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BEYOND THE HUMAN IN *TIGER STRIPES* (2023) AND *JANGSANBEOM* (2017) Malaysian and Korean Cinema in Dialogue with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the theme of metamorphosis in contemporary Asian cinema through a comparative analysis of Amanda Nell Eu's *Tiger Stripes* (2023) and Heo Jeong's *JangSanBeom* (2017). Using Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as a foundational literary and theoretical framework, this study explores how these films employ regional folklore to articulate modern anxieties surrounding identity, familial alienation, and societal pressure. It investigates the transformation of the body in *Tiger Stripes* as a potent allegory for female puberty and a subversion of patriarchal folklore, arguing that the protagonist's transformation represents a reclamation of agency. In contrast, it analyzes the metamorphosis of voice in *JangSanBeom* as a psychological horror that weaponizes grief and maternal guilt, turning the familiar into the uncanny. By juxtaposing these narratives, this paper reveals a shared Kafkaesque

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thread of communication breakdown within the family unit yet highlights their divergent conclusions: one of empowered defiance, the other of tragic submission to trauma. Ultimately, the paper argues that these films demonstrate the enduring power of the tiger as a cultural symbol to critique contemporary social structures and explore the fragile boundaries of the self.

KEYWORDS

Metamorphosis, Kafkaesque, Folklore, Tiger, Abjection, Asian Cinema

In literature and cinema, the transformation of humans into animals serves as a powerful metaphor for exploring themes of identity, alienation, and the fluidity of the human condition. One of the most iconic representations of this is Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*,¹ where the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, awakens to find himself inexplicably transformed into a giant insect. Kafka's tale is not merely about a physical transformation; it delves into the psychological and existential consequences of this metamorphosis, symbolizing the isolation and dehumanization of modern life. Similarly, cinematic representations of body-changing transformations often build on this tradition, using the visual medium to amplify the tension between human identity and animal form.

One such example in Asian cinema is *Tiger Stripes* (2023) by Malaysian director Amanda Nell Eu. Here, the body transformation is pivotal and serves as the primary focus of this paper. This film presents the transformation of a character into an animal form; specifically, a girl undergoing puberty transforming herself into a partial tiger. This film adds layers to the symbolic and psychological implications of transform-

¹ Franz Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 89-139.

ation, and more so, with the elements of the traditional folklore stories in the region. Just as folklore creatures transform their bodies to mimic humans, this film imagines a girl transforming to express animalistic sounds and frustration, which parallels Kafka's imagination.

This paper broadens the analysis by incorporating a South Korean film to explore the theme of fluidity in the tiger's symbolism. Tigers in South Korean folklore possess many of the same transformative qualities as those found across the broader Asian region, and furthermore their representation has evolved into modern urban legends. One such legend is that of the *JangSanBeom* (장산범), a tiger-like creature known for its ability to mimic human voices, specifically the voices of loved ones, to lure victims to their demise. The South Korean film under discussion, which is named after the urban legend, is *JangSanBeom* (2017) by Heo Jeong. While the aforementioned Malaysian film centers on a young girl's identity and her relationship with her environment, this South Korean film heightens the terror by focusing on the fear of the unknown yet familiar, particularly the chilling horror of hearing a loved one's voice that masks a lurking danger.

Both films share a common theme: a tiger-like presence rooted in folklore. These stories not only draw on traditional tales but also depict transformation, connecting directly to the concept of metamorphosis. This paper seeks to examine the theme of metamorphosis of body and voice, where transformations affect not just the physical form but also how one communicates with, and is understood by, the surrounding world. Across literature, film, and folklore, the metamorphosis of both body and voice highlights the fragility of identity and the alienation that often accompanies profound, uncontrollable changes. This paper employs Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* not as a claim of direct influence on the selected films, but as a comparative and diagnostic framework for

understanding metamorphosis as a rupture within. By drawing parallels between *The Metamorphosis* and the selected films that incorporate folklore elements, this study will reveal how these transformations critique societal norms, explore the limits of identity, and question what it means to exist within the confines of family, society, and self.

The Kafkaesque And The Folkloric: Frameworks Of Metamorphosis

The definitive narrative of physical alteration is Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. As one of his best-known works, the story explores the disintegration of the main character, Gregor Samsa's identity, and gradually reveals the profound solitude resulting from his inability to communicate with his family. The novella opens with the following sentence: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."² This transformation, though grotesque and surreal, serves as a metaphor for the internal fragmentation of identity. Gregor, once a hardworking salesman and the family breadwinner, finds his human characteristics stripped away, leaving him trapped within an alien body that elicits horror and repulsion from his family. This moment introduces the possibility of a dream or imagined state, allowing for an alternative conceptualization of Gregor's identity as potentially fluid, challenging the boundaries between body and mind. Sweeney (1990) describes this fluidity as "the clash between Gregor-as-insect and Gregor-as-consciousness" suggesting two characters "clashing yet jointly existing in the same body."³ Upon this clash of individual identity, the most outstanding factor within this discussion of personal identity involves

² Ibid., 89.

³ Kevin W. Sweeney, "Competing Theories of Identity in Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1990): 28.

the perspectives of psychoanalysis, most notably Freud's Oedipus theory examining the relationship between Gregor and his father.

Previous research has consistently pointed out the Freudian elements in Kafka's work, particularly the Oedipal structures through which familial authority, repression, and unarticulated desire emerge as sources of conflict (Sokel 2002; Weninger 2008; Duttlinger 2013). Freud's theories of dreams and the Oedipus complex are particularly relevant to Kafka's work, as they delve into conflicting emotions of love and fear. Specifically in *The Metamorphosis* the relationship of the family and the dream factors is strong. As Williams (2017) notes, Kafka himself acknowledged that much of his writing reflects his fraught relationship with his father.⁴

In Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*, Kafka utters a statement of his relationship with his father, marked by anxious and conflicted feelings, as seen in his remark, "My father. He is anxious about me. Love often wears the face of violence."⁵ Moreover, Kafka's diary contains numerous reflections on his family members, particularly his father, and these entries often include dream sequences that reflect his internal struggles.⁶ This thematic tension is mirrored in the novella's apple tragedy, where the father picks up apples and throws them one after another at Gregor ("without taking particularly good aim"), one of which hits Gregor's back, wounding him significantly.⁷ This act of

⁴ Meg Harris Williams, "The Oedipal Wound in Two Stories by Kafka: *The Metamorphosis* and *A Country Doctor*," *Psychodynamic Practice* 23, no. 2 (2017): 121.

⁵ Gustav Janouch, "Conversations with Kafka," *Partisan Review* 20, no. 2 (1953): 169.

⁶ Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka, 1910–1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 1988): 260.

⁷ Kafka, "The Metamorphosis," 122.

aggression is not just a physical attack but a symbolic one, as the apple lodges into Gregor's back and festers, contributing to his eventual death.

Previous research has also delved into the symbolic significance of the apple in *The Metamorphosis*, asking, 'Why apple?' Beyond the biblical connotations of the Fall of Man and Original Sin, Kafka's use of the apple as a weapon reflects his imaginative engagement with Jewish folklore traditions. Bruce (2002) argues that Kafka was influenced by Hasidic tales, particularly those of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, recorded by Martin Buber (1878–1965), in which protagonists undergo numerous metamorphoses within a kabbalistic cycle of transgression, punishment, exile, and trials aimed at redemption.⁸ The tension between whether this is dream or reality, of which the story started with, at last, ends in his insectile form where "his whole body was aching, but it seemed that the pain was gradually growing less and would finally pass away."⁹ Ultimately, Gregor's spiritual trial ends unknown, or at least with ambiguity, leaving as an open question of whether redemption is achievable.

Reading *The Metamorphosis* through this lens of Jewish folklore and psychoanalysis also provides a new perspective on more recent films, allowing us to explore intertextual connections. These intertextual connections between *The Metamorphosis* and other works, especially the films in focus in this paper, highlight parallels with, and further expand, Kafka's exploration of identity, transformation, and the anxieties surrounding the loss of self, utilizing folklore as a structural support. By exploring the two selected films in dialogue with Kafka's writing on transformation, this paper will examine how the blending of folklore and

⁸ Iris Bruce, "Kafka and Jewish Folklore," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kafka*, ed. Julian Preece (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 151.

⁹ Kafka, 135.

psychoanalysis shapes the portrayal of the self and its struggles within a modern, often high-pressure, society. Through this comparative analysis, this paper aims to illuminate the multilayered nature of the Kafkaesque narrative and its continued resonance in contemporary visual storytelling.

Transformation In Folklore: Shifting Selves

As such, traditional folklore from Korea, Malaysia, and other cultures also frequently portrays transformation as a means of deception, survival, or inheritance. Korean folktales such as *The Sun and Moon*¹⁰ where a Tiger is a creature that tracks and mimics human speech to prey on the unsuspecting, suggest that transformation is not merely physical but represents an existential shift. Similarly, Malay folklore often depicts supernatural metamorphosis, as in *Harimau Jadian*¹¹ (Were-Tiger), where becoming a tiger is both an inherited curse and a source of power. In both Korean and Malay contexts, transformation narratives encode social fears surrounding transgression, inheritance, and survival. By situating

¹⁰ A traditional Korean folktale in which two siblings flee a man-eating tiger that disguises itself as their mother in order to deceive them. The children escape by climbing a tree and praying to the Sky God, who lowers a rope and lifts them to heaven. The siblings are transformed into the Sun and the Moon, while the tiger's failed attempt to follow them explains natural elements such as the red color of sorghum. See Felix Im, "When the Tiger Comes Knocking, Look to the Heavens for Salvation," *Korea.net*. <https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=122348>. See also Sim and Yang, "Reading the Mother in *The Sun and the Moon* from Klein's Perspective," *Journal of Early Childhood Education* 34, no. 4 (2014): 207–226 (in Korean).

¹¹ In Malay folklore, the *Harimau Jadian* refers to a human who transforms into a tiger through magic, spiritual practices, or a curse. Unlike ordinary animals, the were-tiger retains human consciousness, memory, and intent while possessing the strength and instincts of a tiger. Such figures often appear in village stories as feared but familiar beings, sometimes acting as protectors, avengers, or threats within the community. See "Harimau Jadian," *Gods and Monsters*, <https://godsandmonsters.info/harimau-jadian/>. See also Walter William Skeat, *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Macmillan, 1900).

cinematic metamorphosis within this living folkloric framework, the films discussed here reveal how traditional symbols, particularly the tiger, continue to mediate modern concerns about identity, authority, and belonging.

Crucially, this cross-cultural mapping raises a vital theoretical question: do regional folk traditions simply lend themselves to Kafkaesque psychoanalytic interpretation, or do they actively reconfigure those paradigms? This paper demonstrates that these narratives possess an inherent logic of estrangement and metamorphic fluidity that operates independently of Western models. By anchoring the analysis in the mythic presence of the tiger and the threshold of the home, these films do more than mirror Gregor Samsa's anxieties through a shared motif of transformation; they actively extend the analytical reach of psychoanalysis by translating individual internal crises into collective, circumstance-driven confrontations with the supernatural.

***Tiger Stripes* (2023)**

Tiger Stripes, directed by Amanda Nell Eu, uses the transformation of its protagonist, Zaffan, as a metaphor for puberty and self-discovery, blending themes of personal identity with elements of regional folklore. Praised for its bold storytelling and visual style,¹² the film also sparked debates due to its candid exploration of sensitive themes related to modesty, religion, and adolescence.¹³

¹² On Rotten Tomatoes, 97 percent of 64 critics' reviews are positive, see here: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/tiger_stripes. On Metacritic, a score of 68 out of 100, based on 13 critics, indicates generally favorable reviews. See here: <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/tiger-stripes/>. Both websites were accessed on January 12, 2026.

¹³ Google review showed that *Tiger Stripes* is marked with 2.1 out of 67 reviews, most of the general feedback expressing uncomfortable views, with 1 or 2 stars in majority, when accessed on October 23, 2024. Now, although Google review comments are not available, it shows 53 percent users like this film.

The story begins with Zaffan, a spirited middle schooler, dancing in a restroom as her friends film her for a short-form social media platform. Tension arises with Farah, a strict prefect, who criticizes Zaffan's bra strap but also envies it, while Miriam remains cheerful and supportive. Zaffan is later publicly reprimanded at school for this mischief in the restroom, but the next scene shows the three girls being cheerful on their way home, stopping by the stream to play. The trio shows similar tension in the stream—Farah sounds jealous at the same time curious, while Zaffan is carefree. Returning home in her innerwear and a bag full of wet clothes, she is harshly scolded by her mother, while her father seems rather indifferent to the fight of the two, where her sense of alienation continues to grow. That night, she gets her first period, but instead of support, she is shamed by her mother, who calls it 'dirty.' This moment introduces the baseline of Kristevan abjection, where the biological realities of the maturing female body become coded as social contamination. As Zaffan grapples with physical and emotional changes, her friends begin to distance themselves with mean comments to the first-among-us who started her period. Being lonely, she notices surreal events, such as a mysterious woman in a tree—the figure is called *Pontianak* in Malay, meaning 'dead child' and symbolizing a ghost of a woman who died in childbirth. The film changes scenes with a tiger spotted in the village, and her father gearing up with a hunting rifle.

The tension peaks at a girl scout camp, where Zaffan demonstrates bravery by finding a missing girl, earning admiration but intensifying Farah's jealousy. When Farah leads a bullying incident in the restroom, Zaffan's suppressed frustrations explode, triggering her transformation into a tiger-like creature. Chaos ensues as students and teachers collapse, leading to mass hysteria, and Zaffan flees into the forest. The villagers bring in a shaman, called *bomoh* in Malay, to exorcise Zaffan,

but the ritual spirals out of control, leaving her further isolated. Fully embracing her animalistic transformation, Zaffan reconnects with Miriam, the only friend who remains supportive. In the final scene, Miriam films Zaffan dancing freely in a stream at night, her hair down and demeanor liberated, symbolizing her acceptance of her true self amidst societal rejection.

***JangSanBeom* (2017)**

JangSanBeom (in English, *The Mimic*), directed by Heo Jeong,¹⁴ is a South Korean psychological horror film inspired by the urban legend of a creature resembling a tiger that mimics human voices, especially those of loved ones. This legend, rooted in traditional folklore about tigers, gained traction in the early 2000s through testimonies of eerie encounters near a cave on Jang Mountain in Busan, giving rise to the name *JangSanBeom*, meaning ‘Jang Mountain Tiger.’

The film’s main character is Hee Yeon, a grieving mother who relocates to a remote village with her husband, Min Ho, her young daughter, Jun Hee, and her mother-in-law. This move is prompted by the disappearance of her son, Jun Seo, who went missing in a crowded area while under the mother-in-law’s care. They hope the change of location to the mother-in-law’s hometown will help her mother-in-law recover her memory clouded by dementia and provide clues in finding the son with a fresh start. The film opens with a chilling scene: an anxious couple driving through a forest accidentally hits a dog. As they attempt to bury both the dog and a corpse hidden in their car trunk near

¹⁴ *JangSanBeom* is not widely reviewed on Rotten tomatoes and has no review on Metacritics. On Rotten Tomatoes, 83% of 6 critics’ reviews are positive, see here: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_mimic, accessed on January 12, 2026. Like as above, Google review showed mostly positive or neutral comments, with a star rating of 3.7 out of 117 reviews when accessed on October 23, 2024. Now, although the comments are not available, it says 66 percent users like this film.

a cave on Jang Mountain, they hear disembodied voices calling out to them. Investigating the source, they encounter a terrifying entity emerging from the cave. In the following scenes, Hee Yeon's family settles into a house near the cave where they meet two local children searching for their missing dog, who then venture into the cave. During a subsequent search, Hee Yeon discovers a strange, mute girl in the forest. That night, the mysterious girl appears at Hee Yeon's door. After taking her in and cleaning her up, Hee Yeon is shocked when the girl mimics her daughter Jun Hee's voice and even claims to have the same name as Jun Hee. This sequence establishes the foundational logic of the Freudian uncanny, where repressed guilt and past transgressions are externalized by an acoustic force. Freud (1955) explains that "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."¹⁵ Driven by this desperate, uncanny familiarity, and deeply distrusting of the authorities who failed to find her son, Hee Yeon chooses to keep the girl in her home, prioritizing maternal longing over safety, rejecting Min Ho's idea to call the police.

Supernatural events soon spiral out of control. Hee Yeon's mother-in-law begins hearing the voices of her deceased siblings and vanishes after attempting to harm the forest girl. A blind shaman warns Hee Yeon about the creature from the cave, which mimics loved ones' voices to lure its victims and causes blindness. The shaman recounts a chilling tale of a previous shaman who lived near the cave worshipping the tiger spirit, and who was driven to sacrifice his own daughter to receive more spiritual power from the tiger spirit. She urges Hee Yeon to

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 241.

leave the village immediately and to trust no one—especially the forest girl. As the horror intensifies, Min Ho disappears while searching for his mother. Hee Yeon discovers the creature uses mirrors as a conduit for its attacks, which explains why mirrors in the house and cave are covered. When the creature tries to lure Jun Hee, the forest girl helps her escape. Desperate to protect her daughter, Hee Yeon locks Jun Hee in her room, instructing her not to trust any voice, and ventures into the cave with the forest girl who pleads to stay with her. Inside the cave, Hee Yeon is tormented by the voices of her missing son and other loved ones, manipulated by the creature. Just as she is about to succumb to its illusions and be pulled into a mirror, Min Ho shatters the mirror, saving her. The couple, now losing their eyesight due to the creature's power, struggle to navigate their way out of the cave. The forest girl persistently calls out to Hee Yeon, 'mother,' appealing to her longing for connection, and Hee Yeon's deep-seated guilt over past losses. Torn between reality and the profound emotional pull of the forest girl's plea, Hee Yeon ultimately follows the forest girl deeper into the cave, ignoring Min Ho's desperate cries. In the haunting final scene, while Min Ho escapes the cave and reunites with the police, Hee Yeon vanishes into the darkness with the forest girl, leaving her family behind.

Comparative Analysis

Tiger And Folklore Background

This paper grounds its comparative movement in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, a well-known story of bodily transformation rooted in Hasidic folktale traditions. The concept of folklore-rooted metamorphosis meaningfully connects the two films, where both literal and symbolic transformation unfold within the forest setting. However, whereas Kafka confines his metamorphic crisis to a claustrophobic domestic interior,

these contemporary films transpose the rupture onto an expansive cultural geography—the forest.

In both films, the forest, whether in Korean mountains or Malaysian jungles, functions as a culturally significant space in folklore inhabited by both sacred and fearsome supernatural beings. One powerful shared symbol in these stories is the tiger in the forest, an animal deeply embedded in the folklore of both countries. As Wessing (2006) explains, in Southeast Asia tigers are often seen as symbols of rulers, and in some cases royal families claim descent from them.¹⁶ Due to their solitary nature and hunting habits, tigers that wander into villages are sometimes viewed as ancestral spirits, protecting the community by keeping away both natural and spiritual threats. However, Wessing, citing Winstedt, also notes that a tiger entering a village can be interpreted as a warning that the community's ancestral rules have been broken,¹⁷ a significant implication, given that *Tiger Stripes* uses the tiger metaphor to depict a solitary character challenging traditional existence. In the film, this symbolism is subverted through an innovative formal choice: the inclusion of a real video of a tiger walking on a village road, surrounded by cars and people who, rather than showing reverence, seem more confused or indifferent. The tiger itself appears lost. This injection of a documentary aesthetic into the fictional text mirrors Gregor Samsa's own sensory disorientation, exposing the beast to invalidating modern gazes. In response to the question about the tiger's symbolism and the tiger stripes on Zaffan, the director explains that she wanted to portray the dual meaning of the tiger—both as a protected, nearly extinct species and as something that does not belong in human

¹⁶ Robert Wessing, "Symbolic Animals in the Land between the Waters: Markers of Place and Transition," *Asian Folklore Studies* 65, no. 2 (2006): 205.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 217.

settlements, expressing the tension and frustration with this contradiction.¹⁸ The tiger is both symbolic and unreal, especially given that Malayan tigers are almost extinct, despite being national symbols in Malaysia. In the context of this folklore, the loss of the sacred figure is profound; its aimless wandering yields no resolution, and the ancestral warning fails as the new social challenges are imminent.

Similarly, tigers in South Korea are extinct, surviving only as cultural symbols in the modern era, most notably as the 1988 Olympic mascot, 호돌이 (*Hodol-i*).¹⁹ Historical records, starting with the *Samguk Sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms), describe hungry tigers descending from the mountains to hunt for food, prompting people to hunt them in self-defense. Tigers are a common presence in South Korean folktales where they are depicted as both benevolent and malevolent, often paradoxically portrayed as both foolish and threatening.²⁰ During the Japanese colonial period, the tiger became a symbol of national pride and resistance. Historical research indicates that as human populations grew and agricultural expansion reduced the tiger's natural habitat, tiger populations began to dwindle. Japanese authorities accelerated this process by labeling tigers as "harmful animals" and promoting their extermination. Crucially, the Japanese often saw Korea as a land of tigers that they admired and "coveted the symbols of power, strength and national wealth; an animal Korea possessed and Japan lacked."²¹ Kim et

¹⁸ Amanda Nell Eu, "Supernatural Sticker Sisterhood: An Interview with Amanda Nell Eu," *In Review Online*, June 18, 2024, accessed January 12, 2026.

¹⁹ Joseph Seeley and Aaron Skabelund, "Tigers—real and imagined—in Korea's Physical and Cultural Landscape," *Environmental History* 20, no. 3 (2015): 475; and H. Kim, R. Clements, and M. Rhyu, "A Genealogy of Tiger Nationalism in Korea: Post-colonial Discourse, Ch'oe Namsŏn and the Seoul Olympics," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 2 (2023): 555.

²⁰ Seeley and Skabelund, "Tigers—Real and Imagined," 480.

al. (2023) explain that beyond the diplomatic exchanges between the two countries from the early stages, Japanese warriors and hunters practiced hunting tigers as a way to demonstrate their manliness, and would often bring back tiger meat and skins as trophies to Japan.²² Although this aspect is not explicitly depicted in the film's narrative, it underlines the tiger's cultural significance, now preserved in collective memory through history and folklore. The tiger is remembered as both a revered and exploited figure, and the film effectively captures this by weaving it with the recreated urban legend which draws from these shared memories and folktales. This historic loss inflects the folktale with an inherently psychoanalytic dimension: the extinct tiger acts as a site of collective trauma. This positions the entity in *JangSanBeom* not as a mere monster, but as an archaic force returning to restrain modern breakdowns.

As such, even though tigers are extinct in the wild, they continue to live on as powerful symbols in the collective imagination, inspiring stories and representations in both Korea and Malaysia. The symbolism of the tiger in both films represents the shifting relationship between humans and the natural, spiritual world, and the Kafkaesque dissonance between the sacred and the secular in contemporary society.

Shamanism: Power And Vulnerability

Building on the earlier discussion of folktales, another common theme in both films is the human confrontation with supernatural beings, such as the tiger element and the *Pontianak*, the woman in the tree. In this

²¹ Kim, Clements, and Rhyu, "A Genealogy of Tiger Nationalism," 561.

²² Kim et al. point out that in an effort to reduce such an image related to power, Japanese described the land of Korea as a rabbit, while the cultural independence movement activist, Ch'oe Nam Seon, who led a struggle to remove the image of Koreans as weak and dependent by creating a map of tiger analogy to represent the Korean peninsula. See Kim, Clements, and Rhyu, 560–562.

struggle between the human and the supernatural, there exists an intermediary role played by shamans: called *mudang* in Korea, and *bomoh* in Malaysia. Both traditions have their roots in early shamanism, evolving over time by blending with various beliefs and practices. Shamans act as intermediaries between the human and the supernatural, navigating both spiritual power and human vulnerability. The portrayal of these figures reveals the tension between ancient practices and modern aspirations for power. This shamanic threshold is precisely where the films begin to reconfigure the Kafkaesque framework—the shaman functions as a boundary-crosser, bridging human and nonhuman realms to manage a Kafkaesque rupture, which ultimately defies containment. In the case of the *bomoh* in Malaysia, this evolution has been especially shaped by the incorporation of Islamic influences. Interestingly, in Malaysia *bomohs* are often male, though there are a few female practitioners, as Nicolas and Kline note (2010).²³

In *Tiger Stripes*, as Zaffan undergoes physical changes, her mental state becomes increasingly erratic—she begins catching and attempting to devour animals and witnesses the *Pontianak* watching her from a tree. The appearance of *Pontianak* and Zaffan is significant as the symbolic meaning of *Pontianak*: “To fully appreciate the cultural significance of the Asian monstrous/feminine, she has to be understood as a reconstruction within a dynamic socio-cultural space, standing in as a metaphor for the violence against women and the violence of being women.”²⁴ Her transformation into a tiger and the presence of the *Pontianak* do not shock her as much as they do her peers, triggering mass

²³ Cheryl L. Nicholas and Kimberly N. Kline, “‘Cerita Pontianak’: Cultural Contradictions and Patriarchy in a Malay Ghost Story,” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 6, no. 3 (2010): 202.

²⁴ Alicia Izharuddin, “The Laugh of the Pontianak: Darkness and Feminism in Malay Folk Horror,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 7 (2020): 1006.

hysteria among her classmates. This hysteria leads to the *bomoh* being invited to the school in an official capacity to perform an exorcism, a practice that is not uncommon in close-knit, often secluded communities, especially among girls, where a *bomoh* might be summoned to cleanse an afflicted area.²⁵ In the film, the *bomoh*, who initially appears as a figure of authority, is portrayed as a secular, almost comical figure, which the director explains was meant to depict a man seeking the ‘digital age’ power.²⁶ His performance in the film reflects his attempt to leverage contemporary influence; he invites the crowd to film the exorcism and share it on social media, blending ancient practices with modern media culture. His manipulation of traditional rituals for social media attention reflects the commodification of spirituality in a contemporary, media-saturated society. The scene suggests that his pursuit of power makes him vulnerable, subverting the usual dynamic. In the end, his words and rituals fail to control Zaffan, and his authority crumbles. During the exorcism, when his attempts to heal Zaffan fail, the *bomoh* shouts at her parents to restrain her, saying, “She’s your child.” This moment highlights the futility of his efforts and flips the power dynamic, as Zaffan’s parents are ultimately unable to control her either, symbolically letting her go.

While the *bomoh* in *Tiger Stripes* is portrayed with a mix of power and vulnerability in a rather comical way by subverting traditional

²⁵ See Heather Chen, “The Mystery of Screaming Schoolgirls in Malaysia,” *BBC News*, August 11, 2019. The author describes a few recent cases reported in 2018 in a school located in Kota Bharu city, Kelantan state, Malaysia, and a similar case in 2016 in another school in the same state. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48850490>. Accessed on January 12, 2026.

²⁶ Amanda Nell Eu, interview by FlickDirect, “Amanda Nell Eu Discusses Her Horror Film *Tiger Stripes*,” YouTube video, July 27, 2024, <https://youtu.be/TB-cQTdV2zI?feature=shared>. Accessed on January 12, 2026.

authority, the depiction of the shaman in *JangSanBeom* is much darker and more unsettling. The *mudang* in the film, once a ‘nobody’ seeking greater power, sacrifices his daughter, whose spiritual energy was stronger, to the tiger spirit in exchange for more divine power. This tragic act creates a vengeful spirit, represented by the forest girl, the daughter of the *mudang*, whose longing for a mother’s care and affection invites sympathy. Paradoxically, her vulnerability becomes her greatest power, whereas the *mudang* can only wield power through the scapegoat he sacrificed, that is, his daughter. This tragic sacrifice emphasizes the destructive nature of seeking power through exploitation. Both films highlight the intersection of shamanism and human vulnerability: in *Tiger Stripes*, the Malay *bomoh* is depicted with an element of humor, where his vulnerability highlights the futility of his attempts at control, while in *JangSanBeom*, the story of the *mudang* speaks to the darker consequences of distorted ambition, illustrating how the pursuit of power can ultimately trap individuals within the very systems they seek to control. Both films depict how the vulnerability of those seeking power, whether through modern social media influence or ancient spiritual practices, reflects broader social critiques. The subversion of traditional authority in *Tiger Stripes* and the tragic downfall of the *mudang* in *JangSanBeom* reveal the fragility of power and its consequences for those who seek it.

Another compelling connection between the two films lies in the reversal of power dynamics, wherein the supposed victims, Zaffan and the forest girl, ultimately confront and overpower the figures of authority who seek to exploit them. Both narratives subvert traditional folkloric and cultural norms, presenting a nuanced exploration of familial and societal relationships. In *Tiger Stripes*, Zaffan’s transformation into a tiger is a significant deviation from traditional Malay

folktales. In these tales, tigers are often understood as male and represent patriarchal authority or ancestral spirits that protect communities. However, Zaffan's metamorphosis reclaims this symbol, reframing it within a female-centered narrative. Her eventual decapitation of the *bomoh* not only symbolizes a rejection of his authority but also challenges the societal norms he represents. This highlights the vulnerability of those who misuse traditional power structures for personal gain, only to find themselves powerless in the face of authentic, uncontrollable change. Similarly, in *JangSanBeom*, the forest girl, the tragic victim of her *mudang* father's quest for power, reclaims agency and a lost mother, though her journey is steeped in melancholy. The film revisits the Korean folktale in which a tiger symbolizes a wicked animal pretending to be a mother, but it twists the narrative to focus on the destructive consequences of its betrayal. The absence of the brother, featuring in the original story, emphasizes the isolation of the bond and the guilt of the mother Hee Yeon, which the next section will describe further.

As such, the descriptions of Zaffan and the forest girl represent not only the subversion of individuals but also a broader commentary on cultural shifts. By reinterpreting the tiger, these films redefine its significance within a modern, gendered lens. Both stories demonstrate how the victims' resilience dismantles the power structures upheld by traditional figures, whether through humor and futility in *Tiger Stripes* or through tragic defiance in *JangSanBeom*.

The Digital And The Archaic

While both films ground their narratives in these ancient beliefs, they diverge significantly in how they situate folklore within the modern world. *Tiger Stripes* presents a clash between the archaic and the hyper-

modern, visualizing the ‘tiger’ through the specific lens of social media. The film opens with a framing device that mirrors the current ‘consume/is consumed’ dynamic of the digital age where a real tiger roaming a village road is filmed by onlookers as a digital spectacle. Zaffan’s transformation is not merely witnessed by peers and villagers but is captured and consumed through smartphone screens. This creates a dissonance that satirizes the commodification of tradition; the *bomoh* summoned to exorcise Zaffan does not appear as a figure of terrifying spiritual authority but a performative one, who live-streams the ritual. In this digital ecosystem, the sacred terror of the were-tiger is reduced to viral content, stripping the creature of its mystery. However, Zaffan’s final liberational dance in the stream suggests that the tiger can reclaim the narrative not by hiding from the camera, but by standing as her own untamed self in the modern era, though she remains ultimately confined within the frame of a smartphone screen. In stark contrast, *JangSanBeom* treats the tiger creature as a repressed, archaic force that refuses to be modernized. There are no screens or digital filters here; the horror is analog and acoustic. The *mudang* in this film is secluded deep within the mountains, representing a connection to the spirit world that seems authentic, mysterious, and incompatible with modern logic. While *Tiger Stripes* suggests that tradition has become a spectacle, *JangSanBeom* argues that tradition remains a background existence, one that modern rationality feels powerless to stop. This juxtaposition highlights a distinct Kafkaesque anxiety: in *Tiger Stripes*, the frustration comes from the exposure of the self to the invalidating gaze, whereas in *JangSanBeom*, the horror stems from the isolation of the self within an inescapable grief.

The cinematic form of each work further enhances this dynamic, bringing the theme of metamorphosis into distinct sensory experiences

of ‘body’ and ‘voice.’ *Tiger Stripes* is constructed through a visual clash of aesthetics: the confined space of the toilet cubicle, the vertical ratio of handheld phone footage and artificial lighting are intercut with lush, light through leaves, and wide-angle shots of the Malaysian jungles, featuring a dancing girl wishing to be free. This visual tension represents Zaffan’s internal state as she is torn between the grotesque reality of her puberty-stricken body in pressuring surroundings and her innate desire to be free. The last scene of the film, where the camera captures Zaffan’s dancing body in a vertical screen, contrasts sharply with the static, confined framing of earlier scenes in the toilet cubicles. While the vertical framing is technically a confined space, the context redefines it; Zaffan occupies the frame fully, dancing in the flowing stream that the earlier, rigid environment could not contain. Visually, this confirms a paradoxical liberation where she has control over the very medium that sought to trap her earlier. *JangSanBeom*, however, relies on sound design. In the film, a sound is heard without its source being clearly seen, which creates a pervasive sense of chill. The creature’s acousmatic voice that is heard before its body is seen destabilizes spatial certainty and transforms sound itself into a site of horror. This ambiguity forces the audience into Hee Yeon’s subjective experience; like her, the viewer is in a perpetual conflict between doubting and trusting what is heard. By prioritizing sound over sight, the film effectively conveys an existence that cannot be seen, not through silence, but through a deceptive surplus of voice.

Family Dynamics

From Gregor to Zaffan, and to Hee Yeon, a central theme emerges: the inability to communicate within the family. In Kafka’s novella, Gregor’s transformation renders him incomprehensible to his family, and they, in

turn, are unable to connect with him. The inability to communicate is a striking thread that runs through these metamorphic stories. What once felt familiar becomes estranged; this theme echoes deeply in Zaffan's relationship with her parents, and even more so with her peers. As Zaffan experiences frustration and fear surrounding her bodily changes during puberty, her interactions with her parents, especially her mother, become increasingly strained. The conflict between Zaffan and her mother, which escalates to physical confrontation, reflects not only Zaffan's frustrations but also those of her mother. Her mother's actions, though harsh, seem driven by concern for her daughter's free-spirited nature in a conservative society. This moment is significant, as up to this point, it is the mother who has been the most verbally and physically aggressive toward Zaffan, ironically when her daughter may have needed comfort the most. The mother's attempts to control Zaffan mark her own crisis of self-regard: her authority falters even as she tries to maintain it. Kristeva's notion of abjection helps illuminate this paradox: the maternal bond is haunted by rejection and disgust toward what is simultaneously intimate and threatening (Kristeva 1982).²⁷ Here, the mother operates as the primary agent of the symbolic order, tasked with policing the boundaries of what constitutes the clean and proper body. Any threat to these boundaries must be cast out to preserve social and domestic purity. Zaffan's physical changes exemplify the abject: that which disturbs identity and does not respect system, order and borders. Zaffan's body becomes a site of horror because it defies the sanitized boundaries enforced by society. Thus, Zaffan's body, caught in her first menstruation, becomes both the object of maternal concern and the source of rejection. Her mother's harshness, though perhaps driven by

²⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

fear and love, paradoxically transforms into exclusion. When she can no longer control Zaffan, she turns to her husband, asking him to “promise that she won’t get hurt,” hinting that they had already discussed the possibility of resorting to an exorcism performed by the *bomoh*. This paradox highlights the ambivalence in the mother’s behavior—her struggle to protect Zaffan from societal judgment, while simultaneously trying to suppress her, a tension perhaps mirrored by Zaffan herself, as both wrestle with societal expectations.

When the *bomoh* fails to control Zaffan and instructs the parents to hold her down, the camera captures Zaffan in a full shot, with her parents behind. This visual suggests a hidden layer to the ambivalence, perhaps from the mother’s quiet wish for her daughter to break free from control. It is only Miriam, who tries and runs after Zaffan to follow, though her attempts are blocked. In a later scene, the mother is shown sitting on the stairs outside the house, grieving and expressing her wish for Zaffan to return. Yet her positioning outside the home symbolizes more than personal grief, as in an earlier scene the first fight also happens at this same entrance, where the mother throws Zaffan to the ground and orders her to leave the house. This repetition invests the threshold with symbolic weight: it marks a rupture. Zaffan’s departure thus gestures toward a separation from the societal and familial confines that have shaped and restricted her; however, it is neither complete nor stable, but marked by tension and uncertainty: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger.”²⁸ In this sense, the

²⁸ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

threshold functions not as a point of resolution, but as a space where separation and attachment uneasily coexist.

In *JangSanBeom*, the focus shifts to the mother, Hee Yeon, and her complex relationships with her children: her missing son, Jun Suh; her daughter, Jun Hee; and the mysterious girl from the forest, who claims the same name and voice as the real daughter. Grieving for her lost son, Hee Yeon brings the forest girl into her home, nurturing her alongside her own daughter Jun Hee. The two children form a bond, and when the real Jun Hee is endangered by the tiger-possessed *mudang* spirit, it is the forest girl who rescues her. This act of protection creates an important parallel between the forest girl and Hee Yeon. Before Hee Yeon walks to the cave with the forest girl, she promises to protect her and never leave her behind—an echo of her unfulfilled wish to protect her missing son. Inside the cave, they encounter a room filled with mirrors, a space the tiger-possessed *mudang* spirit uses to lure people with voices and attack them. These voices accuse Hee Yeon, urging her to blame herself for her son's disappearance and her mother-in-law's suffering. Overwhelmed by guilt and grief, Hee Yeon nearly succumbs to the *mudang*'s trap, slowly vacuumed into the arms of the *mudang* from the mirror. The mirror scene renders this psychic struggle visible. The cave, filled with endless reflections, becomes a trap where Hee Yeon must confront voices accusing her of maternal failure. In this scene, the mirrors serve as more than fragmented reflections, recalling Lacan's mirror stage, in which recognition is inseparable from misrecognition, and the self emerges as an unstable image (Lacan 2006).²⁹ In Lacanian terms, the mirror image constructs an illusion of spatial and organic

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 75–81.

wholeness that shields the fragile subject from internal fragmentation. The presence of multiple, broken mirrors here intensifies this instability, multiplying misrecognition rather than offering even an illusory sense of coherence. The shattered specular field fractures her maternal ego, ensuring that the defensive misrecognition of the mirror stage collapses into absolute psychic fragmentation. For Hee Yeon, the repeated reflections fracture her sense of identity and confront her with an alienated version of herself. The mirror scene thus functions as a moment of forced self-reflection, suggesting that the victims are compelled to confront past mistakes and unacknowledged guilt, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation. The mirrors operate as a space where unresolved trauma is brought to the surface, making it impossible for her to distinguish between the external reality and her internal trauma. Hee Yeon's journey into the village near the cave was initially motivated by her desire to help her mother-in-law recover her memory in the hope that it might provide clues to Jun Suh's disappearance. Yet the mirrors reveal that Hee Yeon's true struggle lies within herself: her unresolved guilt over her son's disappearance and her failure to protect him, which ultimately leads her to walk into the darkness, almost blind.

Conclusion

By placing contemporary Asian cinema in dialogue with Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, this paper demonstrates how folklore-based horror continues to function as a powerful medium. Through the contrasting modalities of body and voice, *Tiger Stripes* and *JangSanBeom* reveal how metamorphosis exposes the fragility and instability of the self. The chosen works highlight the protagonists' struggles, rooted in their respective regions' folktales, through physical transformations like Zaffan's shift into a 'mere tiger' and psychological susceptibility such as

Hee Yeon's submission to the 'speaking tiger.' By examining these motifs alongside *The Metamorphosis* and the selected films, this paper has explored how the blending of folklore and psychoanalysis informs the portrayal of identity conflicts within a pressuring modern society.

In *Tiger Stripes*, Zaffan's metamorphosis is a visceral metaphor for female puberty and a rebellion against the shame and control imposed by her family and a conservative society. Her conflict is embodied in the ambivalent figure of her mother, whose harshness masks a conflicted desire to both protect and suppress her daughter. Unlike the tragic figures often found in these tales, Zaffan's ultimate liberation is not just a rejection of the ineffectual *bomoh* and his patriarchal authority, but a triumphant dismantling of the power structures that seek to contain her. The film subverts traditional Malay folklore by re-appropriating the masculine symbol of the were-tiger, reframing it as an emblem of defiant female agency and self-acceptance. In doing so, the film pushes Kristevan abjection to a liberatory conclusion where the abject body is actively reclaimed rather than systematically cast out.

In contrast, *JangSanBeom* explores metamorphosis through the terrifying fluidity of voice, which weaponizes memory and grief. The film's horror is rooted in the psychological torment of its protagonist, Hee Yeon, whose unresolved maternal guilt over her lost son makes her fatally vulnerable. The supernatural creature's mimicry forces her into a symbolic self-confrontation within the mirrored cave, where her inability to distinguish the past from the present leads to a tragic surrender. This specular collapse reconfigures the Lacanian mirror stage, transforming what should be an illusion of ego coherence into a fractured trap of unresolved trauma. Ultimately, the narrative twists Korean folklore to tell a cautionary tale about how the ghosts of our past

can be manipulated to destroy us from within, demonstrating how unresolved grief renders one powerless.

Returning to Kafka brings this comparative arc to its conclusion. Like Gregor Samsa's inexplicable metamorphosis, Zaffan's tiger-body and Hee Yeon's spectral encounter with the tiger dramatize estrangement within the family, the collapse of communication, and the abjection of the domestic into the threatening. The domestic home, which should feel safe, transforms into a site of horror, where the characters experience supernatural events. While *Tiger Stripes* demands the visibility of the repressed body and *JangSanBeom* amplifies the auditory hauntings of the past, both films echo the isolation of Kafka's tragic protagonist. Their divergent resolutions reveal the varied ways contemporary cinema critiques the fragility of the self, proving that these regional narratives possess an indigenous logic of estrangement and metamorphic fluidity rooted in folklore that independently mirrors, expands, and, at times, challenges psychoanalytic thought. Together, these narratives demonstrate how ancient folkloric symbols, particularly the endangered tiger, continue to thrive in the cultural imagination, providing a rich framework for articulating modern anxieties about identity, family dynamics, and the untamable forces that lie just beyond, and within, our constructed reality.

Note on the Author

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