Reflection Paper: Masquerade

Masquerade is a 2012 South Korean film depicting a story that happened during Korea’s Joseon Dynasty. Ha-seon is a low-class peasant who is the perfect mimic to the 15th ruler of the Joseon Dynasty -- King Gwang-hae. Ha-seon is told to replace the king for money whenever the king is not present. The king, fearing the threat of assassination, eventually gets drugged by one of the Court ministers, and Ha-seon, therefore, needs to take on the mission to become the new leader. Even though Ha-seon is later found to be the imposter, he does a better job ruling the kingdom and its people with his strong belief in nationalism. The film ends with Ha-seon fleeing and the description of the dynasty perish in a coup a few years after.

This film is very different from Hollywood movies mainly because it illustrates the ideology of third cinema. The story is based on Korean history and one of its dynasties; it shows the lifestyles and traditions of the people living in that era. Because Korea is a country where there were many oppressions and invasions from surrounding strong countries, this film on Korean folk culture is not a typical production under Hollywood cinema. In the movie, we can also see that Korea needs to send soldiers and resources to help the Ming Dynasty without any returns. The emperor and all politicians never think for their people as they try to please the strong nation, and the societal structure left the majority of the civilians oppressed and exploited. This film is also different from Hollywood movies, or Western movies in general, in the cinematography. Masquerade, like many other films focusing on folk culture in terms of third cinema, focuses on the developments in each scene. For instance, the scene at the beginning where Ha-seon being an acrobat, joking with the crowds; the scene that shows people bowing when the King is eating; the scene at the end when that ship Ha-seon is on sails away, etc. There are many other great scenes that help the development of the story. The dialogue interaction between each person in the film acts as a support role. The special art form shows the audience the cultural and traditional side of history and also partly the foreshadowing.

Masquerade also touches upon the ideas of Minjoong, Minjok, and Haan. In a particular sense, all the ideologies are very popular in Korean history because of oppressions.

Minjoong is defined by Namdong Seo as people “who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, and kept under-educated in culture and intellectual manners”. Ha-seon is one of the characters that represents Minjoong. He is a very common civilian just like many other everyday people in that Korean era: low-class, under educated, and with no political manners. In the beginning, he takes on the job of being the fake king just because of the amount of money offered, large enough that normal people will not earn in their entire lives. He has neither no knowledge on how the government court works nor the idea of being a authoritative leader. When the ministers read the scrolls on the future political plannings and actions, Ha-seon just responds with do as you wish. Another character that depicts Minjoong is Sa-wol. She and her parents are oppressed politically. Her dad cannot afford to pay the taxes on the stuffs that they don’t even own, leading to his dad being prisoned, she being sold as slave to the palace, and her mom went missing. Her family is a typical korean family that’s being exploited by the corrupted government regime.

Minjok is the idea of people act on the belief of nationalism, treating themselves with nationalistic and patriotic identities. Ha-seon resembles the idea of Minjok after he finds out all the political disputes and illegitimacy and decides to change the current state of government and help the people. His strong sense of nationalism leads him to learn about the history and the law of the country as well as uphold justice even to the people with lowest power. The scenario of Ha-seon objecting the idea of sending soldiers for free to help Ming dynasty also shows his nationalistic identity. His action and care for the people also reflects Minjok to Captain Do; even after Do finds out that Ha-seon is the imposter King, he still protects Ha-seon for the greater good of the country and in the sense of nationalism.

Haan can be described as the outlooks on life and death, oppression and emaitonal expression. Because of Korean’s history of being invaded numerous times as mentioned before, the very existence of this country shows the idea of haan. As much as half of the population are treated as slaves and properties, and women have suffered through oppressions under the societal structure and the strict law and discrimination. Haan is deep rooted into people’s mind, especially in women, and in turn, it can result in either positive or negative outcomes. In the film, we can see active haan through the head of king’s food servant. Conspired by the Law Minister, she seeks violence and vengefulness to take down the current King, Ha-seon. Unconscious active haan can be shown through Sa-wol. Her situation is created by the society and the kind in that period of time. She, as a young girl, developes haan slowly through her life as a slave in the palace. Until she got noticed by Ha-seon, she is very resentful on the politicians and the king but can’t do anything. She shows humor and love for Ha-seon for his caring and support, eventually leading her to sacrifice herself to prevent poisioning and killing Ha-seon. Passive haan can be perfectly illustrated by the Queen. She live under the name and societal position of the queen that she has been oppressed for a long time, leading her to be stubborn on the current life. When Ha-seon offers her to escape with him, the queen gets scared and refuses. She has no hope on being freed and cannot think about her life after escaping.

Overall, the film conveys the idea of Korean nationalism through its folk culture. With the open ending that Ha-seon fleeing out the country, the film leaves the audience with the plain text of the history in Joseon Dynasty. Even though there is no message delivered at the end, the significance of the film is its process. The change of Ha-seon from his innocence as a lowly comedian to his true care for the people and the country as a leader and a King is the precious development that will impress the audience.