

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO RIO GRANDE DO SUL  
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**VICTORIAN EROTICA TO JAPANESE SHUNGA: HOW CULTURAL AND MEDIAL  
ASPECTS WERE ADAPTED FROM *FINGERSMITH* TO *THE HANDMAIDEN***

Porto Alegre

2023

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Licenciada em Letras — Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa, Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa pela Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Elaine Barros Indrusiak

Porto Alegre

2023

#### CIP - Catalogação na Publicação

Vanazzi, Marina Krebs

Victorian erotica to Japanese shunga: how cultural and medial aspects were adapted from Fingersmith to The Handmaiden / Marina Krebs Vanazzi. -- 2023.

51 f.

Orientadora: Elaine Barros Indrusiak.

Trabalho de conclusão de curso (Graduação) -- Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Instituto de Letras, Licenciatura em Letras: Língua Portuguesa e Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa, Língua Inglesa e Literaturas de Língua Inglesa, Porto Alegre, BR-RS, 2023.

1. The Handmaiden . 2. Fingersmith. 3. cultural transposition. 4. film adaptation . 5. South Korea. I. Indrusiak, Elaine Barros, orient. II. Título.

*“The morning will come again  
No darkness, no season can last forever  
Maybe cherries are blossoming  
And winter is going to be over”*

To 방탄소년단, the ones that made me fall in love with South Korea's culture.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family, especially my grandmother, who inspired me to enter the Letras course and made me understand the importance of a teacher in people's lives. I hope one day I can become as great a teacher as you are.

I would like to thank my advisor, Elaine, for introducing me to the incredible world of intermedial studies and for believing in this work. It is an absolute dream to graduate talking about my favorite film of all time, and I am so glad I had you guiding me through this.

I would like to thank João Vicente, Márcio and Natália, my *letristas* besties, who have been with me since my first semester at UFRGS. Can you guys believe we made it until the end? Thank you for all the class-breaks, lunches at RU, laughs, gossiping and venting moments. College would have been an absolute nightmare without you guys in it.

I would like to thank Eduarda, my lover, who always believes in me, comforts me and reassures me when I feel like I am not good enough. You are the greatest gift Letras gave me, and for that I thank the universe for putting you in my path.

I would like to dedicate this work to my father, who passed away exactly one day before my first class at UFRGS, in 2019, and for that could not see me as an undergraduate. Things are getting better. I miss you and I hope I am making you proud.

Lastly, I would like to thank 2017 Marina, a young girl who was discovering herself, her interests, her identity, her dreams and ambitions, who I know would be so proud of this work. You are loved and you are capable. The things you love and the things you have to say matter, even if sometimes you don't believe it. You made it. We made it.

## ABSTRACT

This study aims at analyzing the adaptive process responsible for transforming Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2002) into Park Chanwook's film *The Handmaiden* (2016), with a focus on how cultural and medial aspects of the source text were adapted and what effects this produced in the adaptation. The analysis on the cultural transposition, considering that *Fingersmith* is set in Victorian England and *The Handmaiden* in a 1930s Japanese-occupied Korea, relies on Shin Chiyun's study *In another time and place: translating gothic romance in The Handmaiden* (2020) and on excerpts from interviews with Sarah Waters and Park Chanwook. It is divided into two parts: the first intends to trace a parallel between the two historical periods and analyze what effects the cultural and historical context adjustments produced in the adaptation; the second focuses on the erotic literature portrayed in the novel and film, respectively Victorian erotica and Japanese shunga, and how they influenced the approaches to sex in both works. For the analysis on the medial transposition — Irina Rajewsky's (2011) concept of “the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium” — the study discusses the intermedial changes of *The Handmaiden* through the lenses of two of Thomas Leitch's (2001) film adaptation approaches, also divided into two parts: the first analyzes what was compressed in the adaptation, while the second analyzes the concept of colonization, with a focus on what new meanings were added in the film and their relationship to Park Chanwook's career as a director.

**Keywords:** *The Handmaiden*; *Fingersmith*; cultural transposition; film adaptation; South Korea.

## RESUMO

Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar o processo adaptativo responsável pela transformação do romance *Fingersmith* (2002), de Sarah Waters, no filme *The Handmaiden* (2016), de Park Chanwook, com foco em como os aspectos culturais e midiáticos do texto original foram adaptados e quais os efeitos que isso produziu na adaptação. A análise sobre a transposição cultural, considerando que *Fingersmith* se passa na Era vitoriana e *The Handmaiden* na Coreia dos anos 1930 ocupada pelos japoneses, apoia-se no estudo de Shin Chiyun *In another time and place: translating gothic romance in The Handmaiden* (2020) e em trechos de entrevistas com Sarah Waters e Park Chanwook. Essa análise se divide em duas partes: a primeira pretende traçar um paralelo entre os dois períodos históricos e analisar quais os efeitos que os ajustes culturais e de contexto histórico produziram na adaptação; a segunda foca na literatura erótica retratada no romance e no filme, respectivamente a erótica vitoriana e a shunga japonesa, e como elas influenciaram as abordagens do sexo em ambas as obras. Para a análise sobre a transposição midiática — conceito de Irina Rajewsky (2011) sobre “a transformação de um determinado produto midiático (um texto, um filme, etc.) ou de seu substrato em outro meio” — o estudo discute as mudanças intermidiáticas de *The Handmaiden* através de duas abordagens de adaptação cinematográfica de Thomas Leitch (2001), também dividida em duas partes: a primeira analisa o que foi comprimido na adaptação, enquanto a segunda analisa o conceito de colonização, com foco em quais novos significados foram acrescentados no filme e suas relações com a carreira de Park Chanwook como diretor.

**Palavras-chave:** *The Handmaiden*; *Fingersmith*; transposição cultural; adaptação cinematográfica; Coreia do Sul.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Hallyu*, or Korean Wave, describes the phenomenon of global popularization and exportation of South Korea's entertainment and pop culture. By combining the opening of the Korean market to global cultural forces — following the end of Park Chunghee's military dictatorship (1961-79) and censorship of what was considered "foreign decadent culture" (Fuhr, 2015) — and the government's economic policy of heavy incentive to South Korea's cultural sector (Kim, 2013), *Hallyu* has become a force to be reckoned with. In the last three decades, starting with President Kim Daejung's multi million fund to promote South Korean cinema (Kim & Jin, 2016), South Korea has produced a significant number of films and K-dramas<sup>1</sup> with the intention to boost its cultural sector. This phenomenon, allied with the growing foreign influence in South Korea's culture and consumption, has created many cases of Korean audiovisual adaptations of foreign works.

*Boys Over Flowers* (2009), one of the most famous K-dramas of all time, and certainly one of the pioneers of *Hallyu*, is an adaptation of the Japanese manga *Hana Yori Dango* (1992) by Yoko Kamio. To have one of the biggest K-dramas associated with a Japanese work is an advancement, considering the fact that, up until the 1990s, there were government laws preventing the importation and distribution of Japanese media in South Korea. Another example of a well-known K-drama adaptation is the historical drama *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* (2016), which is an adaptation of the Chinese novel *Bu Bu Jing Xin* (2005), by Tong Hua. With a time-travel plot and very specific Chinese history references, *Scarlet Heart* managed to transpose the novel's story from the Qing dynasty to Korea's Goryeo dynasty. These two examples illustrate how South Korea's importation, through audiovisual adaptations, of texts from other cultures, which were previously censored by the government, serves as a tool to boost the country's own culture and entertainment sector, as well as making its entertainment industry more open to foreign markets and products, be it in Asia or other continents.

As for South Korean film adaptations, CJ Entertainment<sup>2</sup> has been responsible for many of the productions. From the same director of worldwide sensation *Parasite*

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<sup>1</sup> The term K-drama, or Korean drama, refers to any South Korean dramatic television series.

<sup>2</sup> CJ Entertainment is a South Korean film distribution and production company, currently based in Seoul.

(2019), Bong Joonho's *Snowpiercer* (2013) was adapted from the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (1982) by Jacques Lob. Adapted from another French work, the romantic thriller *Perfect Proposal* (2015), directed by Yoon Jaegu, is an adaptation of the French novel *La Femme de paille* (1954) by Catharine Aley. Lastly, director Park Chanwook has two critically acclaimed film adaptations produced by CJ Entertainment: *Oldboy* (2003), adapted from a Japanese manga of the same name written by Garon Tsuchiya, and *The Handmaiden* (2016), which is an adaptation of Welsh writer Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2002) and is the object of study of this research.

As an avid *Hallyu* fan since 2017, I stumbled across *The Handmaiden* in my Netflix recommendations in 2019 and watched it. It is safe to say it became one of my favorite films of all time, due to the film's intelligent plot, my fascination with South Korea's history and culture, and the lesbian relationship between the two protagonists, which was shocking to me, even as a queer person, to find in a South Korean production, as queerness is still not much represented in the country's entertainment industry.

However, it was not until 2023 that I discovered that the film was an adaptation of a British book. This happened when I took the undergraduate seminar English Literature IV, with Professor Elaine Indrusiak, which focused on intermediality. As the final assignment of the course, the students had to write an essay about a work of British literature from an intermedial perspective, using the course bibliography for the analysis. While thinking of ideas on what to write about, I searched for South Korean films that were adaptations of British novels, and to my surprise *The Handmaiden* showed up. After this realization, I knew I had to write my essay about the process of adaptation from *Fingersmith* to *The Handmaiden*. This research is an extended version of said essay, as I felt that many interesting topics between novel and film were too briefly addressed, or not addressed at all, due to the limited extension of the assignment.

By transporting the original plot of *Fingersmith*, set in Victorian England, into a Japanese-occupied Korea in *The Handmaiden*, many cultural and historical context adjustments were made for the adaptation to feel genuinely South Korean. But beyond the time and place changes, there were also adaptation choices regarding the medial transposition and the plot itself. Therefore, the main objective of this work

is to analyze how cultural and medial aspects were adapted in order to transform a British novel into a South Korean film.

For the analysis, this work will be relying on Irina Rajewsky's concepts of intermediality and medial transposition. In addition, the intermedial adjustments of the adaptation will be discussed through the lenses of Thomas Leitch's film adaptation approaches (Leitch, 2000), with a focus on the effects they produced on *The Handmaiden*. Lastly, for the cultural and historical adjustments, this work draws from Shin Chiyun's study of the same corpus (Shin, 2020) and from excerpts from interviews with writer Sarah Waters and director Park Chanwook.

## 2 INTERMEDIALITY AND FILM ADAPTATION

The term intermediality and the field of intermedial studies first emerged in the late 1990s; however, the interest of studying the relationship between forms of communication and how adaptations work goes further back in time (Bruhn & Schirmmacher, 2022). The difference is that, before the field of intermedial studies was consolidated, these discussions (by disciplines such as literary studies, film studies and interart studies) would neglect the fact that different types of media — literature, film, music, theatre, comics, videogames, etc. — have their own specificities and demand different analysis and research tools. To analyze and compare a novel and a film, for example, and not take into consideration the differences between written and spoken words, printed media and audiovisual media and the effects they produce on the receptor is to ignore that all human communication depends and is shaped by a medium, thus making the analysis shallow. As Gaudreault and Marion (2002, p. 15) stated, “a good understanding of a medium [...] entails understanding its relationship to other media: it is through intermediality, through a concern with the intermedial, that a medium is understood”.

Being a considerably “young” field of study, the definition of intermediality is still heterogenous and varies depending on the author. In its broader sense, Irina Rajewsky (2010, p. 51) defines that “intermediality refers to relations between media, to medial interactions and interferences”. For the purpose of this study, intermediality is to be considered the phenomenon (and the study of this phenomenon) of crossing the borders between conventionally distinct media. The use of “conventionally distinct” is crucial in this definition, as the concept of media and its borders are even more debatable than the definition of intermediality itself. Lars Elleström, in the opening text of *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (2010, p. 11), discusses the difficulties scholars of intermediality face with these complex definitions:

I find it as unsatisfying to continue talking about ‘writing’, ‘film’, ‘performance’, ‘music’ and ‘television’ as if they were like different persons that can be married and divorced as to find repose in a belief that all media are always fundamentally blended in a hermaphroditical way. The crucial ‘inter’ of intermediality is a bridge, but what does it bridge over? If all media were fundamentally different, it would be hard to find any interrelations at all; if they were fundamentally similar, it would be equally hard to find something that is not already interrelated. Media, however, are both different and similar, and intermediality must be understood as a bridge between medial differences that is founded on medial similarities.

With the same issue in mind, Rajewsky (2010) argues that the distinction between media and the delimitation of borders — even if not “fixed” or “stable” — between them are necessary for the study of intermediality to even exist. Just as textual genres have been conventionally classified based on their distinct differences — even though sharing similarities —, the same should be done with media.

Since the two objects of this study are a novel and a film, the conventional medial borders between printed text and audiovisual media are more palpable. To analyze how these borders were crossed, we have to understand Rajewsky’s concept of medial transposition, which is one of the three subcategories of intermediality she proposes (along with media combination and intermedial references).

Intermediality in the more narrow sense of medial transposition (as for example film adaptations, novelizations, and so forth): here the intermedial quality has to do with the way in which a media product comes into being, i.e., with the transformation of a given media product (a text, a film, etc.) or of its substratum into another medium. This category is a production-oriented, “genetic” conception of intermediality; the “original” text, film, etc., is the “source” of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process. (Rajewsky, 2011, p. 51)

The process of taking *Fingersmith*, the original text, and transforming it into *The Handmaid*, a newly formed media product which uses a medium different from that of its source, falls into the medial transposition category of film adaptation, as “the viewer ‘receives’ the original literary text along with seeing the film, and specifically receives the former in its difference from or equivalence to the latter” (Rajewsky, 2011, p. 53). These differences and equivalences will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

It is important to highlight, however, that in this research notions of “faithfulness” and “unfaithfulness” between the novel and the adaptation do not fit the main objective of my analysis. To expect and demand absolute fidelity from a film adaptation of a novel, or from any adaptation at all, and use it to judge its value is an outdated perspective, one that puts adaptations as inferior to their source texts. As Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Theory of Adaptation*, even though adaptations are haunted at all times by their adapted texts, they can undoubtedly be considered autonomous works, and “an adaptation’s double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis” (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 6).

Therefore, the analysis proposed in chapters 5 and 6 simply aims to highlight the main differences (both cultural and intermedial) between the two works, how these differences were created through the adaptive process and the effects they consequently produced, without a value judgment. In order to stress the specificities of intermedial adaptations, this research draws from Thomas Leitch's taxonomy of adaptation approaches, focusing on two of his categories: compression, the adjustment strategy responsible for compressing *Fingersmith's* 500 pages into *The Handmaiden's* almost 3 hours<sup>3</sup> of film, and colonization, which refers to the process of taking a progenitor text and filling it with new meanings (Leitch, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> This research used *The Handmaiden's* extended version for the analysis, which is approximately 20 minutes longer than the theatrical version.

### 3 SARAH WATERS AND *FINGERSMITH*

Sarah Waters is a Welsh novelist, born in Neyland, Pembrokeshire, in 1966, who currently lives in South London. Before consolidating her career as a novelist, she worked as an English Literature academic, receiving a BA from the University of Kent, a MA in gay and lesbian historical fiction from Lancaster University, and a PhD from Queen Mary, University of London, with her thesis *Wolfskins and togas: lesbian and gay historical fictions, 1870 to the present*. Once finished with her thesis, which heavily influenced her future books, Waters started writing her first novel, *Tipping the Velvet*, the first of three books set in the Victorian era and with lesbian protagonists. *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Fingersmith* are all a result of Waters' childhood passion for writing mixed with her years of research and fascination for late 19th century historical fiction:

I always enjoyed writing, at school and at home. The stories and poems I wrote were usually dreadful gothic pastiches – so when I look at a novel like *Fingersmith* I see that nothing much has changed. In my teenage years, when I was reading more widely and studying English at school, I began to enjoy writing in a more academic kind of way. That pleasure in analysis and criticism propelled me through university, and ultimately to a PhD; it was only as I was writing the PhD – on lesbian and gay historical fiction – that I began to think I'd like to try and write a novel of my own. I started work on *Tipping the Velvet* as soon as the thesis was finished, and recovered all the creative writing excitement of my childhood. (McGrane, 2006)

However, Sarah Waters' interest in lesbian historical fiction is not simply an academic interest, as she says she writes her novels “with a clear lesbian agenda”. Being a lesbian herself, Waters advocates it is only natural, and incidental, that lesbianity is present in her stories because that is what is present in her own life. For this reason, and her research experience on lesbian historical fiction, Waters is able to build lesbian characters with deep and multifaceted personalities, and through their relationships she “offers views of what 19th century lesbianism might have been like, thus perhaps filling some gaps left by the absence or invisibility of lesbianism in authentic 19th century fiction” (Heimonen, 2009, p. 1). Hence, Waters' contemporary Victorian works have great importance in rescuing these forgotten queer narratives, and her impact on British literature even made her an OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire).



Her third novel, *Fingersmith*, was published in 2002 and made it to the bestsellers list, as well as was shortlisted for two literary British awards: the Man Booker and the Orange Prize<sup>4</sup>. Divided into three parts, the novel tells the story of Sue Trinder, a low-class orphan who lives in a house of thieves and was raised by Mrs. Sucksby, a baby farmer<sup>5</sup>. One day, she is recruited by conman Richard Rivers, known as “Gentleman”, who has a plan of seducing and marrying a wealthy heiress, Maud Lilly, in order to steal her fortune. His plan involves getting Sue inside Lilly’s mansion, called Briar, disguised as Maud’s new maid, so she can help persuade the mistress into marrying Gentleman. By doing so, Sue will receive a portion of the money, while Gentleman will have Maud committed to a madhouse while he keeps her inheritance. The plan gets more complicated, however, when Sue and Maud start feeling sexually and romantically attracted to each other.

This short synopsis describes the beginning of Part One, which is narrated by Sue. It focuses on her days at Briar as Maud’s maid, and through a very intimate narration the reader has access to Sue’s thoughts on missing her home, unexpectedly falling in love with her mistress, and feeling conflicted on whether or not to follow Gentleman’s plan, as she knows what is expected of Maud’s outcome. Part One, however, ends with the first big plot twist of the novel: Gentleman confines Sue in the madhouse instead of Maud, which reveals that another plan had been unfolded all along.

Part Two, the longest of the novel, is narrated by Maud, and the narrative goes back in time to her first memories as a child: the loss of her “crazed” mother, Marianne Lilly, her childhood living in a madhouse, her arrival at Briar, the physical violence she suffered from her uncle, and the work he put her through at the library, transcribing his collection of erotic books and, occasionally, reading them to his acquaintances. It is through this work that she meets Mr. Rivers, and the reader understands how their plan originated. Once Sue arrives at Briar, the two narratives overlap, and the reader is exposed to the same moments of Part One, only this time through Maud’s perspective. The chronology is restored in chapter 11, when Maud narrates Sue’s incarceration and what Mr. Rivers had planned for them in London. Expecting her freedom, Maud is once again trapped, only this time inside Mrs.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2017, The Orange Prize for Fiction changed its name to Women’s Prize for Fiction.

<sup>5</sup> Baby farming is the historical practice of accepting custody of an infant or child in exchange for payment in late-Victorian Britain.

Sucksby home. The end of Part Two marks the second big plot twist of the novel: Maud is actually Mrs. Sucksby's daughter, who was exchanged as a baby with Sue, the rightful heir of Lilly's fortune.

Lastly, Part Three picks up from Sue's confinement in the madhouse, as the plot switches back to her narration. She describes the violence inflicted on her by the nurses and the agonizing months of being perceived as crazy, as Gentleman had the doctors believe she was, in fact, Maud Lilly, his deluded wife who believes she is a maid. Sue is able to escape with the help of Charles, the knife-boy of Briar, who ran away from the house and went to the madhouse in search of Gentleman. By receiving his help, Sue promises to take him to London, and she can finally be reunited with Mrs. Sucksby. Once there, Sue tells Mrs. Sucksby what happened — not knowing she was the mastermind behind everything — and confronts Maud, with the intention of killing her. Gentleman shows up, and a tussle between them ensues; it ends with Gentleman being stabbed, and when the police show up Mrs. Sucksby confesses to the murder. She is publicly hanged, and Maud and Sue go months without seeing each other. They finally reunite when Sue, after reading a letter left by her mother, Marianne Lilly, understands that both her and Maud were tricked by Mrs. Sucksby and goes looking for Maud. At Briar, she finds a lonely Maud writing in her, now deceased, uncle's library; there they talk about what happened, confess their feelings and forgive each other.

The book was highly praised both for its fidelity to and subversion of Victorian literature, as well as for its engaging plot turns. On writing *Fingersmith*, Waters states that she was very much inspired by sensation fiction, a literary genre established in the 1860s “by novelists such as Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, whose tales of gothic melodrama revel in themes of domestic violence, secrets, and lost and shifting identities” (Waters, 2022). The strong presence of these very-like sensation themes in *Fingersmith*, and others such as theft, madness, murder and seduction, shows how much effort was put into Waters' research of this period's writings, down to perfecting the language and slangs of the time.

Well, in true sensation-novel style, it all gets slightly giddy-making, and there were times when even I struggled to keep on top of the complications. Looking back now at my research, I find detailed notes about Victorian criminal life, along with page after page of juicy street vocabulary. My title comes from Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Historical Slang*: “Finger-smith. A midwife: C.19-20; low. 2. a thief, a pickpocket”. (Waters, 2022)

The novel became Waters' most adapted work: first, it was adapted into a three episode mini-series by BBC TV in 2005; then, in 2015, it received a theatrical adaptation by Alexa Jung, which premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival; the most successful one was Park Chanwook's *The Handmaiden* (2016), winner of the 2018 BAFTAs Best Film Not in the English Language, which premiered at the 69th Cannes Film Festival.

#### 4 PARK CHANWOOK AND *THE HANDMAIDEN*

Park Chanwook is a South Korean film writer, director and producer, born in 1963 in Seoul. His first two films, *The Moon Is... the Sun's Dream* and *Trio*, were not successful at the box office, and for that he pursued a career as a film critic until 2000, when he directed *Joint Security Area*, an adaptation of the novel *DMZ* by Park Sangyeon, which at the time became the highest-grossing film in Korean film history and won Best Film at two major Korean awards: Blue Dragon Film Awards and Grand Bell Awards. With the success of *JSA*, Chanwook had enough budget to develop a more personal project, *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), the first film of what would be known as *The Vengeance Trilogy*.

In 2003, he directed and co-wrote *Oldboy*, arguably his most successful film to date, which is an adaptation of a Japanese manga of the same name by Garon Tsuchiya. The film received worldwide critical acclaim and won the Grand Prix at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival. A year later, *Lady Vengeance* came out, and this sequence of revenge-themed films — even though not narratively connected or intended to be seen as a trilogy — was called by critics as *The Vengeance Trilogy*. All three films deal with the moral complexity of revenge, how far a person who was wronged in the past can go to seek justice, and through them Chanwook's signature style was consolidated: films with troubling narratives, taboo topics, gruesome violence and obscenity, and intricate plot turns, as well as “muted colors, grimy set design, nauseatingly violent set pieces, and an utter lack of regard for the stomachs of the audience” (Gross, 2022).

Following Chanwook's list of very successful film adaptations, with *JSA* and *Oldboy*, it was not a surprise that his 2016 *The Handmaiden* was destined for greatness in and outside South Korea. For the film, Park worked simultaneously as director, screenwriter and producer. When asked about how he contacted the source material, Chanwook said that he had the previous desire to make a film that dealt with homosexuality, but one that would not focus on society's discrimination or where the protagonists are pained over their sexual identity: “I just wanted to tell a love story about the characters' emotions [...] And to not really be conscious of any observation of their love as anything other than two lovers coming to find love in a very organic and natural way” (Juzwiak, 2016). When reading *Fingersmith*, he found what he was looking for and described it as “a perfect match”.

In his interview to *The Guardian*, Chanwook recalls the novel's famous scene in which Sue grinds down Maud's pointed tooth with a silver thumb thimble and the thought he had about adapting it to the screen: "How great would it be to see that as a film, outside the confines of the typed page?" (Barnes, 2016). With his mind set in adapting the novel, together with screenwriter Jeong Seokyeong<sup>6</sup>, Park was firstly taken aback once he discovered that it had already been adapted by BCC in 2005. This, however, propelled the duo to explore the narrative through a different lens than the original, as Chanwook said "this would be his chance to examine a period of his own country's history that had always intrigued him" (Barnes, 2016): the 1930s Japanese-occupied Korea.

The film, just like *Fingersmith*, is divided into three parts. By reading the film's synopsis, one could think that it follows exactly the same plot as *Fingersmith*, with only the changes of setting and period: a poor Korean girl, Sookhee (played by Kim Taeri), is recruited by a conman impersonating a Japanese nobleman, under the name of Count Fujiwara (played by Ha Jungwoo), to help him in his plan of seducing and marrying a Japanese heiress, Lady Hideko (played by Kim Minhee), in order to steal her heritage and commit her into an asylum. Sookhee's role, just like Sue's, is to play off as the lady's maid and persuade her into falling in love with the man, which gets more complicated once maid and lady start having feelings for each other.

At first glance, the initial plot is essentially the same as the original, and knowing that the film is divided in the same way as the book, a viewer who has read *Fingersmith* would expect a copy-paste Korean version of the narrative on screen. Fortunately, this is not the case, as the changes in the plot — which happen around the end of Part Two and affect all of Part Three — reflect a lot of Chanwook's personal style and give the viewer a completely different experience as compared to the reading of the novel, which greatly enhances the role and richness of the adaptive process. According to Linda Hutcheon, "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (2006, p. 7), and in this sense *The Handmaiden* does an extraordinary job on balancing out the dialogue with the original work while also providing a reimagination of it, which enables us to see it in a different way.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeong Seokyeong is a South Korean screenwriter. She has worked with director Park Chanwook in *Sympathy For Lady Vengeance* (2005), *I'm a Cyborg, But That's OK* (2006), *Thirst* (2009), *The Handmaiden* (2016) and *Decision to Leave* (2022).

As for the transposition of Victorian Britain to colonized Korea, the film modifications do not necessarily affect the main plot, as they impact more accessory aspects like characterization, clothing and setting. They do, however, bring a cultural tension that is not present in *Fingersmith*, as well as impact the way the sex theme is approached.

## 5 CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ADJUSTMENTS

### 5.1 Transposition of the Victorian Era to a Japanese-ruled Korea

The Victorian Era encompasses the period of British history in which Queen Victoria reigned (1837-1901). She became Queen at the age of 18, and married Prince Albert in 1840, with whom she had nine children. This period is characterized by the expansion of the British Empire, cementing Britain's status as the most powerful nation in the world at the time, the process of rural migration and urbanization, and the rapid growth of the middle class, which together contributed to the increase of Britain's wealth, "in part because of its degree of industrialization and its imperial holdings and in spite of the fact that three-fourths or more of its population was working-class" (Steinbach, 2023).

In *Fingersmith*, there is no mention of a specific year in which the story happens, but it can be deduced that it is around 1861, as the death of Prince Albert is mentioned when Sue is at the train station on her way to Briar: "The walls were hung with black, from the death of Prince Albert; the crape had got streaked by birds" (p. 41). Many historians consider the mid-Victorian era (around 1850 to 1880) as the "Golden Years" of Queen Victoria's reign, marked by the increase in industrialization and of the national income per person, which heavily affected the nation's lifestyle and politics. Although the bourgeoisie (middle class) was privileged by these changes, becoming Britain's dominant class, the abyss between the upper and lower classes widened dramatically, and the living conditions of the poor population were worsened by inhumane work conditions, child labor, lack of education, and diseases.

Consequently, class is a focal point of *Fingersmith*, illustrated by the drastic differences between Sue and Maud: the first represents the lower class citizen of the metropole, an illiterate orphan with little to no prospect of socially ascending; the latter represents the remains of British aristocracy, the upper class landowners who lived off old money in the countryside. The "Golden Years" status does not represent Sue's condition, and because she is destined for a life of misery, Gentleman's plan of stealing Maud's fortune is Sue's once-in-a-lifetime chance of escaping her reality in London's slums and overcoming poverty.

This class duality is also present in *The Handmaiden*, with Sookhee as representative of Korea's poverty and Hideko as the aristocracy. However, setting the

story in a Japanese-occupied Korea creates a tension that is not present in the novel and goes beyond class inequality alone: a colonial tension. As Sarah Waters differentiated, “the novel is about class rather than gender: people passing themselves off as something they’re not. The film is more about colonialism: that very fraught relationship between Korea and Japan” (Armitstead, 2017). Hideko’s family represents not only the upper class, but also the Japanese occupiers of Korea.

Between 1910 and 1945, Korea was ruled by the Japanese Empire. Less than 15 years before that, in 1897, Korea had just proclaimed their newly formed Korean Empire, a monarchical state that replaced the Joseon<sup>7</sup> dynasty, following their independence from the Qing<sup>8</sup> dynasty after China had lost the First Sino-Japanese War<sup>9</sup>. The Empire was short-lived, as the Japanese control of the region steadily grew until it was formally colonized: it started with a sequence of treaties from Japan in order to establish diplomatic and commercial relations with Korea; then, in 1905, the Eulsa Treaty made Korea a protectorate state of the Japanese Empire; finally, in 1910, Korea was coerced into accepting the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty, which formally annexed the Korean Peninsula as a colony (Savada & Shaw, 1990).

The 35 years of Japanese rule were extremely violent and oppressive towards Koreans and Korean culture in general. With the intent to industrialize and “modernize” Korea, but to also extract the resources of the region, the Japanese colonizers put Korean workers through dehumanizing conditions and extremely low payments; a significant number of Koreans were forced to work in Japan and other regions of the Empire, which caused the rupture of many families and the spread of Korean descendants throughout East Asia. During World War II, many men served the Japanese Army, and in 1944 Japan proclaimed a mandatory enlistment to all Korean males; as for the women, the Japanese troops forced and tricked hundreds of thousands of girls and young women, the so called “comfort women”, into sexual slavery, and many of them died from venereal diseases, suicide or were killed by the troops.

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<sup>7</sup> Joseon (조선) was the last dynasty of Korea, which was heavily influenced by Confucian morals and doctrines. It ended in 1897, when former King Gojong assumed the title of Emperor.

<sup>8</sup> The Qing dynasty was the longest-lasting and last imperial dynasty of China, founded by the ethnic group Manchus. It was replaced by the Republic of China in 1912.

<sup>9</sup> The First Sino-Japanese War was a conflict between the Japanese Empire and the Qing dynasty over influence in Korea, as Korea’s independence would benefit the Japanese Empire, while the Qing dynasty wanted to maintain the Peninsula as a tributary state. In 1895 the Qing dynasty was defeated, and Joseon was declared independent.



Even though military repression is not a central topic of the film, it is interesting to notice that the opening scene (Figure 1) shows soldiers marching through the streets, followed by a group of Korean children. It sets the tone of the film, contextualizes the period, and shows that the distinction between colonizer and colonized will be addressed.

**Figure 1** - Opening scene of *The Handmaiden*



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

When asked about the reasons for choosing to set the story in this specific period, Chanwook argues that the colonial aspect poses yet another obstacle that the two protagonists have to overcome to be together:

In the original novel, you see the difference in class and the idea that they both are scheming to put the other person in ruin and benefit from it. Finding love by overcoming these obstacles is what's exquisite about the original novel to begin with. What I'm allowed to do by setting it in that period is place another obstacle for them to overcome—that they are from two different nations who are enemies of each other. As always with stories, the higher the barrier you have to jump over and the wider the river you have to cross to get to love, the more moving it is. (Juzwiak, 2016)

Shin Chiyun points out how the impersonations of the novel rely on class, while the film plays with the colonial power dynamics between Korean and Japanese identities. Because of this, “the constantly shifting identities are also reflected in the languages the characters use in the film” (Shin, 2020, p. 195), as both Korean and Japanese are spoken. Count Fujiwara, who is actually the son of a Korean farmhand, switches back and forth between his real and fake identities when interacting with Sookhee and Hideko's uncle, Kouzuki: when talking with Sookhee, he speaks informally in Korean, but when talking with Kouzuki, he uses Japanese as if he were one, mimicking the manners and vocabulary of a nobleman.

Sookhee impersonates a maid under the Korean name Okju, but receives a Japanese name, Tamako, as soon as she arrives at the mansion. This was a common practice of the time, called *Sōshi-kaimēi*, which pressured Koreans into adopting Japanese names, and it is estimated that by 1940 84% of Korean families had adopted Japanese names (Savada & Shaw, 1990). This cultural genocide was also extended to education, part of “a policy of assimilation whose primary goal was to force the Koreans to speak Japanese and to consider themselves Japanese subjects” (Savada & Shaw, 1990, p. 22). Therefore, Korean schools were forced to instruct students using only Japanese. Sookhee is illiterate in Korean and Japanese, but is able to speak both, and once she starts working in the mansion she is instructed to use only Japanese, as required by all of Kouzuki’s workers. This rule is broken when secretly interacting with the Count, and with Hideko, who speaks both languages — since she was brought to Korea at the age of 5 — but “prefers to speak in Korean with Sookhee because Japanese is the language of the erotic literature that she is forced to recite publically to audiences of men” (Shin, 2020, p. 196).

Chanwook’s second reason for choosing colonial Korea as the film’s setting has to do with wanting to show how modernism was inserted in Korea and to address the notion of *sadaejui*, both of which are illustrated by Uncle Kouzuki and his mansion. Kouzuki is also impersonating a different identity, as he is, in fact, a Japan-obsessed Korean. He shares no blood relationship with Hideko’s family, has no noble past, and only benefits from the family’s money because he was married to Hideko’s deceased aunt — and now wants to marry Hideko to keep his possessions. However, this does not stop him from behaving exactly as a Japanese colonizer, considering that he even helped the Japanese to take over Korea and received a gold mine in exchange, which is how he was able to buy his collection of erotic books. In a dialogue with Count Fujiwara, Kouzuki says “Korea is ugly, and Japan is beautiful [...] Korea is soft, slow, dull, and therefore hopeless”, which exemplifies the concept of *sadaejui* as explained by Park Chanwook:

There’s a Korean term, *sadaejui*, that is used to uniquely express this notion, where the people of a smaller nation are so drawn to the power of a larger nation, and become subservient to that power. They internalize it so much that they are not worshipping the bigger power by force, but are doing it voluntarily. Through the character of Uncle Kouzuki, I wanted to paint a portrait of these poor, sad, and pathetic individuals—who are poor, I say—but who become a big threat and a serious danger for the other people of their nation. (Topalovic, 2016)

Kouzuki's worship goes beyond Japan and is extended to the West, as the Japanese colonizers imported Western and modernist ideals to Korea. This affected many aspects of Korean culture, such as their paintings, traditional buildings, religion, and literary trends, which "even among writers who emphasized themes of social protest and national independence, tended to follow Japanese and European models" (Savada & Shaw, 1990, p. 22). In the film, this influence is visible in the architecture of Kouzuki's mansion (Figure 2), which blends Japanese and British gothic styles; as pointed out by Shin (2020, p. 195), "the reference to Britain can also be seen as an homage to the original novel". The mixture of influences gets even more diverse when looking at the clothing (Figure 3) used in the house: all the maids dress in simple *hanbok* (Korean traditional clothing); Lady Hideko switches between *kimonos* and Western gowns, hats, shirts and skirts; similarly, Kouzuki dresses in both *kimonos* and tuxedos, while Count Fujiwara dresses in Western suits. On this mixture of influences, Chanwook commented:

I wanted to show this confusing mix of different styles, which is saying how modernism was forced into Korea in a very unnatural way. These foreign ideas and modernism were plopped onto what existed before rather than finding its way into Korea in a harmonious manner. (Juzwiak, 2016)

**Figure 2** - Japanese wing and British wing of the mansion



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

**Figure 3** - Count Fujiwara, Sookhee, Lady Hideko and Kouzuki



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

By dealing with the repression of Korean culture and people, the film feels darker than *Fingersmith*, in the sense that each character's identity represents much more than what is simply shown. In the novel, Sue is given a fake surname, Smith, before going to Briar, as her second name Trinder could be traced back to Lant Street. It is simply a strategic change, which only happened for the sake of Gentleman's plan, and it contrasts with Sookhee's situation: even though with her fake name Okju, she is stripped away of her Korean identity once given the name Tamako, and if the viewer is aware of the colonial practices of this period, they come to the disturbing realization that almost every single Korean of that time went through the same violence as Sookhee.

As mentioned before, while the transposition to 1930s Korea impacts characterization, setting and clothing, as well as introduces the colonial tension, the film's plot remains very similar to the novel's, and the changes it goes through (discussed in chapter 6) are not related to the cultural transposition itself. To Sarah Waters, the proximity between the two works was a surprising factor:

The first thing that struck me was how faithful it manages to be to *Fingersmith* even though it's in Korean and Japanese and set in a different period. I was very interested in the texture of Victorian life, and the power dynamics were played out in a material way, and I think he's (Park) brought a similar interest in artefacts and fabrics. It's such a crowdedly lush film, with all those shoes and gloves and corsets. (Armitstead, 2017)

It does not seem that Waters' comment leans into "fidelity criticism", considering that she has stated more than once how appreciative she is of adaptations, even when they depart from her narratives. Therefore, her comment serves more as "a framework from which to explore the questions as to what has been transformed and yet how it remains 'true' to the novel" (Shin, 2020, p. 194).

## 5.2 The sex theme: Victorian erotica and shunga

If the first focal point of *Fingersmith* is class, the second is sex. It is addressed through the character of Mr. Lilly, representing the male perspective, and the relationship between Sue and Maud, representing the female perspective.

The word 'Victorian' is most commonly associated with the idea of moral restrictiveness, "a restrictiveness which necessarily and even primarily applies to sex"

(Mason, 1994, p. 3). There still remains a stereotype that Victorians were prudish and refused to acknowledge the existence of sex. And while in some cases this sexual moralism was actually practiced — such as by respectable middle-class wives, who “in particular were proud of how little they knew about their own bodies and childbirth” (Steinbach, 2023) — the Victorian period is known for its sexual double standard: women were expected to be pure, to ignore their sexual desires, and submit to sex only when pleasing their husbands, whereas men were free to bypass these morals and express their need for sex, routinely resorting to prostitutes (Mason, 1994).

Paradoxically, the period was characterized by both the purist morality and an obsession about sex, as the debate on sexuality blew up in Victorian society. The extreme repression of the topic backfired, and even though “sex was publicly, indeed ostentatiously denied”, this only caused it “to return, repressed, to flourish in the fertile undergrowth” (Weeks, 2012, p. 44). This was visible in medical and psychological studies, which focused on understanding sexuality, Parliamentary debates on venereal diseases, overpopulation, and prostitution, and in the arts, especially through erotic literature.

In *Fingersmith*, Mr. Lilly represents the sex-obsessed people of that time. He owns the largest erotic library of England, and is perfecting an index of the books. The nature of his books and work is only presented in the second part of the novel, when the reader learns that Maud was taught, since her childhood, to help her uncle in his craft, for he is losing his sight and hopes she will become his hand. She is also taught to declaim softly and clearly, as her uncle requires her to occasionally read some books out loud for his bookish partners.

Mr. Lilly addresses the period’s sexual moralism when explaining what he does to Maud: “Keep this from others. Remember the rareness of our work. It will seem queer, to the eyes and ears of the untutored. They will think you tainted, should you tell. You understand me? I have touched your lip with *poison*, Maud. Remember” (p. 145). He refers to himself as a ‘curator of poisons’ and to his books as ‘poisons’, and not once in the novel the word ‘erotic’ is used. This reflects the period’s use of euphemisms when addressing what was related to sex, as was also done with prostitution (‘social evil’), gonorrhoea and syphilis (‘social diseases’) and sodomy (‘sin against nature’) (Weeks, 2012).

In the acknowledgements section of the book, Sarah Waters states that this character was inspired by a real Victorian figure, a book collector, writer and

bibliographer named Henry Spencer Ashbee (1834-1900). He is most known for his three bibliographies of erotic works, published under the pseudonym Pisanus Fraxi: *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (A Catalog of Books which should be Prohibited), *Centuria Librorum Absconditorum* (A Hundred Books that should be Hidden) and *Catena Librorum Tacendorum* (Further Books which should not be Mentioned).

Mr Lilly's statements on book-collecting echo those of Ashbee, but in all other respects he is entirely fictitious. All of the texts cited by Maud are real. They include: *The Festival of the Passions*, *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, *The Curtain Drawn Up*, *The Bagnio Miscellany*, *The Birchen Bouquet*, and *The Lustful Turk*. For publishing details of these see Ashbee, above. (Waters, 2002)

In the midst of the discussions about sex, homosexuality emerged as a hot topic in politics and literature. Male homosexuality was considered a sin, and up until 1861 sodomy was punishable by death. In 1885, the Labouchere Amendment made it possible for gay men to be arrested even when actual sodomy could not be proved (Weeks, 2012), such as Oscar Wilde and Alan Turing. However, this law and others of the period completely ignored female homosexuality, which allowed for such acts to be fairly common in private spaces. Erotic literature portraying lesbians was also a popular trope of Victorian erotica, but the majority of the works were written by men and, consequently, the representation was tainted with the male gaze and fetishization.

Sue and Maud's relationship serves as a counterpoint to the figure of Mr. Lilly and the Victorian society, in the sense that they go against what was expected from women then — to be ignorant of their desires and be subservient to men — and that they explore their pleasure away from male eyes and purely for their own enjoyment. Throughout the novel, Maud realizes that what she has read in her uncle's books is not simply the product of a male writer's imagination, but something she can experience and take pleasure from. In the scene where Sue grinds down her pointed tooth, Maud thinks: "May a lady taste the fingers of her maid? She may, in my uncle's books.—The thought makes me colour" (p. 186). Her knowledge of her uncle's books proves useful in their sex scene:

'I wish,' I say, 'I wish you would tell me what it is a wife must do, on her wedding-night...'

And at first, it is easy. After all, this is how it is done, in my uncle's books: two girls, one wise and one unknowing... 'He will want,' she says, 'to kiss you. He will want to embrace you.' It is easy. I say my part, and she—with a little

prompting—says hers. The words sink back upon their pages. It is easy, it is easy...  
Then she rises above me and puts her mouth to mine. (Waters, 2002, p. 204)

Their feelings stay hidden from almost everyone in the narrative, but Gentleman is the first to notice what was happening. Similarly to the indifference Victorians had with lesbianity, he is not worried about the morals behind their relationship or reprimands Maud in a homophobic way; instead, he is more worried on how this could mess up their plan and manipulates her into thinking Sue would not truthfully correspond: “Have you forgotten what she has come to you for? Do you think *she* has forgotten? Do you suppose yourself anything to her, but that? You have been too long among your uncle’s books. Girls love easily, there. That is the point of them...” (p. 201).

With the cultural transposition, *The Handmaiden* deals with the sex theme with some modifications. Hideko’s uncle is also a collector of erotic books and the owner of an ostentatious library. Unlike Mr. Lilly, his goal is not to make an index, but to auction off his books after recitals with potential buyers. As the Count explained when telling Sookhee his plan, “This man considers books and art to be as valuable as his life”, therefore he fabricates fake copies to sell in order to keep the originals. The Count’s role is to impersonate a Japanese painter and offer his services to Kouzuki, helping him create illustrations for the copies, known as shunga.

Shunga means ‘spring drawings’ and is the generic name given to the erotic paintings, prints and illustrated books of Japan (Evans, 1975). It reached its production peak during the Edo period (1603-1867), and throughout this era eroticism was seen as a natural subject in Japanese society. With the arrival of Westerners and Western morals in Japan in the middle of the 19th century, the Edo period gave place to the Meiji era (1868-1912), in which the new regime’s objective was to modernize and industrialize the country in order to protect themselves from Western imperialism. This was the first half of the Japanese Empire, characterized both by “an enthusiastic acceptance of many Western mores and cultural values” and a disapproval of traditional Japanese art, including shunga, as “they came to be seen largely as evidence of a more primitive stage of development, which had become an embarrassment” (Evans, 1975, p. 268). As a result, shunga was now frowned upon and banned, but it kept on being produced and commercialized illegally.

Kouzuki is one of those shunga admirers who wanted to protect the remaining works, considering that many were destroyed or censored during Japan's modernization. Differently from *Fingersmith*, Hideko is not required to help her uncle in copying the books, but is taught, since her childhood, the art of reciting, as was Maud; as a child, she is instructed by Kouzuki and her aunt, who was also forced by her husband to read erotic literature. However, Hideko's situation is even more absurd than Maud's, considering that not only does she have to read erotic scenarios to much older men, but to perform and reenact (Figure 4) some of the parts, positions and illustrations of the books. Since Kouzuki's objective is to sell the books to collectors, Hideko's reading is a key-part in this process, and his library is equipped with benches for the collectors to watch Hideko performing and with props such as mannequins, sex toys and ropes.

**Figure 4** - Hideko performing a scene from her uncle's book



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

Shunga often portrayed homosexual acts, which were common and socially accepted in the Edo period, “due to the secular nature of sexual activity, which imposed no taboos and attached no religious significance to intercourse” (Evans, 1975, p. 53). However, while men's same-sex relations had their own concept and code of ethics (*nanshoku*), lesbianity was overlooked and “not accorded the same level of moral seriousness as that between men” (McLelland, 2011, p. 1). It was represented in some shunga works, such as the one read by Hideko in *The Handmaiden*, called *The Sound of Bells on a Windless Night* (Figure 5). The story tells the lovemaking of a maid and her lady using mienling<sup>10</sup>; during Hideko's reading the lights of the mansion go off, and for a brief moment in the dark, away from the

<sup>10</sup> Mienling, or Ben wa balls, are metal balls connected by a string used in female masturbation and sexual intercourse.



men's gazes, she closes her eyes and smiles while narrating, seemingly enjoying for the first time what she was reciting and feeling pleasure from it. It is not a stretch to say that she was picturing herself and Sookhee in her reading, as this scene precedes their sex scene and is recreated by them at the end of the film.

**Figure 5** - Shunga painting in *The Sound of Bells*



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

By comparison, the film takes a more explicit approach towards sex, seen in Hideko's performances and also in the sex scene between the two protagonists, which was in itself very performative. On this matter, Sarah Waters comments that "[Park] does a lot more with the pornography because he turns it into a spectacle. For me it was all about words" (Armitstead, 2017). During many interviews, Chanwook is asked about the differences in these approaches and if male gaze played a part in his portrayal. While the more explicit approach can be understood as a consequence of having a male director's perspective, and also Chanwook's past history with R-rated films, there are other factors that may have influenced it. One that is worth mentioning is the difference between the works Maud and Hideko were exposed to: the first, Victorian erotica, relies purely on words and the imagination of the reader/listener, while the second, shunga, takes advantage of the visual aspect of the illustrations, which would often show nudity and diverse sexual positions.

As a result, each sex scene resonates its respective works; Maud and Sue's scene focuses more on the thoughts and emotions of the characters than the action itself, and does so through very lyrical constructions: "She reaches so far, she catches the life, the shuddering heart of me: soon I seem to be nowhere but at the points at which my flesh is gripped by hers" (p. 205). On the other hand, *The Handmaiden's* scene feels like a shunga painting that came to life, much more explicit and with more focus on the body action. Having been exposed to more

explicit works and having to perform them, Hideko has a sexual expertise that differs from Maud's — who was mostly led by Sue in bed — and she skillfully appropriates aspects of the erotic material she has read into the act, which would also explain the more explicit scene. This causes the adaptation scene to have a comical moment between the two girls, as Sookhee, unknowing of the nature of the books Hideko reads, thought her lady was completely ignorant on the subject, but is surprised by her proficiency during it and says "You must be a natural!". The considerable amount of dialogue during the scene, according to Chanwook, was his way of showing the emotional intimacy of the characters (Juzwiak, 2016), considering that a literal transposition of the novel's narration into audiovisual is not possible.

Even if more or less explicit, the relationship between the two protagonists represents the same in the novel and the film: it is a way for them to be free from what is expected of women and to pursue pleasure with each other on their own terms, away from prying eyes. For Maud and Hideko, it is also a way to resignify the trauma and abuse they have suffered all their lives, appropriating sex as a liberating activity. As Sarah Waters points out: "Though ironically the film is a story told by a man, it's still very faithful to the idea that the women are appropriating a very male pornographic tradition to find their own way of exploring their desires" (Armitstead, 2017).

## 6 FILM ADAPTATION APPROACHES

As discussed in chapter 2, each medium has its own media-specific qualities and means. When adapting a work from another medium, it has to go through a unique transformation process in order for it to fit the desired medium specificities. With that in mind, Thomas Leitch proposed a taxonomy of film adaptation approaches, in which he argues that “by far the most common approach to adaptation is *adjustment*, whereby a promising earlier text is rendered more suitable for filming by one or more of a wide variety of strategies” (2001, p. 98). Considering that “not all adaptations are created equal” (Leitch, 2001, p. 93), it makes sense that different adaptations will have their own types of adjustments, and many of Leitch’s adjustment strategies can be used by the same film in the remediation of various aspects of the source text. Therefore, differently from the approaches he proposes, these adjustment strategies are not categories meant to classify films in terms of the relationship they establish with the original work.

In the following subchapters, I address one adjustment strategy, *compression*, and one adaptation approach, *colonization*, which are present in *The Handmaiden*.

### 6.1 Compression: omission, lack of narrative voice and plot twists

Compression, as the name suggests, is the type of adjustment responsible for compressing long novels into films. This strategy is resorted to because an extensive novel, like *Fingersmith*, “cannot be adapted to feature length films without a great deal of systematic elision and omission” (Leitch, 2001, p. 99). Consequently, many aspects of the original story are skipped over or reduced in the adaptation, starting with Sue’s background and family. In the first chapter of the novel, Sue introduces herself and the people she lives with, as well as a scene from her childhood living among poverty:

My name, in those days, was Susan Trinder. People called me Sue. I know the year I was born in, but for many years I did not know the date, and took my birthday at Christmas. I believe I am an orphan. My mother I know is dead. But I never saw her, she was nothing to me. I was Mrs Sucksby’s child, if I was anyone’s; and for father I had Mr Ibbs, who kept the locksmith’s shop, at Lant Street, in the Borough, near to the Thames. (Waters, 2002, p. 8)

Sue was told that she was the daughter of a famous thief, who came looking for Mrs. Sucksby to take care of her baby — which in the end we discover is a lie. According to Mrs. Sucksby, Sue’s “mother” had an unfinished business and ended up murdering a man, for which she was publicly hanged. Unlike her “mother”, Sue did not get involved with theft because Mrs. Sucksby protected her from it. The novel provides details about Sue’s relationship with Mrs. Sucksby, as they share a mother-daughter-like closeness: “She had been paid to keep me a month; she kept me seventeen years. What’s love, if that ain’t?” (p. 14). Along with Mrs. Sucksby and Mr. Ibbs, she lives with John Vroom, a sly fourteen year-old boy, and Dainty Warren, a twenty-three year-old girl who helps John in his schemes. Gentleman’s plan is introduced at the end of the first chapter.

The adaptation starts with a different approach: it shows Sookhee outside a house saying goodbye to an older lady, a girl and a boy who are all holding babies. The girl is crying and says “It should have been me! It is me that should go to that Japanese lady’s house!”. In the film, the initial introduction of the characters is skipped over, as well as the evil scheme that is about to take place, and the narrative starts right before Sookhee’s arrival at Kouzuki’s mansion. Differently from the novel, in which Gentleman takes Sue to the train station, Sookhee goes on her own, as the Count is not introduced until later in the narrative. With this *in medias res*<sup>11</sup> approach, the viewer (under the circumstances of not having read the synopsis) is completely unaware of the Count’s plan and Sookhee’s part in it, which is revealed as a flashback in a scene where the duo are alone. The adaptation skillfully transforms the initial part of the novel into the first plot twist of the film: the maid is actually a thief. In this flashback, Sookhee dialogues with the viewer and briefly introduces herself and the people of the first scene:

You think I’m Tamako, a poor Korean maid. But my real name is Nam Sookhee. I was raised by Mrs. Boksun, the top supplier of stolen goods. At the age of 5, I was able to tell if a coin was real or fake. Afterwards, I learned how to forge stamps with Gugai and how to pickpocket with Kutan...  
(Chanwook, 2016)

That small description is about all of the information that is given on her adoptive family and her relationship with them: Mrs. Boksun parallels Mrs. Sucksby,

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<sup>11</sup> *In medias res* (Latin: into the middle of things) is the narrative technique in which a story starts without an introduction and cuts right to the action. Works that employ this technique usually fill in the backstory by using flashbacks and nonlinear narrative.

Gugai parallels John and Kutan parallels Dainty, and the character of Mr. Ibbs does not have a counterpart in the adaptation. Right after that, Count Fujiwara arrives at their house and explains his plan, inviting Sookhee to take part in it. In contrast to Sue, who asks many “What if?” questions and needs a lot of convincing to accept her role, Sookhee is confident of her abilities and accepts the offer right away, under the condition of raising her payment. Without a deeper exposure to Sookhee’s relationship with her adoptive family, which in the film feels very superficial, her acceptance feels like an individualistic choice, one that matches her previous experience as a thief, whereas Sue, a non-thief, takes into consideration the collective importance of having this much money, to help her family and honor the image of her “mother”, as highlighted by Mrs. Sucksby: “Your fortune, Sue, and ours along with it...” (p. 14); “I know *she* would have done it, and not given it a thought. And I know what she would feel in her heart—what dread, but also what pride, and the pride part winning—to see you doing it now” (p. 38).

There is also compression on Hideko’s childhood and life before Sookhee’s arrival, which are addressed in the second part of the film. In the source material, Part Two begins with Maud talking about what she believes to be her birth: she describes what it was like to be born at a madhouse and the death of her “mother” while giving birth. Maud was raised by nurses in a madhouse for 10 years, who would encourage her to act like a ‘little nurse’ and be violent with the patients: “Thus I learn the rudiments of discipline and order; and incidentally apprehend the attitudes of insanity. This will all prove useful, later” (p. 131). At eleven, her uncle arrives at the madhouse to take her to Briar and “make a lady of her”, with the intention of instructing her to help him in his work. Throughout the first months at Briar, Maud is tested on her “good manners” before learning her uncle’s ways; she narrates vile episodes of violence and verbal abuse from her uncle and Mrs. Stiles, the house-keeper, in order to make her complacent and submissive. She also narrates episodes with her previous maids, Barbara, who held her in her sleep, and Agnes, who was a victim of her lady’s rage: “She reminds me of myself as I once was and ought still to be, and will never be again. I hate her for it... I beat her the harder, the more I fancy the resemblance” (p. 147).

In the adaptation, Part Two begins with Hideko already at her uncle’s mansion, with no explanation of her life in Japan before it, and the scene jumps right into violence, with Kouzuki using the mienling to strike Hideko’s hands. Immediately after

her arrival, her recital lessons start, and taking into consideration that Hideko mentioned she came to Korea at 5, she starts learning about erotic literature much earlier than Maud (at 13). Hideko starts getting violent with the maids and Madame Sasaki (counterpart of Mrs. Stiles), and explains that, because she was going crazy, she felt better by making others as crazy as her. During one of their lessons, Kouzuki says “I understand that you are a bit mad. You got that from your mother’s family”, and he mentions a Japanese madhouse that could treat her, which implies that she was neither born nor raised there; therefore, Hideko’s upbringing is entirely omitted. Her relationship with her previous maid, Junko (Agnes in the novel), is also skipped over, and she only appears after Hideko and the Count establish their plan, in a scene where he seduces Junko in order to have her fired.

Another aspect of the novel that is inevitably compressed are the thoughts of the two girls. When a novel is adapted into audiovisual, a technical resource that makes it possible to translate the text’s narration is voiceover narration; however, it is not well accepted in film circles, as it is considered a “lazy” adaptive solution when overused. With the power of visibility, much can be communicated through the actors’ performances and cinematography in *The Handmaiden*, and so it would be unproductive to fill the film with voiceover narration. There are some instances of short voiceovers, however, with the goal to reveal necessary information — such as the flashback previously mentioned — or add bits of reflective commentary. Sookhee is the one that does it the most, and as Sue, she has sympathetic thoughts about sending her mistress to a madhouse: “That’ll be mine when she goes to the madhouse. It pains my heart to see this poor girl”. In this case, having a voiceover adds an ironic layer to the film, as Sookhee has no idea that another plan is taking place right under her nose.

Even with some instances of voiceover, the lack of a narrative voice detailing the characters’ feelings and thoughts affects how the relationship between the protagonists is perceived. In *Fingersmith*, from the moment they first meet, it takes about 50 pages for Sue to realize she is in love with her mistress, and in those pages she goes through many ups and downs of feeling bad about Maud’s situation, showing affection, remembering the reason she is in Briar and trying to get over her feelings. For this reason, the first person narration works in favor of the reader, pointing out exactly when Sue comes into this realization and how this affected her: “It was as if there had come between us, without my knowing, a kind of thread. It

pulled me to her, wherever she was. It was like. *It's like you love her*, I thought. It made a change in me. It made me nervous and afraid" (p. 101).

In the adaptation, due to the omission of many scenes, Sookhee's and Hideko's romance grows more fast-paced than in the novel — which as a result, in addition to the more erotic approach, makes it seem very desire-driven in the beginning. Moreover, with the lack of a verbal account of the characters' emotions, pointing out the moment they fall in love with each other becomes more subjective to the viewer, as their feelings are conveyed through facial expressions, touches and clues in direct dialogues or voiceovers. Taking into consideration the moment that precedes Sue's realization in the novel, in which Sue confronts Gentleman about pestering and touching Maud too much (and this makes her realize how much she cares about Maud), it is possible to theorize that Sookhee's realization comes after a similar scene in the film. The Count asks to be alone with Hideko, but Sookhee watches them from a window, worried that he might do something with her lady, and sees him gripping Hideko as she tries to escape from his touch. In the scene that follows, she finds them kissing in the garden, and calls for her mistress with a heartbroken tone and expression (Figure 6). This sets Sookhee off, and she has a breakdown, conflicted on what she feels: on one side, she does not want to give up the plan, and that includes accepting the Count's actions; on the other, she cannot stand to see Hideko being treated like that. Through a voiceover, she says "I need to think. I need to become rich, sail off to a distant harbor, eat food I scarcely recognize, buy my fill of glittering baubles, and not think of Hideko. Never think of Hideko", which resembles Sue's realization:

I never really thought of telling her the truth, of showing up Gentleman as the villain he was—of doing anything, anything at all, that would spoil our plot and keep us from our fortune. I let her suppose he loved her and was kind. I let her think that he was gentle. I watched her try to make herself like him, knowing all the time that he meant to take her, trick her, fuck her and lock her away. I watched her grow thin. I watched her pale and dwindle. [...] I thought, *It can't be helped*. I thought, *It's their business*. But, here was a curious thing. The more I tried to give up thinking of her, the more I said to myself, 'She's nothing to you', the harder I tried to pluck the idea of her out of my heart, the more she stayed there. (Waters, 2002, p. 101)

**Figure 6** - Sookhee's realization

**Source:** *The Handmaid* (2016)

In the novel, Maud realizes her feelings when talking with Gentleman, as he notices the way she was looking at Sue sleeping. He is the one that names her feelings as love: “You may love and be damned, for all I care [...] But keep me from my money— keep us languishing here: put back our plot, our hopes, your own bright future—you shall not, no.” (p. 200). Up until their sex scene, Maud reflects and grows afraid of what loving Sue means: “This feeling haunts and inhabits me, like a sickness. It covers me, like skin. I think she must see it. Now he has named it, I think it must colour or mark me—I think it must mark me crimson...” (p. 201). In the adaptation, as with Sookhee, there is not a specific moment in which Hideko confesses that she is in love, but the film makes it visible during a short scene when Sookhee and Hideko talk about the death of their mothers, and Hideko says she wishes she had never been born. Sookhee takes her face in her hands, looks into her eyes and says: “No baby is ever guilty of being born. If your mother thought you could understand, this is what she'd have said. That she was so lucky to have you before dying. That she had no regrets”. Hideko shows an overwhelmed and surprised expression (Figure 7), and through a voiceover she thinks “Is this the companionship they write about in books?”, which can be interpreted as her way of realizing she is in love.

**Figure 7** - Hideko's realization

**Source:** *The Handmaid* (2016)



Lastly, the adaptation omits everything that follows Maud and Gentleman's trip to London, including all of the plot twist surrounding Mrs. Sucksby as the villain and the revelation of Sue and Maud being exchanged at birth. So how does the adaptation deal with the removal of an essential part of the original plot, and its second big plot twist? It does something even more unexpected than the original: a plot twist inside a plot twist. What is shown in the end of Part One, with Sookhee being incarcerated in Hideko's place, misleads the viewer into believing that Hideko betrayed her lover and with the Count successfully tricked Sookhee. But the end of Part Two shows what actually happened: the lovers teamed up against Fujiwara and came up with their own escape plan, which means that the first plot twist was just an act.

There is a high chance that this choice involves the duration of the film, since up until the 2-hour mark the plot of Part One and most of Part Two remains very similar to the original, and following an ending like *Fingersmith's*, with Maud's incarceration at Lant Street and Sue's months at the madhouse, would require the film to be at least an hour longer. However, in the next chapter, I argue that this modification has to do with Chanwook's personal taste and past works.

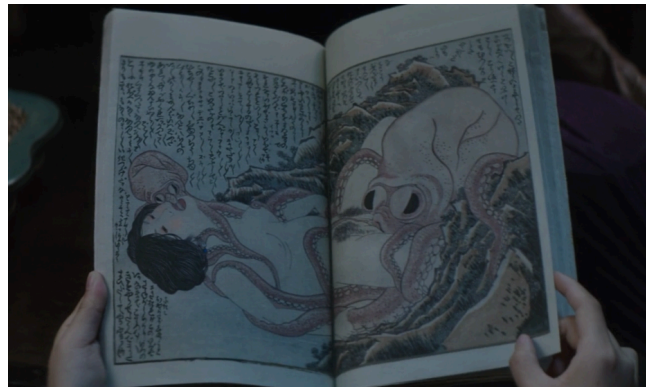
## 6.2 Colonization: Chanwook's vengeance narrative

Leitch's colonization concept refers to the adaptation process of taking a progenitor text and filling it with new meanings. In this process, "any new content is fair game, whether it develops meanings implicit in the earlier text, amounts to an ideological critique of that text, or goes off in another direction entirely" (Leitch, 2001 p. 124). Therefore, when looking at *The Handmaiden*, this concept can be seen in two different ways: 1) that Park Chanwook colonized the original text by adding new meanings through the cultural and historical transposition, as analyzed in chapter 5.1, and 2) that Park Chanwook colonized the original text by adding new meanings related to his identity as a writer and director.

First of all, a Chanwook film is not a Chanwook film if it does not have high levels of disturbing violence. And even though *Fingersmith* has its fair share of violent scenes, most of them involving Mr. Lilly and Maud, the adaptation outdoes the original by a lot. This can be seen in scenes that show practices of sadomasochism

during Hideko's readings (such as strangling and whipping), and the creation of Kouzuki's "basement", which is not present in the original library. Hideko is terrified of ending up there, and her uncle threatens her with it, but the revelation of what is inside only comes in the end of the film: there, the uncle kept body parts (most of them being genitalia) inside glass jars, torture machinery, used to torture Fujiwara for being a fraud, and an aquarium with a living octopus, which was used to kill Hideko's aunt. The octopus is a reference to a famous shunga painting called *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*<sup>12</sup>, which depicts the sexual relation between an *ama*<sup>13</sup> and two octopuses; a copy of the painting (Figure 8) appears in the scene when Sookhee destroys Kouzuki's library, and his version of the *ama*, which was drawn by Fujiwara, purposefully resembles Hideko. Through these additions, it is clear that they function more as an indicator of Chanwook's personal style than as a necessary addition to the plot, ensuring that an avid Chanwook fan, who is used to seeing discomfoting violence in his films, can also recognize *The Handmaiden* as a true Park Chanwook film.

**Figure 8** - *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*



**Source:** *The Handmaiden* (2016)

Secondly, and most importantly, it is possible to say that Chanwook's relationship with vengeance and vengeance narratives played an important part in the addition of the adaptation's divergent ending, which as a result created new meanings to the progenitor text. But according to Sarah Waters herself, she welcomes with open arms adaptations that, as described by Leitch, add something

<sup>12</sup> *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife* was painted by the Japanese artist Hatsushika Hokusai in his shunga book *Kinoe no Komatsu* (1814). It became the artist's most famous shunga design.

<sup>13</sup> *Ama*, which means 'sea women', are the Japanese female divers that collect pearls and seafood.

new and original to the source material, especially when it comes from the director's own views and experiences:

“Adaptations are interesting things, aren't they? Sometimes they're so faithful that you end up thinking: what was the point of that? The best, I think, are the ones that stay faithful, yet bring something else to the source – something of the director's, I guess.” (Hardy, 2018)

Chanwook is, undoubtedly, most known for his revenge stories, and as stated by himself, his relationship with the vengeance theme goes beyond a filmic interest and affects his identity: when asked why vengeance plays a part in the adaptation, Chanwook said “Maybe revenge is a part of me. Because it's not part of the source material” (Barnes, 2016). In his *Vengeance Trilogy*, Chanwook profoundly explored the complexity of revenge in a way that few do: with *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* and *Oldboy*, in showing what painful acts drive his characters to seek revenge, Chanwook shows that revenge is a double-edged-sword, through which his protagonists, blinded by the need to destroy their oppressors, are also doomed in the process; with *Lady Vengeance*, he shows that revenge can be a cathartic experience. Even with three films in sequence that deal with the theme, in *The Handmaiden* Chanwook finds a new way to reinvent his relationship with vengeance narratives.

*The Handmaiden's* plot starts to diverge from *Fingersmith's* in the end of Part Two, right before Sookhee, Hideko and the Count are about to escape Kouzuki's mansion for the mistress and conman to be married. Hideko talks with the Count, saying that she does not want to continue the plan, to which he asks if it is because she pities Sookhee. As Gentleman does in the novel, Fujiwara tries to put them against each other. In the following scene, the two girls are talking about the Count's marriage proposal, and Hideko asks Sookhee if this is the right thing to do, even if she does not love him: “Even if I say I don't love him, if I say that I love someone else... Me, who has no one in this world... Do you still want me to marry him?”, to which Sookhee responds “You will love him”. Hideko hits her in the face, with her eyes filled with tears and an expression of betrayal; by asking these questions, it feels like Hideko was testing territory, if there was a chance for them to come clean and join forces.

Overwhelmed by rage and betrayal, Hideko kicks Sookhee out of the room and takes a rope out of her closet — the same one with which her aunt was found

hanged on a sakura tree. In the same place, she attempts to hang herself, but is stopped by Sookhee, who holds her legs. They tell each other the truth, and from this part forward the viewer gets to know how their plan of tricking the Count enrolled. This is the start of the duo's revenge, and the possibility of the protagonists teaming up against the conman is not something that came out of nowhere. In *Fingersmith*, there are small passages of hesitation that Sue and Maud express towards Gentleman, in which they fantasize about giving up their original plans and finding a way to be together: "I might have found a way — I don't know what — to keep her from her fate. We might have cheated Gentleman. I might have run with her, to Lant Street" (p. 144); "I think, 'I will tell her, then. I will say, *I meant to cheat you. I cannot cheat you now. This was Richard's plot. We can make it ours*'" (p. 206). Through these passages, the novel created a "What if?" gap, which pointed to the possibility that, if they wanted to, the lady and maid could have come up with their own plan to escape. Therefore, Chanwook took the liberty of filling this gap with new meanings.

With the new plan settled, the duo pursue their revenge against Kouzuki and Fujiwara. Before escaping the mansion, Hideko takes Sookhee to the library and shows the nature of the books her uncle made her recite. Hideko's intention seems to be more related to showing Sookhee the truth, her real self, rather than actually getting back at her uncle for what he did. The one that wants revenge for Hideko's suffering turns out to be Sookhee, and filled with wrath, she destroys all of the erotic books while Hideko admires her lover: "The daughter of a legendary thief, who sewed winter coats out of stolen purses. Herself a thief, pickpocket, swindler. The saviour who came to tear my life apart. My Tamako. My Sookhee". The act of destroying the erotic books is present in *Fingersmith*, but reduced, as Maud destroyed a few before escaping Briar, without Sue's knowledge:

I cross to my uncle's shelves and unfasten the glass before the presses. I begin with *The Curtain Drawn Up*, the book he gave me first: I take it, and open it, and set it upon his desk. Then I lift the razor, grip it tight, and fully unclasp it. The blade is stiff, but springs the last inch. It is its nature to cut, after all.

Still, it is hard—it is terribly hard, I almost cannot do it—to put the metal for the first time to the neat and naked paper. I am almost afraid the book will shriek, and so discover me. But it does not shriek. Rather, it sighs, as if in longing for its own laceration; and when I hear that, my cuts become swifter and more true. (Waters, 2002, p. 211)

Even so, there is not a moment in the novel where Mr. Lilly pays for what he did to Maud, or where she comes back to get her revenge. Instead, she returns to

Briar to nurse him until he succumbs to his disease, and to the reader's surprise Maud even continues to get involved with erotic literature, only this time by writing her own and selling the remaining books of the library. Through the total destruction of the library in the film, it symbolizes Hideko's complete disruption with this part of her life, both her uncle and the literature world.

The revenge plan against Fujiwara, shown in Part Three, is more complex. At first, they make him think he has succeeded: Sookhee is in the madhouse and he has Hideko and her money. What he does not know is that Sookhee contacted her adoptive family to help her escape the madhouse, and while she escapes, Hideko plans to use poison, which was a gift from the Count himself, to drug him and leave with the money. His biggest flaws, his greed and egocentrism, are what assure his ruin: he is certain that Hideko is in love with him, and as stated by Chanwook, Fujiwara "considers himself so mesmerizing that he cannot think of any possibility other than a woman falling in love with him" (Juzwiak, 2016). It becomes easy then for Hideko to manipulate the situation, pretending that she loves him too, and even easier for him to not suspect at all that the protagonists planned against him, since "having two women fall in love with each other when he's around is not in his vocabulary" (Juzwiak, 2016). After a tense scene, in which Fujiwara tries to rape Hideko, she successfully poisons him, and he wakes up with no money and in the presence of two men, who take him back to Kouzuki's mansion.

What makes the adaptation's revenge plan unique — in light of all of Chanwook's other experiences with vengeance narratives — is that the women succeed by using their intelligence, and reach their freedom with no downside or dark consequences. If "violence begets violence", then it makes sense that Hideko and Sookhee got their happy ending, because their revenge plan did not involve, at least from their part, violence against their oppressors, as they focused on psychological damage (by destroying what Kouzuki valued the most and exposing Fujiwara as a fraud). The death of Kouzuki and Fujiwara was not a part of the revenge plan, but rather a result of their own foolish actions: Kouzuki, as always, chose violence to get back at the Count for tricking him, and by torturing the conman, Kouzuki was dragged to his own death along with his victim inside his own death chamber.

Therefore, there is, undoubtedly, a feminist perspective driving *The Handmaiden's* narrative. And while *Lady Vengeance*<sup>14</sup> opened up the path for Chanwook's films protagonizing women, there are clear differences in the films' approaches to vengeance: even though in both revenge against men is a cathartic experience to the female protagonists, in *The Handmaiden* it is not achieved through murder, but through Sookhee and Hideko's desire to be together no matter what:

This film is fundamentally different from my previous films because it's about two women—it's not just one woman fighting a lonely battle—but it is two women who find love and form a bond of solidarity. Overall, *The Handmaiden* is a very simple film. It divides everything into two clear sides, and that's to make a point. It pits man against woman, almost as a battle of the sexes, and you have the female characters forming an alliance to fight against the male oppressors and escaping from them. In this film, all the men are villains and all the men are pathetic. The only cool characters are women. (Topalovic, 2016)

The relationship between love and revenge, trauma and salvation, is how Chanwook managed to create a vengeance, but also romance, narrative that deals with the theme in a refreshing way. The scene that shows Sookhee and Hideko jumping over the stone wall symbolizes that: the wall that separated Hideko from her freedom was small enough for her to jump over it by herself at any time, "but the deep-rooted emotional trauma inside her was holding her back" (Topalovic, 2016). Chanwook's past protagonists, driven by their hate, pursued their revenge alone, but in Hideko's case she was only able to jump over the wall and get back at her oppressors through Sookhee's love and companionship.

The last scene of the film, with the women on the ship to Shanghai reproducing the use of mienling from *The Sound of Bells on a Windless Night*, offers an almost-fairy-tale-like ending to the narrative, through which Chanwook wanted to convey sex as "a ritual, of these two women celebrating their newfound freedom" (Juzwiak, 2016), and to end the film on a very positive note, allowing the viewer to dream about this idealized world in which love transpasses gender, social class, nationality and male domination. Although the source material and adaptation took different paths — as Maud and Sue got their "happy ending" only after losing everything they had — they reach a similar resolution: the protagonists manage to be free and together, as well as resignify their relationship with sex.

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<sup>14</sup> *Lady Vengeance* tells the story of Lee Geumja, a woman who was framed for a murder that she did not commit. After being imprisoned for 13 years, she seeks revenge against the real murderer.

## 7 FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this work was to analyze how cultural and medial aspects of the novel *Fingersmith* were adapted in the film *The Handmaiden*, with a focus on the effects this produced in the adaptation. On the cultural and historical adjustments, from 1860s Victorian England to 1930s colonized Korea, this research showed how the adaptation was able to introduce the colonial tension through characterization, setting and representation of the oppression against Koreans — thus making the film darker —, as well as analyzed the historical parallels between the two period's erotic writings and the adaptation's more explicit approach to sex through its relations to Japanese shunga.

On the medial changes, Thomas Leitch's (2001) concepts of compression and colonization were used to analyze the adaptive process: the first caused the adaptation to reduce and omit aspects regarding the background of the protagonists and their thoughts (usually filled in with voiceovers), and the novel's plot twist on switching identities; the second caused the adaptation to portray more violence and change the original ending for the plot to fit as a vengeance narrative, both analyzed as being influenced by Chanwook's past films. Given the limitations of this work, other film adaptation approaches present in *The Handmaiden*, as well as other original additions, were not discussed in this research for the sake of achieving the specific objectives proposed.

Considering that the field of intermedial studies is relatively recent, it is of great importance to shine a light upon works that, as *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, choose to portray queerness and eroticism between women, a topic often overlooked in academic spaces. This becomes even more necessary when considering the impact a film like *The Handmaiden* had in its country of origin, in the sense of causing discomfort in the more conservative audiences of South Korea, where LGBTQ+ rights are ignored and very scarcely represented in the media, and where sex is still a taboo subject.

Along with its domestic impact, the film managed to break into the Western mainstream, an achievement restricted to very few South Korean works in the last years, and received worldwide critical acclaim through awards and reviews, going as

far as being listed as the third<sup>15</sup> best South Korean film of all time. Therefore, there is an urgent need to discuss and give more visibility to adaptations derived from *Hallyu*, given that they can provide unique cultural revisitations of other works and, in doing so, “keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 176).

As Sarah Waters pointed out: “One of the nice things about adaptations is it gives you a chance to revisit the story and characters” (Armitstead, 2017). This quote perfectly accentuates the distinguishing aspect of *The Handmaiden* as an adaptation — in comparison to, for example, BBC’s *Fingersmith* miniseries (2005) —, considering that it was able to balance out fidelity to the source’s plot while proposing new meanings and culturally-accurate revisions, in this sense providing a complex and transcending dialogue with the original text. Through my analysis, I aimed to testify how Park Chanwook managed to deeply understand the spirit of *Fingersmith* and fully translate it into a Korean film, attesting the theory that narrative is a general human universal which can be repeated and adapted to fit different times and places (Hutcheon, 2006). Hence, it is through intermedial adaptive practices like the one between *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, through the crossing of cultural and medial borders, that we can see, after all, how universal some experiences can be.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Handmaiden* has a rating of 8,1 and a Metascore of 85 in the IMDb ranking, surpassed only by *Parasite* (2019), with 8,5, and *Oldboy* (2003), with 8,4.



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