

In Sickness and in Love?

Autumn in My Heart and the Embodiment of Morality in Korean Television Drama

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Abstract

The modern ideology of romantic love is a prominent theme in Korean television dramas (K-dramas). In this paper, I focus on one particular drama, Autumn in My Heart (2000), and the real life love stories of young Korean women. By examining the moral discourses of love within the drama in conjunction with the personal experiences of my informants (echoing the ways my own informants spoke of their love stories in the context of the dramas), I argue that the melodramatic form that emerges from such a study exposes a certain ambivalent attitude to the ideal of modern romantic love. My informants and the narrative plot of the drama in question articulate an embodied moral discourse that conceives of illness as a moral consequence of romantic love with a consequent detachment of the individual from the moral community of kin.

Keywords: romantic love, *Autumn in My Heart*, illness, K-drama, melodrama

Introduction

The study of Korean drama (K-drama) has been on the rise since its international recognition as part of the Hallyu phenomenon.¹ Analysis has tended to focus on K-drama's international reception, adopting theoretical concepts such as globalization, transnational identity, and "soft power" (for example, Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Jang and Paik 2012; G. Lee 2009; Kim, Long, and Robinson 2009; Yang 2008). In the course of conducting fieldwork in South Korea (2006–2007) with young South Koreans in Seoul, I noticed that the young women I interviewed frequently utilized and made reference to K-dramas in order to articulate the dilemmas they encountered in their day-to-day lives. Following the lead of scholars such as Abelmann (2003), I combine ethnographic research with narrative analysis. In this paper, I trace the contours of a moral discourse that connects the body to social order in a melodramatic expression that blends the lives of my informants with the characters and plots of certain K-dramas—a refractory process that expresses the dilemmas engendered by end-of-the-century attitudes towards romantic love. Such dramas function as "critical sites in which to find the sensibility of social transformation" (Abelmann 2003, 22). They can serve to explore the ambivalent position of women in contemporary South Korea as they try to negotiate the ideals of romantic love with its social and familial (im)possibilities.

The first section of this paper will introduce three young women to the reader: Yu-jin, Su-mi, and Yu-na. I came to know these three young women—my informants—through the course of my research, and I focus my discussion of these women on the ways in which they discussed and presented their own relationship histories. These discussions with my informants often led to conversations about certain K-dramas. While these

1. Hallyu (Korean Wave) is a term coined to describe the global rise in popularity of Korean pop culture. According to Kim, Long, and Robinson (2009, 315), Hallyu began with the first export of K-drama into China in 1993: "Having first penetrated the Chinese mainland, the Korean cultural phenomenon of Hallyu, in particular Korean television, has spread throughout East and Southeast of Asia . . . and later even the Middle East and East Europe."

conversations also included discussions of the dramas then being aired, we often found ourselves repeatedly referring to one drama in particular, *Autumn in My Heart* (*Gaeul donghwa*). *Autumn in My Heart* aired five years prior to my fieldwork. Since the drama was broadcast at a time when my informants were undergoing their first experiences of love, I suspect the drama, like the relationships themselves, constituted a reference point for my informants.

Before describing the narrative plot and some of the key themes of *Autumn in My Heart*, I discuss the context of K-drama more broadly as a Korean gynocentric melodramatic form. The subsequent discussion of *Autumn in My Heart* focuses on the drama's presentation of the possibilities of romantic love within the context of an ideology of modern individualism at the end of the twentieth century.² The narrative of *Autumn in My Heart* presents the viewer with a moral discourse premised on what Alford (1999) has described as a *joe-beol* (crime-punishment) cycle. The articulation of romantic love within this discourse presents illness in the context of a self that is isolated from the moral networks of kin. The tragic element of this discourse centers on the desirability of romantic love, which actually results in a seemingly inevitable disaster. The moral discourse of *joe-beol* is still relevant and indeed has been adapted for contemporary notions of romantic love. In these narratives the female body, in particular, features as the pacified somatic marker of the malaise of modern love. Drawing insight from the medical anthropological literature on illness and social transformation, I proceed to contextualize this embodied moral discourse in light of culture-bound syndromes that consider the physical body as

2. It is of course difficult to draw conclusions on the nature of contemporary Korean society based on a drama that aired in 2000 (*Autumn in My Heart*), especially given the rapid pace of Korean cultural production expansion. My comments and analysis are best taken in light of the moment of its production and collection in the years 2004–2006. The extent to which my informants used such cultural productions in order to understand their own lives turns these “texts” into rich materials of relevance. Anthropology can only at best offer a picture of society in a moment in time, and by referring to these soap operas, I do not intend to deny the importance of further research into more recent Korean drama productions. I can only hope that my research can provide the backdrop for further research in the field.

inseparable from the emotional implications of a social body in Korea and elsewhere.

Yu-jin, Su-mi, and Yu-na: Articulating the Personal

The ways in which many of my informants described their own love lives often constituted a narrative plot that was highly melodramatic and could have easily been right at home in any K-drama.

Yu-jin was a young woman in her late twenties. She did not come from a particularly well-to-do family. She had one “big” love in her life, Kim In-uk. He was in his early thirties and came from a well-to-do family. They dated for a few months (she never told me how they met). She fondly recalled his kindness and how they went on skiing trips together. His mother, however, opposed their marriage. In-uk, at first, insisted that he intended to go ahead with his marriage plans, despite the opposition. His mother, however, fell severely ill and was hospitalized. Out of consideration for his mother, In-uk broke off their wedding plans. Devastated, Yu-jin quit her job as a kindergarten teacher and left Korea for a long holiday.

Su-mi came from a well-to-do family. She was in her early twenties and attended an “average university.” She had met Kim Mi-nam at a *hakwon* (private academy) a few years before while preparing for her university admission exams. She quickly fell in love with him and they started dating. She disliked that he was *sosimhae* (“cautious” or “timid”).³ At the time, neither she nor Mi-nam knew that their mutual friend, Myeong-jin, was also in love with him. Myeong-jin, however, fell seriously ill. Mi-nam felt somewhat responsible for causing her illness and broke off his relationship

3. The *hanja* (Chinese characters) for *sosim* (小心) are literally a combination of the characters “small” and “heart.” In the Korean cultural anatomy, smallness of heart seems to denote cowardice. In Korean traditional medicine (*hanyak*), internal organs are centers for combined physiological and psychological functions. The heart is the organ related to the spirit or mind, which is the center of all psychological functioning (see Keum-Young 1991; Lin 1981).

with Su-mi out of consideration for Myeong-jin. This breakup devastated Su-mi; she felt *maeum-i apa* (emotionally hurt), cried a lot, and even lost her appetite for food. Mi-nam ended up dating Myeong-jin. Su-mi told me, to her satisfaction, that she had heard from a friend, who heard it from a friend, that even though Myeong-jin was feeling better, Mi-nam and Myeong-jin were no longer together. Su-mi was a very headstrong, dramatic girl. Maybe as a result of her experience with Mi-nam, she believed that the best situation is when you love (*saranghada*) another person without knowing whether the other person loves you back; “It does not matter,” she added confidently, “He will eventually start loving me.” Su-mi liked *jjaksarang* (one-sided love) the best.

Yu-na was my closest informant. She was in her late twenties when I first met her and I am still in regular contact with her. I met her one Saturday afternoon, and I was telling her Yu-jin’s story. Scoffing, she said that what Yu-jin experienced was an “old way of thinking.” As often happened during my research about romantic love, Yu-na and I began to discuss K-dramas. I suggested to her that there were some interesting similarities between Yu-jin and Su-mi’s stories and the (by then already dated) drama, *Gaeul donghwa*.⁴ I was quite surprised to learn that Yu-na knew the drama very well. She was, however, highly dismissive of it, stating, “That’s silly, it is tragic nonsense, it is too far-fetched.” Months earlier, in Seoul, Yu-na had told me that she blamed this very same drama for her poor results in the university entrance exams. She had wasted precious study time religiously following this drama when she should have been studying.

The Korean Drama as a Melodramatic Genre

In the course of conducting my fieldwork, I was struck by the ways in which my informants’ own life stories were narrated with a certain “melo-

4. From now on I will exclusively refer to *Gaeul donghwa* by its English title, *Autumn in My Heart*. This research was conducted in 2005 and 2006, while *Autumn in My Heart* initially aired in the year 2000—before the Korean drama boom in foreign markets.

dramatic” quality. Abelmann (2003) experienced a similar phenomenon when conducting her fieldwork. She argues (2003, 23), “A melodramatic sensibility has been pervasive in contemporary South Korea.” Korean melodramas, as in the case of certain K-dramas, are a means of making sense of experiences and interpreting events. In a way, the love lives of my informants mirrored these dramas, or perhaps the dramas mirrored the experiences of my informants. At certain points, the distinction between life and drama was hard to draw, in terms of narrative style and plot. As melodramas, K-dramas have been neglected as a cultural form, and are largely seen as being precluded from any meaningful engagement with social and cultural transformations.

It must be noted at the outset that the very act of defining a genre on the basis of nationality, as implied when using the term “Korean drama” or “K-drama,” is implicated in nationalist politics. There are, in fact, several sub-genres that one could identify within K-drama, depending on the intended audience. Even the same drama can be marketed as being of a different genre depending on the nature of the given market.⁵ It is, however, outside the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive analysis of K-drama’s sub-genres, or to delve into the complex “genrifications” involved in the definition of a specifically Korean genre of drama. A genre is a historical production and “genrification” is itself a naming process (Yang 2008, 278). It is difficult to categorize the dramas referred to in this study in any particularly accurate way. Using terms such as “soap opera,” or even “melodrama,” runs the risk of ignoring a rich native genealogy of sentimental narratives that predate the rise of a native television industry. This genealogy ranges from the appropriation of colonial *sinpa* theatre in the Joseon dynasty to “melo” films.⁶ In this paper I use the terms “drama” and “melodrama” interchangeably to refer to K-drama productions that utilize a melodramatic sensibility *primarily* targeted at women as consumers. In particular, the dramas that I discuss address issues that arise from the

5. In Taiwan, for example, *Autumn in My Heart* was marketed as an “idol drama,” emphasizing its modern romantic components (Yang 2008, 288).

6. I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for highlighting this fact.

articulation of romantic love in modernity.

K-dramas are important events in Korean television, with major networks competing for their dramas to get the largest share of the audience. K-dramas typically range from 16 to 20 episodes of 45 minutes to an hour, and are anticipated weekly events. K-drama is characterized by an excess of affect and plot (see [Abelmann 2003, 2005](#); [Dissanayake 1993](#)). Since the 1990s, K-drama productions have become the focus of a transnational audience, mostly in East and Southeast Asia, and form a key cultural export.

Modernization was a prominent theme in Korean cinema during the 1990s ([Han 2003](#)). The critical potential of the melodramatic form, however, tended to be overlooked in the face of the genre's fantastical and over-marked qualities. For [Han \(2003\)](#), for example, melodrama is only a banal genre. Even in the analysis of Western critical genres, the melodramatic form tended to be equated with alienation. Melodramas were often represented as the antithesis of realism and tragedy (see [Smith 1973](#); [Ang 1985](#); [Gledhill \[1987\] 2002](#)). [Althusser \(2005\)](#), for example, appealed to a scientific and realist vision of the social. According to [Althusser \(quoted in Kowsar 1983, 464\)](#), a historically progressivist vision "cannot allow for sentimentality."⁷ It was only relatively recently that the term "melodrama" was used in anything but a pejorative sense (see [Dissanayake 1993](#); [Brooks 1976](#)). Whether melodrama functions as subversion or as escapism cannot be decided outside of the social and historical context in which it is viewed (see [Elsaesser 1972](#)).

Within melodramas, personal life is dominated by dramatic conflicts and catastrophes, "which are blown up to improbable proportions" ([Ang 1985, 60](#)). While American dramas tend to focus on one episode at a time, K-dramas tend to have a continuing story ([Park 2004](#)). In both Asian and Western melodramas, the family features prominently. In Western dramas, however, we usually see the individual in the context of the family, while in Asian melodrama, "it is the familial self that is the focus of interest" ([Dis-](#)

7. One must also note, however, that for [Adorno \(see Rosen 1980\)](#), for example, it was precisely the *melos* in cinema that held the greatest progressive function for the genre.

sanayake 1993, 4).

The audience studies carried out to date provide evidence that K-dramas, much like soap operas (see [Kuhn 1984](#); [Brown 1994](#); [Brunsdon 2000](#)), are primarily a gynocentric genre (see [Hayashi and Lee 2007](#), 211; [Lin and Tong 2008](#)). [Lin and Tong \(2008, 92\)](#), in fact, refer to these sorts of K-dramas as “women’s genres” and “melodramatic soap operas.”

A melodramatic component is, to a certain degree, a common factor across the various sub-genres of K-dramas. My discussion, however, is limited to those dramas that prominently feature themes of modern romantic love that articulate millennial attitudes towards gendered individualism and the promises and failures of romantic love in modernity. In Asian drama more generally, romantic love is “still taken much more seriously [than in the West] . . . even though there is ambivalence and uncertainty about [its] possibility” ([Ang 2004](#), 308). Korean dramas express this ambivalence towards the ideal of modern romantic love in a powerful way. It is important to note that, for my informants, there was no confusion in distinguishing between the fantastical and the real aspects of the melodrama. Yu-na, for example, clearly looked at these melodramas as fantastical and divorced from the real world. However, my informants repeatedly sought to bring the soap opera into the dialogue when discussing their perceptions and experiences of romantic love. According to [Abelmann \(2003, 105\)](#), it is this tension between the “viewer’s desire for the unrealistic and their demands for the realistic that keep[s] viewers tuned in.” The somewhat ambivalent relationship to these dramas is best exemplified by the attitude of Yu-na. While she dismissed dramas such as *Autumn in My Heart* as fantastical nonsense, she immediately offered a narrative from her own family history that mirrored the tragic consequences of romantic love exemplified in *Autumn in My Heart*. Her aunt, who was fairly well-to-do, decided to marry a poor man despite her family’s opposition. This resulted in a tragedy, and, in the words of Yu-na, “She ended up getting a divorce and even had an abortion!” Her evocation of a story from her own personal life demonstrates the psychological realism of the feelings expressed through these dramas. Melodrama amplifies real experience to fantastical proportions through remarkable plots, monopathic characterizations, and

emotional intensity. At the same time, it contains a core “psychological realism” that speaks to the genre’s critical *potential*—a third route between realism and its deconstruction (Gledhill [1987] 2002, 33).

In the following section, I discuss some elements of the plot and some key scenes from *Autumn in My Heart*, focusing in particular on the relationship between illness and romantic love portrayed in this drama. In *Autumn in My Heart*, illness is often portrayed as being the result of romantic love that transgresses the moral boundaries of the social order. The association between illness and romantic love was something that resonated with my informants.

Romantic Love and Illness in *Autumn in My Heart*

Autumn in My Heart aired on the KBS network in 2000. The drama, directed by Yun Seok-ho, became immensely popular, and the shooting locations became tourist destinations. It enjoyed remarkable international success outside of Korea as well, most notably in the Arab countries (Kim, Long, and Robinson 2009). The plot has many incredible twists and turns. It features characters named Jun-seo and Eun-seo, who are raised as brother and sister for 14 years until, by accident, their parents realize that Eun-seo was switched at birth with a character named Shin-ae (Jun-seo’s real sister). Upon learning of the hospital’s mistake, Jun-seo’s affluent family migrates to the United States with Shin-ae, leaving Eun-seo in Korea with her biological mother, a poor, widowed storeowner. After nine years, Jun-seo’s family returns to Korea. Jun-seo and Eun-seo eventually meet again, but by this stage, Jun-seo has become engaged to Yu-mi (a woman of equal class background). Tae-seok (the son of the owner of a chain of hotels and Jun-seo’s friend) falls in love with Eun-seo, who is working as a maid in one of the hotels owned by his family. The plot revolves around Jun-seo and Eun-seo’s love for each other, a love that transgresses social and moral boundaries.

In the 10th episode, Jun-seo and Eun-seo run away in desperation to an idyllic ranch, away from their family and friends. Eun-seo, however, is worried and secretly calls her birth mother from a public phone to reassure

her that she is well. As the music increases in intensity, Eun-seo's mother bursts into tears and pleads with her not to hang up. She demands to know her whereabouts, asking, "What are you doing? Where are you?" In reply, Eun-seo says, "Mother, sorry, I'm sorry but I'm happy. I'm really happy here." Her mother, with a puzzled tone, replies, "Happy? How can you say that? How can you be happy? Your brother has a fiancée. What about the man who likes you? How can you be happy when you break your parents' hearts like this? You'll be punished (*beol*) for this." Eun-seo, tears streaming down her cheeks, says, "Mother, I'm sorry. . . . I'm sorry. Don't worry, I am fine." As she hangs up, her mother's words echo in her head as she thinks over the implications of her actions: "How can you be happy when you break your parents' hearts like this? You'll be punished for this. . . . What sort of happiness is that?" Eun-seo then suddenly gets a nosebleed and tilts her head back to stop the bleeding. This nosebleed is the first symptom of what we later learn is Eun-seo's fatal leukemia.

The onset of the first symptoms of Eun-seo's leukemia coincides with the realization, and the first clear recognition, that Eun-seo and Jun-seo have transgressed in their love. For Eun-seo, this transgression is three-fold. First of all, she is breaking up her brother's engagement and her own relationship with Tae-seok, who had proposed to her. She is also breaking her parents' hearts by going against their wishes and what is expected of her. For these transgressions, her mother warns Eun-seo that she will suffer punishment, and no sooner does she utter these words than Eun-seo's leukemia begins to manifest itself. This *beol* is of a cosmic/moral nature characterized by a certain inevitability that things will end in illness and death. In this same episode, Tae-seok drives up to the ranch and faces his friend Jun-seo and chastises him, stating:

You think you can do it now, but think it over. It won't happen. It won't. Your parents and Yu-mi [Jun-seo's betrothed] . . . you can't disappoint them [*neo jeobeoril su eopseo*]. You think you can do it but you can't. Yun Jun-seo can you do this? Can you? How can you do this to Yu-mi? How can you do this to your parents? How can you do this to me?

The transgressions defined by Tae-seok echo those outlined by Eun-seo's mother. They center on the idea that the selfish desires of Jun-seo and Eun-seo will devastate their families and friends. *Autumn in My Heart* is animated by this moral dilemma that pits selfish romantic love on the one hand against duty and responsibility to one's significant others on the other. The tragic component is that Jun-seo and Eun-seo are both fully cognizant of the impact of their actions. In Jun-seo's words, "I know I'm bad. I've betrayed my parents, friends, fiancée. . . . That's fine as long as Eun-seo forgives me." The "pure relationship" that represents the ideals of romantic love in modern society is built on an assertion of individualism and freedom as supreme values. Jun-seo and Eun-seo's elopement is significant in this respect as a physical and affective detachment from their respective families.

In some respects, this pattern of romantic love leaves the woman in an especially vulnerable position, as she is left bereft of kinship support networks. In one scene, Eun-seo looks hesitantly at Jun-seo and is ready to tell him that she cannot go through with the elopement, when Jun-seo looks intently into her eyes and tells her, "Just think of me," echoing the assurances he had given her earlier in the ranch: "Don't worry, I'll take care of everything. You just stay next to me. Don't listen to them [her family and friends] or look at anyone else."

The relationship between Eun-seo and Jun-seo verges dangerously close to incest. The incest theme represents the assertion that romantic love transgresses social order. Romantic individualism represents a deregulation of desire that threatens the social and moral order. It is the rejection of this social order by Jun-seo and Eun-seo that underlies their horrific moral crime. It is therefore in keeping with the genre of melodramatic excess that romantic love, as a symptom of a modern ideology, should be represented as the most complete denial of the symbolic regulatory function represented by the "immorality" of incest. Ironically, the ideology of liberation, pursued to its logical conclusion, entails a rebellion against the very fundamental premise of desire—its regulation.

Embodying Morality

Exploring Korean morality, Alford (1999) writes of the importance of *joe* (a “crime” or “offense”). *Joe* cannot be understood outside the context of *beol*, as part of what Alford calls a *joe-beol* cycle.⁸ Furthermore, the notion of *beol* in Korea is not limited to the individual subject. *Beol* is the self-evident consequence of transgression and isolation, which manifests itself in one’s loved ones as well as oneself. Examples of *beol* can range from the wronged seeking revenge to one’s own grandchildren being born handicapped. It can also simply refer to the moral sentiments that result from a transgression, such as shame and regret.⁹ *Beol* transcends the individuals directly involved in *joe*.

In *Autumn in My Heart*, it is because Eun-seo and Jun-seo commit *joe* that they repeat time and time again that they will be punished. The *beol* that, in the end, kills Eun-seo and leads to the suicide of Jun-seo fits the paradigm of this *joe-beol* cycle. Among my informants, the *joe* committed by In-uk led to his mother’s illness, while Su-mi’s *beol* came in the form of her friend’s illness. Yu-na’s aunt faced her *beol* in the form of divorce and abortion; illness is but one form that *beol* can take. In *Autumn in My Heart*, illness is manifest not simply in the form of Eun-seo’s leukemia but also in the form of Jun-seo’s mother’s sudden illness immediately following the elopement of Eun-seo and Jun-seo. Eun-seo even blames herself, declaring, “This is my fault.” While committing *joe* is an individual act, *joe* has ramifications that extend to one’s kin and loved ones and, in the process, also defines the boundaries of a moral community.

The relationship between bodily order and social order has a long-documented history in anthropology and feminism. Feminist scholars have argued that representations of the body tend to serve to naturalize social inequality (Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Grosz 1991). However, illness is a meaningful state that could also embody a protest of this social order by

8. According to Alford (1999, 96), the principle regulating the *joe-beol* cycle “originates in the face-to-face group, the extended family and village. There, one can see the results, including the fact that some sicken and die after committing *joe*.”

9. I would like to acknowledge an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this fact.

parodying the way it disempowers the gendered individual (see [Bordo 1993](#); [Herzlich 1995](#)). Anthropologists have long studied the ways in which certain culture-bound illnesses can function as “idiom[s] of distress” ([Scheper-Hughes 2007](#)). Others argue that illness often features as an embodied response to social transformation ([Jenkins 1991](#); [Scheper-Hughes 2007](#); [Low 1994](#)).

In South Korea, we can also find such “idioms of distress.” Authors such as [J. Lee \(2002\)](#) discuss *hyeondaebyeong* (modernization illness), which relates to a collection of symptoms including hypertension; diabetes; diseases of the heart, liver, and stomach; bronchitis; and various cancers. These diseases generally affect men who are seen to have worked themselves sick in the process of achieving rapid modernization. As [J. Lee \(2002, 56\)](#) states, “The ailing middle-aged Korean man is canonized as the altruistic victim of prevailing chronic diseases.” While *hyeondaebyeong* is seen as affecting middle-aged men, the middle-aged female body is also subject to its own culturally meaningful illnesses. In South Korea, *hwabyeong* (“anger illness” or “fire illness”) has been described as a Korean somatoform “culture-bound syndrome” ([Lin 1983](#)). As such, it combines a number of physical, behavioral, and psychological symptoms. *Hwabyeong*, as a syndrome, is primarily applied to women. For example, according to Korean psychiatrist [Lee Si Hyung \(1977\)](#), in his research, more than three of every four sufferers who complained of *hwabyeong* were women. *Hwabyeong* sufferers linked their condition to anger provoked in their family lives by a stressful relationship with their husband or mother-in-law. [Min \(2009\)](#) states that sufferers of *hwabyeong* claim they have to suppress or inhibit their anger, which is caused by feelings of unfairness, discrimination, exploitation, and deprivation.

The embodiment of social and personal distress in Korea is not surprising when we consider that in Korean traditional medicine, the somatic and the psychological are part of a complex cultural anatomy ([Lin 1980](#)). Furthermore, the belief in the *moral* causes of illness in Korea seems to transcend religious differences ([Keum-Young 1991](#)).

Morality is experienced as a lived reality through the immediacy of the body. In Korea, the body is inextricably woven into the cultural system

as an embodied expression of its moral order. The representation of illness in dramas, such as in *Autumn in My Heart*, often expresses this embodied morality, which in turn refracts the everyday lives and experiences of my informants.

In *Autumn in My Heart*, *beol* is repeatedly represented through illness. Jun-seo's mother falls ill when she hears of her son's affair with Eun-seo. Yu-mi becomes deeply depressed and suicidal. She ends up crippling her hand, permanently leaving her unable to pursue her career as a painter. There is also Eun-seo's fatal leukemia. This is the punishment that Jun-seo was anticipating. Fully aware that their actions will have consequences, Eun-seo tells Jun-seo, as he sleeps on her shoulder on the bus, "*Beol badeul geot gatae*" (We will be punished for this). In the case of Eun-seo, the *beol* she ultimately receives is death and her mother's ill health. For the characters (and I suspect the viewers), the connection is self-evident. As Shin-ae tells her father, "It is because of Eun-seo that mother is sick!" For Jun-seo, *beol* comes through the role he plays in Yu-mi's ill health. Ultimately, the weight of the punishment is too great, and their love is not enough. Jun-seo decides to forsake his plans to marry Eun-seo because he cannot face his *beol*. Earlier in the drama, it was Jun-seo who had convinced Eun-seo to go ahead with their relationship; "I will take all the punishment," he had claimed. Reassuring her that everything was alright, he had placed his hand on her head, and smiling, had told her, "I forgive you of your sins." Smiling, Eun-seo had reciprocated the gesture. Jun-seo and Eun-seo seek redemption in each other, and this mock forgiveness is an attempt to reassure themselves that they are only answerable to one another. This same gesture is repeated by Eun-seo when Jun-seo reneges on his marriage promise. Holding back her sadness, she tells him to go make Yu-mi happy.

Autumn in My Heart could be read as a complex moral tale that presents the conflict between two moral values: affective individualism and the social and moral obligation to others that forms the basis of the person in South Korea. Illness features in representations of a *joe-beol* cycle as a statement to the effect that one's own actions always implicate others. There is a certain similarity between the love lives of Su-mi and Yu-jin, with whom I started the paper, and the sort of moral dilemma at the heart

of a K-drama like *Autumn in My Heart*. Both cases portray loved ones becoming ill as a consequence of one's own selfish desire for romantic love. This is accompanied by a deeply felt sense of moral responsibility which is articulated in a somatic trans-individual manner.

In K-dramas, as in American dramas, illness plays a central role (Casata, Skill, and Boadu 1979). Most of the victims are women, and it is often the woman's body that suffers the pathological effects of *beol*. Women feature as the objects of morality but are rarely accorded a position as authorial subjects. In *Autumn in My Heart*, the *beol* inflicted on men is represented in terms of acts of agency. In the end Jun-seo decides to go back to Yu-mi to take care of her, even though he does not love her. His own death is not a passive consequence of the transgressive properties of love, but rather an act of supreme agency, as he decides to take his life by letting a truck run him over. Similarly, the young women I came to know in the course of my study spoke about women who suffer the consequences of the decisions of their male partners, who break off their respective relationships because they cannot face up to the consequences of their love. The sick and suffering female body is depicted as the passive effect of the moral order. In South Korea, both the male and the female body function as somatic markers of social and familial transformation. It is interesting to note, however, that it is the female body that is perceived as suffering from purely emotional causes. While the male body is perceived as a victim of hard work and stress (*hyeondaebyeong*), the female body suffers from passion in the form of anger (*hwabyeong*) or love. This represents what feminist scholars have described as the "docile body of femininity" (Bordo 1993, 180).

Representations of Illness and Love in Popular Culture

The representation of illness in high culture has a long-established history in the West (see Daemmrich and Daemmrich 1987; [Lupton 1994](#); Meyers 1985). Within such narratives, illness tends to be a "symbol of moral, social or political pathology" (Meyers 1985, 1). Certain illnesses are even consid-

ered representative of a particular age or generation ([Herzlich and Pierret 1987](#)). Even in the West, romantic love was often represented as intimately linked to illness. Susan Sontag (1991) argues that representations of tuberculosis showed the ways in which the disease was associated with romantic love in earlier times. Now cancer has taken over the role of tuberculosis in the modern imagination. Cancer was often understood as the result of an unexpressed passion that “moves inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses” (Sontag 1991, 47). Certain biological facts, however, only become culturally meaningful illnesses under specific historical circumstances ([Lock 1993](#)). Through the narratives of my informants and through the moral discourse of dramas such as *Autumn in My Heart*, I believe we encounter a form of “romantic love” that is experienced symptomatically in the female body.

In *Autumn in My Heart*, the culmination of the tragic pathos of the plot is reached when the viewer realizes that Eun-seo was struck with a fatal cancer. I agree with Sontag (1991)—culture constructs illness as a metaphor. Illness, however, could, as anthropologists have shown, function as a complex idiom of distress (for example, [Herzlich and Pierret 1987](#)). While the language of illness can serve to distort and naturalize the social order, it can also embody a reaction to social transformations. Therefore, when interpreted in light of native moral codes, a modern disease like cancer becomes culturally meaningful.

In celebratory narratives of modernity, romantic love emerges as a product of modern transformations based on the individual right to choose—a triumph for freedom and gender equality (for example, [Giddens 1992](#); [Stone 1977](#); [Goode 1963](#); [Macfarlane 1986](#)). The rise of modern “love marriages” in South Korea has often been interpreted in this light ([Therborn 2004](#), 123; [U. Kim 1999](#)). Critical scholars have pointed out, however, that such a celebration of the present constitutes “an ideological simplification of social change” ([Jamieson 1999](#), 480; see also [Morgan 1991](#), 1996).¹⁰ Romantic love has been the subject of an extended critique in the social sciences because of the gross

10. See [Baldacchino \(2008\)](#) for a critical discussion of this opposition between love marriages and arranged marriages in Korean modernity.

gender inequalities that are obscured by it ([Hart 2005](#); [Jamieson 1999](#); Morgan 1991, 1996).

The vision of romantic love presented in *Autumn in My Heart* and in the lives of my informants could be seen as presenting a certain skeptical attitude towards the possibilities of modern romantic love. The narratives make use of the fantastical overextension of the individualist overtones of romantic love in order to underscore the trans-individual understanding of a moral order in which *beol* is intimately linked to the dramatic separation of the individual from his social environment. According to Alford (1999), morality in South Korea is premised on an understanding of evil itself as “unrelatedness.” Without necessarily agreeing with Alford’s proposition, I believe that the association of romantic love with illness via *beol* can serve as an embodied ground for a gendered critique of the anomic effects of modern transformations. In Asia, romantic love in popular culture provides “a language through which people can construct their own lives and search for intimacy . . . helping to constitute such relations” (Kahn 2001, 118; see also Kahn 2006).

The culturally informed morality that emerges in these narratives problematizes the dual canons of individualism and liberation that form the ideal of a “pure relationship” in modern society. My argument is that the way my informants used drama in their lives turned the drama into an ambivalent cultural text that (in)formed their own relationships. The ambivalence of these cultural texts stems from the fact that they are used to promote an ideology of romantic love in modern society that places affective individualism at the center of one’s life, while at the same time being used, often by the same people, as a means to critique precisely this ideology by highlighting its fantastical elements. K-dramas like *Autumn in My Heart* can (and have been) dismissed as fantastical idealizations of romantic love in modernity. However, a detailed analysis of the plot, read in light of broader cultural moral discourse and the interaction of the audience with these dramas, can shed light on the ways in which the ideology of romantic love is tempered by an embodied critique. It is in both the celebratory and the critical qualities of the cultural representations of romantic love that we can locate the ambivalence of the moral discourse of/about

modernity.

Contemporary studies of melodrama have emphasized the fact that, as a genre, melodrama could be said to articulate a third form of critique between realism and its deconstruction (Gledhill [1987] 2002). Whether or not these melodramas provide my informants with a means for critical engagement with what Berger (1977) terms “dilemmas of modernity” is an open question. We should, however, not be surprised that the resistance to popular culture can reveal itself as partly a “conservative” response “precisely because industrial modernity is figured as revolutionary” (Highmore 2003, 153). The language of illness, as adopted in *Autumn in My Heart* and in the narratives of my informants, suggests an appropriation of the objectified body of modern medicine. If the language of illness in South Korea could be considered as providing the basis for a critical discourse on the morality of romantic individualism in modern society, it would fall somewhere in between the “symmetrical errors of archaistic nostalgia and frenetic overmodernization” (Giard 1998, 213).

This critique, however, is both conservative and ambivalent, and this emerges all the more clearly once these dramas are read through the narratives of my informants. All of my informants wanted to pursue relationships based on love, and yet they all recognized its moral ambiguities, as represented through the *joe-beol* cycle in narratives such as *Autumn in My Heart*. At the same time, this distinctly modern form of romantic love is inseparable from considerations of upward social mobility (see Abelmann 2003). The nexus of modern romantic love often features a heterosexual, cross-class relationship in a “Cinderella fantasy” of young women being rescued by affluent and handsome men (see Baldacchino 2008). The ambiguity of modern romantic love emerges in the form of a tension between aspirations for upward social mobility, the desire for affective individualism, and apprehension about the isolation of the individual in pursuit of love. In this paper I focused my discussion on the moral tension between romantic love and kinship, and the ways this morality is embodied in melodramatic causal explanations of illness. While previous publications by authors such as Abelmann (2003) and [Baldacchino \(2008\)](#) considered, in depth, the nexus between marriage and social mobility in connection to

Korean melodramas, these dramas could also potentially articulate a conservative moral critique of romantic love, in a manner that connects the organic body with the social body.

One must, however, be wary of proposing that it is uniformly young women who relate to these K-dramas. Some of my informants identified with the tragic heroines of such dramas while fully recognizing that these dramas are “far-fetched.” At other times my informants used the characters in these dramas in order to define exactly what *not* to do and how *not* to behave. I was particularly struck by the recurring assertion by my informants that such dramas are “exaggerated nonsense,” while at the same time persistently discussing the characters and plots of these dramas in relation to real life.

Coda

During my fieldwork, I was hospitalized with a suspected tumor. While undergoing the required tests, I went to visit the house of a close informant of mine and asked her if she could be my emergency contact and help take care of some affairs, should I need to be hospitalized. Her mother and sister were having dinner with us while I was telling this to Hae-mi. Her mother, in tears, looked at me in puzzlement. She could not understand how this could be happening to someone like me, a bright young man, who, to all intents and purposes, had done nothing wrong. She turned to Hae-mi and asked her about my parents, ascertaining that I was effectively and affectively isolated from them, alone in the world. This rendered the illness understandable for her. She began to see me as the tragic victim of modern individualism, disconnected from my moral community. I was *bulssanghae* (deserving of pity). In an attempt to help redeem the anthropologist, the elderly woman sought to affectively integrate him within her own family, and up to this day she keeps watch on his health from afar.

Being sick and alone, detached from one’s family and loved ones, is one of the most haunting fears that animates modern Koreans. Romantic love, as a force that acts to remove individuals from their network of kin

and obligations, in a melodramatic imagination, is the cause of illness. I personally experienced the manifestation of an illness that could be interpreted as a result of my detachment from kin. My informants told me time and time again that their worst possible visions of the future involved representations of themselves alone in the world at their parents' funeral. Kinship provides people with a moral system (McKinley 2001), a "non-negotiable moral frame of reference for people's actions" (Carsten 2007, 33). By highlighting the ways in which the modern ideology of romantic love serves to isolate individuals from networks of obligation that structure kin relations, the somatic connection between love and illness acts as an ambivalent conservative critique of the destructive effects of modern individualism. While romantic love is still presented as a seductive and desirable goal, it is the object of a tragic structure of feeling because it comes at a price that is too great.

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