

**“Somewhere between Glory and a Sad Ending”: Love and Identity Politics in *Mr. Sunshine* (2018)**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the South Korean television series, *Mr. Sunshine* (2018), which narrates Eugene Choi's history through a love story during the turbulent days of early twentieth-century Korea. Caught between his two “homelands”, Joseon and America, and between his self and his beloved, a noble lady who personifies the “ideal” Joseon, Eugene finds himself at an impasse. In this sense, Choi comes to embody the modern Joseon subject living a “liquid life” (Bauman), whose identity is characterized by precariousness and uncertainty. This paper analyzes how the politics of individual identity and national identity operate through the characters' romantic engagements. While Eugene and other “liquid” characters like him may take advantage of the quickly disintegrating traditional social boundaries in the midst of modernization, their liminal identities, however, are considered to be “disabilities” that need to be “cured” for Joseon's idealized future. Eugene and the other male characters' love for the noble lady (and therefore Joseon) lock them in a conflicting position where only patriotic sacrifice can negotiate their non-normative identities. Told in the form of an ill-fated, tragic love story, *Mr. Sunshine* is a reminder of how hybrid modern characters who threaten homogeneous and therefore “normal” Joseon, are ultimately driven towards sad endings, sacrificed for the glory of the nation's future.

**Keywords:** identity, love, curative violence, passing, modernity

On a hot summer day in 1907, a violent tension overwhelms the train to Pyeongyang.<sup>1</sup> A band of Japanese soldiers is searching to arrest the members of the Righteous Army<sup>2</sup> who have secretly boarded the train, trying to pass as Japanese or Westernized upper-class civilians. The main target is Ae-sin Ko, a noble lady of Joseon,<sup>3</sup> who by now has become not only the best sniper of the group, but more importantly, the figure who epitomizes the last hope for the Righteous Army's ideal: Autonomous Joseon. When Ae-sin fearlessly identifies herself to confront the Japanese, Eugene Choi, the tragic Joseon-American hero, valiantly enters the scene to save her one last time. Eugene threatens the soldiers to move backward down the aisle while protecting Ae-sin behind his back. Eugene no longer “has many bullets left.”<sup>4</sup> He is now left with his last one. With tears in his eyes, he solemnly declares his final words: “This is my history and my love story. That's why I must go. I wish for your victory. You should take a step forward. I will take a step back.”<sup>5</sup> After a brief glance back at his beloved, he forces the Japanese men and himself towards the next cart and uses the final bullet to disconnect the cart from the rest of the train. He takes a step back so that his beloved and the values she embodies can take a step forward. Finally, realizing Eugene's

plan, Ae-sin runs to reach for him, but it is too late. Being caught in between the politics of his two homelands, Joseon and America, and that of his self and his love, Eugene can only exist discontinuously, finally asserting his liminal identity through self-sacrifice.



Figure 1 Eugene turns back to say his final words to Ae-sin. *Mr. Sunshine* (2018). Episode 24 (1:21:30)



Figure 2 Eugene and Ae-sin's first meeting in the U.S. Embassy. Episode 2 (1:07:11)

*Mr. Sunshine* (2018),<sup>6</sup> a highly acclaimed original Netflix series from South Korea, narrates Choi's history through a love story. It follows his transformational journey from Choi Yu-Jin, a Joseon boy born into slavery, to Eugene Choi,<sup>7</sup> a U.S. Marine Corps officer who is assigned back to his home country thirty years after his escape, eventually becoming someone caught between two nations. Eugene's love story complicates his identity struggle because his beloved, Ae-sin, not only embodies his romantic ideal, but more importantly, personifies the national ideal of Joseon. For Eugene then, loving Ae-sin also translates into patriotism for Joseon, even if he is a contested in-between figure that Joseon ultimately fails to embrace. Eugene's Joseon-American status, symbolic of the nation's modernized and globalized future, opposes Ae-sin's emblematic idealization as Joseon's pre-colonial past. As illustrated in the train scene, the two characters cannot move forward together. The one has to sacrifice itself so that the other might move forward. Eugene's death for his love becomes an allegory for a hero's patriotic sacrifice, for the continuation of the nation's idealized and romanticized past. Following this plot then, *Mr. Sunshine* upholds the nationalist ideology of de rigueur patriotism, dramatized through an ill-fated love story. Eugene, along with other modern characters in the series, occupy a liminal space at the intersections of a desire for self-identity on the one hand, and the nation's desired identity on the other, which is represented

by Eugene's beloved, Ae-sin. This paper investigates how the politics of individual identity and national identity operate in ways that are sometimes at odds with each other, through an analysis of the characters' romantic engagements.

*Mr. Sunshine* is loosely based on historical events specifically around the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Although it narrates the story of an implausible Joseon-American U.S. Marine Corps officer protagonist, Eugene Choi's short lifetime, from 1863 to 1907, parallels the historical timeline of the country. Certain crucial events are accentuated to ground the narrative's historical specificity. The U.S. Expedition to Korea in 1871, an exploration that soon turned into a historical "armed conflict known as Shinmiyangyo, which roughly translates to 'the Western Disturbance in the Shinmi year'" (Yim 1) is Eugene's escape route to America in the first episode. After his parents are murdered by his *yangban*<sup>8</sup> "owner", Eugene runs away from the master's house and meets Joseph, an American pastor who is among the early American missionaries in Joseon. Joseph aids the young Eugene's emigration to America by hiding the latter in a box. Although Shinmiyangyo did take place and religious missionaries indeed composed a significant part of the group, there is no surviving proof that Joseon people moved to America that year. The historical Russo-Japanese War of 1905, which becomes a climatic turning point for many characters in episode 22, did happen and Japan's victory secured the country's annexation of Joseon (Kim 32). Towards the end of the series, multiple explosions of buildings and frequent clashes of violence on the streets create a shared sense of paranoia that impact the daily lives of the people. As a result, more and more people decide to join forces against the Japanese. The Righteous Army, the patriotic resistant group in *Mr. Sunshine*, did in fact exist during those turbulent days. Frederick Arthur McKenzie's photograph of the group<sup>9</sup> was reported as the main inspiration for the drama's development (Kang 1). Although *Mr. Sunshine* is a work of fiction and some of its historical inconsistency has been criticized by historians and fans alike,<sup>10</sup> it is firmly connected to the modern history of Korea through approximate representations.



Figure 3 McKenzie, Frederick A. "1908 Righteous Army in Yangpyeong." *Korean Herald*. 17 November 2015.



Figure 4 Screenshot of the photograph of the Righteous Army in *Mr. Sunshine* (2018). Episode 24 (30:15)

It is important to emphasize that *Mr. Sunshine* focuses on a time period prior to Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, when the influx of multiple colonizers meant that identity became increasingly fluid for both Joseon and modern Joseon people. At the turn of the twentieth century, Joseon existed as both a diminishing dynasty and a nascent nation on the verge of being consumed by imperialists from both close and afar, including Japan, Russia and the United States. The colonizing threat also brought new opportunities for modernization. Previously restricted lower class men and women were free to traverse class, ethnic and gender lines. The imported modern commodities and ideologies transformed the daily lifestyles of the common people, destabilized traditional socio-political values, and introduced the possibility of recreating one's identity beyond the limited class system. The novel idea of recreating one's identity, along with the lure of rising individualism, overwhelmed the people of modern Joseon.

In "The Ethics of Authenticity," Charles Taylor identifies the advent of modern freedom in individualism as being the first of the three malaises of modernity (Taylor 2) followed by "the primacy of instrumental reason" (5) and the political conflict between the two (8). Taylor's conceptualization of authenticity as a product of modern liberation from past orders embodies a moral dimension with conflicting interests. While authenticity depends on individual choices, questions of right and wrong complicate such decisions. Carl Elliot argues in his essay on the relationship between modern self-improvement technologies and the new conceptualization of the "true-self", that *authentic identity* becomes something to be achieved through a series of decisions (Elliot 30), rather than, as argued by Marshall Berman, a quality "ascribed" (Berman 89) to individuals as was the case in pre-modern societies. In the crisis of modernization and globalization, both modern Joseon and its people were forced to evaluate newfound values and to make choices that contributed towards crafting new identities. Joseon had a finite number of choices for its modern identity; the imperialist agenda had dominated Joseon up until the late 1800s and it was left to make a choice among potential colonizers. Reclaiming Joseon's pre-colonial, conservative, and traditional identity against the imperialist invasion was a possibility for the nation and the nationalists supported

such an option. However, such a decision to retreat into the pre-colonial would require negotiation with the quickly modernizing Joseon people. New social conventions and values which emancipated people from their past had become threatening counter-normative entities to the essentializing and solidifying ideologies that informed what the nationalists assumed to be Joseon's authentic identity.

Set within this particular historical context, *Mr. Sunshine* vividly visualizes the rapidly changing Joseon and the fluid lives of its people, in a way that recalls Zygmunt Bauman's insistence on the intimate connection between "liquid life" (Bauman 1) and "liquid modernity" (1), referring to the way in which the speed of change, exceeds the solidification of individuated meanings in liquid modern society (1). Those living a liquid life face a dilemma of either submitting to modernization or being consumed by the rapid changes; as Baumann says, one has to either "modernize or perish" (Bauman 3). Living a modern life in Gyeongseong, the capital of Joseon, thus amounts to living a liquid life in a quickly disintegrating traditional society. As accurately depicted in the first episode, the hereditary system of slavery was abolished in 1894, which led to the liberation of countless *nobi*.<sup>11</sup> Legally emancipated lower class characters now interact more freely with their previous masters. The presence of modern technology and imported commodities form the backdrop for characters' interactions throughout the series. The first public electric light event in the city, which historically took place in 1898 (Nam 7), becomes an important incident particularly for Eugene and Ae-sin's romance because it coincides with their first encounter.<sup>12</sup> On the brightly lit streets of modern Gyeongseong, the two characters face each other as the first streetcar (7) runs in between the two, foreshadowing their immanent separation later, because of the different ideologies they each embody. Along with modern technology, foreigners bring with them to Joseon foreign products, cuisines, religions, attire and languages. Learning a foreign language, in particular, provides quick access to power. Lee Wan Ik, a pro-Japanese villain in the first half of the series, is born into a lower class family, but rises to power after teaching himself Japanese and English. In earlier episodes, Ae-sin learns English alongside her ex-servants and often enjoys eating French cakes with her friends. The streets of Gyeongseong are filled with foreign-language speaking Joseon people freely consuming foreign products and the foreign values they symbolize. Modern Gyeongseong is indeed "a society of strangers" (Samuel 1), which resonates with the changes that many metropolitans experienced during the crisis of identification since the mid-nineteenth century was "driven by a multiplicity of factors, including greater geographic and class mobility; urbanization, colonialism, and expansion" (Samuel 1). People were in constant motion as society underwent rapid changes that obscured traditional boundaries.

With these notions of mobility, fluidity and "liquid life" in mind, *Mr. Sunshine* can thus be further examined through an ideological lens that examines questions of authenticity: if "the pursuit of authenticity as an

ideal reveals the paradox built into the world the people live in” (Berman xxiv), then what political and social ironies are revealed in an analysis of *Mr. Sunshine* through the lens of the politics of authenticity? At the end of his search for authenticity, Eugene dies as an American to save his beloved and the values she embodies. In spite of his sacrifice for Joseon, his name is lost in the official records, while his body is buried in a cemetery designated for foreigners.<sup>13</sup> He ultimately embraces his in-between identity as he describes his final destination as being “somewhere between glory and a sad ending”<sup>14</sup>, for he cannot belong to a new Joseon as the country attempts to reclaim its pre-colonial, stratified dynasty as its authentic identity. When the characters’ quests for authenticity intersect with the nation’s avowal of hegemonic conservative identity, the hybrid modern characters who threaten the homogeneous, self-governing, and therefore “normal” Joseon, are driven towards sad endings to secure the nation’s glorious future. This conflict is dramatized through the characters’ romantic commitments in *Mr. Sunshine*.

Eugene and Ae-sin’s ultimate inability to move forward together and the series’ violent treatment of Eugene can be analyzed through Eunjung Kim’s theory of “curative violence,” with which Kim critiques Korean cultural representations of “invisibilized” violence under the veil of a possible “cure” for the nation’s future (Kim 9). Kim’s theory is useful in my analysis of *Mr. Sunshine* as yet another example of the repeated call for personal violence in the guise of national “advancement”. The theory of curative violence is particularly effective in analyzing Eugene’s love story and the political imperatives embedded in *Mr. Sunshine*. Although Kim’s theory draws on disability studies, she defines disability very broadly as “differences that are considered aberrant, which includes deviations from historically and culturally specific norms of ethno-racial and gendered personhood in a given historical and cultural context” (Kim 26). Within *Mr. Sunshine*’s late nineteenth to early twentieth century modern historical context, not only Eugene, but also other characters involved in the love story, besides Ae-sin herself, can be categorized as figures of disability in Joseon because of their hybrid and aberrant nature. Such figures of disability, who will be the focus of my analysis later, include Dong-mae and Hui-sung, the two rivals of Eugene in the series’ romantic complication, and Kudo Hina, another key female figure in the series. Carrying scars of the nation’s traumatic past and colonial present, they are drastically different from Ae-sin because their past social status and unpatriotic ideals go against the noble, pre-colonial past that the Righteous Army attempts to regain. These counter-normative figures, having to compensate for the nation’s future that idealizes the autonomous past, must “disappear through the imperative of cure, habilitation and rehabilitation” (11) because the conservative ideal of Joseon embodied by Ae-sin cannot and will not coexist with them. The deaths of these figures of disability, who represent sickness in a Joseon that aims for a restored normalcy in the guise of future progress, serve simultaneously as the symbolic cure for both Ae-sin and the nation’s well-being in the future. The

characters' political involvements, which both complicate and complement their personal journeys towards achieving their authentic identities in modern Joseon, eventually lead them to die, unwittingly, as patriots for the country's fulfillment of its pre-colonial, conservative authenticity. Their inevitable deaths are vivid portrayals of a violent cure in negotiation for Joseon's "cured" and "rehabilitated" (Kim) future.

The tension between these two ideals – modern individualism versus the stratified conservatism of the pre-colonial past – is symbolized in the love affair between Eugene and Ae-sin. Eugene, representing the "oddity" or "disabling" organ of Joseon, and Ae-sin as a personification of an ideal homogeneous Joseon, can neither coexist permanently nor be in alignment with each other even temporally. In keeping with the conservative nature of Korean television and the subgenre of historical drama, there is barely any physical interaction between the two lovers. In the majority of scenes, Eugene and Ae-sin are positioned to face each other, their distance emphasized in the lack of intimacy, apart from tearful embraces. The varying distances between the two lovers correspond to an underlying emotional tension, a reminder once more of their incompatible ideological persuasions. Furthermore, in a still conservative Joseon, a man and woman cannot walk side by side in public. The only way for them to walk side by side on the streets is for Ae-sin to dress up as a man, that is, to engage in *crossdressing*. In other words, the two can coexist side by side only when Ae-sin is not a noble lady, when she also becomes a transgressive counter-normative figure. Both need to be "in line", whether this means queering on the part of Ae-sin, or "straightening" on the part of Eugene. Applying Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, Eugene has to be "in line" with Ae-sin to be subsumed into normative position. As demonstrated above, their subjective positions and directions in relation to their space visually situates them as unreachable to each other (Ahmed 66). Phrases such as "taking the same direction"<sup>15</sup> and "walking towards you (me)" dominate their conversations. After a series of repetitions of "straightening" effects, a vertical line is finally established between Eugene and Ae-sin in the final scene, but one that exists only temporarily. Their oppositional positions alter for the first and the last time in the final train scene. Eugene stands in front of Ae-sin to protect her and the staging resembles an earlier scene in which a crowd of commoners stands in front of Ae-sin to protect her from the Japanese army. Although Eugene "straightens" himself to be an alignment with "normative" Ae-sin, the space that his identity expands into (66) is beyond the physical world. His death can be interpreted as his final effort of straightening his queer identity in Joseon. The final distance between the dying Eugene and the crying Ae-sin illustrates their ultimate inability to coexist. They cannot be together because Eugene's identity is incompatible with that of ideal Joseon, personified by Ae-sin. They have to say "goodbye" in the present to "see [each other] again" in the ideal future when the country is independent again.<sup>16</sup> Conservative Joseon fails to recognize Eugene's efforts at "straightening" in the present, and only considers him a disability to be "cured" for future rehabilitation.

Kim further theorizes the cure involved in curative violence as “an attempt at crossing” (Kim 11) from otherness to normality, which not only reveals the liminal existence of those who attempt to cross, but also questions the precarious line between what is accepted as normal and abnormal. Kim’s theory relates to the critical concept of passing, which refers to an individual’s conscious choice and consequential action to leave one social group to assume a new identity in another group or to stay in-between. While Kim’s notion of crossing is particular to the purpose of claiming normalcy, passing encompasses crossing of various borders in multiple directions. Passers challenge conventional social boundaries by traversing the supposedly fixed lines that confine them. Existing scholarship has however largely focused on racial and gender passing in American contexts. For instance, scholars such as Walter Benn Michaels, Daniel Reginald, Judith Smith, and Lauren Berlant have invoked passing in critiquing the idea of a dichotomous Black/White America, and the complicated politics of visibility related to racial identity in the country. The concept of gender passing similarly lies at the heart of the work of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, Amy Robinson and George Chauncey on gender performance and gender performativity. However, passing as a socio-political concept can be developed further into understanding liminal, hybrid characters like Eugene in *Mr. Sunshine*. Passing allows new subjectivities to emerge beyond traditional boundaries. Because “passing is an appropriate figure for the anxiety of having no secure position” (Caughie 13), the passing subject occupies a precarious position, and his/her passage subverts the idea of a stable or solid identity. As explained previously, new assets and changing social conventions in a liquid, modern world like Joseon, allow characters in *Mr. Sunshine* to pass class, ethnic and gender lines more easily. The concept of passing utilized in my analysis of *Mr. Sunshine* is similar to Judith Butler’s theoretical approach in constituting or accomplishing gender identities through repeated performance.<sup>17</sup> Driven by the emerging value of individualism, multiple characters in *Mr. Sunshine* become passers, having more to gain by crossing the multiple lines that had previously posed a limit to their identities. They “creatively destruct” (Bauman 3) their past selves to claim new identities. Eugene can easily pass as an American when he wears his army uniform, and together with his fluent English, no one suspects him to be an *ex-nobi*. Dong-mae, a character similar to Eugene and his rival in the romantic triangle, is also a man who destroys his previous lower-class self by moving to Japan. He returns to Joseon as a fearful member of “the notorious Black Dragon Society” of Japan and easily passes as a Japanese as he surrounds himself with his Japanese followers and exhibits bloody samurai skills. Kudo Hina, the owner of the Glory Hotel,<sup>18</sup> achieves a new upper-class Japanese identity through her marriage to a wealthy Japanese man, thus passing from a lower social status to a higher one. These characters, in passing, can “enjoy a new kind of personal identity” (Berman 114) as they are “emancipated from all traditional modes of servitude” (114).

Among the various types of passing in *Mr. Sunshine*, class passing appears to be the most common, yet



the most difficult one to fulfill permanently. Those who pass the class line are either frowned upon or portrayed antagonistically. As Bauman writes, “the freedom to choose, freedom to stop being what one already is” (Bauman 5) is only *seemingly* available to people living in liquid modern society because the *actual* access to such freedom is “highly uneven” (6). The class line remains a persistent barrier even after radical social reforms, such as the abolition of the *nobi* system. Class passers like Eugene, Dong-mae and Kudo Hina are well aware of society’s intolerance towards their transgression and thus attempt to stay away from political involvement. In the beginning of the series, Eugene and Dong-mae, the two men who are in love with Ae-sin, have no interest in getting involved in politics. By remaining indifferent to the political turmoil of the country, and by actively choosing what Eve Sedgwick refers to as “unknowing”, they enjoy their new freedom in modern Joseon. In “Privilege of Unknowing”, Sedgwick underscores how knowledge is “the magnetic field of power” (Sedgwick, 102) because one’s use of knowledge and ignorance has potential to create power dynamics. Unknowing is not dialectically opposite of knowing, but can be construed as a political decision to distance oneself from particular knowledge, even if that knowledge informs the context one inhabits. Eugene and Dong-mae play at “unknowing”, choosing not to know, or to not get involved in any political situation that would take away the privilege of modern life. The space they occupy in choosing not to know is, however, an “invigorating and maybe revelatory [one] but [a] dangerous place for dwelling” (104). Their active “unknowing” thus places them in a precarious position, one that leads to their eventual deaths later on. Eugene and other passers in modernizing Joseon can thus be understood only through their “shared condition of precariousness” (Butler 13) and their “grievable deaths” (14), which grant meaning to their precarious lives, and function as forms of self-redemption. For Butler, recognizing precariousness amounts to acknowledging that one’s life, in some sense, is always in the hands of another; in this case, the lives of Eugene and other figures of disability like him, are in the hands of Joseon and the nationalist engine that drives it. As Kim argues, “attending to disability’s political presence in these seemingly ‘privatized’ individual narratives of trauma might reveal the larger structural conditions that create different embodiments and construct otherness” (Kim 38). The violence in *Mr. Sunshine* is deeply political though it is, arguably, personally motivated, which reveals the overwhelming dominance of the nation’s normative ideal.

Towards the second half of the series, the male characters get increasingly drawn into political involvement as their love affairs with Ae-sin intensify. Loving the noble lady turns into loving the political ideology she embodies. Eugene, Dong-mae and Hui-sung’s process of falling in love with Ae-sin is accompanied by violence both in terms of personal conflict and the national struggle for autonomy, as the personal gradually becomes the political. The characters’ growing political consciousness further complicates their quests for recreating their identities. As Eugene, Dong-mae and Hui-sung become attached to their country’s fate, vis-à-vis

their attachment to Ae-sin, they realize that there might not be space for them in what ideal Joseon strives to be. Their past, which has not been “righteous” enough to be considered patriotic, becomes an obstacle for the country’s future. Eugene has become too Americanized to assume the life of an authentic Joseon man. Dong-mae has murdered too many innocent Joseon people. Hui-sung’s hedonistic past taints the noble status that Joseon wants to reclaim. Personal alignment becomes political affiliation, and any discrepancy between personal claims to authenticity and political ideology is cause for conflict, often leading to violence.

The political charge of Eugene’s love story intensifies as it becomes clearer that Ae-sin personifies Joseon. Ae-sin is a public figure who not only represents the beauty and grace of the country, but also the Confucian values of conservative Joseon. While not a royal member, Ae-sin is, however, a lady from the most respected Ko family of Joseon and her grandfather was a mentor for King Gojong. Eugene’s interpreter friend describes Ae-sin as “the noblewoman” to whom many have owed their lives because her family helped them during the famine.<sup>19</sup> Loving Ae-sin thus translates into loving the country and being faithful to her signals one’s patriotism. Love therefore becomes the magnetic source that binds Eugene to political ideology. Consequently, the country in danger also translates into Ae-sin in danger, as she comes to embody Joseon. As the country’s struggle against the Japanese annexation intensifies, Ae-sin is portrayed to be frequently in trouble, often unable to save herself, having to rely on others for help. Her double representation of victimized, yet “authentic” Joseon only calls for “righteous” Joseon people who are either willing to risk their lives to protect her or the country, or who have remained righteous throughout the series. Eugene, Dong-mae, Hui-sung, Kudo Hina, the hybrid characters of modern Joseon, belong to the first category, but not to the second. Their unrighteous past has to be negotiated through their patriotic deaths.

One of Eugene’s several narrations in the last episode supports the impossibility for hybrid characters to peacefully coexist with Joseon. While looking at the special newspaper flyers written by Hui-sung, which incite Joseon people to unite to fight against the Japanese, Eugene describes the “final destination” of the tragic passers. Eugene, Dong-mae and Hui-sung gaze at the papers flying down from a building, and the scene parallels an earlier scene in which the three men look at falling cherry blossoms. A montage of each character’s final actions supplements the voice-over narration. The three men in love with Ae-sin are inevitably driven into alignment with patriotism. Eugene solemnly narrates,

*We may have taken different paths, but it was our destiny to end up together. The steps we took resembled who we are. The article one wrote instead of a will. (Hui-sung) Opium that burned through one’s broken body in the amount of the life he had left. (Dong-mae) The Korean flag that*

*was given to a man who was forever a foreigner. Will our final destination be somewhere between glory and a sad ending? Maybe we just didn't know how to stop. Or perhaps, we had no reason to stop. Maybe... it was patriotism.”<sup>20</sup>*

The three men are forced to take irrevocable steps towards patriotism because they have failed to “stick lightly” (Bauman 5) to shifting modern values, seen in the way all three are unable to put an end to their romantic, and one might add, idealized, attachments to Ae-sin. Caught between “glory and a sad ending”, it is only through “creative destruction” (3) of their bodies, that they can finally pass (in the common sense of the term, but also in the way Kim uses it, as outlined above) for authentic Joseon men.

Traversing these paths from past to future, individualism to patriotism; from a desire to consume to the fear of being consumed, and from the personal to political, Eugene can only exist as a liminal character that conservative, homogeneous, “normal” Joseon can never fully embrace. He symbolizes an impasse. He is the victim of the early, immature modern condition constructed by the imperialists’ rapidly globalizing modern, colonialist agenda. While he is forced into his search for his authentic self in the midst of modern changes that have shaped his history and love story, his fluidity and liminality are considered an obstacle for his country’s future. His passing for an authentic Joseon man is not recognized in a country that considers him an othered body that disables the nation’s ideal. He is forced into an impossible situation in which he can only exist and be recognized in the present, and he makes a choice “to compress the present into eternity” (Bauman 7) by dying a glorious death. Eugene’s authentic self has to take a step back for authentic Joseon to step forward so that its future is secured. His ill-fated love makes this sacrifice possible. *Mr Sunshine* is a love story that belies the violence of a nationalist ideology that demands self-sacrifice as a “cure” for the nation’s troubled history.

I would like to end by giving some thought to the current state of what constitutes national identity in South Korea. Today, there are thousands of Koreans who hold dual citizenship in Korea and the U.S., which means that hybrid figures like Eugene Choi are no longer fantasies. In contemporary, “global” South Korea, multiculturalism is a social issue requiring urgent attention. The governmental policies of *saegaehwa* (globalization) from the 1990s corresponded not only to the newly developed democratic South Korea on the level of global competition, but also to the image-making of a more globalized, multicultural country (Kim 187). Since the influx of multiethnic migrant workers and foreign brides in the 1980s, the percentage of foreigners in the country has been rising constantly and is expected to reach 10% by 2050, which will make South Korea an immigrant society by the OECD standard (Yun and Park 132). Where would the line between “authentic” Koreans and “other” Koreans exist and what paradox would that division reveal about contemporary South Korea? Can

“other” Korean identities pass normative boundaries without being reduced to figures of “disabilities”? Has there been a mature transformation for the country in order to incorporate disabled, non-standard bodies without violence? These questions hold great weight considering the national popularity<sup>21</sup> and the global distribution of *Mr. Sunshine* through Netflix, and how its political and social ideologies have been reformulated for its audience.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Now the capital city of North Korea, then a city in the mid-region of Joseon. The Righteous Army members are on their way to Pyongyang to take another train to China.

<sup>2</sup> The resistant army consisting of ordinary people who fought for Joseon’s autonomy.

<sup>3</sup> Name of the dynasty preceding modern Korea.

<sup>4</sup> Reference to Eugene’s line in episode 21 (58: 57).

<sup>5</sup> Reference to Eugene’s line in episode 24 (1:20:37-1:21:40).

<sup>6</sup> *Mr. Sunshine* is 24-episode long and is written by the top-rated TV series writer, Kim Eun Sook, who is known for her genius in conceiving complex and attractive characters.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene’s Korean name and English name are phonetically the same, but the order between the first and the last name is reversed. During the 24 episodes, the only time Ae-sin calls Eugene in the Korean way is the moment he dies.

<sup>8</sup> The name of Joseon’s upper class. A yangban’s servants were his commodities.

<sup>9</sup> “Frederick Arthur McKenzie (1869-1931) was a correspondent active in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who wrote several books on geopolitical developments in eastern Asia” (Wikipedia article, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Arthur\\_McKenzie](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Arthur_McKenzie) )

<sup>10</sup> “K-drama ‘Mr. Sunshine’ writer accused of distorting history” <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/news-trends/article/2156587/k-drama-mr-sunshine-writer-accused-distorting-history>

<sup>11</sup> Nobu is the name of the slavery/servant class during the Joseon Dynasty.

<sup>12</sup> Episode 2 scene. In fact, this is the first time they “see” each other clearly. In the preceding scene before the encounter on the street, the two characters in the disguise of snipers confront each other as they have the common target (32:01-34:10).

<sup>13</sup> In the scene following the death of Eugene, his interpreter friend reports to emperor Gojong the list of the Righteous Army members who died during the last battle and the train incident. Since Eugene is not an official member of the Righteous Army, his name is lost. The interpreter friend later writes to Eugene’s American friend and asks for his support in burying Eugene at the foreigners’ cemetery in Gyeongseong, the capital of Joseon.

<sup>14</sup> Reference to Eugene’s narration in Episode 24 (22:10)

<sup>15</sup> This phrase first appears in their first conversation. Early on the second episode, they first encounter each other while on secret mission to assassinate a common target. Ae-sin gets the target before Eugene kills him. Both recognize each other, but can’t see each other’s faces. Later, they finally see each other for the first time on the street during the first electric light event. Eugene suddenly disappears into the crowd and Ae-sin attempts to find him in the chaos. When she finds him in an alleyway, he asks, “which way are

you going?” and as she says, “why do you ask?” Then he answers, “I think I should go the same way.” Even before establishing a love relationship, Eugene realizes that he is bound to go the same way with Ae-sin because they are connected through politics.

<sup>16</sup> Reference to Ae-sin’s last voice-over narration, “Good bye comrades, see you again when our country regains independence.”

<sup>17</sup> Reference to Judith Butler’s seminal essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531.

<sup>18</sup> The Glory Hotel is a modern style hotel where multiple foreigners gather around for both travel accommodation and Western coffee. Kudo Hina is a liberal, educated and graceful business leader who does not discriminate any nationality or class. Eugene Choi is a regular guest in room 304.

<sup>19</sup> Reference to Episode 3 (5:10-6:08)

<sup>20</sup> Reference to Episode 24 (21:41-22:33)

<sup>21</sup> The final episode rating on Korean television was 18.129% nationwide, which was the highest rating in tvN history. tvN is the cable broadcasting station that aired the show in South Korea. (<http://www.kdramapal.com/mr-sunshine-becomes-highest-rated-korean-cable-drama-all-time/>)

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