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**“THIRD SEX” STEREOTYPE IN SOUTH KOREA. REASONS AND
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NEW GENERATIONS’ WOMEN**

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***Abstract:** The South Korean middle-aged women, also known as *ajumma*, are the ones that provided Korea with its current educated and skilled labor force, by giving up their career dreams and taking care of their children and families. Moreover, they are encountered nowadays in shops, restaurants, offices, factories, etc., working hard in small jobs in order to provide some economic support to their families. They are seen as strong, overprotective, and aggressive and are sometimes referred to as the “third sex”. This article looks into the historical, social, cultural and economical reasons why these women, after a life full of sacrifices, are stripped of their femininity and considered a “third sex”. Also, it analyses the opinions of younger generation about their mothers, grandmothers etc., if they consider *ajumma* a model to become or something to avoid. The research is based on the literature related to the South Korean historical, social, cultural and economical environments and on the data provided by Statistics Korea.*

***Keywords:** *ajumma*, stereotypes, “third sex”*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Korean society age differences are very important. They are used to locate one’s position in relation to others and help to decide how to address someone else. There is a term for each period of a person’s life and it is usually accompanied by social stereotypes that include expectations, roles, etc. For example, *yuchiwon* represents the kindergarten students, *daehaksaeng* the university students, *nuna* is an older sister for a boy, *onni* is an older sister for a girl, *ajumma* is translated as a distant aunt and *halmeoni* is the grand-mother (Joinau & Rouville, 2015).

This article focuses on the stage in a woman’s life when she is called *ajumma* and to the malicious connotation that the designation “the third sex” may gain. It analyses the meaning of the term *ajumma*, the roles and expectations that the Korean society has from these women, the reasons for considering *ajumma* the “third sex” and the implications for today’s young women. The hypothesis that guided the research is that the title “the third sex” is used not as a reference to the gender of the person, but to the level of life the person achieved, after fulfilling some parts of the

women’s duties that the Korean society requests by traditions, such as getting married and giving birth.

A second hypothesis is concerning the young generation’s women and it refers to the fact that young Korean women could not agree with the appellation used for the elder women and they are trying to avoid becoming like their mothers and grandmothers.

2. WHAT IS AN “AJUMMA”?

In South Korea, jokes like the followings are very famous: “Who would be left in this world if the world ended? Cockroaches and *ajummas*” or “Who would get the far away empty seat in a subway? The world’s fastest sprinter, Carl Lewis, or an *ajumma*? The *ajumma*” (Park, 2007).

Ajumma in Korean refers to a middle aged lady or a married woman, but the meaning goes deeper than that. It has a low and middle class connotation and it cannot be used to highclass women, for whom the proper way is to address them as *samonim* (Joinau & Rouville, 2015). Actually, the term cannot be used as an appellative due to a negative meaning that it infers, so it is better to use other terms such as *Ajummoni* (with the same

meaning), *Omoni* (mother), *Imo* (maternal aunt) or *Eonni* (elder sister).

Ajumma are often considered dangerous because of their tendency to be strong, aggressive or self-centered. The reason for their toughness comes from the fact that the Korean society is a very competitive one and only with dedication, hard work and perseverance can one be successful (Kim, 2012). The representative visual elements of an *ajumma* are as follows: identical hair style (solid perm) and clothes (brightly colored outdoor apparel or head to toe equipment in case of hiking (the biggest fad among *ajumma*)), speedy and powerful (in doing daily outdoor activities), loud, social and always willing to help (Park, 2007). In their young age, as required by the Korean social rules and culture, they were shy, quiet and obedient. However, after completing their familial and social duties and empowered by marriage and age, they gained influence (Cho, 1998).

Inside the household, they are managers of the husband's income and are mainly in charge of the children's education. If the husband's income is not sufficient, they take part time, seasonal or daily jobs to support their family. As managers of the family's finances, many women joined *kye*, an “informal private short-term credit association that gives them access to funds that might not be obtainable from a conventional bank.” (Savada & Shaw, 1992:107). Although there are many types of *kye*¹, the most common one is “wives *kye*”. Each participating wife contributes to the *kye* with money from her household budget and the accumulated money can be accessed on a rotation basis, each of them winning in turn. However, in case of an emergency, the wife having the problem can access the fund (Lafayette de Mente, 2012).

The *ajummas* that are the head of the households can also have full time jobs. Although the wage gap is high in South Korea, they work hard in difficult conditions, which often imply the lack of healthcare, pension or unemployment benefits, the statistics indicating that they represent almost half of the Korean workers (48.9 percent in 2003 based on Statistics Korea's findings²) (Rowan, 2010).

¹ *Wichin-gye* (parents organization) – people with aged parents participate in it in order to raise money for the celebration of their parents' seventieth birthday, that is an important but also very expensive event in Korea; *Sangjo-gye* (funeral Association) – organized to help families to pay for a parent's funeral; *Kyorhon kye* (wedding pools) – to help for weddings that are very expensive; *village kye* – created for special needs such as repairing a house, building a new one, for emergency aid in case of disasters.

² Statistics Korea webpage: <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/>

Underrepresented in politics, as in many other fields, and not sufficiently supported by the state in respect of paid maternity leave, childcare and nursery, and employment, *ajumma* have an important role in the Korean economy and had a great influence in making Korea what it is today. Some of them lived during the Korean War and worked hard as part of the country's industrialization, technological advancement and knowledge (Rowan, 2010).

The lack of support never stopped them and they always found ways to organize themselves and work well in groups in case of emergencies. For example, in 2014 after the Sewol ferry disaster, the Korean *ajumma* living in America organized simultaneous rallies across the country, protesting against president's Park Geun-hye's administration and the way the disaster was dealt with. The protesters also organized a crowd-funding campaign and raised more than 160,000 dollars for the families of the Sewol victims, mentioning about themselves “this is the power of *ajumma* – quick judgment and speedy action.” (Han, 2014).

As mothers, Korean *ajumma* have been praised in literature, music and films for their exceptionally sacrificial nature and their strong relationship with their children. Shin Kyung-sook's book, “Please look after mom”, a best seller of the New York Times, insightfully explores the meaning of mother in the Korean society. Korean mothers are sometimes seen as birds that do not eat anything all day, being too busy to feed their children in the nest. Compared to Western mothers, it is known that a Korean one will give up her job and career, forget her dreams and not stop limiting the sacrifices that need to be made for her children (Kim, 2013).

The image of Korean women has also been strengthened by surviving the harsh days of Japanese colonialism, the Korean War, etc. They are considered to have rebuilt their homes, educated their children and endured poverty and catastrophe after the war. Moreover, they managed to work with all the changes that appeared in the college entrance exam policy and help their children enter college. As author Helie Lee said, “We *hanguok* [Korean] women can do anything once we put our minds to it” (Lee, 1996:24). And more than that, as Lee (1996:25) stated “We Koreans can do anything and will do anything to preserve our culture and language”, referring to the harsh period of the Japanese colonization and to the Korean emigrants that live in other countries. Wherever they are located, the Korean *ajumma* are

considered an “intangible cultural treasure and heritage”, “an engine for social progress, and a measure of Korea’s democratic intentions and performance” (Rowan, 2010).

3. REASONS FOR CALLING THE AJUMMAS THE “THIRD SEX”

If India’s Supreme Court has created in 2014 an official “third sex” for the eunuchs and announced to take care of them in what concerns employment and discrimination overcome (Nelson, 2014), in South Korea the term is used unofficially in reference to *ajumma*. In fact, the concept of “third sex” was used in Korea by the Women’s Research Association in 1984, adopting it from a German women’s movement; it refers to a woman that retains “all the good qualities of women such as warmth, gentleness, peace and motherly love but, when at work, she also has the strength and qualities of men. In other words, the ‘third sex’ has all the valuable feminine attributes as well as all the masculine skills and qualities necessary to be competitive with men in a working situation” (Hye, 1988: 113).

The main reason of this usage seems to come from the Neo-Confucianism influences in Korean culture, more precisely from the third stage in the life of a married woman: the mother-in-law stage. On entering this stage of their lives, women were relieved from their past duties and were considered more equal to men, being physically weakened and lacking fertility or femininity. They were considered “trans-women” and could joke or even talk back to their husbands. Also, they had strong bonds with their sons, which gave them power in the household (Cho, 1998). Another reason could come from the fact that, as in many other countries, South Korean women have a higher life expectancy (85 years) compared to men (78 years) (OECD³), providing them with a certain period of independence, when they have to take care of themselves and their children. However, it cannot explain the fact that this appellation is also used for young women that just turned only thirty.

Ida Daussy, the author of the book “Ida of the land of Morning Calm”, who lived in Korea for more than 15 years and married there, declared in an interview for Korea Times that she had to learn how to succumb to the obsession with female beauty in the Korean society and with the fact that Koreans consider women over 30 as “third sex” or *ajumma*. She also mentions that even the husbands

don’t think their wives are beautiful women anymore after they pass the age of 30 (Seo, 2007).

The “third sex” reference used for *ajumma* (married or not married) has a malicious connotation, meaning that they are too old to seduce anymore and they must look for comfort in their female friends and other *ajumma*, while still being warm hearted and hardworking. Their toughness is only apparent and is a consequence of their important role in the very competitive society that Korea has (Joinau & Rouville, 2015).

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NEW GENERATION WOMEN

The young Korean women have much to learn from their mothers and grandmothers (today’s *ajumma*). Their mothers, most probably born somewhere in between the 60s and 70s, were part of the “386 generation” (named after 386 computers), the generation that is remembered as very active and passionate, and which had to fight for democracy under the authoritarian rule, escaped the dictatorship and built democracy in Korea. They experienced a booming economy with plenty of jobs and opportunities (Park, 2007).

Compared to them, the generation born in the 90s and called *Shinsedae* has been free from ideological or political bias but has to struggle with unemployment and fierce competition. Although this generation was raised in an affluent society with full access to Internet, it had to witness the collapse of their families and the job loss of their parents after the Asian financial crisis, experiencing different types of hardships compared to their mothers (Park, 2007).

Due to a high youth unemployment rate of 11.6 %⁴, the high costs for housing, education and life in general, the young people call their country “Hell Joseon” and women choose to give up childbirth and marriage until later in life, as a 2015 survey performed by the Chung-Ang Ilbo newspaper indicates (Kim, 2015).

Another effect of today’s harsh life in Korea is represented by a high number of Koreans between their 20s and 40s who identify themselves as “kangaroo tribesmen” and depend on their parents financially, emotionally or both. A survey conducted by Job Korea indicated that almost 40% of 3,574 respondents identified themselves as “tribesmen” and 70% declared they still receive financial help from their parents. Out of the total, 42% of female respondents declared they are part

³ Data from OECD webpage: <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/korea/>
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⁴ Data from: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/south-korea/youth-unemployment-rate>

of this family supported category, in comparison with only 31% of men (Park, 2015).

In terms of marriage, the changing patterns (late marriage or non-marriage) may be encountered especially among young women with a more advanced education, who want to have a career or gain financial independence. Also, the Korean social norm indicates that a woman should marry a man of higher income and education, and due to the fact that more and more women improve their status, there are not enough men to keep pace with them. Only 64% of men (25-34 years old) attained tertiary education compared to 72% of women in the same age range in 2015, based on OECD's statistics⁵.

Compared to their mothers, 63% of Korean women reported they achieved higher educational attainment, however, South Korea has the lowest score in terms of educated people who reported being in good health, based on OECD's data⁶.

The main reason for this is the stress and continuous pressure regarding education and future jobs, pressure that comes especially from their mothers, rather than anyone else. The modern South Korean mothers are generally seen as over controlling tiger moms⁷ / Gangnam moms⁸, forcing their children to study hard with no relaxation time. Moreover, they use smartphone apps that allow parents to track their children's activities during the school day. Also, they can contact the teachers directly, through KakaoTalk, the leading messaging app in South Korea, in order to find out information about test scores or other issues.

The culture of competition is widely spread in South Korea and education is one of the fields where parents (especially mothers) insist on the highest standards. Apart from the controlling ways mentioned above, mothers push their children to study hard every day (up to 13 hours a day, with only 5.5 hours of sleep per night) (Koo, 2014).

A high emphasis is also set on the image and the physical aspect. According to the International

Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, one in five Korean women had cosmetic surgery. Women equate beauty with success and so they undergo different procedures in order to secure a good path in their future. K-pop has also contributed to this matter, by creating a new beauty aesthetic. With many examples of stars who undertake surgery, the ones who decide to use this type of “improvement” are not judged as harshly as before by the society. In many cases, even parents financially support their children in having cosmetic surgery (Stone, 2013).

Today's Korea is a cultural mix of the modern and the ancient, where families embrace traditional routines, such as family gatherings and living together with relatives, but at the same time they encourage their children to work around 18 hours at school, be perfect in all they do and in line with new trends and technology. In this context, women have to live up to the traditional expectations, being engaged citizens, productive and obedient, and at the same time full of beauty and femininity, an example of perfection (Stone, 2013).

However, this image of femininity in South Korea has a long history, and only after the Korean economic crisis of 1997, the competition for jobs led to the boom of surgery. This might explain the uncool look of “traditional Korean *ajumma*” compared to the newer generations in matters of style, of clothing, make-up and hairstyle. Even if, back in their young age, the Korean economy needed a high number of working women and the competition was not as harsh as today, women of all shapes and styles could easily find jobs. Nowadays, when searching for employees, the Korean companies try to find the ones with the best professional qualifications and with the best physical attractiveness. And that is why the pressure on beauty continues to be very strong in Korea. Most probably, only after the economy will mature and the mad rush to economic growth and wealth will weaken, the pressure on beauty will diminish.

Until then, the young generations of women have to compel to the requirements of present economical trends and behave as requested by the (still) traditional society.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Korean *ajumma* has been and continues to be a symbol of the country's development and traditions, a fighter for her family and children and a source of inspiration for the younger generations. The appellative “third sex” offends her and doesn't do her right, by disrespecting the efforts and sacrifices she did as a woman for her family and children. Moreover, it nullifies her femininity and forces her to resort to plastic surgery or other

⁵ Data from: http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeed/education/education-at-a-glance-2015/korea_eag-2015-66-en#page2

⁶ Data from: http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeed/education/education-at-a-glance-2015/korea_eag-2015-66-en#page1

⁷ Warm mothers that “monitor their kids closely, while also demonstrating hostility toward bad behavior, at times punishing their children with no explanation, and using shame as a way to try to mold behavior” (Adams, 2013).

⁸ Mothers whose parenting is “information-driven” and are gathering in the famous district from Seoul called Gangnam in order to pursuit the necessary information that will help their child excel (Park *et al.*, 2015).

unnatural ways to keep a young and beautiful physical aspect.

The new generations of women are also affected by this stereotyping and undergo surgery to become beautiful in order to find a good husband and get a good job, at the same time being aware that they will also be seen as the “third sex” after a certain age. However, they are willing to take this risk, feeling resigned with the thought that they will have, at least, fulfilled their roles as women. After this realization, they search for company in their other *ajumma* friends and transform themselves into the visual typology representative for them worldwide. Of course, the future generations of *ajumma* might develop more modern looks and due to the transformation of South Korea into an international fashion hub, the trends might change. Some indications can be found in the use of the *ajumma*’s specific look (mismatched prints, sun umbrellas, oversized visors and protective arm sleeves), also present in the last years’ fashion collections of several international designers.

Regarding the first hypothesis that guided the research, the appellation “third sex” is indeed used as a reference to the period of life where that person is situated, but it is not necessarily used only after fulfilling the women’s duties that the Korean society entails by means of culture, such as getting married and giving birth. Even women who are not married are called *ajumma* and can enter the category of “the third sex”.

Concerning the opinion of young generations about their mothers, the findings indicate that young Korean women are passing through a difficult time and are unsatisfied with the economical situation of the country and the stress that it imposes on them. However, nothing suggested they might feel ashamed by *ajumma* and they would not try in any way to avoid becoming like their mothers and grandmothers. On the contrary, authors like Kim Hyung-geun are supporting *ajumma* and are proud of them, being aware that “Sooner or later I will be an *ajumma* myself. I only hope that I can do the current *ajumma* proud and follow in her strong foot-steps, with the same honesty, integrity, and courage she’s shown me” (Kim, 2012: 65).

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