

## **Subaltern Women in Double Effacement - From Bhubaneswari to Sulli -**

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### **Abstract**

This paper engages with Spivak's approach to a gendered subaltern woman manifested in her reflection on the death of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri who lived as an oppressed subject in Colonial India as well as in the hegemony of patriarchy. According to Spivak, a subaltern woman's experiences in the past and present is doubly effaced under the particular socioeconomic circumstances and long-lasting patriarchy. I compare the death of Bhaduri with the death of Sulli (Jin-ri Choi), a Korean celebrity who committed suicide in 2019 in South Korea. Prior to the analysis of the case of Sulli, I address a brief history

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of the term “subaltern” via Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha. Then I describe neoliberalism as a continuing modality of imperialism in South Korea’s postcolonial era. Based on David Harvey’s research on neoliberalism, I will argue how rich celebrities could still be the subaltern in spite of their socioeconomic class. Hereafter, I will state the influence of the patriarchal hegemony that affected Sulli’s life and death to revisit Spivak’s question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

- Keywords

subaltern, subalternity, double effacement, neoliberalism, patriarchy, Sulli, suicide

## I. Bhubaneswari Bhaduri

In 1926 in North Calcutta, a young woman hanged herself in her father's apartment. She was thought to be pregnant illicitly, but at the moment she died, she was menstruating. In fact, she had waited for menstruation. Her religious tradition considered menstruation unclean; meanwhile, self-immolation of a widowed woman was regarded honourable. Thus, if she were a widow, she wouldn't even have been allowed to immolate herself by the time her period ended. While waiting, therefore, this woman Bhubaneswari Bhaduri "perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way," or "she generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by taking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny), in the physiological inscription of their body."<sup>1</sup> The way she killed herself remained like a riddle until a letter was discovered a decade later. The letter, which was left to her elder sister, revealed that Bhaduri was involved in a group engaged in armed struggle for Indian independence and had been assigned to carry out a political assassination. "Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust," she committed suicide.<sup>2</sup>

Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's elder sister who received the forgotten letter was postcolonial scholar and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's grandmother. The way that Bhaduri died and the way her death has been seen and interpreted induced Spivak to write her

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1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 74-5.

2 Spivak, "Speak?," 74-5.

canonical text in post-colonial studies, “Can Subaltern Speak?”<sup>3</sup> Spivak herself answered “No” to the question, and she later explained that the negative answer came from her passionate sorrow. The lament sprang from the failure of hearing of Bhaduri’s subversive message delivered by means of her death, even to the closest, well-educated nieces. In the ideology of patriarchy, the text of the gendered subaltern woman’s speech inserted into her body was muted and unheard. It remained unread by her family and female descendants for more than a half century. “When someone did try to do something different, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. Double Effacement and Track of Sexual Difference

The term “subaltern” was coined by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Yet, it was rediscovered by Ranajit Guha, one of the founding editors of the Subaltern Studies Group whose research drew attention to the scholars throughout the world in the 1980s. Spivak was one of them, and her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was “at least partially provoked by the work of the subaltern studies group.”<sup>5</sup>

Gramsci’s use of the term subaltern in his Prison Notebooks devel-

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3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In Response: Looking Back, Looking Forward,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 238-40.

4 Spivak, “Speak?,” 51, 75-6; Spivak, “Forward,” 240.

5 Partha Chatterjee, “Reflections on “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: Subaltern Studies after Spivak,” in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 92.

oped from its literal sense of the word to its figurative meaning that refers to positions of subordination or lower status. Gramsci's subaltern signifies a group or a class that are on the margins of history; according to Gramsci's identification, subaltern groups include(d) slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, the proletariat, and even the bourgeoisie in a broad historical periods such as ancient Rome, the medieval communes, and the modern state. Marcus Green states, "Gramsci's interest in the subaltern was threefold. From his notes, it is clear that he was interested in producing a methodology of subaltern historiography, a history of subaltern classes, and a political strategy of transformation based upon the historical development and existence of the subaltern."<sup>6</sup> Gramsci's notion of subaltern evolves with his threefold interest, and "in many ways, Gramsci's definition and understanding of "subalternity" is directly linked with his conceptions of hegemony and state and civil society (or integral state)."<sup>7</sup> Although the subaltern, according to Gramsci, exists within particular contexts of history, economy, politics, society, and culture, the subaltern is fundamentally considered bound to their class of subordination. Gramsci, however, insists that the subaltern can move forward to the permanent victory that breaks their subordination, and such liberation or "the transformation of the subaltern's subordinate social position was Gramsci's ultimate goal." Until then, subalterns are always subject to the ruling group, even when they rebel and rise up, because the ruling group's hegemony influences predominantly the subaltern group.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Marcus Green, "Gramsci cannot speak: Presentations and interpretations of Gramsci's concept of the subaltern," *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 3 (2002): 3-4.

7 Green, "Gramsci," 8.

8 Green, "Gramsci," 15-21.

The marginalization derived from the subordination of the subaltern to the dominating group's ruling ideology and hegemony will continue to be highlighted on its way to the question of subalternity and the possibility for the subaltern to speak or be heard.

Guha set out to contextualize the term "subaltern" in relation to the history of India and South Asia. He defines subaltern groups as "the people" or "non-elite" while analyzing peasant uprisings in colonial India from 1783 to 1900 in his book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. He recounts the political and contemporary quality of the insurgencies and challenges as opposed to the narrative of criminality by adopting a terrain of collision between the local and regional indigenous elite and the peasant. The peasant is "the people" or subaltern in Guha's analysis, and the pre-political characteristics of their uprisings are regarded as the space of difference that creates the gap in the conformity to social and political norms. Guha also attempts to reconstruct the consciousness of ordinary people, which had remained void, by reinterpreting the insurgencies found in distortion in the official colonial records or through the very few records of their own.<sup>9</sup>

Guha states that "the distortion has a logic to it." Although the rebellion was only represented as its mirror image under the colonial perspective, it is clear that he believed the subaltern history is traceable and reconstructable.<sup>10</sup> Spivak also found it significant to give emphasis to the "trace-structure," which effaces itself when disclosed since it ap-

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9 Taek Hyeon Kim, "Subaltern History as Critique of History: On Ranajit Guha's Historical Work," *Sarim* 49 (July 2014): 377-392.

10 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999): 333.

pears in the desperate last resort to the muting. However, Spivak's trace-structure might not be indecipherable in general since it is likely to end up with failure "to institute an idiomatic moment." When the attempt fails, the trace-structure remains as an enigmatic *signifiant* in the space of the difference not to be read or heard.<sup>11</sup>

While Gramsci's concept of the subaltern encompasses diverse subordinate social groups indicating marginality, Guha's approach highlights the status of the non-elite within the subaltern group in contrast to that of the elite. Spivak's notion of subalternity is consistent with Gramsci's subalterns that are alienated historically, culturally, socially, and ideologically by the dominant group, and Guha revealed the possibility of the space of difference that could be opened up by the subaltern group with their struggles. However, Spivak's analysis of subalternity uniquely presents the gender issue: how the subaltern woman is positioned between colonialism and "the ideological construction of gender [keeping] the male dominant." Even as an "object of colonialist historiography," it is the male subaltern who are represented as the subject of insurgency. "The subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Spivak attempts to break off the link between the socioeconomic class and the concept of the "true" subaltern with the example of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri by bringing into focus how Bhaburi was silenced and how her death was seen and told in distortion even by her family. Bhubaneswari's life and death manifests how (sexed) subaltern woman can be doubly effaced—hence Spivak reformulates her question: "Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?"<sup>13</sup>

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11 Spivak, "Speak?," 67, 77.

12 Spivak, "Speak?," 53.

### III. Double Effacement in Neoliberalism: Sulli

It is true that the subaltern as female cannot speak as far as no one listens. “She “spoke,” but women did not, do not, “hear” her;”<sup>14</sup> thus, she results in being silenced. As Spivak admits, Bhaburi’s case was read by Spivak in the end, so it could be considered that Bhaburi has spoken in a certain way. However, the fact that tens of years had passed for Bhubaneswari finally to be interpreted only “in an academic institution (willy-nilly a knowledge-production factory) . . . must not be too quickly identified with the “speaking” of the subaltern,” Spivak insists.<sup>15</sup> Generally, furthermore, speaking of the (gendered) subaltern tends to be in ideological subordination to supremacy if it is not unheard or overlooked.

The double effacement of the gendered subaltern’s speaking was, and is still, true in South Korea almost a century after the death of Bhaburi; the way Bhaduri’s death was recorded by patriarchal history and the colonial history and the way her death was remembered and acknowledged by her granddaughters is being repeated.

#### 1. Jin-ri/Sulli’s death

On the 14th of October 2019, a 25 year-old singer, actor, and celebrity Jin-ri Choi (or her stage name Sulli), who called herself an artist, was found dead in her house. The police officials said that Jin-ri/Sulli’s handwritten note was left in her book, which doesn’t indicate the specific dates but the length of the writing is obviously longer than other

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13 Spivak, “Speak?,” 60.

14 Spivak, “Speak?,” 34.

15 Spivak, “Speak?,” 76.



short notes she casually recorded.<sup>16</sup> The police terminated the investigation concluding her death was a suicide related to depression when National Forensic Service, which carried out the autopsy, didn't find anything suspicious to indicate her death was a homicide.

The content of her last note has not been made public. Given some of the earliest news articles addressing her last writing of considerable length, however, it seemed bizarre that some other news reports published later mentioned that there was no such suicide note. These were an expression of the same yellow journalist that contributed to enticing the public to play a part in sexually bullying her. The police and journalism might have set a dubious definition of a suicide note, or Jin-ri/Sulli's text inscribed in her body (and her notebook) might be another failing to be heard, just as deciphering Bhubaneswari Bhaburi's letter and death remained in obscurity for decades. Jin-ri/Sulli had made numerous attempts to speak to the public via her postings on social media which often disgracefully ended up being spread as malicious gossip and rumors about her. Lots of them were related to sexual objectification of her in the media. Likewise, her death left other gossips and lots of suppositions that only unveil what the dominant ideology and hegemony in society is.

Jin-ri/Sulli started her career as an actor when she was eleven in 2009. Four years later, she debuted in a girl group, "f(x)" with four other girls in the employ of SM Entertainment, one of the largest entertainment corporations in South Korea. SM Entertainment has a dozen and a half divisions and some are located overseas in Japan, the United States, China, and Indonesia. The company was founded in the K-pop music industry in 1995 and gradually extended their busi-

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16 Spivak, "Speak?," 76.

ness by merging companies of related industries such as film and TV production, an advertising agency, sports agency, modeling agency, and actors agency.<sup>17</sup>

Jin-ri/Sulli was not the first employee/artist of SM Entertainment who killed themselves. Jong-hyun Kim also took his own life at the age of 27 on December 18, 2017, which was about two years prior to Jin-ri/Sulli's death. A day after his passing, Nine, a musician with the modern rock band Dear Cloud, shared a posting on her Instagram, "Jong-hyun asked me to publish his words if he should die and left a note. With the consent of his family, I am posting his words here." In Jong-hyun's writing, he states how hard it is to live as a celebrity and how hard it was to be heard about his anguish and depression. He felt lost, lost himself, or never met himself. He felt he was all alone and he was the only one who had to take responsibility (for his boy band and family). He said he wanted to run away from himself and from other people and was sick of blaming himself. His note ends like this: "Please just tell me I did well, I did a good job. I'm not asking you to let me go with smiles but please don't blame me when I go. 'You did well. I know your hard work. Good-bye.'"<sup>18</sup>

As SHINee (pronounced 'shiny'), the boy band that Jong-hyun was the leader of, was one of the most popular K-pop bands in Japan as well as in South Korea, his death started to draw attention to the mechanism of the South Korean show business industry. On December 19, 2017 Sonia Kil, an editor of *Variety*, wrote:

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17 고민서, “배용준 사단` 품은 SM, 1조 엔터공룡 됐다,” 매일경제, March 14, 2018, <https://www.mk.co.kr/news/stock/view/2018/03/167250>.

18 채혜선, “종현 유서 공개 "이만하면 잘했다고 고생했다고 해줘" (전문),” 중앙일보, December 19, 2017, <https://news.join.com/article/22215699>.

The Korean entertainment industry is notoriously high-pressure. It fosters a “Hunger Games”-like work environment in which every colleague is also a competitor and only the strongest survive. Many talented people are recruited as teenagers, who may not be emotionally mature enough to handle the discipline and the scrutiny. The Korean public sets high standards of behavior and physical appearance, and uses social media to pass instant judgment. . . . The reasons for Kim’s decision to kill himself are not yet clear. The last words from one of the industry’s most popular acts, however, reveal some of the dark underbelly beneath K-pop’s gorgeous, glittering façade.<sup>19</sup>

As Kil stated, the work environment is like “Hunger Games.”<sup>20</sup> Young people who want to be a singer or an actor usually need to go through numerous auditions to get into the industry. Once they become a trainee of an entertainment company, they would feel lucky even though they haven’t got a real job, but what is actually waiting for them as rewards of many winnings is not only a substantial fortune and fame but the next stage of survival games with higher pressure, severe competition, and a capricious public with harsh and instant judgment.

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19 Sonia Kil, “Jonghyun Suicide Note Points to Brutal Pressure of Korean Spotlight,” *Variety*, December 19, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/music/asia/shinee-jonghyun-dies-dead-suicide-note-k-pop-pressure-1202644698>.

20 *The Hunger Games* is a series of young adult novels in the trilogy: *The Hunger Games* (2008), *Catching Fire* (2009), and *Mockingjay* (2010). Films were also made based on all three of the novels. The setting of the *Hunger Games* is a dystopia and the dystopian country has the wealthy Capitol and 13 poor districts. In this story, randomly selected children from the first 12 districts have to participate in a battle royal death match called *The Hunger Games*.

Ben Beaumont-Thomas, an editor of the Guardian, also covered Jong-hyun's death in relation to the traits of K-pop industry. He points out how the K-pop bands are manufactured "after signing up to draconian contracts in their early teens" and work under standard contracts, often called exploitative slavery contracts, and under the anxiety of being disposable.

Even accounting for a recent break, as member Taemin released a solo record, SHINee are a rare case of a band reaching a decade in the business; K- and J-pop can have a ruthless, disposable feel. . . . Artists in both territories are often signed up to draconian contracts in their early teens, keeping them tied to specific management companies, such as SM Entertainment. They train in a competitive environment alongside other potential stars, with only the best "idols" making it into the manufactured bands. As well as the aforementioned dating rules, band members' diets are closely monitored. In 2012, girl group Nine Muses revealed their "paper cup diet", where their meals had to fit inside a tiny paper cup. . . . [One] agency spokesperson told the Korea Times that only 40% of management agencies use the standardised contracts, leaving musicians open to exploitation. Even under standard contracts, if a band member wants to leave early, they have to pay the company a fee based on projected profits for the remainder of the contract. Two Chinese members of SM-managed K-pop boy band EXO left the group in 2014, citing wage disputes and brutal work schedules; EXO's band members have been made to perform during illness and dance while recovering from injury.<sup>21</sup>

Not much changed, however, since Jong-hyun and some other young artists disclosed what is behind the glamorous show business scene. Why has anyone not been able to find a practical way to resolve these grave problems for promising young artists? That could be because, as TV columnist and critic Seunghan Rhie states, “what was required to be mended is not the problem of the (social and economic) system but the mechanism or basic principle itself.”<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Neoliberalism as imperialism

What is the basic principle of the system? Spivak argues via Vladimir Ill'ich Lenin that “Capitalism has been transformed into imperialism.”<sup>23</sup> The regime that operates society has long been (global) capitalism, but the capitalism that Spivak mentions might or might not be the ideology that operates the current society: Neoliberalism. It was 1916 when Lenin wrote his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, and it was 1999 when Spivak quoted Lenin, so the onset of neoliberalism is marked between those two writings. According to Marxist economic geographer David Harvey, a “revolutionary turning-point” to the journey to neoliberalism started in the late 1970s. Neoliberalism as the first instance of a theory of “political-economic practices and thinking” proposed “human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills

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21 Ben Beaumont-Thomas, “Kim Jong-hyun: SHINee star dies amid an unforgiving K-pop industry,” *Guardian*, December, 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/dec/18/kim-jong-hyun-shinee-star-dies-amid-an-unforgiving-k-pop-industry>.

22 Seunghan Rhie, “설리와 김용균이 죽음으로 고발한 세계의 뎀 얼굴,” *Hwanghae Review* 106 (March 2020): 226.

23 Spivak, “Speak?,” 77.

within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. ...The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money.”<sup>24</sup> Not only privatization and deregulation but also withdrawal of the state from many areas of social services have become common, and moreover, “[neoliberalization] has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse.” Harvey adds that neoliberalism’s ways of thought have become incorporated into common-sense: the way people interpret, live in, and understand the world. This change in world view also entailed “creative destruction . . . of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” in the process of neoliberalization.<sup>25</sup>

While colonialism was one of the factors in Bhubaneswari being subjected to oppression, neoliberalism that rules the global economy was one of the factors for Jin-ri/Sulli. In the manner that Spivak argued that Bhubaneswari was a subaltern in spite of her socioeconomic class, I will address Jin-ri/Sulli as a subaltern against the perspective that would not regard celebrities as the “true” subaltern group.

### 3. Labour in the age of neoliberalism

After the death of Jin-ri/Sulli, the public reacted in various ways: some were grieving, some regretted their insensitivity and indifference, some blamed Jin-ri/Sulli’s ex-boyfriend, random cyber bullies, or her company, and others showed anger. Especially, those who ex-

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24 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1-2.

25 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3.

pressively showed anger made a point of what they think of being a celebrity: “Celebrities earn their fortune and popularity based on love and attention from people. So they have to tolerate malicious comments posted online, inconsiderate and unkind words or criticism about their private life, and exaggerated and sensationalizing reports (that originated from much attention),” Rhie analyzes.<sup>26</sup> Those arguments viewing Jin-ri/Sulli as a celebrity who makes money based on public attention define her as an entertainer selling a personal story and private life to gain a luxurious life without effort; thus, from their perspective, it is Jin-ri/Sulli’s job to deal with the excessive or unpleasant attention and gossip. Some even say that Jin-ri/Sulli was a capitalist who profited out of the symbolic capital of her attractive appearance and fame.<sup>27</sup>

However, considering that Jin-ri/Sulli asked SM Entertainment to take action against cyber bullies, which is known to be one of the major factors of her depression, she was a mere worker under the employment contract that she is supposed to abide by.<sup>28</sup> If not, she could have hired a lawyer by herself. Her request ended up with no measures to make practical changes although the company “announced that they will pursue legal remedies against malicious commenters in 2018.”<sup>29</sup>

A company ought to provide an adequate protection for their workers to prevent any harm from potential hazards and to secure the

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26 Seunghan Rhie, “설리,” 217-219.

27 Seunghan Rhie, “설리,” 219.

28 Ibid.

29 Angie Chui, “Sulli Asked SM Entertainment To Protect Her From Online Bullies Before Her Shocking Death: Report,” *Business Times*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.btimesonline.com/articles/120322/20191016/sulli-asked-sm-entertainment-to-protect-her-from-online-bullies-before-her-shocking-death-report.htm>.

worker's physical safety. Likewise, artists who work in the show business industry ought to be provided with proper protection especially when pondering their considerable amount of extreme emotional labour. The longer they are exposed to the public, the more they have to hide their own feelings to comply with the assumed expectation of the public, so they can continue to be selling as a product in the entertainment industry. However, what does that mean to sell themselves in the industrial entertainment market? How do you measure the value of popularity, attention, entertainment, and art? Harvey points out about the commodification of liberal and neoliberal theory and the fictitious traits of some commodities through Polanyi as follows:

The commodification of sexuality, culture, history, heritage; . . . the extraction of monopoly rents from originality, authenticity, and uniqueness (of works or art, for example)—these all amount to putting a price on things that were never actually produced as commodities. . . . But there are far more serious issues here . . . [for] at the heart of liberal and neoliberal theory lies the necessity of constructing coherent markets for land, labour, and money, and these, as Karl Polanyi pointed out, 'are obviously not commodities . . . the commodity description of labour, land, and money is entirely fictitious.'<sup>30</sup>

As Harvey states, such fictions are the principle to make capitalism function, however, "if [capitalism] fails to acknowledge the complex realities behind them," it does have detrimental effects: it will affect the bearer of labour, human beings, if the alleged commodity 'labour

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30 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 166.



power' should be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused. "In disposing of man's labour power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity 'man' attached to that tag."<sup>31</sup> Once the tag is removed, individuals in the labour market becomes an undifferentiated factor of production for capitalists.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, K-pop trainees and successful celebrities who are hired and managed by their company are a piece of exchangeable apparatus to produce entertainment, and their emotional (and physical) labour is treated as a mere commodity. Some singers and actors have the desire to be called artists, but the company as capitalist and the public who identify themselves as customers want the singers and actors to remain as a manufactured and replaceable entertainer. The more an artist in show industry wants to be a unique entity person with dreams, hopes, ambitions, doubts, fears, and tastes, the severer the suppression they experience.

Individual security becoming each individual's own responsibility is another trait of neoliberal society. A "personal responsibility system" has substituted social protection such as pensions, health care, and protections against injury, and people can buy social protections in the markets. Therefore, individual security is "a matter of individual choice tied to the affordability of financial products embedded in risky financial markets."<sup>33</sup> In a society where people consider a "personal responsibility system" as the common sense, the risk of constant emotional challenge can be seen as a sort of a potential hazard that accompanies certain jobs with public exposure. The problem is, however,

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31 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 166-167.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid, 168.

that no one cares about the trainees' mental and emotional health while they are growing up in their show business league or "hunger game;" moreover, there is no such social protection you can buy for your emotional well-being. When an artist is not desirable as work force, they can be easily disposed of, in the name of a loser. "Under neoliberalization, the figure of 'the disposable worker' emerges as prototypical upon the world stage."<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. Female artists' labour in neoliberalism**

The traits of the labour market in neoliberalism are harsher to women. According to Harvey, in advanced capitalist countries, lower-class women have been negatively affected after losing social protections. These women have to bear their lives under the pressure of "short-term contracts" and "chronic job insecurities, lost social protections, and often debilitating labour"<sup>35</sup>; however, it is worse for women in developing countries, because as Harvey says:

The paths of women's liberation from traditional patriarchal controls in developing countries lie either through degrading factory labour or through trading on sexuality, which varies from respectable work as hostesses and waitresses to the sex trade (one of the most lucrative of all contemporary industries in which a good deal of slavery is involved).<sup>36</sup>

Even though South Korea is considered one of the advanced capi-

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34 Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 169.

35 Ibid, 170.

36 Ibid.

talist countries, when it comes to gender equality, it is questionable whether the economic position would be in agreement. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, designed to measure gender equality by the World Economic Forum, South Korea (Republic of Korea) scored 0.672 and ranked one-hundred-eighth out of 153 countries in the world, whereas Sweden ranked fourth, New Zealand, sixth, Philippines, sixteenth, Canada, nineteenth, Colombia, twenty-second, Uganda, sixty-fifth,, and India, one-hundred-twelfth.<sup>37</sup> Under the circumstances, the sexual objectification a female artist (or entertainer) had to experience through her career would not have been easy.

It was on the 9th of March, 2009 when a female actor, Ja-yeon Jang committed suicide after leaving a long note that discloses a list of names who sought sexual favours from her by abusing their power. Since *Boys Over Flowers*, the TV show where she appeared in a supporting role, was still broadcast when she died, her death gained wide public attention. However, the case has not been resolved over 10 years because “there's insufficient evidence to prove that those accused of committing a crime actually did it. . . . The offenders were able to avoid punishment and this is why there are no offenders, even though there are victims.”<sup>38</sup> While 31 persons of high-profiles that Ja-yeon listed in her letters<sup>39</sup> revealed the lurid true face of male dominant society, the fandom of “Uncle fans” in K-pop market manifests an old trick of patriarchy.

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37 “Global Gender Gap Report 2020,” World Economic Forum, accessed May 24, 2020. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf).

38 Hyun-kyung Kang, “Decade on, actress' death haunts,” *Korea Times*, March 15, 2019, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2020/04/142\\_265444.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/culture/2020/04/142_265444.html).

39 Yonhap, “Prosecutors to review 2009 suicide of actress Jang Ja-yeon,” *Korea Herald*, March 19, 2019, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20190319000615>.

Uncle fans are the male fans in their thirties or forties who craze for K-Pop girl groups. Some criticize the uncle fans for their “consuming sexual images of young teenage girls.”<sup>40</sup> However, these uncle fans are not only suspected of hiding the Lolita complex, but also characterized by peddling their views on sexual self-presentation. In their imagination of pseudo-family, when they find “their ‘niece(s)’ appears on TV shows and being ‘forced’ to present the niece’s ‘sexual’ attractiveness excessively, the uncle fans express their deepest sadness and ask their niece(s) to restrain such way of public appearance.”<sup>41</sup>

Jin-ri/Sulli was one of the rare young female artists who refused to be tamed by uncle fans’ peddling. In May, 2019, she shared an Instagram posting with a short comment: “One day, with Sungmin Ssi.” Ssi is a Korean title which is usually used when people call someone of their age or someone who is younger than themselves. The title can also be used among colleagues, but when the colleague is older or has more experiences in the field, people feel reluctant to use it. However, Jin-ri/Sulli called her older and more experienced colleague by Ssi in her posting, and it was rather unconventional. After sharing the posting, Jin-ri/Sulli received substantial amount of comments, many of which criticized that it is not adequate to call Sungmin by Ssi. Jin-ri/Sulli advocated herself by posting another to explain her thoughts on the title.<sup>42</sup> However, the reaction she met with was an appeal letter

40 Youn-Gon Kang, “An Excuse for ‘Teenage Girls Group Singers’ Uncle Fans’: A Case Study by Autoethnographic Method,” *Korean Journal of Popular Music* 8 (November 2011): 44.

41 Yoonsoo Jeong, “Adventure in ‘Girl Group’ world—survival in the Risk Society,” *Korean Journal of Popular Music* 8 (November, 2011): 109-110.

42 “Sulli Responds After Being Criticized For Calling Actor Lee SungMin ‘SungMin Ssi,’” accessed May 24, 2020, <https://www.kpopmap.com/sulli-responds-after-being-criticized-for-calling-actor-lee-sungmin-sungmin-ssi/>.

written by her old uncle fans. Even though the letter sounded euphemistic, their expression of concern intended to rectify Jin-ri/Sulli's thought and mistake so she could behave better later. Jin-ri/Sulli responded to their concern by sharing the third posting, mocking the tone of the appeal letter, and pointing out the inconsistency between the style of the letter and the content.<sup>43</sup>

Jin-ri/Sulli often did not wear a bra publicly because she believed that wearing a bra ought not to be obligatory since it is a mere female accessory. She proclaimed her right to choose when to wear a bra and when not to. Even though she knew of being targeted by the public to be a contempt and mockery and of the verbal sexual harassment recurrently happening due to violating taboos, she refused to stop practicing what she believed to be true to herself. Given the fact that she had raised her voice, can we still call her a subaltern? I would say yes because she was a worker in the neoliberal world and a woman whose voice kept being disregarded. Jin-ri/Sulli was in the midst of her journey of transitioning into the space of beyond subalternity, but her life ended while her journey had not been completed.

#### IV. Conclusion

Speaking by converting their body into text occurs under the hegemonic power that resists deconstruction of homogeneous discourses. Thus, in the textualized dead body, a stubborn will that risked their life to cause a split is inscribed. In those times when the sati-suicide

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43 Sulli (@jelly\_jilli), “응? 마니 억울했어? 그랬구나 억울했구나,” Instagram photo, May 22, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bxw5suOB1jm/?igshid=1qdhvyohklodm>.

(the self-immolation of widows) was regarded as the only sanctioned way to kill themselves as women, Bhubaneswari exposed her menstruation although it was considered unclean.<sup>44</sup> Through her letter that she left to her sister, Bhubaneswari would have wanted to speak out that women can also die for their country and that there has to be an honour beyond patriarchal approval.

Although Jin-ri/Sulli's socioeconomic status and the subaltern group did not match according to the theory of class, it is also questionable to characterize her as a ruling class in the neoliberal society. If Jin-ri/Sulli's death was also stubborn determination or desire to create a space of the *differend*, what would her message be? Both Bhubaneswari and Jin-ri/Sulli had to face (glass) walls of the male-dominant structure. While in life, Jin-ri/Sulli was called an attention-seeker, scandal maker, and fighter. In the middle of the fights and scandals that she had involved in, there were her navigation and exploration against stereotypes in relation to sexuality, gender roles, and ageism. The expectation towards a young female artist in K-pop market was not different from the pressing requirement to remain content as a muted subject. Jin-ri/Sulli was learning and in the making, which did not mean, however, that someone should teach her. There always were older male figures who were passionate about leading younger women, but she was capable of breaking through her own paradox and struggles.

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44 Spivak, "Speak?," 65.

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