

Panel 7

Text-Image: Philosophy, Discourse and Rewritings

Briar and Lily: Postmodern Narrative Rewritings of Female Plight and Emotional Bonds in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*

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Sarah Waters's novel *Fingersmith* is a contemporary neo-Victorian romance that portrays a lesbian story set in the rigorous class and patriarchal system of 19th-century Britain. In 2016, Park Chan-wook adapted this story in his film, *The Handmaiden* (Korean title *Agassi*), and changed the setting to Korea under Japanese colonial rule in the 1930s. In doing so, he created "a complementary classic of erotic cinema that defies differences in culture, gender, and media" (Armitstead, 2017). So far, research on global imperialism, post-colonialism, and feminism have extensively discussed the similarities between the oppression of the female protagonists in the two works, which are set patriarchal societies, and how their polyphonic narrative structures present multi-layered intrigues. However, scholars have not sufficiently addressed the differences in artistic symbolism across cultural contexts, nor have they adequately analysed the postmodern narrative techniques that Waters and Park employ to revisit and reinterpret historical conditions of women's plight as 21st-century authors. This article argues that both *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* highlight hierarchical and patriarchal social structures through the use of symbols and images with strong cultural signifiers in their settings, suggesting that women's behaviour and desires are strictly controlled by aesthetic perceptions. In addition, both Waters and Park incorporate self-reflexivity and intertextual elements, focusing particularly on erotic plots to reveal the experiences of their female protagonists as constructed textual narratives. In conclusion, this article will examine how culturally-specific visual, narrative and symbolic forms present similar structures of gender oppression, and how both works use postmodern narrative strategies to represent the emotional and erotic bonds between women.

Biography

Yexuan Xing is a part-time Research Assistant in the Department of English at Lingnan University (Hong Kong). She received her MA degree in English Literary Studies from The Chinese University of Hong Kong in 2024. Her research interests include literary film adaptation, contemporary fiction, narrative theory, and feminism.