

# **An Ostracized Minority Silently Facing Denial of Social Acceptance: The Depiction of Disabled People in South Korean and Japanese Movies**

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**Abstract** The article compares the depiction of the disabled minority in selected South Korean and Japanese movies to the general image of disabled protagonists in western cinematography. It also focuses on legal regulations that are to change the inferior position of the disabled, a position based on prejudice, fear and negligence. The article presents different ways of showing disabilities, both from the ‘outside’ and from the perspective of a disabled hero, which appears to be quite an achievement when it comes to the mentally challenged ones and their recognition of the outer reality. It also describes the methods of assistance presented in the movies, both on the side of society and the side of the family of the disabled, in comparison with their treatment in the real world, where the adaptive process of disabled people turns out to be a tough and slow one; generally it is depicted this way in South Korean productions chosen for this article. What distinguishes the Asian movies’ depictions from the mass productions of the West is the attempt to present the inside of the differently able and by doing that to gain the viewers’ understanding of their perception of the surrounding reality, which results in evoking the viewers’ sympathy and their will to help the suppressed and marginalized group forbidden to coexist in society on equal terms.

**Key words** physically and mentally disabled; South Korean legal regulations; adaptation

Shocking as it may seem, there are over 550 million disabled people in the world (“Jakość”). Statistically, in almost every country at least one person out of ten is either physically or mentally disabled, or evinces some emotional dysfunctions. The population census conducted in 1988 showed that the disabled constituted almost 10% of global population. The existence of such a huge number of handicapped

unnecessarily qualifies the disabled as minority, nevertheless they tend to be treated as such which proves the necessity to acknowledge the fight for their rights as minority. Moreover, this immense group generates social unrest or even aversion in some environments. The reason for such treatment is very common. The disabled have obvious problems with adaptation to change. They are usually helpless in the majority of everyday situations. When it comes to mentally sick people, they demonstrate tremendous difficulty in understanding the reality that surrounds them. Mentally disabled people's aims are very often inconsistent, therefore such people are characterized by infantilism and the inability to see the reality in a way letting them adjust their behavior to the prevailing rules and, by doing that, function in society without disturbances. Therefore being classified as disabled generates endless obstacles. Firstly, the standard of living of the disabled generally appears to be inferior to the average one. This unfortunate and unjust treatment of disabled people depends on numerous aspects. Besides their medical condition, physical and psychological parameters and non-self-sufficient functionality, their plight is also the consequence of various reasons unrelated to them, namely generated on both micro and macro social levels. These are not only the social standards which influence the situation of the family of the disabled person, but also the economic situation of the country this person lives in, binding law regulations and social policy rules, not to mention the overall social approach toward the disabled which more than occasionally happens to be based on some primal or religious prejudices (demons living inside the disabled body, etc.). The profile of the approach in question, however, can be shaped by the media. They have enough power to attract attention to various barriers and limitations inflicted on people who struggle with disability.

At this point of the discourse a conclusion may be drawn that the limitations of such people stem from the relation between them and their environment. The handicapped meet barriers of various kinds: cultural, social, physical, and many others. Such barriers are the expression of the lack of acceptance, which results in the impossibility of the everyday independent functioning of the disabled, not to mention their participation in even basic aspects of social coexistence. For instance, why are the crippled and mentally retarded deprived of decent conditions of living that are, after all, guaranteed by the Constitution? This issue is widely debated, however, the undeniable fact is that the disabled cannot function independently due to multiple obstacles unrelated to their disability. Consequently, their participation in social systems available to other citizens is withheld. It can be assumed that such social ostracism causes a high level of existential fear. This fear is the source of the negative recognition of the surrounding world and, subsequently, the disturbed orientation in it, which creates a specific lifestyle, dominated by too few cognitive and intellectual

interactions, especially verbal ones.

The awareness of harm done to the disabled began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It brought tremendous changes in the recognition and acceptance of the fact that the disabled are an integral part of society and should be guaranteed the same opportunities as the non-disabled ones. This shift in the treatment of disabilities, especially physical ones, was mostly due to the increased number of war invalids who suffered from multiple injuries. Apart from medical care, they were treated psychologically because of the traumatic experience they were forced to go through (e.g. Vietnam War). The fact that mental destabilization was added to the list of curable diseases was connected with the widespread popularity of psychoanalysis and the acknowledgement of stress-related problems, generated by the surrounding environment, which surely influenced the person's state of mind. Thanks to this innovative wave of thinking, fresh attitude towards the disabled developed and led to a breakthrough point in the 1960's. The law was changed and the disabled were guaranteed rehabilitation. Since then, the early diagnosis and intervention have been the key issues in dealing with various disabilities. The 'differently able', as they tend to be referred to, have the right to medical care, education, social help and counseling, training in the field connected with their work, necessary equipment and services, support in a job-finding process, and generally, everyday life based on self-sufficiency.

In the western part of the world, which is the common name embracing all well-developed countries in Europe and overseas, namely the USA and Canada, dealing with the differently able is based on the word 'integration'. The people with not only minor disabilities attend regular schools, graduate successfully and later find a stable and secure occupation. The fact that they can afford their expenses gives them necessary confidence and strength to develop their careers and simply live their lives. The legislature in those countries ensures essential rights and privileges together with medical care and different kinds of help, including the crucial one-financial. Unfortunately, such a security for the disabled ones is not always granted in the eastern part of the globe, for instance in Asian countries. Surprisingly, this issue does not appear to be resolved successfully even in Japan, where 'disability' seems to be the word its inhabitants are ashamed of. In this well-developed, prosperous country, disability remains a huge problem. The focus of this article is mainly on the depiction of the disabled minority in selected South Korean and Japanese movies, where the treatment of the people with both physical and mental disabilities also appears to be quite the opposite to the one prevailing in the West.

The disabled in Korea are called 'invisible people'. After reading some articles from the websites (such as "Korea's Invisible People", "South Korea: Steps Taken to Protect Rights of People with Disabilities" and "N. Korea Puts Disabled in Camps"),

our impression is that the people who are labeled as crippled or handicapped must undertake quite a struggle to lead a relatively independent life. The biggest complaint on their side is that they are restricted to a very limited, usually isolated accommodation and doomed to vocational schools, depriving them of the chances to develop intellectually. Finding a job turns to be a rare achievement as the majority of employers there assume that the disabled are less productive than the non-disabled ones. *The Korean Herald* from 2005-05-19 reveals that: “Although the government estimates there are 1.6 million disabled people in Korea and civil activist groups say there are 4.5 million, ‘Where are they?’ is a question many ask. It reflects the isolation in which the disabled live” (“Korea”). Such is the reality depicted in the Korean movie *Oasis* (2002) directed by Lee Chang-dong.

The story begins with Hong Jong-du being released from prison and going to reunite with his family in Seoul. He is a slightly retarded man, unable to comply with social rules. His family reluctantly provides accommodation for him. Their help stems from the fact that his family took advantage of him and his disability because they made him serve time for his sane brother who caused the car accident and killed a man. They even arrange a job that Hong Jong-du could keep, however, his extreme social misfit occurs to be an obstacle withholding him from reconciliation with the surrounding reality. Nevertheless, Jong-du has a goal—visiting a family of the man that was killed in the hit-and-run accident he was unjustly accused and convicted of. In his attempt to get to know that family he discovers that the victim’s daughter, Gong-ju, suffers from severe cerebral palsy. She lives alone while her brother, Sang-shik, illegally robs her of all the benefits granted by the State for her, for instance: a new, spacious apartment where he moves with his family and invites his disabled sister over only when there is an inspection conducted by a social worker, checking how the guardians take care of the sick person. This episode clearly points out that the misuse is on the side of the family, whereas the Korean Government does a lot to provide decent standard of living and rehabilitation. The State guarantees accommodation, money in a form of a disability pension and, most of all, it ensures that there is and will be a guardian in the vicinity of the disabled one. In *Oasis*, the disabled Gong-ju is left alone in her old apartment, at the mercy of her frivolous neighbors who regularly neglect her. Gong-ju, however, creates her own imaginary world that helps her survive the constant negligence and abuse. Lee Cang-dong tries to enter this world with his cameras and, naïve as it may seem, he reflects the girl’s imaginary asylum. His attempt to recreate the disabled girl’s thoughts without any external narrator, this invitation to a place which is impregnable by means of oral communication, appears to be quite successful when compared to the American movie *Birdy* (1984) (directed by Alan Parker), an adaptation of William Wharton’s novel. In *Birdy*, the depiction of

the mentally sick boy is totally external and most of the time his actions and behavior are, in some way, narrated by his sane friend. Apart from the main hero's fascination with birds and obsessive attempts to fly that are observed from 'the outside', there is not a single endeavor to enter the inner world of the boy. Due to those limitations of *Birdy's* depiction the boy is condemned to be recognized and acknowledged as incapable of communicating with society, which equals his further isolation in the institution for mentally sick people, where he is confined to a claustrophobic room. The purpose of providing such conditions, in theory, is to cure the insane man, however, as can be seen in the course of the film, instead of his recovery and reunion with society, only distress and deeper isolation of the disabled person is achieved. The inability to communicate and, what follows, to understand disabled people seems to be the key issue in the depiction of them. Therefore Lee Chang-dong's attempt to change the perspective and put a viewer in the position of a sick person clearly shows and definitely proves that such a person can be contacted with. Owing to this attempt the people watching this movie realize that Gong-ju can communicate and wants to be loved, experience the outside world she is so much afraid of. With the help of the slightly retarded but fully fit Jong-du, who after several encounters becomes her boyfriend, she finally goes outside. The couple becomes inseparable. Jong-du covers Gong-ju's physical disability and, literally, carries her on his back. In this manner they are eventually able to overcome at least some of the barriers of the outside world. Although the couple faces harsh reality of the discrimination, they find consolation and happiness in their love. This picture of disability, both mental and physical, has a revolutionary effect on portraying them. They become 'differently able' but definitely able to behave and react like an ordinary human being. They have the same needs and expectations, which is smartly reflected by Lee Chang-dong's protagonists.

Yet the obstacles posed by society are very often impossible to be overcome. *Oasis* shows Jong-du's attempts to find a job and it is not surprising that he fails in this crucial area of social coexistence. Although Disability and Employment Act in South Korea prohibits discrimination in employment, it '...does not provide any specific guidelines on duties, liabilities and remedial procedures. Therefore, this Act is viewed as symbolic, rather than practical' (Soon-Wook Lee). Following the legal steps taken to secure the rights of the disabled in Korea, the Mandatory Employment of Disability Policy must be mentioned. It is to "...promote employment prospects for people with disabilities". Moreover, Anti-discrimination Against Disabilities Act which was enacted on April 10, 2007 (Act No.8341, April 10, 2007, Effective of April 11, 2008) gave the legal ground for the employment of those differently abled ones. Unfortunately, the employment of differently able proves to be contradictory

to legal regulations in this field, therefore the media, following Lee Chang-dong's example, should use their influence and power to break the stereotypes of thinking and prejudices against disabled people. The movie *Oasis* successfully reflects the plight of those invisible and denied ones and sends a message that they are an integral part of society, yet the part that remains misunderstood and unseen.

Another serious problem the disabled are faced with in Korea is the tendency to confine them to one place which they cannot leave, so called an isolated group facility. Some of those institutions are owner operated, usually illegally "admitting disabled people with an entrance fee and taking their welfare money and donations, using only a small portion to support their residents. Inside the facility, authorities said, incidents of physical and sexual abuse were common and the living conditions were dire" ("Korea"). One of the patients, Ms. Hyun, 42, suffering from cerebral palsy, the resident at Paul Missionary, the owner operated isolated group facility, recalls: "I am a recipient of government welfare, but I don't know what's being done with that money, I have never seen it. This is a lawless place: we have to follow the laws of the facility [...] The manager is like the president of a nation here. I'm afraid of the night. Something always happens in the night. Men come into the women's room whenever they get the chance. Many girls have become victims of rape. But my parents tell me that I should live and die here." The examples of such appalling mistreatment of the disabled can be multiplied.

Surprisingly, the picture of an institution for mentally sick people created by another Korean director, Park Chan-wook, in his film *I'm A Cyborg, But That's OK* (2006), does not apply to the vision of a place of torture, full of distress and abuse. The patients there are under excellent care of eager-to-understand them doctors. There are sessions during which the doctors try to form a bond with the hospitalized ones, try to find the source of mental problems, try to cure the disability and bring the 'insane' ones back to society. In this film the belief in the awareness of the mentally disabled person prevails. The main protagonist, Young-goon, a girl who thinks she is a cyborg and obviously acts like one, is interpreted as a mentally unstable and suicidal after the attempt to recharge her batteries with high voltage wires she connects to her wrists. As a consequence she is sent to a mental institution where she is supposed to be cured. A female doctor who is responsible for Young-goon's well-being and recovery, approaches her patients from various 'angles'. Being also a young woman she cleverly tries to connect with Young-goon, believing that when the roots of her psychosis are determined, the problem of mental disability can be dealt with. In one of her medical attempts she interviews Young-goon's apathetic mother who reveals that the Cyborg's grandmother has been institutionalized and qualified as schizophrenic

for the delusions of being a mouse. This scene discovers one more aspect, namely the fact that the mother figure was aware but ignorant of her daughter's delusion of being a cyborg, a powerful self, able to rescue her grandmother. In this movie the faith in the discovery of common consciousness, the place where the doctor and the patient can meet, the golden remedy, seems to be the aim. In modern psychology and psychiatry a prevailing approach is that an attempt to put oneself in the position of the sick person can create such a place, in other words, empathy can evoke the essential awareness enabling to understand the patient's problem. In the collection of articles and discussion, Honorata Korpikiewicz raises a question of whether the awareness is the reflection of reality, and she differentiates the notions of awareness and consciousness in the medical sense. In her opinion such awareness is the reason for particular behavior of the hospitalized. She claims that the activity of certain areas of the cerebral cortex has been observed depending on the surrounding occurrences or recollected memories. Young-goon's hallucination of turning into a Terminator slaughtering all the doctors and orderlies of the hospital, is definitely provoked by the recollection of her helpless grandmother being taken away by the men in white. That inflow of memories also explains the girl's frequent fantasies of reuniting with her grandmother. They are tear-provoking scenes, making the viewer sympathize with the Cyborg. The film evokes genuine concern towards schizophrenic people and the need to understand their world. Compassion is one of many positive emotions cleverly sparked by this movie and planted in its viewers.

Yet another aspect proving Korpikiewicz's point can be found in *I'm A Cyborg, But That's OK*, where the patients themselves continue the treatment of their co-patients after the doctors' failure. Il-sun, a young man who suffers from schizophrenia and kleptomania and who is generally labeled as anti-social, occurs to have remedies for all his co-patients. When Young-goon's health deteriorates rapidly as she denies human food and licks batteries instead, and force-feeding through her nose is only a short-term solution the doctors come up with, his clever trick with installing an imaginary 'rice-megatron' in Young-goon's back eventually makes her eat. Il-sun happens to be the one that reveals in himself many layers of understanding and empathy for the Cyborg-girl and therefore manages to change her eating habits. An even more striking example of his awareness of reality that saves Young-goon's life is presented. The Cyborg wants to detonate herself as a 'nuke bomb' which requires a bolt of lightning. To prevent that fatal accident from occurring Il-sun places a cork on the top of the metal rod she brings, thereby ensuring the girl will not be hit by lightning. In this case outsmarting the sick girl confirms the observation by Honorata Korpikiewicz that empathy is necessary to feel the psychic of another creature

(14). Ms. orpikiewicz also explains that the personality of a schizophrenic changes temporarily into a completely different self, not necessarily aware of the existence of its alter ego or egos. The dissociation of personality is a typical symptom of schizophrenic psychosis. She explain that the recollections of schizophrenic patients in the state of remission prove that schizophrenic reality is so clear and vivid that it is difficult to be considered unreal. Such reality of unreal is depicted in a masterly fashion in *I'm A Cyborg, But That's OK*. The audience can no longer deny the existence of the world of the mentally disabled. The compassion and sympathy for them definitely change the way they are depicted and show that some delusions should not erase a human being from social life. Park Chan-wook's innovative approach deserves attention, especially when compared to one of the most famous American depictions of a mental hospital in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo* (1975) based on Ken Kesey's novel. Even the outstanding performance of Jack Nicholson does not make it possible to enter the world of the mentally sick patients, see their fears and dreams like in *I'm A Cyborg, But That's OK*.

While *Oasis* tends to reflect the plight of the disabled, *I'm A Cyborg, But That's OK* denies the accusations of wrongdoing when it comes to the treatment of the institutionalized mentally disabled in Korea. The movie *Madeo* (2009) ("mother" in Korean) by Bong Joon-ho, shows yet another treatment of the disabled there. It depicts a retarded young man with a rebellious streak and his over-protective mother with whom he has a particularly intimate relationship (they share the same bed, she holds up a bowl to his mouth so that he can consume his soup as he urinates, etc.). The social situation of the disabled person here is completely different from the ones described before. Yoon Do-joon, the mentally challenged protagonist, has a 24-hour care provided by his loving mother. She is overbearing to such an extent that the man's rude behavior towards her seems to be justified and interpreted as an act of struggling for independence. The movie, however, touches a completely different aspect of dealing with the retarded ones in Korea. Yoon Do-joon is arrested as a prime suspect and after a violent and manipulative questioning he signs a confession. The fact that he is mentally disabled gets no recognition at the police station where he is treated in the same way as the 'healthy' ones. This young man is unaware that he has a civil right to defend himself and he is not informed about it by the police officers questioning him. Such unawareness may be caused, among many other factors, by the lack of proper education of the disabled. That 15.8% of the disabled in Korea have not gone to elementary school is a fact, moreover, 45.1% of them reach only an elementary level of education ("Korea Disabled"). These statistics definitely prove how unreachable the chances for normal life for the disabled in Korea are.



In *Madeo* it can also be observed that the disabled boy wants a normal personal life, a partner. Do-joon expresses his need to have a girlfriend when he is mocked by other men for not having one and admitting to sleeping with his mother. Nevertheless, the statistics do not bring optimism in this matter, either. They show, for instance, that over 60.5% of disabled women in Korea, age 20-29, are single (Lee Ye-Ja). Many international organizations, UN among them, have made tremendous effort to resolve the problems concerning the disabled and enable them to function in society because their exclusion due to the disability is an undeniable fact.

The disabled in South Korea, however, do not remain silent. There are numerous conferences, acts and declarations, protecting them, especially Asian women. In 2000 'The Declaration of the Rights of the Disabled Women' stated as follows :

Disabled women have the right to political, economic, social power.

Disabled women have the right to be equal.

Disabled women have the right to choose as consumers.

Disabled women have the right to use convenience facilities.

Disabled women have the right to be educated.

Disabled women have the right to be safe from all forms of violence.

Disabled women have the right to work, and also the right to be employed.

Disabled women have the right of health.

Disabled women have the right to make and live with their own families.

Disabled women have the right to live independently. (Lee Ye-Ja)

Ignorance is not an option in this developing country. By issuing such declarations the disabled send a message that they want their country to be acknowledged and recognized as a civilized one, where human rights are not violated regardless of ability or disability of a person. The common attempt of both activists and artists supported by the media is certainly going to bring positive changes in the depiction and treatment of the differently abled, as they are referred to now.

The question arises whether this tendency to hide disability can be observed in the developing Asian countries only or, on the contrary, it is an occurrence on a massive scale, no matter how far economically the country is advanced. Erich Fromm in his series of lectures entitled *The Pathology of Normalcy* observes that the number of mentally unstable citizens in the well-developed countries is much higher than in those economically unsafe ones, which proves that, paradoxically, the security of

existence decreases simultaneously with the increase of affluence. In his article “Is ‘disability’ still a dirty word in Japan”, Tomoko Otake points out a big number of interesting facts about disabilities in this rich and well-governed country. According to him: “Government statistics show that, out of a population of around 127 million, some 3.5 million are physically disabled, 2.5 million are mentally ill and 500,000 are mentally disabled. That's a total of around 6.5 million individuals. But where are they?”, Otake asks and he answers as follows: “Granted, we see more station elevators, wheelchair-accessible toilets and buses with passenger lifts nowadays. Such facilities are visible, but many people hardly ever encounter those who use them—let alone anyone with non-physical disabilities. In fact, apart from people with disabled family members or friends, most Japanese quite likely live their whole lives without ever interacting with their disabled fellow citizens.” And he adds: “Japan is extremely behind [other countries] in the inclusion of the disabled in jobs and education, [...]the education ministry remains firm in its stance that education systems for disabled and non-disabled people should be separated.” In the course of the article it appears that the prejudice against the disabled students is mostly generated by the State, as non-disabled students provide help for their disabled classmates when the permission for such a mixed class is granted by the school’s authorities. This situation proves that the disabled ones in Japan do not attract enough attention and the tendency to ‘sweep them under the carpet’ prevails.

However, in his film *Dolls* (2002), Takeshi Kitano, the worldwide recognized Japanese director, features both mentally and physically disabled. The plot covers three distinct stories that occasionally cross-over. There is a story of a young man, Matsumoto, who breaks his girlfriend’s heart and ask his company’s president’s daughter to marry him. When his former fiancée, Sawako, attempts suicide which ends up in her semi-vegetative state, he takes responsibility for her and they start walking aimlessly together, connected with a red rope, the symbol of their former love. The second story shows another young man, Nukui, helplessly in love with his idol—a beautiful singer who has a car accident after which she remains disfigured and hides herself from the world, ashamed of her unattractive appearance. As she rejects people who can see her, Nukui blinds himself to be able to meet the pop star. The third story is about an aged yakuza and his attempt to reunite with the girl he loved and who loved him back before he chose the path of a villain. One more disabled character is depicted in this story, a boy on a wheelchair, but the viewer soon realizes that he has a comic role and is not to be treated seriously. Based on these three stories the picture of the disabled ones in Japanese society is formed.

First of all, the young couple walking in shabby clothes and a rope between

them, are laughed at and shun. The people they encounter express lack of mercy or sympathy towards them. There is a winter scene in which the couple sits on the snow in the vicinity of a building full of young, prosperous people they used to be. Matsumoto starts a little fire to warm them up and a moment later they are chased away by the owner of the building who offers no help, but instead, treats them like unwanted stray dogs, a dirt that must be removed from his backyard. The two beggars, one of them mentally disabled, must keep walking in the freezing snow at night. They are treated in a surprisingly inhumane way, especially as the action takes place in a well-developed and affluent country—Japan. Another scene from *Dolls* that depicts the disabled ones in the country where cherry blossoms bloom shows an isolated beach where Nukui, after blinding himself, goes to encounter his beloved singer. In this scene two stories cross over. The viewer can see Matsumoto and Sawako walking there at the time when the isolation-seeking singer allows the blind fan to contact her. This scene provokes an opinion that the isolation of the disabled ones can be inflicted on them both by society and by themselves, because they personally believe the disability eliminates them from the world of success, career, prosperity and pleasure.

Unnoticed, neglected, abused and avoided—hopefully these are not the only epithets that can be applied to the disabled minority in Asian countries. Their situation presented in the four movies described in this article deserves a fair judgment. On the one hand, they are depicted as fully dependent citizens, unable to coexist under the terms of society. On the other hand, they are portrayed as people with natural human needs: the crave for love and partnership, or the necessity to reunite with the family members. The irrefutable fact is, however, that their disability, whether mental or physical, excludes them from society and condemns them to a life on the outskirts of human existence. The disabled encountered in the above mentioned movies seem to be mute and susceptible to the environment and the inferior position it imposes on them. Nevertheless, such movies speak for them, to shout out their plight and attract the essential attention of the outside world. The major change the movies can make is the change of attitude towards the disabled. That can be achieved by showing the world from their perspective. This cinematographic endeavor raises common understanding and acceptance of the fact that the disabled are the integral part of society and the exclusion of them is not an option. On the contrary, the State and society have moral obligation to ensure that their conditions of life are on acceptable level. The research into the situation of the disabled shows that their needs and expectations are not marginalized. Unfortunately, concluding from the image presented in the above South Korean and Japanese productions, numerous barriers, created by both society and the family, still must be fought against.

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