



Growing Across Borders: The Symbolism of *Minari* in World Literature

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the symbolism of the Minari plant in Lee Isaac Chung's film Minari (2020) using a world literature approach. The film tells the story of a Korean-American immigrant family and depicts their struggles in building a new life in the United States. The Minari plant, as the primary symbol, not only represents resilience and adaptability but also serves as a bridge between the family's original culture and their new environment. Through the world literature approach, this study highlights how local symbols like Minari can transcend cultural boundaries and be universally interpreted by audiences from diverse backgrounds. The method used is descriptive qualitative analysis with narrative analysis of scenes, dialogue, and visual context in the film. The research findings indicate that the Minari symbol holds rich cross-cultural meaning, and Minari as part of the global literary discourse.

Keywords: *cross-cultural, minari, symbolism, world literature*

Introduction

In today's era of globalization, literary works and films are no longer only known in their countries of origin. Many works are spread and accepted by audiences from various parts of the world. The concept of world literature is used to see how a work can cross national and cultural boundaries (Taras et al., 2016), then gain new meaning when read or watched by people from different backgrounds. According to (Damrosch, 2003) world literature is not only a collection of works from various countries, but works that can function in the world, meaning that they remain meaningful when read or watched across cultures. In this case, film as a visual medium can also be understood as part of world literature (Andrew, 2009), especially if the film raises a story that is local but can be understood universally.

One example of a film that is relevant to analyze using the world literature approach is *Minari* (2020) by Lee Isaac Chung. This film tells the story of a Korean immigrant family trying to start a new life in rural America. Although the film depicts the experiences of a Korean-American family, *Minari* also touches on global issues such as migration, identity, and cross-generational family relationships. The simple and personal story in this film depicts the struggles of life, adaptation to a new environment, and the hopes that grow amidst alienation, themes that can be felt by many people in various parts of the world.

One of the important symbols in the film is the *Minari* plant, a type of aquatic plant from Korea that can grow in various places, even in less than ideal conditions. In the film, this plant is not only present as a background story, but also holds symbolic meaning. *Minari* symbolizes survival, adaptability, and cultural heritage that persists even when moving. This symbol connects the old life with the new life, the original culture with the new place of residence, and the inherited identity with the identity being formed.

With a world literature approach, the symbol of *Minari* can be seen as a representation of the diasporic experience that crosses cultural and national boundaries (Park, 2022). When a film like *Minari* is watched by audiences from various backgrounds, the meaning of the symbols in the film also develops. It not only reflects Korean culture, but also speaks to the general human experience—about loss, hope, and the courage to start over. This shows that local elements can carry universal messages and become part of the global cultural conversation.

This study aims to analyze the symbolism of *minari* in the film *Minari* (2020) using a world literature approach. This study will focus on how the *minari* symbol depicts the experience of migration, dual identity, and resilience in living a cross-cultural life. In addition, this study also wants to understand how this film can be read as a work of world literature that is able to combine the characteristics of the original culture with values that can be accepted globally. Through this approach, the author hopes to contribute to understanding how film, as a form of cross-media work, can be part of

world literature. This study also wants to show that simple symbols in films can convey meaning to people from various cultural backgrounds.

Literature Review

The film *Minari* from various perspectives. Asnur et al. (2023) analyzed intercultural communication using Peirce's semiotic theory, revealing how the film uses signs and symbols to depict cultural interaction between Korean and American values. Hidayat (2024) explored the representation of Korean cultural identity through six key cultural aspects shown by the main characters, guided by Stuart Hall's theory. Nguyen (2022) compared *Minari* and *Shang-Chi* to assess the development of Asian and Asian-American representation in contemporary films. Meanwhile, Prasetyanti (2025) investigated differences in cultural identity between first- and second-generation immigrants in *Minari*, using categories like material and spiritual culture. Lastly, McCarroll (2020) emphasized Asian-American agency in cinema, focusing on how films like *Minari* serve as acts of cultural citizenship by resisting stereotypes and expanding Asian diasporic narratives.

Unlike the studies above that mainly focus on representation, intercultural communication, and generational identity, this research offers a different perspective by analysing the symbolism of the *minari* plant within the framework of world literature. Rather than only examining cultural content, this study explores how a local symbol *minari* gains universal resonance when interpreted by global audiences. By adopting world literature theory, this analysis emphasizes the cross-cultural mobility and interpretive richness of symbolic elements, positioning *Minari* as a film that not only reflects a specific cultural experience but also participates in a broader, transnational literary conversation. This is a dimension that has not been deeply explored in the previous studies.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a textual analysis method. This method is used to explore the symbolic meaning and cultural themes contained in Lee Isaac Chung's film *Minari* (2020). The focus of the analysis is directed at the symbol of the *Minari* plant and how it represents the diaspora experience, cultural identity, and survival in a global context.

The film *Minari* is analyzed as a work of world literature, based on the concept of David Damrosch, who states that world literature is a work that can cross cultural boundaries and gain new meaning in global circulation. Therefore, this study not only looks at the content of the film from a Korean-American cultural perspective but also examines how the film can be widely understood by cross-cultural audiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the theory of World Literature as the main basis for analysing how the film *Minari* (2020) can be understood as a story that has cross-cultural meaning. The main focus of the analysis lies in the symbol of the *Minari* plant in the film, which is

considered to represent universal values about life, identity, and human resilience amidst the experience of migration.

World literature is a way of reading and understanding literary works (including films) that are not limited to their culture of origin. In this approach, a work is seen from its ability to cross geographical boundaries, be translated into various languages, and be understood meaningfully by readers or viewers from various cultural backgrounds (Jay, 2010). So, the main focus is not on the origin of the work, but rather how the work can be accepted, experienced, and interpreted widely by the world community.

According to David Damrosch (2003), a work can be called part of world literature when it not only lives in its culture of origin, but also acquires new meaning when it enters and is read in other cultures. He states: “*A work enters world literature through its circulation and reading; a work enters a foreign cultural space, where its original cultural context is preserved but also open to new meanings.*” (p. 281) This means that a work like *Minari* is not automatically considered part of world literature just because it comes from Korea or America. This film becomes part of world literature because it can be watched, understood, and appreciated by audiences from various parts of the world, even those who do not have the same cultural background. Each audience member may interpret the film differently, but they can still feel the depth of the meaning conveyed.

This opinion is reinforced by Beecroft (2024), who states that world literature is not a list of works from all over the world, but a way of thinking and reading across cultures. World literature opens up the possibility for local works to speak to a global audience through universal themes, symbols, or human experiences.

The film *Minari* can be positioned as a work of world literature because the story not only relates to the Korean-American community, but also conveys human values that can be felt by anyone, such as the struggles of migration, the search for identity, intergenerational relationships, and hope for the future. These themes are universal, making the film emotionally touching for audiences from various cultures.

One of the key elements in the film is the symbol of the *Minari* plant a type of Korean herb that can thrive in various conditions, including in difficult environments. In the story, this plant is planted by the grandmother on the banks of a river and grows on its own without much care. This symbol illustrates the resilience, adaptability, and sustainability of culture in the context of a diasporic family. This symbol also reflects how the original culture can survive and thrive in a new land, even when having to adapt to very different conditions.

According to Mihkelev (2018), symbols in the context of world literature have power because they can be interpreted in different ways by people from different cultures, but still convey a strong message. The *Minari* plant in this film, for example, can be interpreted by the audience as a symbol of migration, struggle, or hope, depending on their life experiences and cultures. This is what makes this symbol globally powerful: local roots, universal meaning.

Using world literature theory, this study aims to show how the symbol of the *Minari* plant is able to connect local Korean culture with global human experiences. This symbol is flexible, can be reinterpreted, and remains meaningful in different contexts. This is the power of the world literature approach: providing a space for dialogue between local culture and global readers, and opening up the possibility of new meanings for a story.

Result and Discussion

This chapter presents the results of an analysis of the film *Minari* (2020), *Minari* by Lee Isaac Chung is a drama that was financed and produced by Netflix in 2020. Director Chung depicts the hardships and struggles of a Korean family who immigrates to rural Arkansas in the United States. The Korean family in *Minari* represented Korean diaspora in the United States of America (Kristianto & Wahyuni, 2022). Although the film takes place in the U.S., the language of the film is bilingual, crystallizing even further the acculturation process of immigrants, particularly Asians whose languages are very different from European ones. This bilingualism of the film is an indication that the family lives in a hybrid micro-culture (Uzuner, 2021). Grandmother Yuh-Jung Youn, who embodies the concept of cultural migration in the film, won the Oscar for the Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in 2021 (Oscar Awards 2021). This study focuses on the symbolism of the minari plant as a representation of cross-cultural experiences in the context of world literature. The discussion is conducted by linking data taken from the film's dialogue with concepts in world literature theory, as proposed by David Damrosch.

The Symbolism of Minari

In the film *Minari* (2020), the symbol of the *Minari* plant first appears through the character of Soon-ja, a grandmother who comes from Korea to live with her family in Arkansas, United States. The grandmother brings *Minari* seeds from Korea and plants them around the river near their home. Although it initially seems like a small gesture, this planting turns out to have a very deep meaning for the story and the film's main theme.

In the scene where the grandmother and her grandson, David, walk to the riverbank, Soon-ja says, "*Minari is wonderful. It grows very easily. It grows wherever you plant it, even if you do nothing*" (00:42:29). From this dialogue, *Minari* is not just an ordinary plant. It could grow in various conditions without requiring much care. In the context of the story, this becomes a symbol of hope and resilience, especially for the Yi family, who are struggling to build a new life as immigrants in a foreign land.

The symbolic function of *Minari* in the film also strengthens the dynamics of the relationships between the characters. Soon-ja, as the bearer of Korean culture and traditions, not only brings warmth to the family but also serves as a bridge between the older and younger generations. Planting *Minari* becomes a symbolic act: introducing cultural heritage to the next generation in a simple yet meaningful way. In the film, *Minari* does not grow perfectly overnight. The plant is left to grow on its own, without

daily monitoring, and it is only at the end of the story that we learn the *Minari* has flourished. This mirrors the development of identity, which is not always immediately visible but unfolds slowly, naturally, and with deep roots.

Through its simple yet meaningful presence, the *Minari* symbol becomes an integral part of the film's overall narrative. It is present not only as a visual element but as a symbol that enriches the story's meaning. In the context of World Literature theory, this symbol serves as a key linking Korean local culture with universal understanding that can be embraced by cross-cultural audiences. As Damrosch (2003) notes, literary or film works can be categorised as world literature when their meaning can resonate across different cultural spaces without losing their original essence.

The *Minari* Symbol as a Representation of Resilience and Cultural Adaptation

The *Minari* plant in the film *Minari* (2020) is not just an ordinary plant, but a powerful symbol of the ability to survive and adapt to a new environment. In the story, this plant is introduced by the grandmother (Soon-ja), who brings *Minari* seeds from Korea and then plants them around the river on their farmland. This symbol holds deep meaning. Soon-ja explains: "*Minari is truly the best. It grows anywhere, like weeds... Minari can be put in kimchi, put in stew... It can be medicine if you are sick. Minari is wonderful, wonderful*" (01:30:00). This dialogue shows that *Minari* is a plant that can thrive in various conditions, even in barren soil. This mirrors the experience of Korean-American immigrants in the film: they must face new challenges in a foreign land but continue to strive to survive, grow, and not lose their original identity.

The main character, Jacob, also demonstrates the same spirit. In one of the early scenes, he says, "*Look at the colour. This is why I picked this place. This is the best dirt in America*" (00:04:18). This statement affirms that he has high hopes for the new land where his family lives, despite the difficult initial conditions. This hope aligns with the philosophy of *Minari*, which can grow without much care but provides great benefits.

In the context of World Literature theory, this symbol can also be seen as a form of local narrative with universal appeal. Beecroft (2024) notes that world literature is not only important because of its origins but because of its ability to convey meanings recognisable to audiences from diverse cultures. In this sense, *Minari* is not solely a product of Korean culture but represents the struggles of many families worldwide striving to build new lives.

Thus, the symbol of *Minari* becomes a representation of strength, resilience, and hope that is not exclusive to one community but can be understood globally. This reinforces the position of the film *Minari* as a work of world literature that speaks to universal human experiences.

Minari and Intergenerational Relationships

One of the important themes in the film *Minari* (2020) is the relationship between the first generation of immigrants (Jacob and Monica) and the second generation (their children, David and Anne). In this context, the symbol of the *Minari* plant serves as a bridge connecting the cultural values passed down from the older generation to the younger generation, particularly through the character of the grandmother, Soon-ja.

Soon-ja, who came from Korea, brought *Minari* seeds with her and planted them in her new environment. In a warm and symbolic scene, she invites David, her grandson, to accompany her to the river where she planted the *Minari*. Soon-ja's dialogue reveals the symbolic meaning of this action: "*Minari is for everyone. It's good for your health, and it grows well anywhere. You'll see*" (01:01:00), Soon-ja's words are not merely an explanation about the plant but also contain the philosophy of life she wishes to pass on: simplicity, resilience, and the value of mutual aid. *Minari* becomes a tool for intergenerational communication where the grandmother does not merely tell but shows how to survive and care for something precious, even in a foreign environment.

The intergenerational relationship in this film is not always harmonious. At first, David resists getting close to his grandmother because he sees her as "not like other grandmothers" she doesn't cook, play cards, and is even considered "strange." However, over time, their relationship grows, alongside the growth of the *Minari* they planted together. This reflects how openness and time are key for the younger generation to understand and appreciate the cultural heritage passed down to them.

The symbol of *Minari* also marks David's internal transformation. From initially distancing himself, he becomes closer and more caring towards his grandmother, even feeling a sense of loss when she suffers a stroke. In this context, *Minari* is not merely a physical symbol of the plant but also a symbol of belonging, emotional closeness, and cultural awareness that gradually grows in the hearts of the younger generation.

Within the framework of World Literature theory, this demonstrates how local narratives, in this case, the dynamics within a Korean-American family, can speak universally to cross-cultural audiences. Many cultures worldwide experience conflicts or gaps between older and younger generations, especially in the context of migration. Therefore, the *minari* symbol can also be interpreted more broadly as a symbol of intergenerational connectivity in any society.

Thus, *Minari* functions not only as a symbol of adaptation and hope, but also as a cultural medium that bridges differences in age, values, and perspectives within an immigrant family (Adidarma & Ismail, 2022). This reinforces the message that culture is not only passed down through words, but also through small actions and natural symbols that grow alongside life experiences.

Cross-Cultural Meaning: Local Symbols that Become Global

The *Minari* symbol in the film *Minari* (2020) essentially originates from the local context of Korean culture, but has the potential for meaning that transcends national and

cultural boundaries. In the context of world literature theory, as articulated by David Damrosch (2003), a work becomes part of world literature not merely because it originates from abroad, but because it can “enter” into another cultural space and remain meaningful to audiences from diverse backgrounds.

Damrosch (2003) writes that “*A work enters into world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space in which a work’s original cultural context is preserved but also opened up to new meanings.*” (p. 281). In the film *Minari*, the *Minari* plant may have initially been known only as part of Korean cuisine or agricultural tradition. However, when this symbol is incorporated into the narrative of an immigrant family’s struggle in America, its meaning expands. It becomes not only a symbol of Korea but also a representation of universal values such as hope, resilience, and the ability to adapt to a new environment.

For international audiences, especially those from diaspora communities or who have experienced migration, the *Minari* symbol can be read as a depiction of the struggle to maintain identity while adapting to a new environment. The nature of *Minari*, which can grow anywhere with little care, serves as a powerful metaphor for people who must ‘plant themselves’ in foreign soil and survive, even thrive.

This aligns with Emily Apter's (2013) perspective, which emphasises that world literature (and visual works like films) enables cross-cultural exchange of meaning that is not one-sided. In this context, local symbols like *Minari* do not lose their original identity but gain additional meaning when interpreted within a global context. This is the power of symbols in world literature: they serve as a meeting point between the original culture and the new culture of the reader or viewer.

Through this approach, it can be seen that *Minari* successfully uses its local elements in terms of plants, language, and family values as a gateway to discuss global issues. Therefore, the symbol of *Minari* not only has meaning in the Korean-American context, but can also be felt emotionally and symbolically by audiences from all over the world. This demonstrates that local symbols can grow into global meanings, provided they are packaged with a narrative that resonates universally with humanity.

From the discussion presented earlier, it can be concluded that the *Minari* plant symbol in the film *Minari* (2020) holds deep and diverse meanings. This plant is not only a symbol of the resilience and adaptability of the Korean-American immigrant family but also an emotional bridge between the older and younger generations within the family. *Minari* serves as a simple yet meaningful cultural ‘bridge.’

Additionally, the *Minari* symbol resonates with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. Though rooted in Korean culture, its meaning feels universal, especially for those who have experienced relocation, adaptation, or the struggle to maintain identity in a new environment. Through a world literature approach, we can see that the film transcends the boundaries of its cultural origins. *Minari* is not just a story about one Korean-American family, but about values that can be felt globally, such as hope,

family, and the struggle of life. In other words, *Minari* is not only part of Korean-American cinema but can also be considered a work of world literature (Park, 2021). The film invites us to see that simple symbols, like the *Minari* plant, can serve as a shared language connecting human experiences across different places.

Conclusion

This study concludes that *Minari* (2020), directed by Lee Isaac Chung, serves as a powerful example of how a local narrative can transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries to become part of world literature. Through the lens of world literature theory, the film reflects universal themes of migration, identity, and resilience that resonate globally. The *Minari* plant, which can grow in almost any condition, symbolizes adaptability, perseverance, and cultural continuity, values that represent both the immigrant experience and the broader human struggle for survival. While Korean-American audiences may view *Minari* as a symbol of preserving cultural roots in a foreign land, global viewers interpret it as a universal metaphor for renewal and endurance across borders. Through its bilingual dialogue, the film demonstrates David Damrosch's concept of a literary work that "enters world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture." Ultimately, *Minari* shows that a story rooted in one culture can become a bridge between many, proving that world literature is not defined by geography but by the ability of stories like the *Minari* plant itself to grow and thrive across borders, languages, and generations.

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