

Women Desire, Too



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That the term ‘female narrative’ is widely used means there are still uncharted territories when it comes to exploring women’s stories. It’s not a coincidence that brilliant storytellers have taken interest in female narratives. Think of football strikers who have nose for open space and pounce on it. But it’s no longer enough to simply replace male characters with women. A great striker doesn’t stop at putting himself in a position to score. He does end up scoring. It’s no different with female narratives. Astute sensibilities of creators who understand desires of the time have helped usher in female narratives that fit with the new era. The ‘new woman’ who openly expresses and realizes her desires, good or bad, stands at the forefront of this movement.

“Do you stop loving someone in Korea when the person gets married?”



Song Seo-rae (Tang Wei) in <Decision to Leave> is a brutally honest woman. She never says anything she doesn’t mean. With a lie detector on, she admits to killing someone if she has indeed done so. There are moments when Song has no choice but to lie, but in such instances, she only takes the best course of action to get herself out of trouble. If there is someone she wants to protect, Song doesn’t hold herself back, even if it means she ends up being a suspect. Song falls for Detective Jang Hae-jun (Park Hae-il), who suspects her of murder, and she lets the world know she’s into him. Song never stops letting her heart to take wherever it wants to take her. Be it murder or love, Song does it to live.

Director Park Chan-wook had long presented self-driven women in his earlier films, such as Lee Geum-ja (Lee Young-ae) in <Lady Vengeance>, Tae-ju (Kim Ok-bin) in <Thirst>, and Hideko (Kim Min-hee) and Sook-hee (Kim Tae-ri) in <The Handmaiden>. He expanded the horizons for female characters once again in <Decision to Leave>. Tang plays a Chinese woman who struggles with the Korean language but who captures the imagination of the audience with some classic vocabulary that an average Korean wouldn’t even know. Providing a soft landing spot for Tang in Korean cinema is one of this film’s more special accomplishments. Screenwriter Jeong Seo-kyeong, who has partnered with Park on several films since <Lady Vengeance> to breathe new life into the director’s worldview, provides inimitable dialogues that make you want to watch <Decision to Leave> over and over again.

Casting comedian Kim Shin-young as Yeon-su also made headlines. The move truly came out of blue, but even more surprising was Kim’s brilliant acting that made people forget about her day job and throw whatever stereotypes they had against comedians out the window. She also played a not-so-insignificant role as a rare, female detective. And it was also fascinating to see a woman replace Jang’s male partner, Soo-wan (Go Kyung-pyo). Between Song, Yeon-su and Jang’s wife, Jung-an (Lee Jung-hyun.), there is no shortage of female characters in the late moments of the film.

“How can you be incompetent but nice? When you’re incompetent, you’re just bad.”

Oh In-ju (Kim Go-eun) in <Little Women> may seem ordinary, but she is quite the responsible woman. She comes from a poor family and she is ostracized at work. But she is ready to do everything and anything for her family. She wants to take care of her two younger sisters, if only to show up her deadbeat parents. Oh keeps grinding. And then she strikes it lucky, in the form of 2 billion won. The money is so silly that she doesn’t even know what to do with it or if she can even spend it. Oh starts out buying expensive ice cream at a convenient store. As she starts spending more money, she decides to dream big. That’s when she gets into trouble, just as unexpectedly as all that money had found her.



Inspired by the classic novel of the same name by Louisa May Alcott, <Little Women> features sisters with different personalities. But compared to the ones in the book, sisters in the TV show have rotten luck with their parents. The mom, who offers absolutely no financial support, runs away with the money In-ju and In-kyeong (Nam Ji-hyun) set aside for the field trip for their baby sister, In-hye (Park Ji-hu). The three down-on-their-luck sisters confront their fates with different sets of desires. <Little Women> has the clearly-defined conflicts based on income gaps. But its characters, defined by complex minds and inner thoughts, are far from ordinary. The show is so interesting because it presents multidimensional and inimitable female characters in abundance.

In addition to the three sisters who try to overcome poverty in their own ways, other women that dominate their world also make their presence felt throughout the series. Jin Hwa-young (Choo Ja-hyun) is the trigger that turns In-ju’s life upside down. Oh Hye-seok (Kim Mi-sook), great aunt of the three sisters, provides a turning point in In-kyeong’s life. Hyorin (Jeon Chae-eun) serves as a lifesaver for In-hye. These female characters add to the dramatic narrative while playing integral roles. The ultimate antagonist of <Little Women>, Won Sang-ah (Uhm Ji-won), has a particularly memorable scene in which she absolutely goes into hysterics. It is the type of sequence long reserved for men. The scene proved femininity can open up all kinds of new possibilities in films or TV shows. The writer of this series definitely tried to demonstrate what could be possible when female characters dominated the narratives.

“Me, I am going to protect my husband my way.”



Queen Im Hwa-ryeong (Kim Hye-soo) in <Under the Queen’s Umbrella> has so much on her plate. It’s easy to assume a queen in a royal palace must be leading a charmed life and enjoying all the trappings of royalty. But in reality, the opposite is true. With different sons getting into trouble left and right, the queen can never rest easy. Only her crown prince, mature and well behaved, could keep her sane. But then in the broad daylight, the prized son suffers a shocking death. Something is up in the palace. Queen Dowager (Kim Hae-sook) is none too pleased with the queen and her sons. Concubines have their eye on the throne after the crown prince’s death. And there are those who want to shake and rock the throne. As their desires boil to the surface, the queen tries to figure out what to do. There is so much she has to uncover, look after and prepare for. She may as well be a detective.

The Korean title of the historical series comes from the old word meaning umbrella. It follows the struggles and travails of the queen who indeed acts as the umbrella for her children and for her people. <Under the Queen’s Umbrella> follows conspiracies and confrontations surrounding the crown prince’s assassination and proclamation in the royal palace. And rather than following the script of other period drama that tells such stories from a male point of view, featuring the king and his aides, <Under the Queen’s Umbrella> focuses on women inside the palace. Women in royal families had long been considered accessories to the story. But this series takes us along for rides through feuds between the queen, concubines, queen dowager and her court ladies, as they all try to one-up each other. There is palpable tension between women who want to push their son to the throne.

There’s something exhilarating about seeing the powerful royal palace turn into a stage for power struggles among women. Female characters had long been pushed to the peripheries in films or dramas set in the royal palace, instead of assuming an active control in running the ship. To see women take center stage is to unearth possibilities of new narratives in period drama. There have been very few, if any, instances where female characters had such diversified presence in a historical show set against the royal palace. This represents an important step forward. Watch the way the queen take matters into her own hands. This serves as a declaration that the queen would not be held back by the limitations of the prevailing trends of the times.



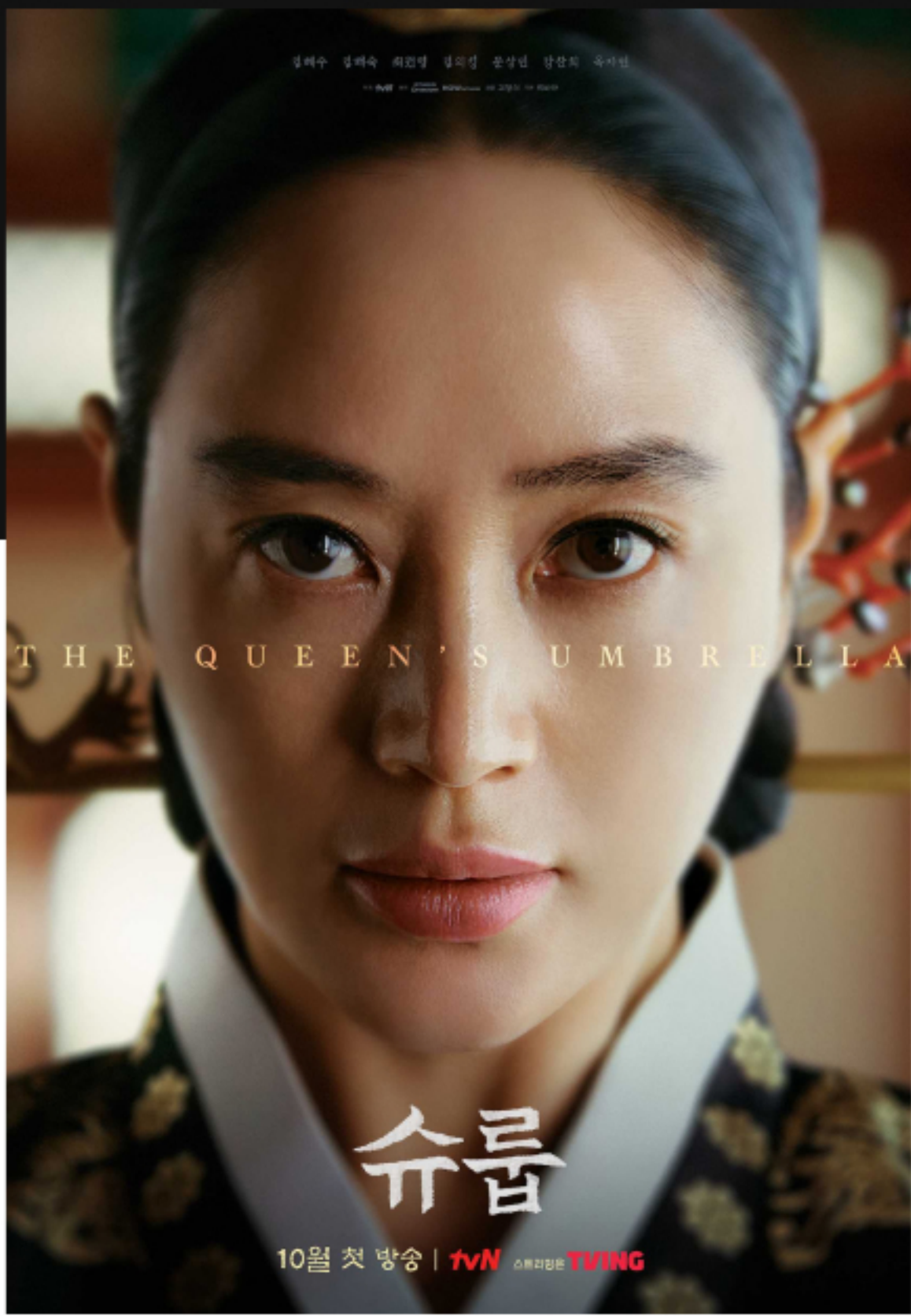
We have moved past the era of ‘bromance’ and reached the age of ‘womance,’ a new word combining ‘woman’ and ‘romance.’ And this really represents desires and longings of the new era. Women are no longer brought into the picture just to complete a love story with men. They don’t play the sacrificial lamb or some token sidekicks for men in their pursuit of power. Women in films and TV shows today control their own destiny and drive the narrative. They express and fulfill their desires, either with others or on their own. And they still have so much more to tell. As people who think, act and choose for themselves, women desire, therefore they are. They will transcend the definition of female narrative and move into the world of new, unexplored stories. Women represent the future of storytelling.



Decision to Leave



Little Women



Under the Queen's Umbrella