

This Is Our Story:
“Minari” (2021)

When I visited an H-mart in the suburban Chicago area, I said to myself with amazement, "Here is minari." It made me surprised and delighted to see a Korean leafy vegetable in the United States thousands of miles away from home. It reminded me of the taste of spicy stew (a.k.a. Mae-un-tang) that my grandmother used to cook for my family. The emotion that came to my heart after watching a film of the same name, "Minari," was not different from what I felt with finding minari at H-mart. It made alive the memories of my family in my childhood and the memories of my family's struggles in the United States. As a lovely story, which is well-described in a plain but heartwarming manner, was getting uncovered the memories that were buried in the deepest of my heart, it made me unleash the emotion that I tried to lock in there as much as possible. The film does not try to squeeze an emotion by plotting dramatic events with all kinds of cinematic techniques. Instead, it unfolds a story of an immigrant family who had a dream, struggled for it, but got frustrated and found their love, by giving a glimpse of visual symbols in a rural landscape and words that sound mundane. Perhaps it was cleverer to unfold the story in that way than seeking spectators' tears explicitly.

When I watched a scene of entering a dreamland in a rural area of Arkansas where Jacob (Steven Yeun) purchased to farm, when it showed me a mobile home where his family will stay, it brought me back to the moment when my family was entering the Chicagoland after a two-day road trip from Atlanta for my doctoral study there. It was a moment of awe. When we saw a flock of light was fluttering over the buildings after going through a seemingly endless plain of Indiana, it evoked a mixed feeling of fear and hope in me, my wife, and my two kids. As we were about to start a life in a new land where nobody knew us and we knew nobody, it overwhelmed us with anxiety for the uncertain future and lifted us over a cloud of hope, within which we cannot see an inch. While one tried to see a bright side of the cloud, like Jacob, the other felt anxious for its dark side, like Monica (Yeri Han). We didn't know whose eyes were farsighted, but we knew we should help each other to survive and fulfill our dream.

After serious efforts to settle down in the new land by themselves, Jacob and Monica invite Soonja (Yuh-Jung Youn), Monica's mother, as helping hands. When Soonja arrives at their home, a new chapter begins with tears. While Monica greets Soonja with unease for a shame for the uncomfortable environment and guilt for requesting her mother's sacrifice, Soonja comforts her with kind words and giving over what she brought from Korea, such as pepper sauce, anchovy, and money, after a long trip. Perhaps for many Koreans, maybe many immigrants, this scene would be a Deja vu. They would be readily empathetic with these characters and could understand the meaning of Monica's tears well, as I did. The presence of Soonja comforts Monica, empowering her to challenge reality again. However, it may not work the same for David (Alan Kim). While Soonja is familiar to Jacob and Monica, she is unfamiliar to David. As one meets a new world, living with Soonja gives an ambivalent experience to David, giving an expectation and an unease. Soonja's weird ways of living gives him a somehow uncomfortable, but the unique experience of grandmother.

As the situation gets worse even after Soonja's coming, the conflict within the family rises to the climax. While Jacob tries to overcome the stumbling blocks, Monica's anxiety is getting bigger. At the peak of the conflict, Jacob calls up the conversation they had a long time ago, "We were struggling too much in Korea. Then, you said, 'let's go to America and save each

other.'" This shows an irony that the conflict that came from good intentions for each other was about to destroy them. Behind this scene, Soonja is struggling to save the family. Despite her body not being in a good condition because of her stroke, she tries to help them by cleaning up the trash. Her shaky effort makes the worst result, burning up the warehouse of the farm. Ironically, the disaster saves the family. Amidst the fire, Jacob and Monica hold together to save each other. David gets to hold Soonja strongly, who was hopelessly walking away from the burning warehouse. The family that was about to be broken up comes to be reunited when they discover the love they did in their own ways.

The reason why many people acclaim this movie might be because it has the power to evoke our story and our memory. Regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, immigrants have a story in which they came for a dream, struggled to survive, and were raised again as a family. Many immigrants have a memory to leave home in search of salvation. For many immigrants American dream might have meant a salvation by America or in America. *Minari* does not talk about God nor aims to be a religious movie, but it tells us a story of a family who sought a salvation in America. Thus, one may approach this movie as a theological piece in the sense that it offers room to ponder our life in light of a theological question, "What saves us?"

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