

# Exploring Anne Frank and Difficult Life Stories

Edited by  
Kirsten Kumpf Baele, Waltraud Maierhofer  
and Doyle Stevick

First published 2025

ISBN: 9781032645148 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781032645285 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781032645315 (ebk)

10

More Hidden Children

The Korean Film *Silenced*  
as/and Disability Rights Activism

*Waltraud Maierhofer*

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781032645315-13

# 10 More Hidden Children

## The Korean Film *Silenced* as/and Disability Rights Activism

*Waltraud Maierhofer*

It is difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality. It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart.

(Anne Frank 1995. *The Diary of a Young Girl*, July 15, 1944; 332)

### Introduction

What mobilizes people? What makes people—especially young people—act on a particular issue? What turns them into allies for marginalized members of society? The internet and social media have introduced a new tool for social movements, a tool that both facilitates organizing and reaching new audience groups and is available to people for whom traditional forms of organizing are less accessible. In this chapter, I feature one example to draw attention to forms of advocacy that are available to and leveraged by less privileged members of society.

Films depicting the life of an extraordinary person with a disability have a strong tradition of winning prestigious awards, garnering media attention, and earning popularity with audiences. I am building on such broad appeal of film when teaching an introductory college course titled “Disabilities and Inclusion in Global Writing and Film.” The goal is not for students to analyze the films as works of art but to examine their depiction of disabled individuals in their respective countries together with the barriers they encounter, the issues of discrimination they draw our attention to, and the arguments they make about Human Rights and the need for more inclusive societies. Readings and lectures provide additional information about the legal situation and disability activism in the countries and provide insights into the historical and structural bases of inequality and the place of films in public discourse. Students are asked to contemplate how writing and film not only reflect societal attitudes but also help shape them and bring challenges such as those of diversity into public and private discussion.

It is a course in the General Education (“Core”) category of “Diversity and Inclusion” within the World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Division and/or Global Health Studies Program at the University of Iowa.<sup>1</sup> One class in this category is required from students in all undergraduate colleges at the University of Iowa. The desired outcomes for courses in this category include deep personal engagement:

Students explore the historical and structural bases of inequality. Students learn about the benefits and challenges of diversity. Students reflect critically on their own social and cultural perspectives. Students increase their ability to engage people who have backgrounds or ideas different from their own.

(The University of Iowa 2022–23)

The challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion have inspired a large number of recent publications and the development of web resources for teaching on all levels. For my course, I rely on a Disability Studies approach. Disability scholars have developed arguments for “why disabled people should inhabit our democratic, shared public sphere,” as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explained (2017, 133). Garland-Thomson is a scholar of English literature who became a founder and leader in the field of Disability Culture and Justice as it emerged in the 1990s. By practicing this approach in their writing, students learn to argue

That the ways of being in the world we think of as disabilities must be understood as the natural variations, abilities, and limitations inherent in human embodiment. When this happens, disability will be understood not as a problem to be eliminated but, rather, as a valid way of being in the world that must be accommodated through a sustaining and sustainable environment designed to afford access for a wide range of human variations.

(Garland-Thomson 2017, 133)

Advocating for and ensuring the Human Rights of persons with disabilities (abbreviated as PWD) is not just an academic field but a worldwide movement. An important recent milestone has been the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). As stated in its article 1, governments take on the obligation to “promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity” (United Nations 1996–2022, article 1). As of October 2023, 188 countries have ratified the convention, making it one of the widest and most swiftly adopted conventions. It can be understood

as a “comprehensive instrument” to promote physical and social inclusion (Rimmerman 2012). One of its many aims is that states worldwide raise awareness and combat stereotypes related to persons with disabilities. This commitment includes promoting an accurate image and enhancing the voice of persons with disabilities in the media. Audiences will likely not be aware that an increased number of disabled characters on TV shows and in feature films including international productions available on streaming platforms may be due to increased governmental funding for such works.

After teaching “Disabilities and Inclusion in Global Writing and Film” for several years, I find it very encouraging that most of the students take equal rights for PWD already as a given, and that many of them report positive experiences with inclusive education and participate in volunteer work. In exploring recent narratives from around the world and their backgrounds, students better understand how knowledge about disabilities and Human Rights has motivated people and brought change. By examining policies in various countries, students gain insights into what structural changes have been successful and what issues remain. Students analyze and discuss media products (film, social media postings, and recordings) and narrative works, both formally and informally, orally and in written discourse. Students are asked to go beyond the first emotional response in analyzing how the specific film or writing makes an argument for inclusion and/or promotes empathy and activism.

In this essay, I describe my approach, using as an example the South Korean film, *Silenced* (*Dogani*, 2011, directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk). As in the classroom, I introduce the film with a brief overview of the real-life events it is based on and the film’s reception, which set in motion a wave of citizen activism and led to revisions of laws affecting persons with disabilities in South Korea.<sup>2</sup> In the main section, I provide guiding questions for discussion of the film after students have watched it or examined reviews and related studies, and we investigate key scenes in groups and as a class. The film thus becomes a prime example of how writing and film can invoke a deep emotional response, raise awareness of Human Rights violations, and how such awareness can lead to change. This essay will conclude, as does the coursework, with reflections about the personal and societal values of equity and empathy and experiences of exclusion/inclusion.

A standard reading in introductory courses in Disability Studies is biologist Ruth Hubbard’s article, “Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Should not Inhabit the World?” (2010; first published 1990). She reframes issues arising from the possibilities of genetic testing and prenatal testing for disabilities by applying the question that Hannah Arendt asked in the epilogue of her commentary on the trial of Adolf Eichmann: Who has the “right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world?” (1977). Hubbard insists that any argument on this topic needs to be seen

from the perspective of the rise of eugenics in the early twentieth century, which was in Germany called “racial hygiene.” She points to the direct link between the campaign of “selection and eradication” of genetic diseases and disabilities and the subsequent genocide of Jews, gypsies, communists, homosexuals, and others the Nazis considered to be “undesirables.”

### The Hidden Children of *Silenced* and Their Story

In order to frame the teaching of *Silenced*, a brief summary of the real events behind its story, their unveiling, and the novel it was adapted from set the stage. Korean bestselling and critically acclaimed writer and journalist Gong Ji-young [Gong Jiyeong, Kong Chiyong] (born 1963) published the novel titled *Dogani (The Crucible)* first in online serial format (2008), then in book format (2009), and an English translation appeared more than a decade later (Gong 2023). The film and its artistic techniques, as well as the role of social media in spreading its impact, merit separate examination, but are beyond the scope of this piece.<sup>3</sup> I begin the unit with an outline of the actual events and a brief analysis of the expectations the trailer raises. At Inhwa School for the Deaf in the South Korean metropolis of Gwangju, young Deaf students were the victims of repeated sexual assaults by members of the faculty and administration of the boarding school from 2000 to 2004 (Lee 2011b).

According to a 2005 criminal investigation, six teachers, including the principal, sexually molested or raped at least nine of their deaf-mute students. A newly appointed teacher alerted human rights groups in 2005, which prompted the investigation, and he was fired from his job for making the report. Nine victims came forward, but additional victims, traumatized or fearing the repercussions, are believed to have stayed silent, so that the full scope of the crimes is unlikely to ever be known. The police began an investigation four months later, but only after former students talked to a national TV station. As the Gwangju city government and school board tossed the case back and forth, students and parents staged a sit-in for eight months outside their offices, calling for justice. Of the six perpetrators, four received prison terms of one to two years, while the other two were freed immediately because the statute of limitations had expired. The appellate court reduced the initial court ruling even further and suspended all the jail sentences. Among those jailed, two were released after less than a year. Four of the six teachers were reinstated in the school, which continued to receive state funding. The case didn’t draw much media attention when it went on trial in 2005, but human rights activists and victims criticized the lax legal action taken against the abusers (Bae 2011; Kim 2011a).

In 2008, South Korea ratified the UN CRPWD, and “enacted unprecedented legislation to prohibit disability-based discrimination”

(Arrington 2021, 233). People were sensitized to the topic of discrimination against and abuse of disabled persons. Abuse is the ultimate form of discrimination, in the words of the UN convention “a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person” (UNCRPWD, preamble h). Director-screenwriter Hwang Dong-hyuk (born in 1971) adapted the novel into a polished film titled *Dogani* [*Silenced*] in 2011. Backed by media conglomerate CJ Entertainment, it had a large budget (about \$4 million) and a cast of famous South-Korean actors (Chung and Diffrient 2021, 3). It adopted, as an American reviewer noted, “mainstream genre conventions to develop ambience, suspense and calculated twists” (Lee 2011c). It was only after the film’s release and enormous public impact that the facts about the trial and its outcome were addressed in national newspapers including in English-language ones. Its explicit depiction of the victims’ suffering created a massive public outcry against the sexual predators’ inhumane acts and the perceived flaws of the legal system which spread by social media (Moon 2019, 86). Massive public protest prompted the investigations to be reopened, and the City of Gwangju closed the school two months after the release of the film (“Police to Reinvestigate”; Na 2011a). The South Korean parliament “unanimously passed a bill in October 2011, which eliminated the statute of limitations for sex crimes against children under 13 and disabled women; the bill also increases the maximum penalty to life in prison” (Chung and Diffrient 2021, 30). It was nicknamed “Dogani Bill” after the novel and film (Kim 2011b).

After *Silenced*, South Korean film producers continued to address true-life events about sexual and physical violence, especially with children and teens as victims, such as *Don’t Cry Mommy* (*Don keurai Mami*, directed by Kim Yong-han 2012), *Hope* (*Sowon*, directed by Lee Joon-ik, 2013), or *Han Gong-ju* (directed by Lee Su-jin, 2014). In the 2000s, feminists continued to address sexual crime and speak out about the need for assistance and support for the victims of sexual violence of all ages and abilities, fighting the persistent opinion of sexual violence as “private” or a “matter of female chastity” in Korean society (Palley 2009, 219).

*Silenced* also exerted a forceful impact beyond the borders of South Korea, especially in China where it raised awareness of the existence of sexual and physical abuse of teenagers. As Chinese students shared in class, Chinese viewers were used to more conservative and traditional sex and gender roles portrayed in films. One student recalled,

In the early 2000s, the topic of sexual harassment was still a cultural taboo that all Chinese citizens felt ashamed of and afraid to talk about publicly as well as privately. The movie *Silenced* enabled Chinese audiences to notice an existing problem with sexual crimes due to legislation flaws.

(Shi 2019)

Its plot made viewers reflect and resulted in advocacy for legislation changes or reform to protect the rights of defenseless subjects. “The film also shaped the tastes and expectations of Chinese viewers when it came to films about sexual crimes. However, due to explicit elements of nudity and sex, the discussion of the film remained underground” (Shi 2019). The Chinese film, *Angels Wear White* (directed by Vivian Qu, 2017), which also addresses sexual crimes, was called “a Chinese response to *Silenced*” by critics and in social media posts (Chen).

### How Does *Silenced* Tell the Story of the Abuses, the Trial, and its Outcome?

The film *Silenced* places the school for the Deaf not in a major metropolis but in the fictional remote city of Mujin, advertised in one of the concluding scenes as “City of Fog” on a poster he walks by (min. 1:59:06). The fog becomes symbolic of the fog of resistance and inertia that hides the crimes committed and protects the perpetrators. The film takes place in a rather short, unspecified time frame. It begins with the arrival of a new young teacher named Kang In-ho (Gong Yoo) and his coincidental acquaintance with Seo Yoo-jin (Jung Yu-mi), a young woman who works for the local Human Rights Office.<sup>4</sup> The audience learns about Kang’s personal story and life difficulties later. Kang notices right away that the children are strangely distanced, afraid, and not responding to sign language. When he encounters screaming from a bathroom at night, the janitor rudely prevents him from investigating. Soon he begins to uncover that at least some of the children have been physically and sexually abused by principal Lee (Jang Gwang), his twin brother and teacher Lee (played by the same actor, Jang Gwang), and headmaster teacher named Park Bo-hyun (Min-Sang Kim). One child, a brother of Jeon Min-soo<sup>5</sup> (Seung-hwan Baek), has committed suicide. Together with Seo, Kang tries to initiate a criminal investigation but must overcome resistance from school and city administration, even the police and prosecutor, all of whom are covering up what has been going on at the school for a long time. Finally, they bring the case of three deaf-mute children to court, the two girls Jin Joo-ri (Jeong In-seo) and Kim Jeon-doo (Kim Hyeon-soo), and the boy Jeon Min-soo (Baek Seung-hwan). It is obvious that the accused continue using blatant lies and even bribes, so that the prosecutor withholds convincing evidence, and the offenders get very light sentences. Min-soo is desperate about the injustice, and when teacher Park indicates his intent to rape him again the following night, they both die under a train. Kang is seen with a group protesting the verdict, but the police disperse them.

After this highly emotional and dramatic confrontation, the film ends with a short scene that is marked as taking place a year later. Kang now

lives in a big city, and Seo writes to him about the lost appeal and the condition of the two girls who have left the school and are improving in the care of herself and others. Before the credits begin to roll, the viewer reads, “Currently [2011], some assailants are reinstated at the school and court rulings for the case are done. But the effort to dig up the truth is still ongoing” (1:59:47–2:00:04). This note is clearly meant to inspire the viewers to join efforts in protesting the light verdicts and the reinstatement of the perpetrators as teachers.

### **Encouraging Cross-Cultural Empathy and Advocacy with *Silenced***

When introducing this film for class, I give appropriate trigger warnings about the abuse theme and upsetting nature of the film, giving students a choice between watching the film and reading about the events behind it in reviews such as the ones cited above, summarizing an article on disability and crime, and an English-language press release related to a study on disability and abuse in South Korea several years after the film (see “1 in 10 Disabled Children” 2016). I explicitly give permission to fast-forward difficult scenes. Furthermore, I remind them that the abuse scenes, while appearing realistic, were filmed with the children and the abusers in separate rooms and other measures, conforming to the highest ethical principles of the film industry. Students are also encouraged to find more recent news items or posts on advocacy sites, especially if there are students with Korean-language skills in the class. It is from the latter group of students that I have learned aspects of the film not discussed in scholarship, such as the meaning of signs which are not subtitled or of names of characters or actors. For context, we draw upon Eunjung Kim’s 2006 survey article, “History of Disability: Korea,” which emphasizes the role of the values of achievement, authority, chastity, respect for elders and educators, and the history of special education in Korea.

The film clearly aims at an emotional response, and discussion begins with students’ reactions in small groups. The class then reflects its very different circumstances of watching the film as part of a class in the United States versus in South Korea shortly after it was released. The question may arise why the director included scenes that may appear sadistic and sensationalized. I remind students of the fact that the “real” trial that had revealed the crimes had not made national news before.

Explicit scenes dramatize children’s fear and helplessness and effectively appeal to the viewers’ empathy and anger. While some critics question “the need to go this far to shake up the audience” (Lee 2011c), the strategy to emphasize the harm to the children proved effective in mobilizing substantial numbers and ultimately changing legislation. (There is a



similar debate in Holocaust education, of course, about how to use atrocity images responsibly.)

What can students learn by reflecting on the depiction of the children? The film reduces the number of nine victims in the actual trial to three, which has the effect of making them appear more as individuals than a group.<sup>6</sup> They have characteristics in common, though: They convey the impression of innocence, they are beautiful (a quality even invoked by their names),<sup>7</sup> timid, sensitive, and have nobody who cares about them. The child actors were 10 and 12 years old at the time of filming, which is congruent with the ages discussed. No relatives of the children appear except for the grandmother of the youngest girl. She accepts a settlement because she needs money to care for her sick son. Students tend to understand her priorities and that justice cannot be achieved as long as the basic economic needs of the disabled children and their families are not met.

The film constructs the antagonism of abusers and victims as simple and clear: the perpetrators appear as cruel and inhumane, the victims as pure and innocent, helpless and hopeless. They are not dressed provocatively but wear simple and plain clothes, and they act very demurely. Haircuts, dress, and behavior stress childlike features. Despite the trauma of abuse, they soon develop a trusting bond with their helpers. One of the girls constantly eats sweets. The viewer is presented with a clear distinction between evil and good. All the young victims are of lower socio-economic status, while the abusers are of higher. The new teacher and the human rights worker also are outsiders in the town. They understand the victims' physical and emotional suffering and become their helpers (more on this aspect below). They question them in a subtle and temperate manner, employing sign language, and they make video recordings of their testimony which avoids secondary harm and minimizes stimulations of past memory and emotional discomfort.

However, even the filmmakers undermine the children telling their own stories, as the scenes quickly change to flashbacks where the children suffer silently or utter unheard cries. The relationships between the children remain unexplored; there is no sense of helpful solidarity, and indeed, that isolation may be part of what renders them so powerless. Min-soo clearly had a strong bond to his brother, and he is motivated by his suicide to avenge him and stop their rapist on his own. He crosses over from timid victim to angry and violent attacker, but he meets his death before the audience can judge him for this action.

### **Who Is Being Tested for Their Moral Strength?**

Before we explore the theme of silence and silencing more deeply, I reveal that the original Korean title was different and translates to "The Crucible,"

subtly directing the viewer away from the abused to the teacher and how his moral strength is tested. Some students will know the meaning of the word from chemistry or from Arthur Miller's play with the same title about the Salem witchcraft trials (*The Crucible*, 1953). In chemistry, a "crucible" is a container in which metallic elements or other substances are subjected to high temperatures and melted to create a new alloy. The term is applied to people who undergo a severe test or trial, revealing whether their moral standards prevail, whether they sacrifice their principles or falsely confess. In the film, it is not the abuse victims who are exposed to such a test of character. It is the teacher Kang whose first name, In-ho, tellingly means Humanity and Goodness. He initially has a strong belief in the legal system as the channels to obtain justice but witnesses its shortcomings and the tragic consequences for the children. During the protests following Min-soo's death, Kang holds up a photo and keeps shouting that Min-soo could not hear or speak. For speakers of Korean, the name which means gentle, affable citizen (according to Behindthename.com), underscores that the disabled are citizens with rights. Kang's departure from the town can be seen as acknowledgment of failure.

The explicit message to the viewer is packaged in Seo's report to Kang of her and other volunteers taking in the girls Joo-ri and Jeon-doo after the trial and caring for them. The email text is heard as voice-over and culminates in the sentence: "They realized they're precious just like everyone else" (min. 1:57:59). That is not all, though, as she reflects "that we should not fight to change the world itself but to stop it from changing us [from what] that we really are" (sic 1:58:18). Most students agree enthusiastically with both statements.<sup>8</sup> They concur with the expressed belief in the goodness of individuals and warning against complacency with power structures that corrupt such goodness and cause suffering.

### **Who or What Is Silenced and How Does the Film Employ Silencing?**

After the above warnings, most students watch the film on their own. Class coverage moves from conversations in small groups about personal reactions and most memorable scenes to me recapitulating media and public reactions including legal changes in Korea which in this chapter are outlined above. I highlight the film as an example of fiction and film having a tangible impact in real life. Then we watch specific scenes again and discuss how they evoke an emotional reaction in the viewer, paying special attention to empathy and outrage.

Inclusion requires students to become sensitive to whose voices are heard, whose are silenced, whose cries are heeded, and whose are dismissed. The film's coordination of camera work and sound or the absence of it, the use

of silence and silencing helps students to develop a nuanced appreciation of this aspect of inclusion. The deaf-mute children already live in silence. Additionally, they are largely invisible because they are hidden from the public in the boarding school. They are secluded in the school and some are abandoned by their families. Apparently, the children were not taught in sign language at the school, although most know how to use it with each other. They are held in a state of non-communication with the adults. When they find advocates who take them seriously and believe them, their testimony is not believed, or even withheld.

The English title, *Silenced*, addresses the paradox that the children are prevented from getting the crimes committed against them noticed and heard, not because they cannot speak but because the persons with authority do not want to hear and know about the crimes. First, the perpetrators chose victims who had no person of authority to trust in, no immediate family members, and no teacher or other employee who would listen and not protect the abusers. Then, the persons of authority in the school system and town send Kang and Seo on to others, claiming after-instruction events or the school were outside of their dominion.

At the beginning of the first court scene, the deaf-mute children are excluded from knowing what is going on. (Students often describe this scene as one of the most memorable ones.) The filmmakers focus on the tension by contrasting the experience of hearing persons in the courtroom with that of the students with hearing impairments and how information is withheld from them. At first, there is no sign language interpreter present, so the children have no idea what is being said until others protest on their behalf and demand an interpreter. Initially, all they can do is lip read to the best of their ability. Here, an additional fact is helpful for understanding. It was only in 2015 that Korean Sign Language (KSL) was recognized as an official language after the National Assembly passed the KSL act. The act (articles 2.4, 11.3, and 16.2) declared education in sign language a right of deaf persons and required among many other details that KSL is used in schools for the deaf as a teaching and learning tool and that the state and local governments provide interpreters at judicial procedures (“A brief history of Korean Sign Language”).

Twice, the filmmakers employ silencing as a technique by muting tumultuous scenes. After students have discussed in small groups the scenes they found most memorable (often the depictions and narrations of abuse), we rewatch key segments and pay attention to the sounds they hear and see (yes!) and where these two sensations clash. After the mild verdicts are read and there are loud protests and chaotic interactions in the room, the scene goes quiet to show what the students may be experiencing. The teachers and administrators are being congratulated for their short sentences, while the students and their sympathizers are in shock, upset and shouting or

screaming. The entire room is in loud chaos as the defending side protests the judge's verdict. At this point, the sound of the room is cut off and switches to a melancholic melody, while the audience still watches the tumultuous scene in slow motion with crying children and adult observers screaming or lashing out, Kang's stunned expression of disappointment, and the prosecutor's evasive looks (min. 1:43.03–1:44:45). The film mutes the sound of protests, just like the claims of abuse have been silenced by the corrupt judicial process. The second muting happens after the death of Min-soo in the above-mentioned scene with Kang in the middle of the street protesters. Armed police forces are fighting them with water cannons and removing them using violence. Kang is forcefully held down, water still pouring over him. Here, the sounds of protests and fighting are again replaced with the slow, melancholic tune. It is this sorrowful silence over visuals of Kang's final defeat that gives the viewer room for their own scream and contemplation about how to react to such injustice, how to put empathy with the victims into action. Again, the film doubles the meaning of institutional power not wanting to hear protest by eliminating sound from a scene that is clearly agitated and noisy. Students then reflect about their thoughts and feelings during the void, how empathy is different from pity, and they explore in small groups other cases where empathy and anger served as motivators, be it in their own lives or what they have encountered elsewhere.

### **What Can We Learn from Stereotypes of Persons with Disabilities and Helpers?**

Chung and Diffrient show in their monograph, *Movie Minorities*, that issues of disability rights have moved from South Korean minoritarian filmmaking to the mainstream (105–42). They note that films such as *Silenced* “invite their audiences to reflect on societal prejudices and to become more engaged citizens for whom human rights is a matter of pressing national concern” (Chung and Diffrient 123). Since the presidency of Kim Dae-jung, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea, “rights advocacy has become a prominent facet of fiction and nonfiction films” in South Korea, in fact “part of a larger cultural phenomenon that reflects shifting social values and growing civic awareness of the rights and dignity of oppressed, silenced members of South Korean society” (Chung and Diffrient 23).

*Silenced* has been praised for the legal changes its reception brought about and the closing of the school. However, Disability Studies scholars have voiced concerns about the film's shortcomings, such as using familiar tropes of the disabled as silent child victims and adult heroes who show

them affection and protection and fight and speak on their behalf. Although Kang is a troubled hero and flees the place of his defeat at the end, he appears through most of the film as the selfless intervener and able-bodied defender of their rights, pushing the children into the background, which represents “a propensity within the culture at large” (Chung and Diffrient 2021, 8). He does not assist the children in overcoming their helplessness. Film scholars Chung and Diffrient conclude in their study: “Thus the binary and power hierarchy between the benevolent state (imagined as powerful, able-bodied males who can extend or withhold protection) and the vulnerable (and thus sexualized) subjects with disability was yet again reconfirmed and legitimated after the scandal” (Chung and Diffrient 2021, 22). There is also one female medical professional who refuses to advocate for the children. Seo is reduced to an assisting role, and in the end can offer protection and nurturing only in the specific case of the two girls.<sup>9</sup> Students’ awareness is directed to notice the film’s affirmation of the power structures between men and women, able-bodied and disabled.

At the end, the children are cited as reflecting about their worth in society. The surviving girls still depend on the help from governmental organizations and volunteers. They are not recognized as part of a societal group with rights and are not treated as such. The outrage caused by the film led to immediate legal changes for prosecution of abuse in institutions but did not change the perception of disabled persons overall, namely, as helpless and in need of saving instead of citizens with rights and entitlement to dignity. This goal was already expressed in 2007 when the government passed South Korea’s Disabilities Act (“Anti-Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act,” 2007).<sup>10</sup> The act promises to fully integrate people with disabilities into the larger society and to “establish their right to equality which will ensure their human dignity and sense of value” (Chapter 1, article 1). *Silenced* shows how this goal is not achieved by declaration but has to take place in the heads of all citizens.

### **How Do Students Process the Emotional Appeal of the Film, and Can It Support More Inclusive Attitudes and Behavior?**

Students react to *Silenced* in encouraging ways. (There is, of course, a self-selecting component in that students who enroll in the course, are already sensitive to barriers disabled persons face.) Most students are genuinely interested in the topic and quite a few have volunteered in inclusive programs for PWD. However, there are others who have never encountered a person in “real life” who has a severe form of impairment, for example, is quadriplegic, has a severe form of cerebral palsy, or is completely deaf. Students tend to be more upset by the facts that

the deaf children were isolated, not educated according to their abilities, especially not taught in sign language, and not valued as human beings than by the shortcomings of the penal code. While very few students in the course identify as having a disability or learning impairment, nearly all attended public schools, benefitted from inclusive education, and are convinced of its benefits.

Providing additional information about the intersection of disabilities and abuse in the US helps US-based students assess the relevance of the South-Korean case in domestic context. Otherwise, some students tend to believe that cases of abuse and injustice only happen in societies they deem as “backwards.” While *Silenced* was only one fictionalized event that may seem geographically removed, similar acts of violence are all too familiar in US history and even today. I provide additional recommended readings for students to consult for their papers. For example, the website *Disability Justice* is dedicated to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and contains statistics about the frequency of sexual assault of PWD in the US today. Persons with developmental disabilities are at an especially high risk of abuse and neglect. A clinical report published in 2021 found that children with milder forms of disability are at higher risk of abuse and neglect than more profoundly affected children (Legano et al. 2021). Other students may explore how the American public in the past shared with Korea and other countries an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude to disabled persons put away in institutions and inform themselves about the history of abuse and neglect in US institutions for disabled persons and what led to change in the 1960s (see O’Brien, Newell, and McEninery 2006, 32). Students are also encouraged to explore for their writing assignment news sources about abuse of PWD or sexual abuse and the judicial outcomes/handling in the United States and the issue of poor care (an example is Leys 2022).

Knowledge of this risk and willingness to be an ally are important for everyone, not just those in healthcare professions and special education. Everyone can become more aware of whether they treat persons with disabilities with respect. Everyone can ask themselves what they can do to ensure their safety, freedom, and sense of worthiness, which are non-negotiable aspects of respect. If we do not, we easily fall into the dynamics of what Park called “the great drama of globalization” in which the losers become invisible, the neglected victims of “econocide”:

It is imperative that we engage in a new type of scholarship and activism that contributes to the creation of a world where ‘the losers’ of globalization are conferred autonomy and capabilities rather than more and more layers of protection or pity.

(Park 2016, 40)

## Conclusion

Examining the difficult story of *Silenced* enables students to think critically about forms of portrayal and to make stronger arguments for more inclusive societies; it also helps them to become aware of strong emotions such as anger and empathy and how they can motivate activism. This course on the representation of disabilities in writing and film and the role of the professor in it are guided by the wish to move us from thinking about inclusion and anti-discrimination to practicing it. Whether the class has a lasting effect cannot easily be tracked. In the concluding writing assignment, I ask students for a personal reflection about a selection of the films and writings of the semester with special attention to the final goal of the “Diversity and Inclusion” learning outcome: Do they perceive an increase in awareness of physical and social barriers, their ability to engage with persons with disabilities, and advocate for them should they encounter anti-inclusion attitudes. *Silenced* is referenced a lot as leaving a lasting impulse for the need to hear the difficult stories of those hidden from their college-life bubble. I therefore end this chapter with a few such reflective statements by the students themselves. I find thoughts such as these rewarding and encouraging.

## Student Statements

Throughout high school, I spent numerous hours working and interacting with special education students, whether through Best Buddies, or Special Olympics. Putting it into perspective, it is sickening even picturing one of my “buddies” undergoing an incident half that bad. While there are limits to disabled people, they still are humans, and all humans deserve refuge. Acknowledging that there are people in this world who torment others without processing the harm done is alarming (Jill, September 2021).

True acceptance of those with a disability is needed, not pity, or an inspirational narrative. To truly be accepting of those with disabilities one must realize that not all people with disabilities have the same experience. In class this semester we saw those with a disability in a wide variety of situations, which shows that people with disabilities all have different life experiences just as any other person. Challenging one’s own prejudices and attitudes must be done in order to create an anti-ableist society (Molly, December 2021).

For me, *Silenced* was the movie that affected me most emotionally. ... With the intentions of social advocacy, with this sort of lens, the film unapologetically can show the real-life issue without having to worry about being socially acceptable. In all, I felt *Silenced* used its platform incredibly well and the way they portrayed disability with respect and compassion

while advocating for their situation was impeccable. ... I cannot speak for the disabled community on what is and what is not a positive representation, but I can say for a fact that in an age when we are much more openly seeing representations of disability, it is now time to hold creators accountable. Simply including a character with a disability is no longer enough; the media should absolutely have the intention of education and advocacy, the two tools that will actually benefit those in the disabled community (Bailey, December 2021).

This film is a call to action to increase awareness to protect the vulnerable, but it also celebrates the resilience of those who have survived. As part of society, we are all encouraged to speak up against injustice and to ensure that all voices are heard (Mayquelin, September 2023).

This film has a very interesting way of getting the main point across—this point being to demand accountability and fight corruption in society. It does this beautifully, however, through visual storytelling. The film *Silenced* shows that corruption is hidden in society, and people need to take action in order to live in a better society (Alex, September 2023).

## Notes

- 1 This is the same category that Kirsten Kumpf Baele's course, "Anne Frank and her Story," serves (see her contribution in this volume). However, as of July 2024, the category is to be renamed and the learning goals adjusted following directives by the Board of Regents.
- 2 In this chapter, the romanization of Korean titles and names follows the McCune-Reischauer system as the academic standard endorsed by the Library of Congress. Whenever Korean authors' works that have been published in English are cited, their names are presented in the way that they are printed in the source materials. Other Korean names appear in their native standard order, with surname first.
- 3 See Chung and Diffrient 2021, on the actual events Park 2016, 17.
- 4 No details are provided but her office is probably based on services offered by the Korea Human Rights Foundation (KHRF) which was founded in 1999; its mission includes education on Human Rights.
- 5 Most scholarship uses this spelling although he name is transcribed as Minsu in the subtitles.
- 6 See the chapter by Oren B. Stier on the effectiveness of selecting individuals in appealing to specific audience reactions.
- 7 According to a website about Korean names, Yoo-ri can mean class-pane and associates a very beautiful girl (Behindthename.com). The viewer of the film may have similar associations because of the child actresses' appearance.
- 8 This observation opens an intriguing parallel to one of Anne Frank's statements in the entry dated July 15, 1944, the second-to-last entry of her diary, quoted as motto to this chapter.
- 9 On the different gender politics in the film versus the novel, see Park 2016.
- 10 See National Human Rights Commission of Korea, n.d. For the South Korean disability movement and how it changed the law and Korean society within the rights movements for marginalized groups, see for example the study by JaeWon Kim who mentions *Silenced* and the Dogani law (Kim 2021, 224).



## References

- “1 in 10 Disabled Children Face Physical, Verbal, and Sexual Abuse.” 2016. *The Korea Bizwire*, February 19, 2016. <http://koreabizwire.com/1-in-10-disabled-children-face-physical-verbal-and-sexual-abuse>.
- “A Basic History of Korean Sign Language.” 2021. *Korea.net*, June 11, 2021. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/HonoraryReporters/view?articleId=199389>.
- Arrington, Celeste L. 2021. “Disabled People’s Fight for Rights in South Korea and Japan.” *Current History* 120(827): 233–39. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2021.120.827.233>.
- Bae, Ji-sook. 2011. “Film Rekindles Rage over Inhwa School Case.” *The Korea Herald*, September 29, 2011. <http://nwww.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110929000867>.
- Chen, Lux. 2018. “Angels Wear White (Jia Nianhua). Review.” *Cineaste Magazine*, XLIII(4). <https://www.cineaste.com/fall2018/angels-wear-white>.
- Chung, Hye Seung, and David Scott Diffrient. 2021. *Movie Minorities: Transnational Rights Advocacy and South Korean Cinema*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Disability Justice. N. d. “Sexual Abuse.” Accessed November 17, 2022. <https://disabilityjustice.org/sexual-abuse/>.
- Frank, Anne. 1995. *The Diary of a Young Girl. The Definitive Edition*, edited by Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler. Translated by Susan Massotty. New York: Doubleday.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2017. “Eugenic World Building and Disability: The Strange World of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*.” *Journal of Medical Humanities* 38(2): 133–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-015-9368-y>.
- Gong, Ji-Young. 2009. *Dogani*. [The crucible]. Seoul: Chang-Bi.
- Gong, Jiyoung. 2023. *Togani*. Translated by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton. (Modern Korean Fiction.) Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Hubbard, Ruth. 2010. “Abortion and Disability: Who Should and Should Not Inhabit the World?” In *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed., 107–19. New York: Routledge. (Reprinted from *The Politics of Women’s Biology*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990, 179–98.)
- Hwang, Dong-hyuk (dir.) 2012. *Silenced (Dogani, South Korea, 2011)*. Written by Hwang Dong-hyuk based on the novel by Gong Ji-young. Perf. Gong You and Jung Yu-mi. CJ Entertainment. DVD.
- Kim, Eunjoo, Jie Zhang, and Xiaoke Sun. 2019. “Comparison of Special Education in the United States, Korea, and China.” *International Journal of Special Education* 33(4): 796–814. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1219486.pdf>.
- Kim, Eunjung. 2006. “History of Disability: Korea.” In *Encyclopedia of Disabilities*, edited by Gary L. Albrecht, et al. 858–63, Thousand Oaks: Sage. Ebook.
- Kim, JaeWon. 2021. “From Invisible Beneficiaries to Rights Bearers: How the Disability Rights Movement Changed the Law and Korean Society.” In *Rights Claiming in South Korea*, edited by Celeste L. Arrington and Patricia Goedde. 217–35, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Rahn. 2011a. “Film Ignites Call for Probe into Assaults.” *The Korea Times*, September 27, 2011. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/09/117\\_95595.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/09/117_95595.html).

- Kim, Rahn. 2011b. "National Assembly Passes 'Dogani Law'." *The Korea Times*, October 28, 2011. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/10/113\\_97529](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/10/113_97529).
- Korean Sign Language Act, Act No. 13978, February 3, 2016, Korea Law Translation Center, Korea Legislation Research Institute (KLRI) 2019. [https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng\\_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=43932&type=part&key=38](https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=43932&type=part&key=38).
- Kwon, Hyunsoo. 2005. "Inclusion in South Korea: The Current Situation and Future Directions." *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education* 52(1): 59–69.
- Lee, Hyo-won. 2011b. "Film Examines Child Abuse Case." *The Korea Times*, August 24, 2011. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/08/135\\_93389.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2011/08/135_93389.html).
- Lee, Maggie. 2011c. "Silenced: Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 26, 2011. [www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/silenced-film-review-276353](http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/silenced-film-review-276353).
- Legano, Lori A., Desch, L. W., Messner, S. A., Idzerda, S., Flaherty, E. G., Council on Child Abuse and Neglect; Council On Children with Disabilities. 2021. "Maltreatment of Children with Disabilities." *Pediatrics* 147(5): 401–11, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-050920>. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/147/5/e2021050920/180813/Maltreatment-of-Children-With-Disabilities>.
- Leys, Tony. 2022. "Iowa to Close Scandal-plagued Glenwood Institution for People with Severe Disabilities." *Des Moines Register*, April 7, 2022. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/health/2022/04/07/glenwood-resource-center-iowa-closing-disabilities-dhs-investigation-experiments-abuse/9498913002/>.
- Moon, Miri. 2019. *International News Coverage and the Korean Conflict: The Challenges to Reporting Practices*. Singapore: Springer Nature. Ebook.
- Na, Jeong-ju. 2011a. "'Dogani' School to Be Shut Down." *The Korea Times*, October 31, 2011. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/10/113\\_97714.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/10/113_97714.html).
- National Human Rights Commission of Korea. N.d. "Anti-Discrimination against and Remedies for Persons with Disabilities Act." Public Law No 8341, first enacted April 10, 2007. Accessed October 15, 2022. <https://www.humanrights.go.kr/site/homepage/menu/viewMenu?menuid=002003001005>.
- O'Brien, Patricia, Christopher Newell, and Irene McEninery with Evril Thesing. 2006. "Lifting the Silence." In *Community Disability Services: An Evidence-Based Approach to Practice*, edited by Ian Dempsey and Karen Nankervis, 27–50. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- Palley, Marian Lief. 2009. "Feminism in a Confucian Society. The Women's Movement in Korea." In *Women of Japan & Korea: Continuity and Change*, edited by Joyce Gelb and Marian Lief Palley, 274–93. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Park, You-me. 2016. "The Crucible of Sexual Violence: Militarized Masculinities and the Abjection of Life in Post-Crisis, Neoliberal South Korea." *Feminist Studies* 42(1): 17–40.
- "Police to Reinvestigate Sex-Abuse Claim at Deaf School." 2011. *Chosun Media*, September 29, 2011. [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2011/09/29/2011092901215.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2011/09/29/2011092901215.html).
- Rimmerman, Arie. 2012. *Social Inclusion of People with Disabilities. National and International Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Shi, Junqui. 2019. "The Reception of the South Korean film *Silenced* in South Korea and China." Student honors paper, University of Iowa.
- The University of Iowa. 2022–23. "GE CLAS Core Areas and Requirements: Diversity and Inclusion." *General Catalogue*. <https://catalog.registrar.uiowa.edu/liberal-arts-sciences/general-education-program/#di>.
- United Nations Human Rights–Office of the High Commissioner. 1996–2022. "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." Adopted December 13, 2006. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>.