

# From Competition to Cooperation -- A Feminist Interpretation of *The Handmaiden*

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**Abstract.** Directed by Park Chan-wook, the Korean film *The Handmaiden* is adapted from the novel *City of Briars* by British writer Sarah Waters. It tells the story of money and love between an aristocratic lady who inherits a huge fortune, a deceiving count who covets her property, a maid who is hired by the count to approach the lady, and the lady's guardian during the Japanese colonial rule of Korea in 1930. This paper takes *The Handmaiden* as the text, Beauvoir's feminist theory in the *Second Sex* as the perspective, takes two female characters in the film, lady and maid, as samples, discusses the complex relationship formed by two women with completely different backgrounds, and studies how the film expresses the relationship between them from the initial competitive relationship to the relationship of cooperation and synergy. Through the analysis of Park Chan-wook's directing techniques and characteristics, this paper studies the female relationship in the traditional sense of male society, and how the relationship of solidarity, mutual aid, and mutual feelings between women are formed and transformed.

**Keywords:** Feminism; Park Chan-wook; *The Handmaiden*; Female relations.

## 1. Introduction

South Korean director Park Chan-wook's *The Handmaiden* shows the complex relationships between Lady Hideko Izumi, maid Nam Sook-hee, and Count Fujiwara, a con artist, through its colorful movie colors, explicit erotic scenes, complex character relationships, and a story with twists and turns. The film received an unprecedented response when it was released in 2016 due to its unique setting and rare discussion of same-sex feelings and relationships among Asian women. The beginning of the story is around the plot of Sook-hee and Fujiwara cooperating to cheat Lady Hideko's property, but the fact is that Hideko and Fujiwara secretly cooperate in seducing and deceiving Sook-hee. Both the two female characters hope to design each other through Fujiwara's male strength and male identity, to achieve the purpose of profit for themselves. In the end, however, Hideko falls in love with her maid Sook-hee and uses her previous plan to get rid of Fujiwara.

This paper on this film mainly focuses on the colonial background, the "other" status of women to men, and the comparison of female images with different images. Based on the transformation of the relationship between women, this paper will study how the relationship between Lady Hideko and the maid Sook-hee changed from a competitive relationship at the beginning to the final cooperative relationship, in which what roles are played by men. It is hoped that it will be helpful for the study of how women awaken in consciousness, how to move towards cooperation, and finally get rid of their attachment status to men and the identity of "the other", to form female subject consciousness.

## 2. The traditional competition and opposition relationship

"The characteristics of men and women, including roles and virtues, are not their natural endowments but are consciously constructed by the ruling class after entering the patriarchal society to maintain the dominant position of men and build a stable patriarchal social order"[1]. In a male-dominated society for a long time, men control most of the resources of the society: men can read books, participate in politics, and also have the freedom to choose a job. On the contrary, women don't have any freedom or access to resources. "Capitalist patriarchy deepens violence by forcing people, especially women, to alienate themselves from the nature on which their livelihoods

depend...In addition to land ownership, women lack a range of productive resources, including education, information, and financial resources"[2]. If women want to live a good life, they have to rely on men, who have more social freedom with their resources and expect them to dole out pleasurable resources. "It's a machination of a patriarchal society to let women fight among themselves and not have time to work together"[3]. Over time, women develop a stereotype that they can only get what they want through men. This kind of thinking leads women to try to gain the attention of men with abundant resources through competition. Only by gaining the attention of men with abundant resources can women obtain certain property and freedom in social life. Female competition is formed in the patriarchal society.

In the movie, Sook-hee, attachment to Fujiwara, is the only way to achieve the wealth she wants. Fujiwara's conversation, his knowledge, his ability to write and paint, and his confidence to join the upper class are things that Sook-hee does not have. The only thing a woman from the bottom can learn is the ability to steal, the ability to distinguish between real money and fake money, and the ability to be a handmaiden. Although she is smart and sincere, she is an uneducated thief, which is why Fujiwara chose her. However, in the later plot, we can know that Lady Hideko was just like a wet and cold sensible snake, and she could see the purpose of all men approaching her. Fujiwara at the beginning chose to cooperate with the smart rich lady: they pretended to deceive Sook-hee with a purpose to miss side, meaning that after they eloped, let Sook-hee replaces Hideko's identity was put in a madhouse. This can quietly achieve the lady's freedom, and Fujiwara can also profit from it. The relationship between the lady and the maid formed an invisible competitive relationship through Fujiwara. They all want to use the same man, to cheat and use each other, to get their own way. They are secretly competing with each other to get the trust of Fujiwara. However, Hideko is calm and intelligent, and with her identity as the heir to the property, she undoubtedly occupies an absolute advantage in this invisible competition compared with Sook-hee. She was the clear winner in the competition, but their relationship took an unexpected turn along the way.

### **3. The process of female relationship transformation**

The relationship between Lady Hideko and her maid, Sook-hee, is guided by Hideko at the beginning. Hideko needs Count Fujiwara to find her a maid who dies in a mental hospital with her identity. What she needs is a clumsy, gullible scapegoat. When Hideko first saw Sook-hee, her attitude towards Sook-hee was curious and playful. She knew that Sook-hee was peeping into her room and knocking on the door to frighten her. Looking at Sook-hee ran away and hid in the quilt, Hideko bent her mouth happily. Looking at the maid whom she met for the first time, the young lady said to herself, "The count has chosen the right man. She looks simple and dull. We are somewhat alike." At the back of the get-along, Hideko shows her jewelry and clothing; the purpose is to confuse Sook-hee so that Sook-hee is willing to enter the trap. Hideko dressed Sook-hee up herself, dressed her in her own clothes, put on her luxurious hair, and put on her royal blue earrings. Looking at Sook-hee intoxicated in the mirror of his appearance, Hideko's plot also succeeded. But women are naturally inclined to admire their own kind, especially those that rival them in appearance and shape. "Obviously, outside the mirror Sook-hee with greed, and Hideko is also full of conspiracy, but in the mirror, Hideko had to admit that he was attracted by the beauty of Sook-hee"[3]. Hideko looked at Sook-hee dressed up as a real lady, she was stunned out of God, she seems to have not expected that Sook-hee can have such charm. When Hideo was deeply involved in her mother's death and felt guilty about it. Sook-hee acts like her mother and says, "I was lucky to have you and then leaves. I am not sorry at all." Hideko hears and sighs, "Is that what the book says about friendship?" Although their identity is different, both lost their mother in childhood. Sook-hee for the loss of their mother optimistic positive attitude deeply infected Hideko who has been immersed in the shadow of the death of their mother and aunt. Sook-hee's gentle care and concern for her each time make Sook-hee's image gradually disintegrate and reorganize in her mind.

For Sook-hee, she thought Lady Hideko is an ignorant rich girl at the beginning. When Sook-hee first saw Hideko in her gorgeous dress, she exclaimed, "Is there anything more beautiful than this that I served?" She looked at the lady's clean white back and haughtily examined the fair lady as if she were a lamb ready for slaughter. Looking at the young lady in the mirror, she thought, "When she goes to the mental hospital, it will all belong to me. It will make my heart sick to see you pity me." In Sook-hee's vision, all she has to do is trick the foolish lady into falling in love with Count Fujiwara. She looked disdainfully at the lady's jewels and clothes as if they were easy to come by. Sook-hee's admiration for Hideko was unconcealed from the very beginning. She admired her wealth and fine clothes, her elegant conversation, and her fragile heart. As she undressed her, her hands touched Hideko's smooth shoulder blades and she said to herself, "Oh! Lady is a maid's toy, and look at all the buttons that hang there for my amusement and unfasten them, and loosen the straps again, so that if I were still a pickpocket, I should be able to sneak in and touch it." Sook-hee's love and appreciation for the lady gradually transformed into a sexual impulse between the same sex. When Sook-hee helps Hideko to take a bath, the lady's eyes look at her with wet eyes. Sook-hee can't help but look down and see the beautiful white breasts of the lady. She can't help swallowing. She felt a feeling beyond admiration for this delicate, luxurious, doll of a young lady who had experienced a miserable childhood.

They compete with each other but attract each other. They approach each other with purpose but are unable to extricate themselves from each other's unique femininity attracted. Among them, the male character Count Fujiwara plays an important role in the transformation of their relationship. The lady has been trained as a performer of pornographic novels since she was a child, causing her to vomit uncontrollably after every reading experience. Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*: "The events of childhood or girlhood had often provoked in her a strong and sometimes uncontrollable resistance. The conservative upbringing she had received, the crimes she feared, and the guilt she felt for her mother all formed heavy chains"[4]. In the lady's impression, men are obscene and disgusting, she hated those Japanese aristocrats who stared at her beautiful appearance in the reading, and even more hated the men's cheerful and obscene expressions when she read the climax, but Sook-hee for her is really a different existence. "The lady, who was not born homosexual, was imprisoned, intimidated, beaten, sexually abused, and forced to read lewd books. Long-term spiritual oppression made Hideko physically and psychologically disgusted and excluded men lost the ability to feel male love and hated male love"[5]. She kisses Sook-hee, with the smell of a lollipop in her mouth. Sook-hee gently touches her body and whispers softly to her. Everything goes against what she hates. Everything that Sook-hee shows to her completely subverts Hideko for the understanding of sexual relations. She slowly sank into this gentle, cautious, egalitarian sexual relationship with trial and respect. Sook-hee shattered Hideko's image of rough and unequal sexual relations between men and women. "Love between women is steady, the purpose of caressing is not to possess each other, but to create self. Men are competitors for them, they are better at seducing, possessing, and keeping their prey, and they resent the 'defiling' of women by men"[4]. When Sook-hee discovered Count Fujiwara touching Hideko, when Fujiwara and Hideko alone, she did not feel happy of the successful plot; on the contrary, she was jealous, she was furious, she hate Fujiwara molested Hideko at the same time, also hate her own inability to do anything. Both Hideko and Sook-hee initially cooperate with Fujiwara to achieve their own goals, one for freedom, the other for money. But when they found that working with men involved inevitable sacrifices for both themselves and, indeed, for each other, their views changed. "Any transition is a painful process because of its obvious and irreversible nature: to become a woman is to break with the past forever"[4]. They choose to give up cooperation with men and instead use Fujiwara to achieve their common purpose in the way of unity and cooperation. The transformation of female relationships has brought about the awakening of female sexual consciousness as well as the change of female thought.

#### 4. Cooperation and liberation

"Just like in Japan, the negative representations of the New Woman were produced by the multi-layered anxieties of Korean men towards the erosion of Confucian traditions, the expansion of an all-engulfing capitalistic modernity, and the various deficiencies of the colonial state"[6]. During Japan's colonization of Korea, the relationships between women were all linked through men, so the understanding between women was all through men, biased and glimpsed. Women's definition of themselves and others was also defined by men during the colonial period. But after removing the barriers of men, women have a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of their own group. They come to realize the importance of cooperation. After the awakening of Hideko and Sook-hee's sexual consciousness and the change in their thoughts, they will fight back against the male-bound and male-dominated society.

After Sook-hee and Hideko determined the relationship between lovers, their goal is clear which is getting rid of Fujiwara, Hideko's uncle Kouzuki and all the interference and bondage of their conditions. On their elopement, Hideko plans to reveal her deepest and most difficult secret: the reading she has been reading since she was a child is not a decent book that can teach people, but a pornographic book created to please men. "The library's collection is a symbol of a patriarchal society where women are played with and invaded, and where gentlemen gather to listen to young ladies reading erotic texts in a greedy manner"[7]. When Sook-hee saw the full study filled with these pornographic books and saw the lady's eyes filled with tears, she did not hesitate to tear up these so-called reading materials, these filthy things that imprisoned the lady's freedom and degraded her value as a woman. Sook-hee frantically tore up the books, slashed the pornographic images with a knife, sank the books in a pond, then sprinkled ink on them, and stomped on them barefoot out of anger. Hideko lost her mind to follow behind Sook-hee, looking at Sook-hee a little bit of the destruction of these imprisoned her for more than twenty years of chains. "As the newly born woman, Sook-hee's subversive power leads Hideko to attack her closed and repressive environment and sortie from it"[8]. Sook-hee not only shreds the pornographic readings but also destroyed the invisible domination of Hideko's uncle Kouzuki. "An attitude of resignation brings with it an enviable tolerance in women. What women want is to maintain, adapt and plan, not destroy and rebuild. They prefer to compromise and reconcile to revolution"[4]. Hideko is such a female representative who is not willing to revolutionize. Hideko is smart, calm, and calculating, but she is also conservative, set in her ways, and afraid to jump out of her own circle. She lacks Sook-hee's courage and fearlessness, and she lacks Sook-hee's ability to say no to men's rights. "The cobra is an obstacle between Sook-hee and Soo-ko, and an obstacle to the escape of her aunt. In fact, it is a moral that paternity prevents women from uniting and resisting. The breaking of the last cobra represents the fall of the patriarchy "[9]. When Sook-hee broke the cobra, the symbol of patriarchal control, with her staff, the only fear and submission of male control in Sook-hee's heart was also broken. When they opened the doors and walked to the wall of the manor, Sook-hee piled up the luggage one by one and built a staircase for Hideko, but also paved the way for her liberation. To step over the wall is to step over the bondage of men's control. They no longer put male power in their eyes but leave it behind, laughing and rushing into the sunshine of freedom. Hideko laughed and said, "She is a thief, a pickpocket, a liar; Who came to turn my life upside down; My beads; My Sook-hee." For the first time, they realize the power of women's cooperation and mutual assistance, and the combination and complementarity of Suk-hee's courage and Hideko's wisdom make up for each other. They achieve the goal of freedom without relying on men but only on women's power.

Hideko and Sook-hee through violence and a happy way to get rid of the control of their abnormal uncle, but the real problem is how to get rid of count Fujiwara. In the eyes of men, the image of women is weak and pure, but pornographic. In order to get rid of this inherent definition of the male perspective, women need to learn to use this definition. Hideko and Sook-hee in accordance with the original plan and Fujihara fled to Japan and successfully shut Sook-hee into a mental hospital. Fujiwara thought that everything into settle, and the huge legacy will generally belong to him, beautiful and docile show son also became his wife. Hideko finds him to celebrate the victory of all

this and said, "If I let you have me for ten minutes, what would you give me?" Fujiwara's honest answer: "Women can actually be extremely happy when they are forced to be." Hideko was elegant but tempted to drink red wine, and to his mouth to feed him, Hideko's slightly raw action, slightly frightened expression, and resistant posture, made Fujiwara feel excited. However, what he didn't expect was that Hideko used her weakness and sex to deceive him. "The two female protagonists of *The Handmaiden*, seem to have internalized the imperial and patriarchal values: the first, as a loyal Japanese citizen; the second, as an obedient colonial subject. In truth, however, their obedience offers two cases of what Homi Bhabha calls "sly civility," that is, resistance couched in the form of compliance"[6]. By taking advantage of her femininity and using the rigid and single-male definition of female, Hideko successfully poisons Fujiwara and gets rid of him. From the perspective of men, they think women are weak and ridiculous, but this female image can be well used by women to deceive and fool men. The way women are then defined can help women resist.

At the end of the film, Hideko wrote to Fujihara. "In the real world, no woman can be happy if she is forced to." This letter undoubtedly is a provocation and disregard for men's rights but also redefines the image of women. The dark and closed environment in the basement is in sharp contrast to the sunshine and brightness of the two women fleeing from Japan in the sea, which indicates that the man is trapped by his own self-righteousness and can only die in the vain struggle of imagining that women who are out of reach. Women, on the other hand, successfully use men to collaborate and usher in their own rebirth and liberation. Finally, Sook-hee personally put the Hideko in order to avoid his uncle's pursuit and disguised as a man's false beard to tear off, posted on the symbol of power and restriction of black leather gloves, gloves also set with the show son and Fujiwara engagement ring. Sook-hee threw the three items representing male characteristics into the sea so that these symbols of heavy shackles and invisible restrictions brought to women in the past, let it disappear in the boundless sea.

## 5. Conclusion

"Within a historical world characterized through repression, particularly along interlocking axes of gender, class, and race, melodrama presents this world as a series of surfaces, where societal contradictions are written on bodies, objects, and spaces, and where character and persona are made visible for the spectator"[10]. Park Chan-wook, through the film *The Handmaiden* shows us the complex relationship between two men and two women, including gender relationships, class relationships, and elder relationships. Mapping the whole with individual cases, shows us the deformed social relationship in the colonial period and explains how women should get rid of oppression and usher in their own rebirth in such an environment. After the initial traditional rivalry between the two women, the women gained a deeper understanding of their group by overcoming the male barriers. Hideko sees Sook-hee's bravery and fearlessness while Sook-hee sees Hideko's talent and intelligence. Women gradually become attracted to each other, appreciate each other, and eventually work together to get rid of male power. "Women need to successfully overcome their passivity in terms of love, affection, and sexuality in order to have a two-way relationship with their sexual partner. As long as the struggle between the sexes persists, the differences in male and female impulses will lead to insoluble conflicts"[4]. Hideko hated the passive relationship in the male world but also hated the contradictions brought by men that could not be solved. Hideko's resistance to male bondage and her liberation lies in the fact that she gives up the conflict of sexual relations and reconciliations with her female identity by being a lesbian. "Homosexuality also means a way for a woman to deal with problems arising from her living situation, especially her sexual situation"[4]. Homosexual relationship solves women's "other" status and passive relationship in a male society, and the relationship between women is equal and harmonious. Hideko and Sook-hee are women of equal strength in terms of appearance, body shape, and charm so they can go from competition to synergy with each other. The novel female image shown in the film lies in that the film discusses the relationship between the sexes, but does not aim to solve the relationship between the sexes. Instead,

through the elaboration of another alternative female relationship, it provides another possibility for women to liberate their own ideological path and consciousness.

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