CHAPTER 20

Gendering the K-Vampire

Hyunji Park

Abstract

What makes a vampire a vampire? From an affective life generally driven by unfulfilled desire to the signature modus operandi of the penetrative biting and entering of the victim's neck, vampires in Western culture are recognizable throughout the centuries. While the Western vampire, for which Bram Stoker's Dracula is the chief exemplar, is mostly male (and phallic), the Asian vampire is often gendered female, returning from death in human form to enact revenge like the Western vampire, but is usually non-penetrative, acting rather as a life-sucking succubus. In Korean folklore, the kumiho, the nine-tailed fox who can take the shape of a woman and suck out the lifeblood of her husband and his family, is the closest we get to a vampire figure. In contemporary Korean cinema, we can see the convergence of traditional folkloric images with Western motifs. For example, yeogui (girl ghost) films represent vampire-like figures who often protest against the strictures of a patriarchal society. But the Western vampire, too, has experienced a renaissance of sorts in the last couple of decades, and it is the popularity of figures from Twilight, True Blood, and others that has regendered the K-vampire into being predominantly male. While the webtoon Orange Marmalade still features a female vampire as protagonist, the watershed Park Chan-Wook film Thirst represents a main male vampire with a much more visceral, kumiho-like female counterpart. Meanwhile, recent television series like Vampire Prosecutor/Vampire Detective offer us handsome, law-enforcing prosecutors and detectives as the newest K-vampires. How does this different gendering of the vampire across Eastern and Western traditions reveal fundamental differences in understanding the individual's relationship to his or her society? Meanwhile, how do popular media, like film, television, or webtoons, demonstrate the convergence of Eastern and Western popular traditions within a shared transnational medium?

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The Cross-cultural Vampire

The *kumiho* is a resonant figure in Korean folklore. With a name that literally means nine-tailed fox, the *kumiho* can take on human form, often as a beautiful woman who seduces men. Throughout countless versions and traditions, the *kumiho* is always a liminal figure between human and beast, motivated by longing and lust and violence. A shape-shifting, succubus-like figure, the *kumiho* is close to immortal: the fox must live for fifty years before gaining the ability to take a woman’s form, another fifty to become an exceptionally beautiful one, and a thousand years to reach a sort of heavenly ascension. The *kumiho* is at once cannibal and predator in its victimization of humans (self and other), alluring and dangerous, and symbolizes human fear of the other – of the beast, of the dark, of the forces that appear at the borders of human experience. The *kumiho* can also be sympathetic. The fox’s desire to become human can only be realized through decades or centuries of self-denial and suffering. In some versions, the fox carries a special bead in its mouth, which, when swallowed, gives a profound understanding of the sky, the earth, or the human, whatever is being looked upon at the moment of swallowing. The bead-swaller invariably fails to look heavenward, demonstrating the existential limitations of human knowledge. Changing with the times, the *kumiho* figure has moved from being a benign, even sacred, figure in early Korean folkloric traditions to gaining more negative connotations as the centuries have passed. As Myung-hyun Lee writes, “through the figure of the *kumiho*, who begins as folklore but now has expanded into ‘drama,’ we can see an evolution in the nature of the insecurities or fear contained in its image.”

Strong, seductive, shape-shifting, spirit-sucking, and long-living, the *kumiho* is the closest figure to a vampire within Korean folklore. This chapter contrasts the Korean vampire’s folkloric antecedent, the *kumiho*, with representations of the vampire in contemporary Korean film and media. It asks how the K-vampire negotiates its origins in a *kumiho*-like animistic tradition with the

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