

# Features of Ugly Eccentric Women and the Methods of Overcoming Ugliness in Korean Oral Literature

Sung Gyun Jung<sup>1</sup>, Kun Hwang<sup>2,3</sup>, Young Joong Hwang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Plastic Surgery, Daejeon Eulji Medical Center, Eulji University

<sup>2</sup>Department of Plastic Surgery, Armed Forces Capital Hospital

<sup>3</sup>Department of Anatomy, College of Medicine, Ewha Womans University

**Abstract** : The aim of this study was to analyze how “ugly but capable women” in Korea looked and how they overcame adversities. “*Compendium of Korean Oral Literature*” edited by the Academy of Korean Studies contains 146 tales categorized as “eccentric women”. Among them, nine tales featuring specific manifestations of ugly and/or deformed women were collected. The texts were analyzed to examine how their ugliness or deformity was portrayed. The nine women exhibited specific physical manifestations. Among the discernible body characteristics, the most common was blindness, affecting 44.4% of the group. This was followed by short stature and unattractiveness, each present in 33.3% of the cases, and limb deformity, which was noted in 22.2%. Less common features included smallpox scars and cleft noses, each occurring in 11.1% of the women. The nine women possessed distinct abilities. The most common among these were sewing and foreknowledge, each exhibited by 33.3% of the women. Wisdom and good housekeeping skills were also noted, with each ability present in 22.2% of the subjects. Less common were running a bar and finding hidden gold, each reported in 11.1% of the cases. We assume that in 19th-century Korea, blindness, short stature, and limb deformity were considered elements of ugliness. Women who were perceived as ugly but capable harbored the desire to overcome adversity through their abilities in sewing, foreknowledge, wisdom, and good housekeeping skills. The ultimate aspiration for these women, particularly those with deformities, was to elevate their sons to high official positions and thereby enrich their families.

**Keywords** : Physical appearance, Body, Women, Literature, Modern, Korea

## INTRODUCTION

There have been instances of women who, despite physical ugliness or deformities, ultimately found happiness.

In Korean literature, cleft lip/palate patient has been called ‘Ugly thing’ instead of her name in short story of Yao-hsieh Chu (1936) [1]. In Buddhist scripture ‘Sutta-Nipata’, an ugly Buddha fixed an ugly woman and made her a beauty [2].

This work was supported by the Korean Military Medical Research Project funded by the ROK Ministry of National Defense (ROK-MND-2023-KMMRP-020).

The author(s) agree to abide by the good publication practice guideline for medical journals.

The author(s) declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

**Received:** March 29, 2024; **Revised:** May 16, 2024; **Accepted:** May 23, 2024

**Co-correspondence to:** Kun Hwang (Department of Plastic Surgery, Armed Forces Capital Hospital, Bundang-gu, Seongnam-City, Gyeonggi-do, Republic of Korea and Department of Anatomy, College of Medicine, Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Republic of Korea), Young Joong Hwang (Department of Plastic Surgery, Daejeon Eulji Medical Center, Eulji University, Daejeon, Republic of Korea)

**E-mail:** jokerhg@naver.com (K. Hwang), yjhmedi@nate.com (Y.J. Hwang)

In the catalog of international tale types (ATU) based on the Aarne/Thompson system, one (ATU 711. “The Beautiful and the Ugly Twin”) has an ugly female protagonist [3]. This tale has been handed down in Europe [3,4]. In Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs*, the protagonist has a facial cleft. Gwynplaine’s unnatural laughter, which stems from an artificial deformation of the muscles, is a silent form of laughter. It represents the eternal laughter of those who do not truly laugh, signifying emotional emptiness and an accompanying sense of indifference [5].

Although very few studies have addressed the concept of “ugliness” in the portrayal of “ugly women” in literatures, we believed that by examining descriptions of the ugly woman, we could infer the prevailing standards of beauty and ugliness in 19th-century Korea.

The aim of this study was to analyze how “ugly but capable women” in Korea looked and how they overcame adversities.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The *Compendium of Korean Oral Literature* edited by the Academy of Korean Studies contains 146 tales categorized as “eccentric women” [6,7].

Among them, nine tales featuring specific manifestations of ugly and/or deformed women were collected. The texts were analyzed to examine how their ugliness or deformity was portrayed.

The names of the tales are as follows: 1. “A man who married a blind wife,” 2. “Wang’s daughter-in-law,” 3. “A brilliant blind daughter-in-law,” 4. “Ugly woman who kicked out her husband became a beauty,” 5. “A blind person is excellent,” 6. “A lame daughter-in-law,” 7. “Jeong Da-san’s ugly wife,” 8. “Wisdom of the Minister’s daughter-in-law,” 9. “A strange daughter-in-law, a heavenly person.”

The characteristics of the subjects, particularly blindness, short stature, limb deformities, and ugliness, were examined.

## RESULTS

### 1. Deformities of the “ugly women”

The nine women exhibited specific physical manifesta-

tions. Among the discernible body characteristics observed in these women, the most common was blindness, affecting 44.4% of the group. This was followed by short stature and unattractiveness, each present in 33.3% of the cases, and limb deformity, which was noted in 22.2%. Less common features included smallpox scars and cleft noses, each occurring in 11.1% of the women (Table 1).

### 2. Abilities of the “ugly women”

The nine women possessed distinct abilities. The most common among these were sewing and foreknowledge, each exhibited by 33.3% of the women. Wisdom and good housekeeping skills were also noted, with each ability present in 22.2% of the subjects. Less common were running a bar and finding hidden gold, each reported in 11.1% of the cases.

### 3. Prognoses of the “ugly women”

After overcoming their perceived ugliness and deformity, all nine women found happiness. Their sons attained high-ranking official positions, including that of prime minister (44.4%), and they acquired wealth (33.3%). Their families were shielded from disaster (11.1%), or the marital relationship improved, resulting in harmony between husband and wife (11.1%). One woman, initially described as ugly with smallpox scars and a cleft nose, eventually became beautiful (11.1%).

## DISCUSSION

Among the discernible body characteristics, the most common manifestation was blindness, affecting 44.4% of individuals. This was followed by short stature and unattractiveness, each occurring in 33.3% of cases, and limb deformity, which was present in 22.2%. Less common were smallpox scars and cleft noses, each noted in 11.1% of the population studied.

Based on the portrayal of unattractive women, it can be inferred that blindness, short stature, and limb deformity are considered elements of ugliness in Korea.

In this paper, we analyzed “ugly but capable women.” However, some disabilities including blindness, elbow joint deformity (곰배팔이), and knee joint deformity (장채다리) would decrease the capability of daily tasks. In late Joseon

**Table 1.** Deformities, abilities, and prognosis of ugly eccentric Korean women

Title	Deformity	Ability	Prognosis
A man who married a blind wife	Blind (봉사)	Wisdom	Son became an official position, Became rich
Wang's daughter in law	Short stature, ugly (단신, 박색)	Foreknowledge	Family protection
A brilliant blind daughter-in-law	Blind with opened eyes (당달봉사)	Foreknowledge	Became rich
Ugly woman who kicked out her husband and became a beauty	Smallpox scar, cleft nose (곰보자국, 언청코)	Good housekeeping skills, Wisdom	Became beautiful, Became rich
A blind person is excellent	Blind (소경)	Running a bar	Became rich
A lame daughter-in-law	Lame, blind with opened eyes (앉은뱅이, 당달봉사)	Found gold	Sons became ministers
Jeong Da-san's ugly wife	Short stature, ugly (단신, 박색)	Good at sewing, Foreknowledge	Son became a minister
Wisdom of Minister's daughter-in-law	Short stature, ugly (단신, 박색)	Good at sewing	Sons became ministers
A strange daughter-in-law, a heavenly person	Elbow joint deformity, knee joint deformity (곰배팔이, 장채다리)	Good at sewing, Good housekeeping skills	The concord of husband and wife

dynasty, the person who had these deformities were called a kind of crippled people who could not be incorporated with 'normal person'. If the people has deformity they were called 'ugly' irrespective of their facial morphology. It is the reason that we included these deformities as 'ugly' category.

Tales of women with extraordinary abilities reveal that they possess distinct types of cognition: fate-centered and reality-centered thinking. Women who engage in fate-centered thinking strive to enhance their lives within the confines of their predetermined destiny. This mindset is often manifested through family-centered relationships, as the family constitutes a system bound by blood ties, leaving individuals with little choice but to cooperate, show tolerance, and seek harmony within this framework. In contrast, women with reality-centered thinking actively respond to the prevailing social structure, endeavoring to address and ameliorate its inequities. They demonstrate their capabilities in domestic affairs, such as childbearing, needlework, supporting their spouses, and other household responsibilities [8].

In this study, which examined the specific abilities of the nine ugly women, the most common skills identified were

sewing and foreknowledge. Wisdom and proficiency in housekeeping were also frequently noted.

A hero or heroine is someone who not only wields a sword or gun but also addresses community problems through inner strength, such as spirit and perception. Heroines should not be seen merely as the female counterparts to heroes; rather, their presence and actions in women's lives should be acknowledged. Heroines are figures who highlight the absurdities of their reality, tackle these issues on their own, and establish a new world order. Women in stories have often been analyzed as extraordinary individuals possessing heroic qualities. If a hero is defined not only as someone who combats a physical adversary but also as someone who challenges an absurd reality and societal structures, then the protagonist of "an ugly woman turned into an unusual person" qualifies as a heroic figure [9].

After overcoming their ugliness and deformities, all nine women found happiness. Among them, one woman, previously marred by a smallpox scar and a cleft nose, became beautiful. A significant proportion of their sons attained high-ranking official positions, including that of prime minister (44.4%), and a substantial number of the women's families achieved wealth (33.3%).

Unlike other abilities, “foreknowledge” seems to be magical rather than real-life cases. It is one of the characteristics of the ‘fairly tail’ in Joseon dynasty.

The “eccentric women narrative” serves as a unique approach to problem-solving for women and their families. It reveals unexpected abilities that arise from breaking free from traditional “hidden” lives [10].

We assume that in 19th-century Korea, blindness, short stature, and limb deformity were considered elements of ugliness. Women who were perceived as ugly but capable harbored the desire to overcome adversity through their abilities in sewing, foreknowledge, wisdom, and good house-keeping skills. The ultimate aspiration for these women, particularly those with deformities, was to elevate their sons to high official positions and thereby enrich their families.

## REFERENCES

1. Jung SG, Hwang K, Hwang YJ. Lifestyle of Cleft Lip/Palate Patients in Korea Before the Introduction of the Millard Technique. *J Craniofac Surg*. May 10, 2024 [E-published]. <https://doi.org/10.1097/SCS.00000000000010269>
2. Hwang K. An Ugly Buddha Fixed an Ugly Woman and Made Her a Beauty. *Arch Plastic Surg*. 2023;50:329-30.
3. Uther H. The Types of International Folktales. A Classification and Bibliography. Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson. Part III. Appendices (FF Communications, 296). Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters; 2011.
4. Hwang K. Metamorphosis From an Ugly Girl to a Beauty. *J Craniofac Surg*. 2023;34:1901-2.
5. Jung SG, Hwang K, Hwang YJ. The psychology of patients with oral-facial clefts: a review of Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs* (L’homme qui rit). *J Craniofac Surg*. [In press].
6. Compendium of Korean Oral Literature [The Academy of Korean Studies website]. Available at: <https://gubi.aks.ac.kr/web/>. Accessed Feb 26, 2024.
7. Kim HH. The Rites of Passage of the Ugly Girls Transformed into Beauties: A Comparative Study of the Ugly-Girl Tales from Korean and Jewish Traditions. *Comparative Korean Studies*. 2014;22:117-54.
8. Lee SH. A study on women of unusual ability-tales. A thesis of Graduate School of Chungbook University. Cheongju-si: Chungbook University; 2007.
9. Lee EH. A Study on Woman Heroism described in Fairy-Tales. *J Lang Lit*. 2011;48:281-308.
10. Chung KM. A Research on Women Eccentric Narratives. A thesis of Graduate School of Ewha Womans University. Seoul: Ewha Womans University; 2020.