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Film Review

Lee Isaac Chung, Minari: Having an Amerikorean Life (2020)

Minari by Lee Isaac Chung is a drama that was financed and produced by Netflix in 2020. Director Chung depicts the hardships and struggles of a Korean family who immigrates to rural Arkansas in the United States. Although the film takes place in the U.S., the language of the film is bilingual, crystalyzing even further the acculturation process of immigrants, particularly Asians whose languages are very different from European ones. This bilingualism of the film is an indication that the family lives in a hybrid micro-culture. Grandmother Yuh-Jung Youn, who embodies the concept of cultural migration in the film, won the Oscar for the Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in 2021 (Oscar Awards 2021). Steven Yeun, who made history as the first Asian American actor to be nominated for Best Actor, drew attention to the intermediary role of the film industry for globalization with this nomination. The film won the U.S. Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic and Audience Award: U.S. Dramatic, presented by Acura at the 2020 Sundance Film Festival, where it had its world premiere at the U.S. Dramatic Competition (Sundance Institute 2021).

The literature suggests that migration occurs mainly for three reasons: war, disasters and development (Horyniak et al. 2016, Taşdemir et al. 2020). While the largest number of international migrants are located in the United States of America (United Nations 2019), concurrently Turkey is the country that hosts most migrants worldwide (Taşdemir et al. 2020). In 2021, nearly four million Syrian war-affected migrants live in Turkey, outside the formal economic system, and employed in illegal jobs. It is argued that young Syrian immigrants start to use and sell alcohol, cigarettes and drugs at an early age when they should be in school, which eventually affects negatively also the country's economy (Taşdemir et al. 2020).

The situation is different in the case of Yi Family depicted in Minari. The efforts of Korean immigrants to find jobs in poultry farms in the 1980s and then to establish their own farms in the USA by buying their own lands were promising. Indeed, all across the United States, there are significant pockets of Asian-American farmers; and one can find...

...thousands of... Korean-American and Asian-American farmers across the U.S. There are clusters of Hmong-American farmers in Wisconsin; Laotian-American and Punjabi-American farmers in California's Central Valley; Vietnamese-American farmers near New Orleans. Many of them are connected by the Asian American Farmers Alliance... Minari's studio A24 reached out to Mai Nguyen, who founded the [farmer] alliance, about organizing an advance screening for her group. When she announced the screening, excitement was so high that the allotted 200 virtual tickets were all claimed within 48 hours. In the end, A24 admitted 300 people into the screening, and Nguyen says her phone exploded afterward with excited responses (Chow 2021).

Indeed, the motivation behind the migration story of Yi Family is the belief in achieving better living conditions by pursuing individualistic paths of development as the migration literature suggests. Basically, Yi family aims to improve their lives in the USA instead of Korea.

A Brief Summary of the Movie

Minari chronicles the life of a Korean family who moves to a rural area in the USA during 1980s. The 7-year-old Korean-American boy David moves to Arkansas with his family who encounters a new environment and lifestyle in Arkansas. David and his sister Anne are bored most of the time with their new life, while their mother, Monica, is terrified of living in a mobile home, which is made of a truck trailer in the middle of nowhere. Meanwhile, the grandmother from Korea joins the family to take care of the kids. Jacob takes his family and marriage on a dangerous adventure as he tries to spawn a farm on the virgin land of Arkansas that has never been touched before by any other people.

Performing the role of a father who takes his family on a whole new adventure, Steven Yeun stars as Jacob, a man determined to make his dreams come true no matter what. Jacob, who wants to bring local flavors to the focus of his new life, wants to grow the local vegetables they were accustomed to in Korea, and market these to other Koreans who immigrated from Korea to the USA, like himself and his own family. Thus, in parallel with his own migration adventure, he wants to migrate these local tastes and Korean food culture to the USA. According to Jacob, Koreans living in America will be able to satisfy their longing for their country by accessing their local delicacies. Minari, as one of these delicacies, is an edible plant commonly found in Asia and often used in

Korean cuisine. This plant, which gave its name to the movie, is a good starting point to discuss the acculturation process of Yi Family.

A Closer Look at the Acculturation Process of Yi Family

Immigrants of the world continue the construction of a "borderless new world order, where people live where they want" that makes old borders and policies obsolete, unlike anything envisioned by any political leader or academic (Peñaloza 1994). Also, the immigrants have a huge effect on the formation of national culture and character. As Peñaloza asserts, in the construction of the concept of nation, the concepts of being included in the nation or staying outside the nation define the nation. These concepts are related to joining a group or a community, or leaving a group or a community. Like the Mexicans who came to the USA from another country and culture, speaking another language and thus seen as foreigners and out of society (Peñaloza 1994), the Yi family are also perceived as foreigners who have come to the U.S. from Korea. They are seen outside the nation-society and also evaluated in terms of their (strange and unfamiliar) consumption habits. They have to work and strive harder than the Americans in order to lead a fully American style life in the United States. Yi Family's consumption habits exemplify the concept of consumer acculturation, which is the aquisition of skills and knowledge relevant to engaging in consumer behavior in one culture by members of another culture (Peñaloza 1989). It is known that the migrants, whose consumption patterns are generally examined, adhere to the current culture, the previous culture or a mixture of two cultures in a hybrid way (Peñaloza 1994). Peñaloza (1994) argues that the most critical factor in the acculturation process is the environment. Similar to the findings of Peñaloza's study (1994) with Mexican migrants, Yi Family is depicted as leading a socially and physically segregated life, like many Mexicans living in America.

The starting point of a new life is the couple's emigration to America to embrace and live the American Dream. Although it is not known how the impact of globalization would have affected their daily lives if they had chosen to live in Korea, as immigrant Koreans in America, they live with global immigrant identities trying to preserve their locality. However, the second-generation immigrant Korean children have already given up their locality and are under the influence of globalization. The acculturation process has worked differently for children versus their parents who have had more connections with Korea. The fact that young David and Anne have their breakfast with a bowl of corn flakes, milk and fruit juice in their quotodian life, mimicking the typical American food culture, is a symbol of

acculturation to the prevalent and pervasive American culture that surrounds their lives in Arkansas.

The changes with the arrival of the grandmother are another striking issue in the movie. The reason behind reluctance of David about sharing his room with his grandmother is a peculiar smell he perceives of his grandmother. On the other hand, Monica (David's mother) brims with tears of joy when she encounters local foods, spices and herbs that her mother brought from Korea. This scene conveys her intense longing for her home country. Monica is thrilled when she receives the hot pepper that her mother brought from Korea. She asserts that this is something special that cannot be found in America.

Food does not only feed and nurture the people who eat it, but also heals the body of the people (Grunding 2018). Food is a cultural treasure of the place where it is produced. Herein seeking a cure for David's heart disease, Monica and the grandmother team up to boil a medicinal herb from Korea. They persistently try to make David drink the juice of the plant. The sister Anne also abides by the decision on this issue. Thus, Anne forces David to drink the herbal drink, even if David does not want to drink it, reluctantly. David gets angry with his grandmother, and his anger makes him prepare a drink from his pee to get a revenge from his grandmother. When he becomes aware of this transgression, Jacob (David's father) takes a tough stance to discipline David and wants to punish him. He sends David to the garden and asks him to find a stick. The grandmother, on the other hand, cannot witness this punishment and tenderly forgives her grandson.

According to the Social Exchange Theory, individuals engage in relationships on the condition of mutual benefits such as the need to be loved and respected, the need for trust, consideration, and economic returns, and thus behave in accordance with social norms (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995). The Korean family tries to embrace the rituals of American families in order to be submissive and loyal to social norms. In sociological terms, church visits are seen as an instrument to alleviate the lack of belonging in immigrant families. In the movie, the religion and belief system that emerges – based on the need for socialization and adaptation to society – is the subject of several scenes in the film. Monica considers going to church to be an important indicator of socializing.

As Schulz (2004) asserts mediatization and other 'izations', such as globalization, commercialization and individualization, have a critical and expressive function. Most often, they are instrumental in critical assessments of social change with the latent function of expressing a certain attitudinal or political position. Concepts are of only limited value

for scientific analysis unless it is possible to clarify their meaning and indicate their analytical usability.

Grandma's curiosity about everything she sees in the new life in Arkansas, the things grandchildren eat and drink, and her appetite for the Western products highlight the geographical archetypes of East and West. The conflict between David and his grandmother in Minari refers to the idea that Western civilization is thought of as a giant archetype, analogous to the struggle between Western and Eastern civilizations as Karaca (2021) asserts in his studies. David as a Korean-American boy who is assimilated as the second generation of the Yi Family in the USA has already started acting like a westerner and sets his gaze on his grandmother as non-Western or even too Korean and thus foreign. The grandmother brings daily life practices and her culture to America through a local card game which she brought from her home country. David revolts that his grandmother carried these cards all the way from Korea.

Struggles, Family Ties, and Minari - An Enduring Plant

During her walk in the field with the children, the grandmother plants the minari plant by the water's edge, believing that it will grow in the wetland. Although this migration story seems like a struggle to build a life, which is told from the eyes of a Korean family, it can actually be defined as a universal expatriate story. Jacob embarks on a new life with the idea of establishing a farm for Koreans in America. The frame of the film is drawn with the events that enable the audience to better understand the concept of a Korean family. As seen in Korean Director Bong Joon-ho's seventh movie Parasite, it can be said that Koreans have strong family ties. The two families in Parasite are inspired by the contrasts in families and the details of the concept of being a family are strikingly revealed (Barunson E&A 2019). As known from Korean movies, Koreans have strong family ties and traditional structures. In this movie, a family drama is projected around the similar dynamics. From this point of view, although it is similar to Parasite, we have a much more realistic and positive story instead of moments full of tension, suspense and fear evident in Parasite. Jacob's struggle to overcome his financial problems without letting his family know of the difficulties, the mother's process of getting used to a place that does not look like home, David's struggle with heart disease, and his older sister's shrunken demeanor trying to support the family evoke positive emotions.

With the immigration of Yi family from Korea to the United States, the effort to migrate the culinary culture and food is the cornerstone of the film. This family, which settled from the East to the West while trying to be a part of the globalizing world, portrays the efforts of acculturation. Therefore, the life of Jacob and his family is molded and fermented by the concepts of consumer acculturation as the modes of assimilation, integration and separation (Peñaloza 1989).

As evidenced from the social distantancing practiced by the Korean poultry farm workers, who had immigrated to the United States from Korea earlier, the later arrivals like Monica and Jacob are marginalized. The main thing that bothers Korean immigrants is that Jacob can determine the sex of the chicks at an unbeatable speed. While the Yi family is greeted frostily by prior immigrants like themselves, they are unexpectedly greeted in a friendlier manner by Paul, who is from the U.S. Paul is an eccentric local character with interesting quirks of his own. He is one of the characters that could have gone unglamourously in so many different ways, but there is something genuine and sincere about him. Paul is just one of the many people in the world who are ignored in the larger society. Giving love to the Yi family is very important to Paul because love is a big part of Paul. Since Paul has no prejudices against the Yi family, they also have no prejudice against Paul. Because all of them are alienated from the culture they live in, they are the outsiders, and they are the most judged. This is the common meeting point for Paul and the Yi family. Minari gives its messages in a naiver way than expected. The film is a discussion and blend of rational thought and spirituality. It offers the feeling that one of these concepts would be incomplete without the other. While the first half of the movie can be considered static, the second half exposes a turbulence of emotions. It deals with the past, childhood, selfsacrifice, nature, family and unity, work, effort, socioeconomic well-being, self-sufficiency, autonomy, belief and disbelief, tradition and despair.

The family is caught between its own identity crises and the economic difficulties of the time. As they move away from their ideal life, Jacob and Monica's bond with each other begins to weaken. The arrival of the mischievous grandmother reminds the family not to give up easily, just like the Korean "minari" plant, which is known to endure and take root in all kinds of conditions. The fact that the minari plant comes back and grows strongly after it dies and that it grows on its own without any effort explains why minari is used as a metaphor (Kitchn 2021).

Furthermore, music, a cultural and differentiating symbolic practice, is used as an indicator of identity and difference for the expression of immigrant communities and migration movements (Çerezcioğlu 2010; Uzuner 2020). In Minari, the audience opens the scene with an intriguing hybrid instrumental, sad and expectant music. Throughout the film, the struggle for immigration flows with music.

The Glass Ceiling of Amerikorean

Jacob refuses to live like most workingclass immigrants from Asia. He does not want to do a job where he will have to separate the sexes of the chicks for the rest of his life in the poultry farm. He wants to get rid of this life model constructed for immigrants. He is hardworking and determined. He believes in rationality. He owns his own land and wants to grow Asian crops for the food industry. He does not believe in the spiritual people who look for water with a stick to find a water source in his land, and he finds the water source with his own knowledge by reasoning and being proud about it. He sets an example for his son and gives lessons to him. However, Jacob encounters many unforeseen setbacks. While hopefully investing in family's future, he repeatedly crashes into glass ceilings as an Amerikorean. The water well that Jacob dug dries up. Jacob is reluctant to pay for city tap water, but he is eventually forced to do so. He faces additional challenges, such as the Dallas client canceling his orders at the last minute. Jacob also perseveres despite Monica's desire to return to California, which brings their marriage closer to breaking point.

In the meanwhile, David's blood pressure is constantly checked and recorded by his mother. In order to avoid possible health problems, David is often warned not to run by his mother. For this reason, David struggles with living his childhood. From time to time, he slips under his sleep. Even when his mother is not close to him, he, who is a stocky boy, leads an indoctrinated life as if there is a glass wall around him, and he is afraid that if he runs, he will bump into it. Unable to discharge his energy physically, the child hides his pranks at home and in his relationship with his grandmother. In this context, David is forced to migrate his limited childhood to adulthood due to his cardiovascular problems before he can fully experience his own childhood. This creates a legitimate reason to dislike the various burdens of health management and to engage in pranks whenever the opportunity arises.

As we watch the disagreements of the dialogues between the husband and wife, we are left with a dilemma about who is right in the given context. It is possible to believe that both are right, from their own point of views.

Ambivalency

Watching the development of the relationship between the family's little kid, David, and his grandmother is emotionally impressive. David's "you're too Korean" attitude towards his grandmother compared to his own half-American family is a prime example of assimilation in a child's eyes. The relationship between a father figure who has difficulty in seeing something

beyond his own dreams and a mother figure who seeks a sense of belonging by establishing communication and bonds is extremely realistic. The more a behavior is rewarded and appreciated, the more individuals tend to behave in that direction. The parties seek to obtain the maximum return with the least cost (Yağcı and Çabuk 2015).

The childish, playful and mischievous ways of the grandmother are not considered to be characteristic features attributed to an old woman in societies. Not acting like an adult makes her feel too insecure to take care of the grandchildren. However, as a result of what happened in the later scenes in the movie, love and compassion are felt towards her due to her mature attitude towards events. The grandmother encourages David as expected of an adult, who is very eager to run but has reservations because of his fear. When David tells her that he saw a snake while walking with her grandmother to the water's edge, the woman wisely approaches the danger of snakes, advises and calms the child.

Moreover, the dialogues between Monica and Jacob while waiting for the doctor at their hospital appointment are significant examples of the communication conflicts of the couple and the deadlock of their marriage. Fortunately, the doctor's hopeful approach to David's health puts the family at ease. Subsequently, the hope sought throughout the film shines through when Jacob receives his first order of vegetables from an Asian store he visits after the hospital visit for David. However, one of the problems in migration adaptation is the inability of the Asian vegetables planted in the American lands to be properly and adequately irrigated, and perhaps not to grow due to the lack of wind, humidity, sun and rain suitable for the Asian climate. The place and importance of climatic and geographical agriculture and nutrition in cultural migration is once again revealed. Monica and David, as husband and wife, are literally dichotomous representations of rationality and sensuality. Jacob's determination to make it through to the end, despite the odds of failing, is the most static point in the movie.

Conclusion

Throughout the history, people have traveled from one place to another for different reasons. The immigration to find and transport different foods and different types of nutrients to other people in other lands highlights one of the cultural issues of international relocation. In this context, the issue of bringing food products to the table in other lands requires many relationships and networking. The originality and centrality of food – in this film – is captured through the minari plant.

The minari plant is a watercress and belongs to a genus of plants from the Apiaceae family and tends to grow in moist soils, swamps or water (Guijarro-Real et al. 2019). Due to the water it contains, watercress is a low-calorie food and is also rich in vitamins A and C. Naming the movie "Minari" makes sense because minari is a common vegetable in Korea, which is known for its ability to survive, grow and thrive even in harsh environments. This plant highlights the key aspects of migration that are the subject of the film. Just as a plant needs suitable climatic conditions to grow, immigrants also need to adapt and be accepted to the sociological conditions of the migrated country. The hopeful ending of the film is that the minari plant is not overemphasized and proliferated at the water's edge, symbolizing fertility, success and harmony.

Considering that many of the food products we eat come to our table with an average journey of one thousand kilometers, it can be said that the multiple studies in the field of marketing and supply chain are realistic in pointing out the challenges of bringing food from farm to the table (Grundig 2019). Minari comprehensively conceptualizes the issue of migration from Asia to the Americas. Just like in the film Okja (Uzuner 2020), which dealt with a meat delicacy sought widely by consumers and corporate players, Minari opens up a wide space to rethink food and cultural migration from different perspectives. Once again, the relationship between orientalism and globalization is emphasized by the identities of being American, Korean and a hybrid version of both as Amerikorean through the distinction between rationality and sentimentality. Orientalism is used to legitimize imperialism in the globalizing world, as Edward Said argues, by being associated with spirituality (Said 1978).

Moreover, despite the migration from Asia to America to seek the American dream of better living conditions, paradoxically, the Korean lifestyle is preserved in quotidian life. Immigration is presented through the effort to cultivate Korean vegetables in America. When the minari plant basically finds the water source it needs, it gives a fruitful crop despite all the harsh conditions. Although the Yi family cannot shed their Korean identities and assume a purely American identity, they produce an American identity that is more in parallel with the currently evolving concepts of global acculturation (Appadurai 1990) than older concepts of rooted acculturation. Consumer acculturation is reflected in the Yi family gaining the knowledge and skills to engage in consumer behaviors in the United States as the members of a new (to them) and adopted culture. A new cultural seed is planted in Minari with the interaction of American and Korean cultures. As in the case of the Yi Family's migration, the emerging

new life and daily consumption habits are mostly the result of acculturation arising from settling in another country.

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