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**Publication Date**

2017-04-01

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27th Annual Thinking Gender Graduate Student Conference

March 12<sup>th</sup> 2017

## **Till All Comes Back Home**

### **Introduction**

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a statement which advised the Japanese government to acknowledge full legal responsibility for their use of Japanese military comfort women and to formally and properly apologize to the victims of this atrocity of World War II.<sup>1</sup> The term “comfort women” indicates the young Korean women who were forcefully drafted by the Japanese imperial army during the Second World War to serve as sexual slaves, and provide “comfort” to frustrated men in war in various forms of sexual abuse, torture, and violence. Around two hundred thousand women were subject to such historical tragedy, and Korean women comprised the great majority of comfort women. Unfortunately, only two hundred and eight women, about one percent of the total number returned home. Today, only forty-three victims stay alive.<sup>2</sup> Still, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the far rightist Japanese government has denied the past atrocities and refused to apologize to the victims of this prototype human trafficking, despite the fact that these very victims are still living and have recounted the painful memories surrounding their enslavement.

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<sup>1</sup> Seokwoo Lee, and Hee Eun Lee, *The Making of International Law in Korea: From Colony to Asian Power* (Boston, MA: Brill-Nijhoff, 2016), 131.

<sup>2</sup> “S. Korea set to take first step to implement deal with Japan on sex slaves,” *Yonhap newsagencies*, May 30, 2016.

Director Jung-rae Cho produced the film, *Spirits' Homecoming* (2016)<sup>3</sup>, which focuses on Korean comfort women to draw attention and raise awareness about this extremely important matter. The film has drawn following in both South Korea domestic society and international communities. The primary objectives of Director Cho were as follows: to console the victims and draw attention to the matter without condemning the Japanese people as a whole.<sup>4</sup> While there have been other documentaries illustrating the historical facts of this tragic event, *Spirits' Homecoming* differentiates itself from its predecessors as a commercialized film. More importantly, this movie fully embraces feminist values and virtues, going against the negative portrayal of women in most commercialized films.

The main objective of this paper shall be to consider how *Spirits' Homecoming* appeals to its audience in contrast to other related documentaries and investigate how this film opens up a new view on the role of women and feminism in cinema. Firstly, this paper will briefly explore the historical background and current issues about comfort women, the central subject of this film, and explain the director's motivation behind the production of the film in regards to its social background.<sup>5</sup> Then, it will examine why there has been such a lack of attention to this matter in the commercial film industry. Thirdly, it will delve into the differences between this movie and previous films. Finally, this paper will discuss the contribution *Spirits' Homecoming* makes to transnational feminism, explaining the film's impact on Korean society. By conducting this research, I would like to demonstrate how going against the imposed standard on women's

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<sup>3</sup> *Spirits' Homecoming*, directed by Jung-rae Cho, performed by Hana Kang and Miji Seo, JO Entertainment, Wow Pictures, 2016, film.

<sup>4</sup> *Arirang Today* "Spirits' Homecoming, A Movie Miracle Made By the People," directed by Tae-chul Kwon, written by Eun-seon Yu, Arirang, Mar 7, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jee heun Kahng, "Film depicting horrors faced by comfort women for Japan army tops Korea box office," *Reuters*, March 3rd, 2016, accessed June 2nd, 2016. <http://www.reuters.com/article/southkorea-comfortwomen-film-idUSL3N1683A5>.

role in cinema can still be commercially successful and have a powerful influence that can change people's perception on women. Finally, I hope to encourage filmmakers to produce more of this type of films so that even when the Japanese government attempts to bury the truth, people will constantly shine a light on the most painful scars of Korea in an effort to eventually heal those scars properly.

### **Historical Facts and Context**

The concept of comfort women emerged in the Japanese army during the Chinese-Japanese War in 1938. The name "comfort women" is a direct translation of the Japanese term, "ianfu" (慰安婦)<sup>6</sup>, a euphemism for "prostitute(s)." When the Japanese government first dealt with the issue of comfort women, it adopted "jugun ianfu (comfort women joining the army)". However, historical documents about wartime only use the term "ianfu (comfort women)".<sup>7</sup>

At the beginning of the war, these women were hired for pay by Japanese military as professional prostitutes to help sexually frustrated soldiers cope. However, as the war progressed the Japanese government became increasingly concerned about a possible military riot, which strengthened the importance of comfort women in quelling the Japanese military officers' anger about the war.<sup>8</sup> Consequently some girls and young women were kidnapped by Japanese soldiers and forced into sex slavery; others were sold to pay off their families' debts. Eventually, two hundred thousand women found themselves in sex-slave stations. These girls were taken to comfort stations at various locations of the war front to ease the soldiers of extreme stress of war.

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 69.

<sup>7</sup> Kirsten Orreill, "Who are the Ianfu (Comfort Women)?," *New Voices: A Journal for Emerging Scholars of Japanese Studies in Australia*, no. 2 (2008): 129.

<sup>8</sup> "Who were the Comfort Women? The Establishment of Comfort Stations," *Asian Women's Fund*, accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-01.html>.

**Estimates of Researchers<sup>9</sup>**

Name of Scholar	Year of Publication	Number of Military Personnel	Parameter	Replacement	Number of comfort women
Ikuhiko Hata	1993	3 million	one for fifty soldiers	1.5	90,000
Yoshiaki Yoshimi	1995	3 million	one for hundred soldiers	1.5	45,000
			one for 30 soldiers	2	200,000
Su Zhiliang	1999	3 million	one for 30 soldiers	3.5	360,000
				4	410,000
Ikuhiko Hata	1999	2.5 million	one for 150 soldiers	1.5	20,000

The above table represents the estimations from various researchers on this topic of sex slaves during World War II, which contains shocking figures, especially on the parameter section. From the studies, one can find that, overall, between thirty to one hundred and fifty soldiers sexually abused one comfort woman per day. In these comfort stations, women suffered something just short of hell. Being enslaved by the Japanese as military sexual slaves, they were

<sup>9</sup> "Number of Comfort Stations and Comfort Women," *Asian Women's Fund*, accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.awf.or.jp/e1/facts-07.html>.

physically, sexually, and mentally abused and tortured. As the insanity of war invaded the minds of the soldiers, the Japanese military increased its brutality on these young girls. In this unbelievable condition, pregnancy was not a choice; it was forced upon them. And yet, pregnancy was a curse for which the only consequence was death since women who became pregnant, sick, or weak were gathered and killed all together because the Japanese found them useless.<sup>10</sup> It is, then, only natural that just a mere fraction of these women survived this exploitation, and even if they did survive, most of them could not get married due to the psychological effects of the abuse they received and the stigma of having served as a sex slave.

#### **Current Issues: Social Background behind the scene of *Spirits' Homecoming* Release**

*Spirits' Homecoming* was released in the midst of an intense national debate in Japan about how and whether or not to acknowledge this largely private history of abuse against women. Many South Koreans were upset with their government's role in the abuse of comfort women issue. Both the South Korean and Japanese governments developed a mutual agreement to settle the decades-old controversy on Japanese sex slaves during World War II, a futile attempt to resolve the festering wound that has agitated tensions between two of the most important U.S. allies in Asia. (The comfort women issue has caused years of strained relations between South Korea and Japan, which has caused some anxiety for the U.S. government) Under the accord, two important agreements were made. 1) The Japanese offered 8.3 million dollars as funds to compensate the comfort women. 2) The Korean government agreed to remove a statue it had placed in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul. The Japanese government disapproved of the statue because it honored comfort women and implied that the Japanese government was

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<sup>10</sup> "Japanese Military and Comfort Women," *Asian Women's Fund*, accessed August 7, 2016, <http://www.awf.or.jp/e1/index.html>.

responsible for the comfort women's abuse. Even as they signed the agreement, Japan never admitted to taking comfort women against their will.

The Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made a personal apology for the comfort women's treatment, something he had been reluctant to do numerous times in the past.<sup>11</sup> However, some Koreans considered this agreement inadequate. The Korean Council for Women Forced into Sexual Slavery, an organization, which represents former sex slaves, stated that to redress the tragedy done to these women, the Japanese government must apologize and compensate each individual woman directly instead of establishing an indirect fund to do so. The council also critiqued the Korean government's agreement to remove the "Statue of a Girl" in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul, calling the agreement humiliating.

*Spirits' Homecoming* became popular as a result of the South Korean public's frustration at its government's failure to secure sufficient compensation for comfort women victims. Though Mr. Abe himself made a personal apology, the Japanese government still refused to make an official apology on this matter, maintaining a stance of denial of this tragic event. Even in Abe's apology, he stated that there is no evidence whatsoever that these women had been forced to work as sex slaves for the Japanese military. Many South Koreans believed that their government had reached a careless agreement with Japan on this sensitive issue without the consideration or participation of former comfort women and the public consensus. Infuriated with the settlement, watching *Spirits' Homecoming* became a way for people to protest and express their dissent from the two governments' position on the issue of comfort women. The film's February 2016 release coincided with the public's existing widespread dissatisfaction at

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<sup>11</sup> Sang-hun Choe , "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime 'Comfort Women'," *The New York Times*, December 28 2015.

the South Korean government's mishandling of reparations for comfort women. The release of *Spirits' Homecoming* presented an outlet for audience's frustration and opportunity to recall the painful historical legacy of the comfort women, thus generating popularity for the film.

### **Motive behind the *Spirits' Homecoming***

In 2002, *Spirits' Homecoming's* director, Jung-rae Cho visited the House of Sharing where the Japanese military comfort women live and derived inspiration from a painting there entitled "Burning Virgins."<sup>12</sup> The artwork had been created by Il-chul Kang, a former comfort woman who was born in 1928. She painted the piece at an art psychotherapy class that she took at the House of Sharing.<sup>13</sup> At only sixteen years old, Kang had been taken to a comfort station and forced to be a sex slave where she was relegated to constant assault and beatings by the Japanese soldiers. Taking in all the horrific torment and abuse, she later became ill with typhoid. The Japanese soldiers determined that she was useless and decided to throw her into an incinerator for disposal. Fortunately, before she was thrown into that inescapable fire pit, she was rescued by the Korean Independence Army, which had waged a surprise blitz attack against Japan. However, she had to make the difficult decision to reside in China rather than go back to Korea because of the potential stigma that her countrymen would put on her due to her experiences. In 1998, after years of endless waiting, she finally returned home and decided to live in the House of Sharing along with other comfort women victims.

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<sup>12</sup> AMY QIN, "From Cho Junglae, a Film on Japanese Wartime Brothels," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Si-soo Park, and Da-hee Kim, "A movie made to heal tortured souls of 'comfort women'," *The Korea Times*, March 2, 2016.





Figure. 1. The painting “Burning Virgins,” which drawn by Il -chul Kang, inspired *Spirits’ Homecoming*<sup>14</sup>

The painting portrays one group of women burning in a pit dug by Japanese soldiers to hide the traces of their war crimes. As the women’s bodies burn, other group of women awaits to be shot by the Japanese soldiers. Kang had watched this horrific situation with her own eyes. She knew she had almost been the victim of this herself and expressed the gruesome spectacle in her painting. After hearing this unbelievable story and witnessing the painting, Cho felt a strong desire to console the lost souls of the comfort women who could never return to their hometowns.

<sup>14</sup> Il-chul Kang, "Burning Virgins," digital image, *The New York Times*, March 24, 2016, accessed November 06, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/25/movies/from-cho-junglae-a-film-on-japanese-wartime-brothels.html>.

### **Understanding the Lack of Representation in Commercial film industry**

Director Cho wrote the script and directed *Spirits' Homecoming* all by himself. He mentioned that "I have thought that I would make a cultural evidence by making this movie,"<sup>15</sup> responding to the Japanese government's denial of the existence of comfort women. However, the production of the movie had difficulty in shooting, distributing, and exhibiting due to financial challenges. Mainly, investors thought that *Spirits' Homecoming* lacked popular appeal. However, around seventy-five thousand people donated a total of nine hundred and eighty thousand dollars through crowd funding for the movie's budget and production; it was enough for Cho to finish creating the movie.

Distribution of the movie also became a challenge. A handful of major distributors, mainly CJ E&M, Lotte Entertainment, and Showbox, dominate the Korean film industry. Since both CJ E&M and Lotte Entertainment are subsidiaries of conglomerate firms, they have enough budget to invest, produce, and distribute motion pictures in South Korea and even abroad. Even more, they have their own multiplex theaters on a national scale, which are obviously the most popularly visited theaters in Korea. Hence, films they produce can more easily and effectively get distributed and exhibited than those from any other distributor. Therefore, movies that cover politically sensitive issues such as comfort women are likely to be shunned by these major film production and distribution company in South Korea.<sup>16</sup> Both CJ and Lotte thought this film would be a box office failure and rejected the chance to serve as the film's distributor.

In the end, a small company called Wow Pictures took in charge of distribution for the film. Despite the incredible effort, however, there was trouble in exhibiting the film. Because of

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<sup>15</sup> Ho-jung Won, "'Spirits' Homecoming' to open after 14 years," *The Korea Herald*, February 14, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Ja-young Yoon, "Cheong Wa Dae pressured CJ vice chair to resign," *The Korea Times*, November 4, 2016.

the lack of the available screening opportunities, the date of exhibition was postponed. Fortunately, people made a petition for the movie to be exhibited in major multiplex theaters. Because of the immense interest and numerous petitions, the number of screens showing *Spirits' Homecoming* was expanded initially from thirty-nine to three hundred and one. Though it had taken a total of fourteen years to finish the production, Director Cho's efforts were rewarded when the film ranked number one on its opening weekend at the box office in South Korea, with a gross of 6.4 million dollars earned.<sup>17</sup>

### **Analyzing *Spirits' Homecoming* into Characters and Symbolism**

The storyline of *Spirits' Homecoming* mixes both the past and present. In the past scenes, the story revolves around Jeong-min (Hana Kang), Yeong-hee (Miji Seo), and other young girls and about their tragedies, being forcibly mobilized as sex slaves for the Japanese imperial army. When the film transition to the present, the two primary protagonists are the-now-old Young-hee (Sook Son) and Eun-gyeong (Ri Choi), a teenager who was sexually assaulted in 2011 and gained the ability to see, listen, and exorcise spirits so that they may return back home. Young-hee visits Eun-gyeong in hopes of communicating and consoling the spirits of her friends who had been killed by the Japanese soldiers. All of the principal characters in the film experience sexual assault as teenagers.

All of the characters except Eun-gyeong represent different types of victims of the comfort women tragedy. Jeong-min represents the many comfort women, who, after attempting to escape the comfort station, were shot to death by the Japanese army. Yeong-hee represents the

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy Tartaglione, "'Deadpool' Crosses \$600M Global; 'Gods Of Egypt' Bow To \$24.2M; 'Zootopia' Hops With \$30M 3rd Frame – Intl B.O.," *Deadline*, February 28, 2016, accessed May 10, 2016, <http://deadline.com/2016/03/gods-of-egypt-deadpool-zootopia-mermaid-international-box-office-overseas-weekend-results-1201710506/>.

few remaining survivors, forty-three in total, who are still living in miserable pain till these days. Through the film, the audience can empathize with these tragic victims and contemplate the more than seven decades of unresolved suffering the victims had undergone. Finally, Eun-gyeong, the sixteen-year-old exorcist, stands for the victims of sexual assault in today's society. Through peaceful exorcism, she consoles Yeong-hee and Jeong-min who have deep resentment.

The young shaman Eun-gyeong shares important traits in common with the former comfort women, including Young-hee and Jeong-min. Not only were they all victims of sexual assault, but after being sexually assaulted, their daily lives and even their relationships with their family and neighbors changed dramatically and often tragically.



Figure. 2. Old Young-hee finally faces Jeong-min's soul through Eun-gyeong's exorcism to console dead comfort women in *Spirits' Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>18</sup>

While the exorcism was held to console the spirits, for Young-hee, the exorcism served as an opportunity to express her guilt and to say "I am sorry" to Jeong-min's ghost. The audience

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<sup>18</sup> Figure.2. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 01:46:36.

might raise the question: why does Yeong-hee, also a prey for human trafficking, repeatedly say “I am sorry” to Jeong-min so many times? The line “I am sorry” has multiple voices. First, she speaks for herself and for the other surviving comfort women, who feel guilty for surviving. After saying “I am sorry,” old Young-hee says that “Since the day I left you there and till now. I have been at the comfort station. My body may have returned. But my heart never did, Jeong-min.” Additionally, her lines function in place of the South Korean public’s apology for its complicity in the comfort women’s abuse and for not seeking justice before.



Figure. 3. Dead comfort women are lying on the fire pit in *Spirits' Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Figure. 3. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 01:51:53

If we remember that the movie was made to console comfort women, we can see the tremendous importance of Eun-gyeong's character. Just as her job is to exorcise the spirits' memories, Director Cho is performing exorcism that South Korea and the world can participate in. The exorcism that Director Cho performs happens symbolically through Eun-gyeong.

Following old Young-hee's apology, the scene changes, and Eun-gyeong finds herself fifty years in the past in the pit in which the Japanese soldiers threw Young-hee's friends. Butterflies emerge from the victims' dead bodies and fly in the direction of their homeland. The butterflies' flight symbolizes freedom that the victims had lost and wished to regain. Just as the title of the film, *Spirits' Homecoming*, suggests, the metaphoric butterflies captures Director Cho's earnest wish that the souls of the dead victims might be able to be peaceful and go back to their dear childhood homelands as they wanted so desperately.

Although Director Cho symbolically alleviates these women's suffering, that alone cannot offer true justice. The other part is to depict Japanese soldiers' brutality. Thus, this movie also includes depiction of the utter brutality among the Japanese soldiers. Historically speaking, during World War II, every day they were in peril and within sight of death. Thus, it would be no mere speculation that the Japanese soldiers were terrified every day with uncertainty of survival. Through maltreating comfort women as their sex slaves, they tried to temporarily forget about their resentment and deal with the insanity caused by war. In this regard, the director is careful not to depict all Japanese as inhumane but how mad and ugly the reality of war truly is, causing people to take extreme measures and commit flagrant crimes against the weak.



Figure. 4. Dead comfort women are burned in the fire by Japanese soldiers in *Spirits' Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>20</sup>

But a crime is still a crime, and the director had no intention of covering up the iniquity itself; he employs mise-en-scene as a tool to express and amplify the infringement of comfort women's rights done by the Japanese soldiers. To explore in more depth, the director's use of lighting also highlights the contrast between the bright, benign atmosphere prior to Japanese invasion and after the atrocities done to the young women by the Japanese Imperial Army. For instance, scenes when the young girls gather up and chitchat have lights with bright glow or clear daylight. There were also some occasions when the lighting of one scene, where Jeong-min meets a Japanese soldier who hands her a map to assist her escape from the comfort station, is bright. Director Cho intentionally manipulates the lighting like this to convey what is good, if not

<sup>20</sup> Figure. 4. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 01:31:25.

right and just. However, scenes where these young girls get raped and lose consciousness contain this dark and gloomy atmosphere through relatively dim lighting.



Figure. 5. A Japanese soldiers is beating a comfort woman in order to have sex with her forcefully in *Spirits' Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>21</sup>

The settings, especially the comfort station, illustrate the cramped conditions that the comfort women had to live. For instance, the puny, rusty iron beds and rooms looked like chicken house or old dilapidated barns, maximizing horrible spectacles by using enclosed space such as the narrow confines of prison life. This gloomy atmosphere represents how horrific these sex crimes were perpetrated against comfort women. To make it even worse, depicting the incinerator, which was used to burn the comfort women after being shot to death, is just a simple, deep pit, implementing the idea how wretched and in vain their deaths were.

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<sup>21</sup> Figure. 5. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 00:40:30.



More so, the camera work buttresses the barren atmosphere of the comfort station. Through the bird's eye-view shot of the comfort station, the reality for girls seems like caged birds. In particular, a scene of burning the girls, who were shot to death by Japanese soldiers because of pregnancy and ill, gets in to full swing of tragedy and cruelty, using a fire blazed in plunging pit bull. Like Japanese soldiers who are emotionally empty and thoroughly unsavory, the shot is portrayed as a matter-of-fact description without zoom-in or zoom-out shots.

However, Director Cho does not forget to depict few humane Japanese soldiers who felt guilty being part of this massacre. Some scenes show them communicating with comfort women as more than sex objects. For instance, when a Japanese soldier, Danaka (Seung-hyun Lee) come to Jeong-min's room in the comfort station, he does not have sex and rather makes her rest. He also asks for Jeong-min's name for her resemblance of his sister back at home, the first humane interaction between a comfort woman and a Japanese soldier. Later, Danaka becomes Jeong-min's helper to escape from the comfort station by giving her a map. However, because of his humane tendencies, he would ultimately be punished. When Danaka hesitated and did not shoot the girls who were ill and pregnant, his commander shot and killed Danaka. As Danaka is the only Japanese soldier who treats the comfort women as human among the whole platoon, he represents the very few of the conscience soldiers. Furthermore, having Danaka being shot for choosing what his inner conscience suggests, the director shows the audiences that some humane Japanese soldiers might have also been victims of the war such as the comfort women; *Spirits' Homecoming* conveys the message that, essentially, war is tragic to all. Through these scenes, though the atrocities done by the imperial Japanese soldiers during World War II were horrible, audiences can treat these soldiers as victims of wartime too.

Finally, the most significant advantage and differentiation this film sets apart from other documentaries is that there is a main character that the audience can associate themselves with. The previous films would also focus on facts and the historical pain of the living victims of this early form of human trafficking.<sup>22</sup> However, most of the victims in these documentaries were now obviously very old, which makes it difficult for younger generations to empathize and sympathize. Also, simply relaying historical dates, numbers, and past events as concrete facts can be hard to take into the heart and mind. However, by having young, relatable characters such as Jeong-min, Yeong-hee, and Eun-gyeong, the audience can visually recognize that these afflictions happened to women in their age but just in a different time setting. They can emotionally invest in the characters, and as the plot develops, their anguish and pain are fully absorbed into the audiences' mind. This was why this movie had so much impact in the contemporary Korean society, unlike any other films dealing with this matter.

Also, while having a past-present plot might feel complicated, it creates a sense of this matter being a current issue that all people can relate to. This aspect is most significantly shown with the character setting of the young female exorcist Eun-gyeong. In the movie, she is also portrayed as a victim of sexual assault, and it is hard to deny that sexual assault against women happens everywhere, even in the United States. In representing Eun-gyeong, a modern time, young woman with a similar, painful background as Yeong-hee, a past victim of sex slavery and still suffering from the pain, the director succeeds in delivering the message that this issue of

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<sup>22</sup> *The Murmuring*, Blu Ray, directed by Young-Joo Byun, (1995; South Korea: The Association of Korean Independent Film and Video, 2007).

*Habitual Sadness*, Blu Ray, directed by Young-joo Byun, (1996; South Korea: The Association of Korean Independent Film and Video, 2007).

*My Own Breathing*, Blu Ray, directed by Young-joo Byun, (1999; South Korea: The Association of Korean Independent Film and Video, 2007).

comfort women is still and should be real, tangible, and relatable to all people. In this regard, *Spirits' Homecoming* shows the feeling of solidarity between women who were trampled by men's violence.

### **Analyzing *Spirits' Homecoming* with Feminism – Women and Cinema**

Feminism, the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men, has been gaining a progressive momentum in the recent years since its birth in the mid-1800s. While there are still more works required for absolute gender equality, significant improvements have shown in the work field, political representation, and most importantly in people's minds.<sup>23</sup> However, it is quite astounding how the cinematic world, one of the major mediums of art in modern society, savors an anti-feminist trend. In the cinematic history, there has been a double standard set against women for almost a century; most women are overly sexualized either to pleasure the eyes of men or to be condemned for their wicked, unethical, and impulsive tendencies. Obviously, not all movie portrays women with a bikini or nudity; nevertheless, it is hard to deny the fact that women are still overly sexualized in many major blockbuster or Hollywood movies.

Regarding this theme of “overly sexualized women” in cinema, Laura Mulvey, a British feminist film theorist, attempts to understand this trend, relating it to Freud's psychological theories in her prominent essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”<sup>24</sup> She states that “cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking,” further explaining that the “active”

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<sup>23</sup> Chris Beasley, *What is Feminism?*, (New York: Sage, 1999), 3–11.

<sup>24</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism :Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833-44.

males are the receiver of this sexual pleasure while the “passive” females are mere givers.<sup>25</sup> Among myriad examples in cinema, one of the most conspicuous cases can be the *007 series*.<sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup>Though James Bond is arguably an attractive character to all genders, what truly mesmerizes the male audience is the presence of the Bond Girls. Regardless of their age, position, or race, they are all depicted as sex symbols, a one-night lover for James Bond.

With respect to Freud, Mulvey infers that voyeurism, the psychological desire to clandestinely seek nudity or sexual images, is one of the major causes to solidify the sexual images of women. She argues “the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation.”<sup>28</sup> As self-explanatory as it may be, male audiences manipulate anonymity as an audience and enjoy being the witness of an erotic scene. Moreover, men can associate themselves with the male protagonist of the sexual encounter. By submerging oneself as the male protagonist, male audiences gain a sense of control and dominance over women through this indirect sex with the women on the screen.

One example of such portrayal of women can be seen in a recent Hollywood movie called *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2015).<sup>29</sup> In one of the last scenes of the movie, Tilde, the strong-hearted princess of Sweden, is locked inside a cell by the villain, and offers to have sex

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid,835

<sup>26</sup> *Dr.No*, Blu Ray, directed by Terence Young, (1962; USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2008).

<sup>27</sup> *From Russia with Love*, Blu Ray, directed by Terence Young, (1963; USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 20, p. 836-837

<sup>29</sup> *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, directed by Matthew Vaughn, performed by Colin Firth and Taron Egerton, Marv Films, Cloudy Productions, Shangri-La Entertainment, TSG Entertainment, and 20th Century Fox, 2015, film.

with “Lancelot” Eggsy if he succeeds in rescuing her and the world from the villain’s plan. Eggsy succeeds, and when he revisits Tilde’s cell, the camera zooms up on her naked figure, exclusively to her hips. These so-called “fan service” scenes, which are unnecessary and irrelevant to narrate the film, clearly indicate that attempts to satisfy male’s sexual fantasy are still prevalent. As John Berger once mentioned, while men are drawn as the active subject, women are passive subjects as an eye-candy.<sup>30</sup>

Some film producers may argue that their depiction of sexualized women is to show their suffering, perhaps as a victim of sexual assault or human trafficking. While those films may enlighten the audience about the harsh reality and struggles that women face, such as human trafficking, they are made in men’s perspective and highlights only on the issue, not the women in pain. A famous Liam Neeson action movie, *Taken* (2008)<sup>31</sup> is a great example of this. The movie revolves around Bryan Mills (Liam Neeson) trying to save his daughter from human traffickers in Paris, France with brilliant stunt choreography. The film does a good job in exposing some aspects of atrocities against women, but it focuses on a man trying to fix the problem in his male way, through violence and brute force. There are some emotional scenes between a father and a daughter, but nowhere in the screen shows sympathy directly towards the women suffering. This is the limitation that these movies have; it is still a movie made ‘about’ women but *for* men. Additionally, when a woman exposes more of her skin or her honest sexual desires, that female character is portrayed as immoral or even magnificent against men. All of

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<sup>30</sup> John Berger, *Way of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1972), 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Taken*, directed by Pierre Morel, performed by Liam Neeson and Maggie Grace, EuropaCorp, M6 Films, Grive Productions, Canal+, TPS Star, M6, All Pictures Media, Wintergreen Productions, Dune Entertainment, and 20th Century Fox, 2008, film.

these depictions of women show that the cinematic world for the most part, perceives women from a man's perspective. As a song lyric says, it is truly a man's world.

### **Analyzing *Spirits' Homecoming* with Feminism – Women, Cinema, and Korea**

The Korean cinematic field displayed similar manners and limitations when portraying the role of women on the screen, as the American market heavily influenced many directors and film producers in Korea. With the rapid modernization of Korea and the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the severity and frequency of violent crimes such as kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder increased significantly. The targets of these psychopathic predators were mainly women or young female children. In order to depict the bleak, dark side of reality, many directors employed these violent crimes as their main topic theme and created many suspenseful, good thriller movies; there is a lineage of these certain types of movies, starting from *Memories of Murder* (2003)<sup>32</sup>, *The Chaser* (2008)<sup>33</sup>, *The Man from Nowhere* (2010)<sup>34</sup>, *I Saw the Devil* (2010)<sup>35</sup>, and many more.<sup>36</sup>

However, frequently, the depiction of these crimes on the screen were often unnecessarily intensified and exaggerated. Furthermore, the real problem is that most of the times, both the camera and plot employ the perspective of men in viewing these atrocities done to women. For

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<sup>32</sup> *Memories of Murder*, directed by Joon-ho Bong, performed by Kang-ho Song and Sang-kyoung Kim, CJ Entertainment, and Sidus Pictures, 2003, film.

<sup>33</sup> *The Chaser*, directed by Hong-jin, Na, performed by Yun-seok Kim and Jeong-woo Ha, Bog House, Vantage Holdings, and Showbox Entertainment, 2008, film.

<sup>34</sup> *The Man from Nowhere*, directed by Jeong-beom Lee, performed by Bin Won and Sae-ron Kim, Cinema Service, Opus pictures, and CJ Entertainment, 2010, film.

<sup>35</sup> *I Saw the Devil*, directed by Jee-woon Kim, performed by Byung-hun Lee and Min-sik Choi, Softbank ventures, Peppermint& Company, and Showbox, Mediaplex, 2010, film.

<sup>36</sup> "Statistics on Korean film industry," *Korean Film Council*, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://www.kofic.or.kr/kofic/business/board/selectBoardList.do?boardNumber=2>.

According to the annual evaluation of South Korean film industry from 2000 to 2015, approximately 23 films with themes on murder and sexual violence were released.

instance, *The Chaser* depicts several prostitutes being kidnapped by the psychopathic antagonist throughout the film. Their role was simple; either to be simply told through some lines that they were murdered or to escape from the antagonist's hideout, only to be caught again and beheaded. The victims did a fine job screaming and shivering, but except for exhibiting primal fears, no concern was given to how those women actually suffered. Rather, it almost fits the cheesy Hollywood equation that women who are open to sex will die horribly. Among the noticeable three prostitutes who were allegedly killed, one had the most screen time, and she was wearing only lingerie for the most part. Right before the antagonist kills her, the camera angles the scene from top to bottom to give a sense of dominance of the murderer. As Mulvey suggests, though it may be violent, through this scene male audiences are able to gain subconscious pleasure for their feel of over-empowerment. The biggest irony to come, however, is that the one who saved the day and caught the perpetrator was the pimp. The narration leading the movie is not between the abuser/men and the abused/women, but the abuser/men and the defender/men. By exaggerating how cruel and bloody the murderer is, it gives justification to one man to harm the murderer under the name of justice. The violence and abuse become a problem of men, and the actual victim of abuse, women, degrades as a mere device to highlight the men's difficult fight.

Additionally, the life of a women or women's suffering is portrayed in the screen only to highlight and criticize the current socio-political structure of Korea, not women's struggle or life itself necessarily. For example, in a movie called *A Petal* (1996)<sup>37</sup>, set in the 80s during the military regime in South Korea, "the girl," the teenage protagonist whose name we never get to know, gets raped; as a result, she experiences mental illness and gets possessed. During the sexual assault scene, the film overlaps back and forth the Gwangju Democratization Movement

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<sup>37</sup> "A Petal," YouTube video, posted by Young An, May 22, 2014, <https://youtu.be/bnI78UpTj10>.

(GDM), a civil uprising on May 18th, 1980, against a military junta. When the camera is on the Girl's body, it shows the people who participated in the GDM in order to obtain liberal democracy. When she moans in pain, the film also shows the bloody massacre done against civilians by the military. In this regard, the Girl's loss of purity symbolizes Korea's loss of freedom and democracy. Interestingly enough, the focus on this scene was exclusively symbolic rather than empathetic for the Girl who was raped, for her pain was visually overcome by the actual footage of people being massacred. Likewise, women suffering from sexual abuse by men are usually portrayed to expose the irrationality and absurdity of the society and only that.



Figure. 6. The Girl is sexually assaulted and abused by a man in *A Petal* (Sun-woo Jang, 1996)<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Figure. 6. Sun-woo Jang, "A Petal," filmed [1996]. *Youtube* video, 00:20:36, posted [December 2015]. [https://youtu.be/Ou3\\_ASNbRSE](https://youtu.be/Ou3_ASNbRSE).





Figure. 7. 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement where South Korean soldiers killed hundreds people, who opposed the country's takeover by the military, is represented in *A petal* (Sun-woo Jang, 1996)<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the many aspects of portrayal of women's suffering in Korean cinema, *Spirits' Homecoming* defies these standards and holds values of feminism, which further buttresses to both console the comfort women and gain favor of the female audience. One of the most distinguishable features and techniques was their camera work. As mentioned above, most films would depict women in a passive, male-dominated way; they are stared down by men which give a subconscious sense of superiority. Moreover, though it may not have been intended, there is a strange tendency of excessively exposing women's skin, creating an eerie, erotic atmosphere, which provides sexual pleasure to the male audience. Despite of all these trends, *Spirits' Homecoming* differentiates itself from other films about comfort women and depicts the suffering of women as it is. There is not a single scene in this movie filming unnecessary skin exposure of the young, comfort women. To be more precise, the camera never went past the collarbone and captures the breasts of the comfort women. The camera solely records the women

<sup>39</sup> Figure. 7. Sun-woo Jang, "A Petal," filmed [1996]. *Youtube* video, 00:23:19, posted [December 2015]. [https://youtu.be/Ou3\\_ASNbRSE](https://youtu.be/Ou3_ASNbRSE).

suffering without showing further nudity, just the sorrow on their faces and avoids any nuisance to clandestinely satisfy the audiences with voyeurism.



Figure. 8. Camera focuses on Jeong-min's face instead of her body in *Spirit's Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>40</sup>



Figure. 9. Camera again focusing on Young-hee's pain-feeling, facial expression, after being sexually assaulted by a Japanese soldier in *Spirit's Homecoming* (Jung-rae Cho, 2016)<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Figure. 8. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 00:39:58

<sup>41</sup> Figure. 9. *Spirits' Homecoming*, Blu Ray, directed Jung-rae Cho, (2016; South Korea: FNC ADD Culture, 2016), 01:32:04.

Furthermore, there is another stream of feminism aspect in this movie; *Spirits' Homecoming* abides to the post-colonial feminism movement. Comfort women were not products of mere human trafficking; rather, they were colonial victims by men under the reign of Imperial Japan. According to T.Denean Sharp-Whotong, there is an intricate relationship between the oppression of women and feminism. In order to pursue nationalistic values and independence against these colonial empires, one usually takes a conservative approach on things to protect what is in their own culture.<sup>42</sup> However, most cultures from older times commonly contain violation of women's rights and embed men's supremacy, which inevitably blocks the progressive movement for feminism. Hereby, feminism declared to be on its own regardless of anti-colonialism or pro-nationalism, which is post-colonial feminism.

South Korea had a similar historical trend regarding to this issue. In order to be freed from Japanese colonialism, most intellectuals and leaders at the time pursued more of social Confucian values, which include seclusion of women from the main power in the country. The desire to be independent was too high at the time being nobody questioned the cons of such movement. However, after gaining independence, now Korea or more specifically Korean women had to fight against the more-tightly implemented Confucian values discriminating women. Such struggles are still occurring in post-modern days Korea. One of the scenes in the movie shows Yeong-hee being mocked by men working in a government agency, to tell such thing that one was a comfort woman is an insane thing to do. The culture of victim-blaming, especially against women, is still strongly prevalent in Korea, and Director Cho and *Spirits'*

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<sup>42</sup> Denean T. Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*, trans. Jae-won Woo, (Goyang: Ingan-Sarang), 2008, 157.

*Homecoming* tackles this issue by constantly “initiating a conversation”<sup>43</sup> about this matter, as Gayatri Spivak, a renowned post-colonial feminist intellect, would approve. Constantly giving chance to subaltern women, the actual victims of these tragedies to talk can create impact on setting the facts straight and resolving the problems.<sup>44</sup> *Spirits’ Homecoming* does this role of giving another chance to comfort women to raise up their voice about their suffering and call for justice, a true feminist act regardless of any other movement that might occur in the same time period.

### **Analyzing *Spirits’ Homecoming* with Feminism – Comparing Imamura’s Documentary and *Spirits’ Homecoming***

*Spirits’ Homecoming* was not the only film to depict the harsh past and reality of female sex slaves during World War II; Shohei Imamura, one of the most accomplished Japanese directors, filmed an hour-long documentary called *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute*<sup>45</sup> (shortened *Karayuki-san*). *Karayuki-san* is a term to describe Japanese women who were forced to work as prostitutes overseas, especially the Southern-East Asian region during WWII. The reason behind them being forced into sex slavery was somewhat similar to the Korean comfort women; some parents needed money and sold their daughters to the imperial Japanese Army; some voluntarily went for it to earn money; some were dragged by the army.

This documentary revolves around a main character called Kikuyo Zendo, an old lady who lives in Malaysia since the migration from Japan. The director starts to conduct the

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<sup>43</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (London: Macmillan, 1988), 25

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute*, directed by Shohei Imamura, (1975; USA: Icarus Films, 2012) , DVD.

interview, asking her some easy questions in the beginning. Then, he asks very sensitive questions, such as “how many men have you slept with?” or “did you still feel orgasm when selling sex?” Zendo never loses her smile during these inquiries, but that does not mean the life they bore was simple or easy. Most of the other Karayuki-sans from this documentary display a sense of hopelessness in their faces; this amplifies the irony and cynicism of Zendo’s smile for she had to endure all the terrible things due to her country and somehow overcome and view it differently. It seems as if sadness was a luxury to bear for her to survive in an unfamiliar land.

While there appears to be some similarities between Karayuki-sans and comfort women, they are not exactly the same, which is also well depicted in their style of shooting and theme between *Karayuki-san, the Making of a Prostitute* and *Spirits’ Homecoming*. Firstly, *Karayuki-san* is a documentary formatted as an interview. As discussed in this paper before, an interview covers reality with facts and actual anecdotes, but it also distances the nowadays audiences from their pain because it seems too historical and factual. There is a higher chance to perceive what the interview is covering as just a thing that happened. The old victims are mere remnants of the past. However, *Spirits’ Homecoming* was different; though it portrays realistic yet fictional characters to cover the tragic topic, it actually brings more resonance to the people’s heart because the main characters’ age and circumstances are very similar to the main audiences’. It creates more sympathy and empathy. *Karayuki-san* tells a testimony of the story, but *Spirits’ Homecoming* shows and makes the audience the witness of the story.

Moreover, there is a big difference in the central focus of the themes. *Karayuki-san* focuses on the devastation of “citizens” under an imperial and militaristic regime. The false-glorified ideology brings destructions to the ordinary people’s lives and the government takes no responsibility for the aftermath. That is the main central theme of *Karayuki-san*; they expose and

criticize the totalitarian government via using a case on sexual slaves, but the main focus was not on sexual slaves. *Spirits' Homecoming* then again differs to be the same with other ordinary critical, journalistic documentaries. As a feminist film, *Spirits' Homecoming's* focus was solely on the comfort women and the sorrowful events that they had to endure. It was not to attack Japanese soldiers blindly or just point out an injustice in the past. It was to create an atmosphere of sympathy, so that people could pay more attention to the women themselves. This is the biggest difference that *Karayuki-san* and *Spirits' Homecoming* has. *Karayuki-san* employs women's suffering to castigate Japan's former militaristic government in the past, but *Spirits' Homecoming* has its focus on women's suffering itself.

### **Discussion on the Film During Reception and Afterwards**

The response to the film during its reception was quite dramatic; on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016, at the Edgewater Multiplex Cinema in New Jersey, there was a range of audiences, from teens to elders, all utterly shocked by the brutal fate that these young comfort women had to face. In this reception event, James Rotunda (Mayor of Palisades Park<sup>46</sup>) and Rep. Gordon Johnson (D-NJ) also came to watch the film, and they wept while witnessing the tragedy. Many audiences in the reception confessed that, “It was only after watching this movie that I realized how serious the comfort women issue is and how severe the pain could have been,”<sup>47</sup> or “I felt embarrassed how indifferent I was on this issue, thinking that it had nothing to do with me.”<sup>48</sup> Some commended

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<sup>46</sup> Kirk Semple, “In new Jersey, Memorial for ‘Comfort Women’ Deepens Old Animosity,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2012. The City of Palisades Park in New Jersey was the first city ever in the globe to build the “Statue of a Girl” on their City Hall.

<sup>47</sup> Chang-hyun Noh, “Mi-kuk-in-tŭl ch'ung-kyŏk pun-no..wi-an-pu sil-hwa yŏng-hwa 'kwi-hyang' nyu-yok si-sa-hoe” [미국인들 충격 분노..위안부 실화 영화 ‘귀향’ 뉴욕 시사회, [American audiences reacted to the New York premiere of *Spirits' Homecoming* with shock and anger], *Newsis*, February 1, 2016.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

and encouraged Director Cho and his staffs' efforts, while others took it even further to make this movie as a start for a new movement for comfort women and women's rights in general. Regardless of the age, class, religion, or race, all came together with a conclusion that the comfort women issue is still real, and there is still much to be done to compensate for their pain.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of *Spirits' Homecoming* is that it was the first commercially successful feature film to deal with this sensitive issue of comfort women. Despite the lack of support from major companies, it made an impressive gross profit. However, the true value of this movie does not rely on those numbers. *Spirits' Homecoming* neither necessarily pursues on denouncing the Japanese government nor aims to provide shallow comfort for the victims. The film attempts to depict a tangible sense of the comfort women's struggle and evoke sensation of being naked together with the comfort women when their human rights and dignity were stripped under the imperial Japanese military. The film accentuates the devastation and tragedy of history itself and heartily sends out the message that this must not be repeated.

Unlike Germany, the Japanese government has never publicly acknowledged and apologized for the terrible things committed to comfort women during their occupation of Korea. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe refused to acknowledge that the recruitment of the comfort women was a systematic crime committed by the Japanese government and military. Moreover, the Japanese government asserts that there is no evidence to prove mobilization of Korean women as sex slaves, despite forty-three living victims testifying to their horrible experience. The influential right faction in Japanese politics insists on unacceptable arguments as they have a stance of total denial on the forced conscription of comfort women along with other historically

well-known war crime facts. To cover up such real atrocities committed against these innocent women are attempts as futile as to cover up the sky with one's own hand.

It is very suggestive that the Japanese government is not being honest and sincerely remorseful, as they claim to be, in the matter of Japanese military sexual slavery. Thus, many surviving victims of sex slavery—mostly from China and Korea—urge the Japanese government to make an earnest apology and are still seeking compensation for their irrevocable experiences. These former “comfort women” are still having demonstrations and protests every Wednesday outside the Japanese embassy located in Seoul, South Korea, on this extremely uncomfortable matter. One of the best journals in the U.S, *The New York Times* also recognizes the atrocities done during the Japanese occupation of Korea, in particular focusing on Japan's use of Korean sex slaves during their colonization period.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, a U.S. House committee has undertaken a first step toward impeaching Japan's sexual enslavement during World War II by passing a resolution for comfort women.<sup>50</sup>

The movie has made the nation aware and has gained worldwide attention that the comfort women issue is not only a problem for those who are concerned, but for all of humanity. That is why Director Cho emphatically declares that this movie is not simply about the story of the ‘past’ but of the ‘future’ for all. Movies like these should come out more in the future to awaken and enlighten people and give them awareness that only through properly healing past wounds can we deal with current problems. As this low-budget movie was able to bring to light the comfort women who could not return to their home, while seeking to alleviate the pain of the

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<sup>49</sup> Sang-hun Choe , "Japan and South Korea Settle Dispute Over Wartime ‘Comfort Women’," *The New York Times*, December 28 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Ki-hong Lee, “Comfort Women Resolution Passes U.S. House Committee Vote 39-2,” *The Dong-A Ilbo*, June 28, 2007.



past, and give impact to the whole society, the film industry should keep on working on lighting the light until all souls of these painful pasts could have a peaceful, mollifying homecoming.

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