

***Ambivalence of Monstrosity and Sense of Reality:  
Discourse of Humanity and Pacifism in the North Korean Film *Bulgasari****

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**Abstract**

As in the Western world, Korea has a variety of mythical monsters. Among them is *Bulgasari*, an iron-eating monster and bizarre hybrid of animals, which will be the main topic of this paper. The monster's name 'Bulgasari' has a paradoxical meaning in Korean which is "cannot be killed but can be killed by fire," which represents the wide gamut of ambivalent identity ranging from physical and metaphorical aspects of the monster, and provides a uniquely Korean reception and interpretation of being monstrous as distinctive from the Western archetypal imagery and understanding of monstrosity as Enduring Evil. For instance, while in the Western myth and tradition monstrosity is commonly recognized as enduring evil, *Bulgasari*'s destructive power is portrayed in the myth as a heroic trait to protect social justice by condemning and punishing the evils of society. Such an ambivalent identity as both monster and hero explains only a part of the features that explain the ambivalent identity of *Bulgasari*. This research especially focuses on the North Korean film *Bulgasari* (1985), and explores the way in which the ambivalent identity of *Bulgasari* develops into the various layers of discourses such as humanity and pacifism in the film, that is, a mixture of imagination and reality or a life-like imaginary space. In all, this research delves into unique ways in which the meaning of monstrosity is accommodated in the Korean environment and sentiment, as mirroring the Korean sense of reality situated in this era of South-North Division and Nuclear Holocaust.

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## **Introduction**

As in the Western world, Korea has a variety of mythical monsters. Among them is Bulgasari, an iron-eating monster, which will be the main topic of this paper. The monster's name 'Bulgasari' has a paradoxical meaning in Korean which is "cannot be killed but can be killed by fire," which explains the ambivalent identity of the monster and provides a uniquely Korean reception of being monstrous as distinctive from the general understanding of monstrosity as Enduring Evil.

In the Western tradition, mythological monsters are usually thought to be a "symbol of disorder and resistance" and "powerful threat to the building of state" (Linebaugh and Rediker 2). This formula is justified in the Hercules-Hydra myth. Hydra, an evil monster, has nine heads and also a special ability to grow back its heads whenever they are cut off by Hercules. As a result, Hydra escapes every crisis of potential death and extends its own monstrosity for another day (Gilmore 39-40). The monstrosity of Hydra reflects the fears of Western society about the enduring nature of evil. The Hercules-Hydra myth presents a hegemonic text of 'monster-making' in which riots, insurrections, and other antisocial actions are defined monstrous by the ruling powers, and collective violence to kill such 'monstrous' actions is justified as rational and 'humanistic' effort to maintain social normalization. Meanwhile, Bulgasari's destructive power is portrayed in the myth as heroic and protecting social justice by punishing the evils of society.

This research specially focuses on the North Korean film *Bulgasari* (1985), and examines that the monstrosity of Bulgasari develops into the discourse of humanity and pacifism. I also look into unique ways in which the meaning of monstrosity is accommodated in the Korean environment and sentiment, as mirroring the Korean sense of reality situated in this era of South-North Division and Nuclear Holocaust.

### **Bulgasari in Legend: Ambivalence of Monstrosity**

The legend of Bulgasari appeared for the first time in the late 14th century, the time of replacement of Dynasties, from Goryeo (918-1392) to Chosun (1392-1910). Thereafter, various subtypes and similar folktales were circulated and handed down by word of mouth. Despite the variety, these stories have one thing in common to say: that this monster began to haunt the Korean peninsula during this period of political transition and power shift. Such scenario, reflecting history, implies "a discourse about the confusion in social situations" (Cho 168). At the same time, the Bulgasari legend conveys additional stories and sentiment that contemporary grassroots must have had, symbolized by being faced with the confusion caused by the emergence of the monster. Here, a series of questions arise. What did the first encounter with this monster mean to the grassroots who had to survive wars in a continuation of day-to-day anxiety? Was it a light of salvation or a shade of doom? What message did the monster herald to these poor people, hope or despair? What was their reception of the monster, as a blessing or a curse?

According to legend, Bulgasari has the ability to defeat nightmares and evil spirits, protect sleeping individuals from incubi, and prevent hurricanes and other natural disasters, and the outbreak of plagues and measles (Chung 1998). Because of this supernatural ability, the image of Bulgasari was sculpted on the outer walls of palaces

and private houses, chimneys, railings, and pillars, and served as a sentry to watch the evil spirits.

A typical example is the iconographies of Bulgasari carved in the four brick chimneys standing in the garden of the queen's quarters at the royal palace Gyeongbokgung of the Chosun Dynasty, located in central Seoul. Each side of the four hexagonal chimneys is decorated with auspicious patterns to pray for good luck and health. They include ten symbols of longevity such as the sun, rocks, turtles and herbs of eternal youth; four gracious plants symbolizing loyalty such as the plum, orchid, chrysanthemum and bamboo; grapes symbolizing the flourishing of posterity; bats symbolizing wealth. The patterns also include reliefs of imaginary and legendary animals such as a dragon-crane hybrid bird Bonghwang (equivalent to the Phoenix), and the fire-eating dog Haetae known as the guardian against fire and arson (Heo 183-87). Among those is Bulgasari. Korean ancestors believed that the images of Bulgasari of the chimneys would prevent the evil spirits from breaking into the queen's private chamber (Chung 1998, Yoon 2010: 163).

The positive perception of Bulgasari was also found in literature. In 1921 during the Japanese occupation of Korea, for instance, a novel entitled *The Tale of Bulgasari at the Last Years of Songdo*, written by Hyun Yeoung-sun, was released. Set in the declining years of the Goryeo Dynasty, this work depicts Bulgasari as a "righteous animal" that defeats the Red Turban Bandits of China devastating the Korean peninsula (Cho 170).<sup>1</sup> In the novel, the author brings out positive aspects of the monster by making it a patriotic hero saving the country from foreign invasion and threats. Given that this novel was published during the Japanese rule of the Korean peninsula, such image of Bulgasari even delivers the 'colonized' people's longing to break free from Imperialism.

Negative descriptions of Bilgasari are also found in literary space including legends, folktales. A typical example is the Korean proverbial expression "Bulgasari at the last years of Songdo," which was borrowed from the title of the novel mentioned earlier. Songdo, the capital of the Goryeo Dynasty, refers to the city of Gaeseong in North Korea today. In the proverb, Bulgasari figuratively refers to a person of rowdy behaviour and personality and an ominous sign of bad things. This proverb originates in a folktale featuring Bulgasari in the mid-19th century. According to the tale, Bulgasari appeared in Songdo and made trouble, eating all the metal things it can find, while expanding its size to the height of mountain and even developing a dreadful ability to breathe fire. The destructive power of Bulgasari in the story is the metaphoric reflection of the chaotic state of the country in declining years, and the sense of crisis felt by the contemporary people trapped in war and poverty. Also, the monster's unstoppable appetite is critical satire on the greed of the haves and politicians.

Bulgasari is associated with fire. It spits fire and shows off its formidable appearance. Irony is that the seemingly impregnable monster is destined to be killed by fire. This

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<sup>1</sup> The Red Turban Bandit, a group of Chinese thieves, originated in the north of the Yellow River in China, between 1351 and 1368, and resisted the Mongol's Yuan Kingdom who ruled China at that time. They wore red turbans and carried red banners to distinguish themselves. Toward the end of the Yuan, they frequently invaded the territory of Goryeo.

paradoxical fate is predicted in the name of the monster. The Korean word ‘bulgasari’ is composed of three Chinese characters—‘bul’(不: not), ‘ga’(可: possible), ‘sal’(殺: kill)—and a noun suffix ‘i’(伊). The meaning of these morphemes combine to make a word, ‘bulgasari’(不可殺伊), meaning ‘something impossible to kill’. As the name implies, Bulgasari refers to a monster of immortality. There is another way to interpret the name. It is possible by replacing the first Chinese character ‘bul’(不: not) with a Korean character ‘bul’(불) with the same pronunciation but different meaning of ‘fire’, which is equivalent to the Chinese character ‘hwa’(火). In this case, the Korean word ‘bulgasari’ can be transcribed into Chinese characters to make the word ‘hawgasari’(火可殺伊), which means ‘something fire can kill’. Accordingly, Bulgasari becomes a mortal being, especially vulnerable to attack by fire. As a result, Bulgasari has ambivalence in its monstrosity: it is impossible to kill and, at the same time, it can be killed by fire. In other words, Bulgasari is a grotesque being with immortality and mortality residing in a single body of monstrosity.

### **Bulgasari in Silver Screen: A Cinematic Reproduction**

The legendary monster Bulgasari has also been represented in films. The North Korean film *Bulgasari* (1985) deserves special attention not only because the film was produced in North Korea but also because of the truly dramatic behind-the-scenes story of the birth.

The film was planned by the North Korean leader Kim Jeong-il (1941-2011), and produced by the legendary South Korean movie director Shin Sang-ok (1926-2006) who was kidnapped to the North for this purpose. It was completed in December 1985. In 1986, right after the film’s completion, Shin successfully defected from North Korea, which caused the film to be banned. The film was not released until July of 1998 when the ban was lifted and the film was screened for the first time in Japan.<sup>2</sup> Two years later, in May 2000, South Korean government announced a plan to activate the South-North cultural exchange with the South-North Summit upcoming in June that year.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the film *Bulgasari* was released in Seoul from August 2000, which is recorded as “the first North Korean film officially released in South Korea” (Na 2004; Noh 2000). Whatever the reason, the film was a total failure in the box office in the South despite the rising mood of reconciliation between the two Koreas.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The opening at the Kinema Omori in Tokyo was successful. It was run for eight weeks, and the audience amounted to 18,000. The film outpaced three times the Japanese monster movie *Godzilla*’s box office at Hollywood in the same year (Chung 2006; Lee 2000; Noh 2000).

<sup>3</sup> The Kim Dae-Jung administration adopted the ‘Sunshine Policy’ as North Korea policy in 1998. The South Korean government encouraged private business ventures in North Korea and expanded the aid to the North at the humanitarian level. The historic 2010 Summit was the dramatic visualization of the Kim administration’s North Korean policy, signalling the move toward peaceful coexistence between the Koreas.

<sup>4</sup> It is reportedly said that the rating process of the film by the Korea Media Rating Board was delayed, which made it difficult for the film to find places for screening in the mid-summer, the busiest season for movie theatres. Also, this film didn’t have enough time to get attention from the audience in the South.

The film *Bulgasari* is set in the last years of the 14th century Goryeo period. A mass of peasants are eking out a scanty livelihood under the tyranny of corrupt officials. Accordingly the have-not's anti-sentiment against aristocracy reaches the peak.

In the opening scene, a group of ironworkers are busy for work. Among those are a young lady Ami, her aged father and her lover. They are secretly making weapons and preparing for the peasants' uprising against the tyranny of aristocrats. One day a government official visits the place, dumping out the carts of farming tools confiscated from farmers. He orders the old blacksmith to melt them into weapons for use against rebels. The old man refuses the order and returns the tools to farmers. Instead, he visits the governor and makes a false report that the iron-eating monster Bulgasari appeared the night and has eaten up all the tools. The governor doesn't buy the old man's saying and imprisons him and other workers.

The old man, starved and tortured, is on the verge of death in the prison. He does not eat the food. Instead he moulds a small doll from the rice, pleading the heavens to bring the doll to life so that it will relieve the peasants from evil. He names the doll Bulgasari and dies. His daughter Ami discovers the rice doll and takes it home. That night, Ami is sewing and accidentally cuts her finger. The blood from her finger drips onto the rice doll in the sewing box. At this moment, the doll comes to life and begins to eat the sewing needles and scissors. The iron-eating monster Bulgasari devours the iron latch of the door and leaves the house. It walks around the town, chewing its way through all the metal things, meanwhile growing continuously until it towers over trees. As the old man wishes, Bulgasari leads the peasants' revolt against the wicked governor, defeating his army at every battle. The peasants draw strength from the powerful monster, and eventually win the battle.

Yet the peasants have to pay for the victory. Worst of all, Bulgasari has grown bigger and bigger and needs more iron to eat. The peasants have to load up a cart of iron things to satisfy the unstoppable appetite of the ever-growing monster. Ami realizes that something should be done to stop this vicious cycle of poverty and suffering. She attracts Bulgasari to a remote mountain by ringing a big bell. Arriving at the mountain, Bulgasari discovers the bell and devours it. In the process, the monster also swallows Ami who has been deliberately hiding herself inside the bell. At that moment, the monster turns into a stone and explodes into fragments. From the pile of broken stones a tiny baby Bulgasari comes and toddles around. It again turns into a ball of blue light and, immediately, flies and disappears into the heart of Ami lying dead.

### **Humanity and Pacifism as Mirrored by Monstrosity**

The monster Bulgasari in the film is given birth by human beings and more specifically by the socially, politically, and economically deprived. Also, it lives among and meets its own destiny with human beings. Bulgasari in the film is crafted by a poor peasant who is 'deprived' of the means for living. The originally lifeless rice doll is given blood transfusion and life by another peasant who has 'lost' her father and become an orphan. Then the creature is nurtured by 'commoners' who suffer from poverty and insecurity. Finally, Bulgasari is killed by or dies with Ami, the mother figure who gives it a life. Thus, Bulgasari the monster shares with common people its life cycle which ranges from birth to growth and death. Bulgasari in the film is described as a revolutionary hero who fights for the socially weak and

innocent folk against privileged but wicked officials, and seeks to implement social justice by overthrowing corrupt social orders. *Bulgasari* is associated with the people's bottom-up resistance against the top-down politicization of the ruling class. The monstrosity and destructive power of *Bulgasari* hints a close connection to the collective sentiment of the non-class or 'proletarian' people.

Dealing with chasm of inequality between the oppressive ruling class and the powerless and innocent populace, championing the latter's resistance against the former, and suggesting a revolutionary hero character, the film *Bulgasari* is definitely a proletarian or revolutionary text. Meanwhile, another overarching theme is found in the film, which is the 'pacifism' message as one that goes beyond such hegemonic issues as class antagonism, state power, and proletarian revolution. This is confirmed by Shin Sang-ok, the director of the film. While many critics have interpreted the film as the socialist realism text aiming at inspiring class struggle and proletarian revolution, Shin himself makes it clear: what he really wanted to deliver in the film is "a warning message against the nuclear weapons race, something that could disrupt world peace" (Shin 2000; Shin 2007: 138). Since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, humanity has been confronted with a new phase of global conflict called 'nuclear holocaust,' or a possible annihilation of human civilization by nuclear warfare. The text of *Bulgasari* is worth reading even in the new millennium because, the universal or transnational theme of pacifism in the film, enwrapped in the allegorical device of an imaginary monster, finally encounters a real nuclear threat that humanity is currently facing in reality (Chung 2006).

In relation to the monstrosity of *Bulgasari*, it should not be overlooked that we human beings are responsible for it. *Bulgasari* is itself a hideous monster. However, such monstrosity is not inborn. *Bulgasari* was not a monster from the beginning. The thing is that humankind is the life-giver to the monster and it is we human beings, whether the ruling class or the ruled, that provide the monster with life and nutrition in the form of farming tools and weapons. It is none other than human beings that mothered and fostered the monster and its monstrosity, therefore we humans have to help ourselves and take responsibility for the pains, suffering, death and other glooming human conditions caused by the monster.

Turning back to the afore-mentioned issue of nuclear weapons and pacifism, and relating it to the meaning of monstrosity dealt in the film *Bulgasari*, we come to a conclusion: it is we humans that created and nurtured the modern monster called the nuclear threat, giving it a boost to grow the monstrous power to the extent of threatening ourselves. We have none to blame but ourselves, for the blunder is of our own making. Humans are both offenders and victims of the monstrous nuclear threat, and we are not free from such ambivalent position in the monster-making. The monster may be inside of us. Or, the monster can be none other than our own identity. Like *Bulgasari*, we humans are the monsters with killing power but turn out to be vulnerable to the monstrosity of our own creation. Then, is there truly no way out for us to be free from the fate to be monsters or the anxiety about monsters? To answer this question, a Korean critic proposes as a potential solution the humanity to embrace the 'monster inside me'.

Every society has monsters. They become monsters because they are oppressed to be. [...] Only if we can be honest to each other about the

monster inside us, so that we can gain the strength to face up to the inner monstrosity of our own selves, we will be able to be more comfortable together (Lee 2006).

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