if she has feelings for him as well, though she disparages his inability to act continuously throughout the show. It seems to an extent her feelings don’t truly matter because they’re already assumed to be together, further restricting her ability to choose. She expresses her rage wistfully to Cheolsoo, wishing that they could burn down the entire school. However, she isn’t motivated to act until she becomes aware of the video set to send out at 9am. Upon learning this, she resigns herself to trying to stop it no matter it’s futility. This isn’t for her own sake, but for her mother who she fears seeing the video. Her own reputation is cast aside and instead she cares about her family members, reflecting a sort of patriarchal Confucian dated thinking in which chastity was related to a woman’s reputation. It didn’t matter that the video was clearly taken under duress, it compromised her chastity. This is reminiscent of the family destroying crimes Shim mentions in which a robber

would also rape the wife in front of her husband and/or family members.<sup>81</sup> Husbands would leave their wives after the attack, viewing her as “unchaste,” thus destroying the family. Additionally, the robbery would never be reported out of shame. Eunji’s bullies weaponize this chastity shame, associating her “purity” with her family. She abandons her reputation to save her mother’s. It didn’t matter that the robber raped the wife, all that mattered was the concept of “chastity.”

Zombies bite Eunji while she tries to run to the teachers’ office. The zombies eventually lose interest after her hombie transformation begins, allowing her to make it to the office. Once there, she destroys every cell phone she finds using brute force, cursing at them all while zombies wander listlessly around, unbothered by her vitriol. By this point, the video already went out and which phone belongs to Gwi-nam doesn’t matter. After a brief violent exchange with Suhyeok and Cheongsan, she cleans herself up in the bathroom. At this point, she washes her face, removes any blood or dirt, puts her hair up into a ponytail, and puts on a lip stain. This marks a noticeable changing point in her behavior, an embrace of her femininity and therein an embrace of her sexuality. She no longer is bothered by the video, instead wandering through the halls of the school. Eventually, she encounters the teacher who ignored and victim blamed her when she tried to report the bullying she experienced. She kills him coldly before beginning to eat his flesh, briefly losing herself to her zombie ways. This marks her first outright rejection of the patriarchy, though later it manifests even more violently while in quarantine. She ignores the teacher’s orders for her to leave and attacks him, targeting him particularly for the trauma he inflicted on her previously. No longer can she passively accept his disrespect, violently rejecting it. In the quarantine zone she re-encounters Cheolsoo. She attacks him as well after saying that

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<sup>81</sup> Shim, “Feminism,” 140.



she's hungry, a representation of her rejection of his previous half-hearted paternalism. The attack begins with her acknowledging that it's who he is to let her go alone to die, not something he should apologize for. This references his decision to not follow her when she ran to destroy the phones, yet also his continuous attempts to keep her alive. He kept the video send out a secret to "protect" her and kept her from jumping off the roof to "save" her. He acts as though he knows what's best for her, trying to gather the money for Gwi-nam without even telling her. She is removed entirely from the decision-making process. Yet, when it demands action and rage, his passivity begins. He won't fight, but he won't die and he won't let her either. She, thus, becomes the one to take his life.

She later attempts to weaponize her femininity while being detained for observation, crying nonstop to the soldiers that she's an innocent human. During the beginning of her containment, she continued this act until she became hungry and freed herself. At this point, she becomes belligerent, demanding acknowledgement from the soldiers observing her. Her zombie nature manifests at this point again as she screams and beats the glass, trying to get their attention. This is a far cry from the girl who passively allowed a teacher to say that she deserved to be bullied. The soldiers who watch her are all men, representing an authority that literally restrains her against her will. It is this same authority that after she's served her purpose kills her to prevent her from spreading the virus. Her death occurs off screen, only implied by her observation room being sterilized by people in heavy duty suits. No one knows if she fought back or accepted her fate, but it doesn't truly matter because her singularity made her weak. With her death, the newfound assertiveness and ability to stand up for herself are suppressed and subjugated by the ultimate display of patriarchal authority, the military. Nothing is left of her in the sterilized room that we can see, once again reducing her to nothing.

### *Onjo and Namra*

The female leads of the show, Onjo and Namra, have very different personalities and with zombies. Within their small team, the two strongly dislike one another at the start. From their interactions, it seems that while Namra is the official class president because of her mother's donation, the other students all believe Onjo would make a much better one. Everyone within the class seems to like Onjo, while Namra is a loner, isolating herself before anyone else could reject her. Additionally, while Namra ranks number one in the school, Onjo scores near the bottom. This is worsened when it becomes clear that the boy Onjo likes has feelings for Namra and Namra reciprocates. However, by the end of the show, they develop a strong friendship and trust in one another. Namra's status as a hambie does not scare Onjo, even from the reveal of her bite. She insists that Namra isn't like the zombies, she's just their friend. Both girls present their own unique forms of self-discovery throughout the show and their own unique subjectivity experienced through their very different relationships with their male counterparts.

Prior to the zombie outbreak, Onjo seems like a typical teenage girl: she's chatty and playful with her friends, kind, and still struggling to find herself. She ranks low on exams but tries to assure her father she'll do better despite him caring only about her health and safety. She has a crush on a boy in her class she doesn't know very well and overlooks the clear feelings her childhood best friend and neighbor, Cheongsan, has for her. Since her father is the captain of a firefighter rescue team, she has survival and emergency specialized knowledge and experience. When the virus begins to spread and the school is plunged into chaos, she initially freezes up, forcing Cheongsan to rescue her. She devolves into suicidal catatonia after her best friend, Isak, is bitten and tries to attack her. Soon after, though, she snaps out of it to begin applying her father's teachings to help the group of students survive. Throughout the experience, she is

insistent that help will come, not necessarily because she has faith in the government, but because she specifically trusts her father. Her father begins the apocalypse forced to rescue a government employee, postponing when he can come save her. This causes a gradual decrease in her faith in the system. After he arrives and sacrifices himself for her to escape, she seems to abandon any faith in emergency services rescuing them at all. Her father coming alone said everything she needed to know. He wanted to save her even when the government didn't want him to. The subsequent loss of Cheongsan results in a narrow focus on just keeping their group together to make it out of there and a nihilistic distrust in all adults.

As much as she provides some insight, Onjo's primary purpose in the drama is to serve as the motivations for two male characters: her father, Nam Soju, and her childhood best friend, Lee Cheongsan. Both characters work tirelessly to ensure her survival, even when it ultimately results in both sacrificing themselves for her. While she expresses her romantic interest in Lee Suhyeok, who does protect her at points, his focus is on his crush Namra until she leaves them. Onjo is the only female character to have a crush on the show that is forthright with it. Namra's crush is silent, only suggested by the occasional longing stare. Onjo, however, confesses to Suhyeok during the first episode through giving him her nametag, a symbol for couples at their school. She is allowed to pine after Suhyeok, but both the viewers and other characters (who believe she's dating Cheongsan) root against her success. Instead, we are encouraged to support the relationship she settles with by the end. After Cheongsan confesses his feelings for her, she's horrified and upset at having just lost the only other person she can lean on. His feelings are not reciprocated. However, in the end, she ends up returning them posthumously for Cheongsan, meaning her romantic subjectivity is never truly realized. It is unclear, for instance, what attracts her to him beyond his attraction to her and their longtime friendship. But perhaps we can

understand her final turn away from Suhyeok as a kind of subjectivity. She is not simply attracted to whoever saves her and has a loyalty to Cheongsan despite his death. When she comes to understand Namra and Suhyeok's relationship, she respects them and eventually moves on to settle into a comfortable friendship with the couple. She isn't forced to move on from her feelings from him. For all intents and purposes, Namra's unceremonious exit could even give her the chance to pursue the newly alone Suhyeok. She, however, confesses through the memorial to Cheongsan instead. She chooses to be alone, rather than with someone who is still pining after someone else, a rejection of subjugation under a patriarchal assumption that she should be with a man to protect her.

In the book chapter "Boy Eats Girl," Ian Olney analyses the zom-rom-com, a subgenre focusing on the development of romantic relationships within the zombie apocalypse. Olney divides three different categories of romantic relationships in zom-rom-coms, "human-human," "human-zombie," and "zombie-zombie," the latter two offering a distinct opportunity for female agency and rejection of patriarchal norms.<sup>82</sup> Namra and Suhyeok have a human-zombie relationship, though Namra's hambie status slightly complicates this. They confess to one another only after she is bitten by hambie Gwi-nam and despite her cannibalistic urges, he resigns himself to stay by her no matter what. Unlike Olney's examples, Namra is the zombie and Suhyeok the human. This means that her decision to be with him is not the subversion of patriarchal norms. Instead, it is the supernatural abilities she gets from the transformation. After turning, their relationship shifts from Suhyeok having to save Namra, to her possessing supernatural abilities that she uses to protect him. This is an immediate subversion of the patriarchal norms enforced by Onjo's character, who often requires the stronger male characters

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<sup>82</sup> Olney, "Boy Eats Girl," 90.

to rush to her defense. Furthermore, the threat of the unknown emancipates Namra from her former restraints and allows her to embrace Suhyeok's affection more readily. She no longer is immensely stoic, now returning the other students' and Suhyeok's affection. Similar to Eunji, her relationship with her zombiism is, in this regard at least, not antagonistic. She seems comfortable with other aspects of it, however her main issue comes in her bloodlust. This bloodlust forces her to leave the group before they reach the quarantine zone. Onjo and Suhyeok witness her holding a grown man's dead body and feasting on him, but only when she turns to attack Onjo do they finally recognize her danger. Even still, they deny her zombiism, still recognizing her as their friend.

Unlike Gwi-nam and Eunji, the reasoning behind Namra's turning seems more unclear. She is bitten by Gwi-nam while risking her life to save Suhyeok from him, however this is not the first time a zombie bites a person while the person risks their life for another. For instance, Woojin is bitten in place of his sister and Ms. Park is bitten trying to protect Nayeon. We can consider, instead, how perhaps to an extent the instances in which Eunji and Namra's turnings both come from significant departures from their previous behavior. For Eunji, she is bitten when taking action. When we first see her, she rejects Suhyeok's protection to return to being sexually exploited by the bullies because she perceives it as safer. She finds inaction and passivity to defend her against bullying, when it destroys her subjectivity. Then, she stands on the rooftop ledge but doesn't jump. In a flashback, we see her at a school violence committee hearing, agreeing that the bullying was just kids playing around. It is only in her determination to destroy the phones and burn down the school that she acts for the first time. She breaks out of her patriarchal acceptance that adults and men will take care of her, seeming to realize that everything she experienced thus far suggests the opposite. Thus, she decides to defend herself.

Similarly, Namra is almost catatonically stoic throughout the show with the exception of her feelings for Suhyeok. She tells the others that she never made friends because she never had the courage to. And yet, she's bitten risking her life to knock Gwi-nam away from Suhyeok and therein saves his life. She, too, rejects her previous self that relies on systems of power to protect her and asserts herself as someone capable of saving too. Previously, her passivity prevented her from making friends or building other connections. Now, she demands to be seen, even when it's dangerous. The reason why some people become hambies and others become zombies is still unclear. These rejections of patriarchal norms and therein the societal paternalism, however, seem to some extent offer a tenuous explanation for their transformation.

## **Conclusion**

The zombie stands apart from the gothic monsters in precisely its ability to *not* stand apart from one another. Vampires, ghosts, and witches are often solitary creatures, occasionally living in small family-like units for community. Yet, zombies are undead hordes, monstrous not just in their behavior, but through their number. Their ability to multiply so quickly is itself something to fear. They also represent an abjectness of the human experience that we recoil from: bloody, decaying corpses feasting on human flesh. Even still they have become synonymous with aspects of the human experience across the globe, representing the oppressed through their subjugation beneath the powerful. They demand to be seen, heard, and viscerally experienced. No longer can the oppressed lie dormant beneath the ground but rising to demand retribution. And in modern media, they are no longer the true enemy. Instead, they serve as tools for the true evil to weaponize. Under a global system of patriarchy, this often presents as a violent masculinity oppressing everyone under a strict hierarchy of expectations.

Zombiism as a genre presents countless opportunities to read zombie narratives as stories of the oppressed regaining power. In the article “Surviving the Shambling Signifieds Zombies, Language, and Chaos” Andrew Ferguson argues that the zombie novel *Zone One* utilizes the zombie apocalypse to subvert the genre norms and give the Black protagonist “an ending in which he no longer falls victim to whiteness re-establishing its own dominance, but rather affirms a Black identity by inscribing his own narrative, on his own terms.”<sup>83</sup> This is not unlike the female characters of *Kingdom* and *All of Us Are Dead*. In both shows, the zombie apocalypse setting provides an opportunity for social upheaval that allows them to redefine their own power and do so through their femininity. Additionally, it pushes forth a female subjectivity against the paternalistic Confucian societal norms, representing recent dialogues by Korean feminists regarding female sexual subjectivity. No longer are women exclusively relegated to being objects for men to pass around and covet, but they may assert themselves as individuals capable and deserving of the right to choose who to love both romantically and sexually. The characters in the shows, similarly, reject the paternalism thrust upon them and utilize the social upheaval to exert their agency. They are not simply victims of their circumstances, but active agents redefining their victimhood into strength. Shim’s emancipatory catastrophism subscribes to this idea through comfort women’s journey from victims to activists.

Within the Korean context, Shim’s readings of Foucault and Beck better portray the agency of women through the shows. Upon initial viewership, the characters feel like victims to the apocalypse, reactive rather than proactive. However, applying Shim’s framework makes even inaction by the characters into action. In South Korea, feminism is inextricably linked to a history of Confucian paternalism and the sexual slavery of comfort women stations during

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<sup>83</sup> Ferguson, “Surviving,” 232.

Japanese occupation. These ideas manifest through these shows in the subjugation of the women both prior to, during, and after the apocalypse. Only through their active rejection of their subjugation do they experience freedom. Though the zombie apocalypse gives opportunity for them to choose to reject tradition, at times female characters embrace the protection patriarchy allows them. Furthermore, Shim's application of Beck's theory of emancipatory catastrophism offered a unique lens through which to view the timeline and aftermath of the zombie apocalypse. Even when the world seems to collapse, men still assert dominance over women during zombie media. Both shows present women asserting their independence despite that, fighting against their subjugation without an outright rejection of their gender. In other words, women don't need to become men to be treated as equal to men.

Thus, through the framework of a zombie outbreak, we can see how humanity falters and tries to rebuild itself, deciding between either maintaining tradition or embracing change. For Queen Consort Cho, patriarchal tradition gives her power and her inability to imagine a world where she defines herself without her relation to a man is too abstract to grasp. Characters like Seobi and Min Eunji, however, take advantage of the changing world to push for their own individuality and choose their paths, separate from their relationships with men. Ultimately, for Eunji, the system rejects her motions for change and suppresses her. For Seobi, however, she achieves a level of freedom that would otherwise not exist for a woman. There is no romance in *Kingdom* and Seobi isn't constrained by those expectations either. She assumes an equality with men impossible for the character of *All of Us Are Dead* in which the patriarchal system violently subjugated them. We can consider these issues, then, and see how our own non-zombie society could grow. Eunji's death and the suppression of her independence exists within our realm of



possibilities. How can we change that? The exploitation of commoners and the lack of value ascribed to their lives exists within our realm of realities. How can we change that?

With the popular rise of South Korean cultural media, more productions may be released exploring similar themes within the society. Just as the United States has pushed out zombie films for nearly a century, South Korea can begin their own journey of exploration through the genre, approaching it with a different cultural lens than Western audiences have previously been exposed to. Yet, the core of the zombie genre remains true in its humanistic approach. A zombie film from the United Kingdom inspires a South Korean director who can inspire an American writer. Oppression is global and feeling subjugation by a power greater than yourself resonates without borders. Furthermore, the threats of ecological collapse and the direct repercussions of our actions rising to force us to take accountability are only growing more poignant in recent years. The zombie confronts us with an abject, unsavory picture of ourselves. They represent a fear of an unknown afterlife, of the violent repercussions of our actions, of being faced with a loved one turned monster. Some approach this subject through horror, some through comedy, and some even reappropriate through children's media. It's easier to confront the zombies when they dress as silly pirates, and Scooby Doo always saves the day. But even then, the real enemy lies within us to defeat. Perhaps an exploitative capitalist system or oppressive patriarchy or looming environmental collapse. The true villain cannot so uneasily be unmasked as a greedy capitalist when zombie media points the finger at each of us as part of a future horde.

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