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**GENDER ROLES AND IDENTITY IN *MINARI***

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**Abstract:**

*This research paper examines the critically acclaimed film Minari directed by Lee Issac Chung through the lens of gender theory to explore the portrayal and subversion of traditional gender roles and the construction of gender identity. Drawing on feminist and intersectional frameworks, the study delves into the nuanced depiction of masculinity, femininity, and the interplay between gender and other social categories such as race, culture, and class. By employing gender theory as an analytical tool, the paper investigates how the characters in Minari navigate and challenge societal expectations, illustrating the fluidity, complexity, and intersectionality of gender roles and identities. Through an examination of specific scenes, dialogues, and character development, the paper explores the ways in which Minari challenges traditional gender norms, disrupts stereotypes, and provides alternative narratives of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, it investigates how cultural hybridity and the immigrant experience influence the flexibility and reimagining of gender roles within the narrative. The analysis encompasses multiple dimensions of gender theory, including the performative nature of gender, the impact of power dynamics, the construction of gender through socialization, and the intersections between gender and other identity markers. It explores how characters like Jacob, Monica, David, and Soonja defy conventional gender expectations, embody agency, and navigate the complexities of identity formation. The findings of this research contribute to the understanding of gender dynamics in cinematic representations and highlight the importance of intersectionality in examining gender. By unpacking the complexities of gender in Minari, the paper aims to broaden discussions on gender representation and challenge the binary and static understanding of gender roles.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Identity, Minari, Masculinity, Femininity, Intersectionality, etc.

Gender roles are societal expectations regarding the behaviors, roles, and responsibilities associated with men and women based on their biological sex. In traditional western societies, women have been expected to embody nurturing qualities, while men have been expected to be leaders and providers for their families. For example, women were traditionally encouraged to focus on homemaking and taking care of their families, while men were expected to work outside the home, provide financial support, and make important decisions for the family (Blackstone, 337). *Minari* portrays traditional gender roles through the characters of Jacob and Monica Yi, highlighting the expectations placed on men and women in the 1980s patriarchal society.



Jacob represents the traditional male breadwinner role. He is determined to achieve the American Dream by starting a farm and providing financial stability for his family. He is shown as the primary decision-maker and provider, taking charge of the family's future. For example, Jacob makes the decision to move the family to rural Arkansas and invests all their money in purchasing a plot of land. Monica fulfils the traditional role of a homemaker and caretaker. She takes care of the household chores, cooks meals, and looks after the children. Monica is often seen prioritising the well-being of her family, ensuring they have a stable and comfortable home. She supports Jacob's dreams while also bearing the emotional burden of the family's struggles, longing for stability and security. Jacob's responsibility as the provider and Monica's role as the nurturer reflect the societal expectations placed on men and women, respectively.

Jacob is depicted as the one making major decisions, such as moving the family to Arkansas or investing in the farm. Monica often expresses her concerns or reservations, but ultimately defers to Jacob's choices. This dynamic reinforces the traditional notion of male authority and decision-making power within the family structure. While Jacob focuses on the farm and financial stability, Monica carries the emotional burden of the family. She worries about their future, struggles with her marriage, and bears the weight of their financial challenges. Monica's emotional labour and resilience align with the expectations placed on women to manage the emotional well-being of the family unit.

In the opening scene, Jacob leads the way towards their new home followed by his wife Monica and his children. Monica's expressions on their way show doubt and insecurity, probably due to past experiences with Jacob. As they reach their new home trailer with wheels, Jacob is looking at it, with romantic optimism while Monica seems to look at it in pragmatic disbelief. She clearly is not happy with her new home and hence her body language stiffens as well when Jacob offers her a hand to climb up the trailer house. Jacob sees this as an opportunity to better their lives while Monica is unsure about this plan which adds to her migration anxiety. This is a reflection of the different aspirations of the man and woman in a family. The man (Jacob) wants to be successful and better their lives while the woman's (Monica) main concern is security and stability even if it means staying poor and in debt.

### **Masculinity and Fatherhood:**

Minari explores masculinity and fatherhood through the character of Jacob Yi, providing a nuanced portrayal of the construction of masculinity and the challenges of fatherhood. Jacob, the father figure in *Minari*, embodies the traditional role of a provider for his family. Throughout the film, Jacob's determination and relentless pursuit of the American Dream drive him to establish a successful farm in rural Arkansas. He takes on the responsibility of ensuring the financial stability and well-being of his wife, Monica, and their children. Jacob's role as a provider is portrayed through his relentless work ethic and his commitment to building a prosperous future for his family. Despite the challenges and setbacks he faces, including the uncertainty of farming, financial strain, and conflicts with Monica, Jacob remains unwavering in his pursuit of success. His dedication to working long hours, investing his time and energy, and taking calculated risks demonstrates his commitment to providing a better life for his loved ones. Furthermore, Jacob's role as a provider is also evident in his decision-making within the family. He takes the lead in making important financial and strategic choices, such as investing in a mobile home and purchasing farm equipment. His decisions are driven by the desire to create a stable and comfortable living environment for his family, even if it means sacrificing personal comforts or enduring hardship in the process. The film also explores the tensions and conflicts that arise from his single-minded focus on providing for the family, which often leads to strained relationships and emotional disconnection. This nuanced depiction challenges the traditional notion of the provider role, highlighting the complexities and sacrifices that come with fulfilling societal



expectations. Lee Issac Chung uses male chickens as a metaphor for men in this scene:

A FLY BUZZES near David. He looks up and sees a big TOWER covered in flies, emitting SMOKE and sounds of SLOSHING.

DAVID: What's that?

JACOB: That? Don't worry about that.

David now sees a scattering of other dead chicks. Flies hover.

David looks to Jacob: what is this?

JACOB: Male chicks are put in there. They're discarded.

DAVID: What is 'discarded'?

JACOB: That word is difficult right? Mm... Their meat is bad, they don't lay eggs. Males have nouse. So you and me should try to be useful, right?

In this scene from *Minari*, the director employs male chicks as a metaphor to explore the societal perception of men and their expected usefulness. The interaction between David and Jacob sheds light on the underlying gender dynamics and traditional gender roles within the narrative. David's curiosity and inquiry about the tower indicate his growing awareness and questioning of the world around him. His innocence and naivety are juxtaposed with the harsh reality Jacob presents about the fate of the male chicks. The scene highlights the introduction of David to the concept of societal expectations and how individuals are judged based on their perceived usefulness or utility. He explains that the male chicks are discarded because they have no use due to their inability to lay eggs and their inferior meat quality. By drawing a parallel between the fate of the male chicks and the expectations placed on men, Jacob implies that men, like the chicks, must strive to be useful in order to find value and acceptance in society. It reflects the notion that men are often judged primarily based on their ability to contribute in specific ways, such as being providers or achieving certain goals, and that their worth is closely tied to their perceived usefulness. Another scene in the film which represents a similar role of a man is when David meets Billy who is the father of his friend Johnnie:

BILLY: How's your daddy like that new farm?

DAVID: Good.

BILLY: He growin' things good? Doin' things right?

DAVID: Yes.

BILLY: Gooood. I knew the fella who was there before. You know about him?

DAVID: Yes.

BILLY: So you know what he did? [Billy points his finger to his head in mock suicide.]

JOHNNIE: Who?

BILLY: Bucky Reed. Went flat broke. I guess that's what a man does. ... You sure your daddy likes that farm? There ain't no ghosts walkin' round?

In this scene, Billy hints that the previous owner of the farm killed himself because of his financial troubles and inability to maintain the farm and provide for his family. This once again underscores the devastating effects of failure to fulfill man's traditional gender role. Gender roles are shaped through the interactions between individuals and their surroundings, providing guidance on what behaviours are considered suitable for each sex. Oakley (1972) argues that gender reflects the biological distinction between male and female, but it encompasses the division and societal evaluation of masculinity and femininity. In essence, gender is a socially constructed concept that arises from human interactions and environmental influences, while also drawing on the biological differences



between males and females. The term 'social construction' highlights the fact that gender is a product of human societal processes and perceptions (Blackstone, 335). So in this particular scene, the information given to David by Jacob about male chicks being discarded for their non-utility contributes to the construction of David's gender role as a man. Another scene representing the social construction of gender roles can be seen when the men of the house go out to dig a well and the women take care of the home by cleaning it. Traditionally men and masculinity are associated with toughness, competition, status, and emotional stoicism (Levant, 718). In one of the scenes, David hurts his leg and grandma nurses the wound and calls David a strong boy for enduring pain without crying. David likes that she calls him a strong boy as opposed to pretty boy. This exemplifies the innate masculine urge even at a young age of being perceived as strong.

The arrival of a thunderstorm at the Yi family's new mobile home adds to their challenges. Monica is clearly upset about this situation in this scene which reveals their financial troubles as well as their past:

JACOB: Who is this all for? You! The kids!

MONICA: Speak truthfully.

JACOB: I worked ten years! Staring at chicken butts all day, coming home to a tiny apartment without a penny.

MONICA: And where did the money go? To the kids? Because your dream is for the kids?

[David throws his plane]

JACOB: Don't start.

MONICA: How much money went to the kids?

JACOB: I had duties as the eldest son, I had to take care of family, and now it's over. Everyone at home is well now.

MONICA: Who's home, my mother's home? Our home? Who's home are you talking about?

The rain in the trailer home serves as a metaphorical backdrop, representing the unexpected challenges and risks associated with their new living situation. Jacob's failure to assess the potential risks of the home reflects his single-minded focus on pursuing his dreams and providing for his family. On the other hand, Monica's anger stems from her anxiety about the safety of their children, highlighting her concern for their well-being and her role as a protective mother. Jacob reveals that he has been working for ten years at hatcheries, yet they have little money and are living in a small house. Monica questions where the money earned during that time has gone, emphasizing her desire for financial stability and her concerns about their future. The revelation that Jacob had been sending money to his family highlights the cultural expectations and traditional gender roles that influence Jacob's actions. As the eldest son, he feels a sense of duty and responsibility towards his family, even if it means sacrificing their immediate financial security. Jacob's actions reflect a societal expectation for men to prioritize their role as providers and caretakers of their families, even if it comes at the expense of their own family's well-being.

In one of the scenes at night, David refuses to share his room with his Grandmother. Jacob completes his duty as a patriarch by threatening David to go to sleep as he is refusing to do so and being unruly. Another time David is scolded by his father because he gives his pee instead of mountain dew to grandma. Jacob's intervention can be seen as an attempt to assert his authority as the patriarch and maintain discipline within the household. By threatening David and insisting on obedience, Jacob fulfils his perceived duty of maintaining order and control as the head of the family.



Jacob's cold behaviour towards Paul during the dinner scene suggests a sense of mistrust and unease. Jacob suspects that Monica may have shared their personal struggles with Paul, which leads to his defensive and guarded attitude. This indicates that Jacob wants to maintain control over his personal and financial struggles, not wanting others, especially someone who works under him, to perceive him as vulnerable or weak. Jacob's raised voice when Paul asks to pray for both husband and wife can be seen as a way of asserting dominance and maintaining the hierarchical relationship between them. As Paul works for Jacob, there is a power dynamic at play, and Jacob wants to ensure that his position of authority remains intact. Jacob's reaction can be interpreted as an attempt to preserve his image as a leader, separate from his personal vulnerabilities. The scene reflects how traditional notions of masculinity often emphasise strength, self-sufficiency, and the suppression of vulnerability. Jacob's reluctance to let Paul see his struggles stems from societal expectations placed on men to be providers and maintain a sense of control. The scene alludes to the social class hierarchy within male relationships. Jacob's position as Paul's boss adds another layer of complexity to their interactions. Jacob may feel the need to assert his authority and maintain a professional distance to preserve the hierarchical dynamics between them.

This scene in *Minari* explores the intricacies of male relationships, power dynamics, and the expectations placed on men within society. It highlights the pressure men face to project an image of strength and authority, even when dealing with personal challenges. The scene reflects the complex ways in which masculinity and social hierarchies can impact interpersonal dynamics and shape behaviour within male relationships. In this scene from *Minari*, the complexities of fatherhood, aspirations, and the desire to provide for one's family are explored,

JACOB: Life was so difficult in Korea. When we married, remember what we said? That we'd go to America and save each other. Remember?

MONICA: I remember.

JACOB: What could we have known? Instead we came and fought so much that he was born this way.

MONICA: ...Honey. Can't you come with us? We can't do this without you.

JACOB: I'm not the one who wants to leave.

MONICA: If I stay, we'll go under. Only in California can we make enough to pay all the debts.

JACOB: We'd be chicken sexing till we die.

MONICA: Think about it for the kids.

JACOB: The kids need to see their father succeed at something for once.

MONICA: At what cost? ...Isn't it better we stay together?

JACOB: Do what you want without me. Even if I fail, I have to finish what I started.

Jacob's discussion with Monica about their life in Korea and their current situation reflects his inner conflicts and aspirations. Jacob expresses his desire to achieve something significant, to succeed in a way that his children can admire and look up to. This reflects his deep-seated yearning to fulfill his role as a father and be a positive influence on his children, particularly David. Jacob's resistance to Monica's suggestion of going back to California and working in hatcheries indicates his ambition to pursue something greater, beyond merely paying off debts. He wants to prove himself, not only financially but also in terms of personal accomplishment and recognition. His desire for success is tied to his self-worth and how he believes his children will perceive him as a father. As a father and patriarch of the family, Jacob feels the weight of responsibility to set a good example for his children, especially David. He wants to show David that he is capable of achieving something significant, to instill a sense of pride and admiration in his son. This reflects the societal expectations placed on



fathers to be providers and role models within the family structure. The scene underscores the pressure and internal struggle faced by fathers to balance their aspirations and the need to provide for their families. Jacob's longing to succeed is driven not only by personal ambition but also by the desire to meet societal expectations and fulfill his role as a father.

Although there has been some increase in men's openness to relationships and greater participation in the emotional and domestic arenas, most men still cling to the older definitions, and emphasise work and individual accomplishment over emotional intimacy and family involvement. As a result, the pressures on men to behave in ways that conflict with various aspects of the traditional masculinity ideology have never been greater (Levant, 717).

Jacob was ready to let go of the family but not the farm. But Monica had expected him to not choose farm over family. She wants to choose a safer path while preserving family but Jacob wants to take a risk for the betterment of his family. Because as a man he knows, if he gives up on the farm, there won't be any family left. For him, his role as a provider needs to be a success for the family to function and persevere. Jacob knows that the success of the farm is intertwined with the survival of the family. Monica doesn't really have an alternative plan and her perspective comes from her romantic attachment to family while Jacob's stance comes from being pragmatic and yet he also has romantic optimism about the success of the farm. Both Monica and Jacob play romantic and pragmatic roles interchangeably to strike a balance and sustain the family.

In the scene where the barn is on fire, Jacob's actions reflect the complexities of his role as a provider and his understanding of societal expectations tied to his worth as a patriarch. As the barn is engulfed in flames, Jacob's immediate instinct is to save the produce. Jacob sees the produce as a symbol of his ability to provide for his family, and he recognises that his capacity to fulfill this role is crucial in how he is perceived by society. In his mind, the success of the farm and the ability to provide financial stability become intertwined with his value as a husband and father.

Jacob taking the lead in entering the burning barn can be seen as a manifestation of masculine traits associated with leadership, protection, and risk-taking. In this context, Monica's decision to follow Jacob's lead and join him in saving the produce can be seen as an expression of feminine qualities often associated with support, collaboration, and nurturing. By following Jacob's lead, Monica reinforces the idea of a complementary gender dynamic where the masculine assumes a leadership role, and the feminine supports and complements that leadership. This interpretation aligns with traditional gender norms and societal expectations of gender roles, where the man is often seen as the provider and leader, while the woman supports and assists him in his endeavours. Overall, the character of Jacob Yi portrays these traditionally masculine qualities:

- **Ambition and Determination:** Jacob embodies traditional masculine qualities associated with ambition, determination, and a drive for success. He dreams of owning a successful farm and providing a better life for his family. Despite the challenges and setbacks he faces, Jacob persists in pursuing his goals, displaying the perseverance often associated with masculinity.
- **Emotional Distance:** Jacob's pursuit of his dreams often leads to emotional distance within the family. He becomes consumed by his ambitions and preoccupied with the farm, leaving him with little emotional availability for his wife and children. This emotional distance reflects a traditional expectation of the stoic, emotionally restrained male figure.
- **Bonding with Children:** Despite his emotional distance, Jacob shares moments of connection and bonding with his children, particularly with his son David. They work together on the farm, allowing for moments of shared experiences and mutual understanding. These instances challenge traditional notions of distant fatherhood and highlight the potential for growth and connection between fathers and their children.



- Through these examples, 'Minari' delves into the complexities of masculinity and fatherhood, questioning traditional expectations while portraying the challenges and internal conflicts that father may face. The film invites viewers to reflect on the evolving understanding of masculinity and the ways in which fatherhood is shaped by external pressures and personal aspirations.

### **Femininity and Motherhood:**

*Minari* portrays femininity and motherhood through the character of Monica Yi, offering a nuanced exploration of the construction of femininity and the challenges of motherhood.

- Caretaking and Nurturing: Monica embodies the traditional expectations of femininity as she takes on the role of caretaker and nurturer within the family. She is responsible for managing the household, cooking meals, and looking after the well-being of her children. Monica's dedication to providing a stable and comfortable home environment showcases the nurturing aspect of motherhood often associated with femininity.
- Cultural Preservation: Monica represents the preservation of cultural traditions and values. As an immigrant mother, she strives to pass on the Korean culture and language to her children, embodying the role of a cultural gatekeeper. Monica teaches her children about their heritage, encouraging them to understand and appreciate their roots.
- Emotional Center: Monica serves as the emotional center of the family. She carries the emotional burden of the family's struggles, worries about their future, and tries to maintain a harmonious atmosphere. Monica's emotional labour, including her efforts to resolve conflicts and keep the family connected, reflects the societal expectations placed on women to manage and maintain emotional well-being within the family unit.
- Sacrifice and Resilience: Monica's character showcases the sacrifices and resilience often associated with motherhood. She faces numerous challenges, such as financial instability and cultural integration, yet she persists in her efforts to create a better life for her family. Monica's determination and strength in the face of adversity reflect the sacrifices and resilience that are often expected of mothers.
- Empowerment and Agency: While Monica fulfils traditional gender roles, the film also provides glimpses of her agency and personal desires. She expresses her concerns and desires to Jacob, challenging the notion that women's stories are subordinate to men's. Monica's journey depicts her as a multidimensional character with her own ambitions and aspirations, even within the confines of traditional gender expectations.

In one of the scenes, David is disappointed when Grandma reveals she cannot bake cookies highlighting his preconceived expectations of traditional gender roles. David's perception of Grandma as 'not a real grandma' because she does not possess the qualities typically associated with grandmothers in society reveals the influence of societal norms and stereotypes on his perception of gender roles. David's expectation that Grandma should possess certain domestic skills and conform to traditional gender roles reflects the societal pressure to fit into prescribed roles based on one's gender. It demonstrates how individuals, even young children like David, internalise and perpetuate these gendered expectations.

*Minari* subtly challenges traditional gender norms by featuring characters who deviate from societal expectations and exhibit behaviours and traits that defy gender stereotypes.

- David's Emotional Expressiveness: David, the youngest son in the Yi family, defies traditional masculinity by freely expressing his emotions. He is shown to cry, openly display affection, and express vulnerability. David's emotional expressiveness challenges the notion that boys should suppress their feelings, highlighting a more nuanced understanding of masculinity.
- Soonja's Unconventional Grandmother: Soonja, the grandmother, brings her own unique personality and non-conformist energy to the narrative. She deviates from the stereotypical portrayal of an elderly



Korean woman. Soonja defies traditional gender roles by openly expressing her desires, engaging in playful banter, and embracing her individuality. She challenges societal expectations placed on older women, illustrating that femininity is not limited to predetermined roles.

- **Monica's Assertiveness:** While Monica fulfils some traditional gender roles, the film provides glimpses of her assertiveness and agency. She actively engages in discussions with Jacob, voicing her concerns and desires. Monica's assertiveness challenges the idea that women's narratives and viewpoints should be secondary to those of men.
- **Jacob's Vulnerability and Growth:** Jacob, the father, experiences moments of vulnerability and growth throughout the film. His journey challenges traditional expectations of stoicism and emotional distance in masculinity. As he faces setbacks and challenges, Jacob is forced to confront his vulnerabilities, which humanises his character and portrays a more nuanced understanding of masculinity. Jacob's perception of gender roles also changes through his exposure to American culture. His interactions with American society and his integration into the local community challenge and broaden his understanding of gender roles. He becomes more open to Monica's perspectives, highlighting his willingness to adapt and embrace a more flexible approach to gender roles.
- **Cultural Hybridity:** *Minari* explores the intersection of Korean and American cultures, depicting a blending of gender norms and expectations. The Yi family navigates a cultural hybridity that allows for the adoption of new ideas while still preserving aspects of their Korean heritage. This blending challenges rigid gender norms by showcasing the fluidity and flexibility of gender roles within different cultural contexts.

These examples demonstrate how *Minari* disrupts traditional gender norms by portraying characters who defy societal expectations. The film challenges stereotypes and offers a more nuanced and diverse representation of gender identities and expressions. By doing so, it encourages viewers to question and challenge the rigid confines of gender norms, fostering a more inclusive understanding of gender in society.

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