

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**THE REPRESENTATION OF KOREAN CULTURE**  
**BY WAY OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION**  
**AND SALEABLE DIVERSITY**  
**IN *KIM'S CONVENIENCE***

**BA thesis**

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**TARTU**  
**2022**

## ABSTRACT

Canada has recently seen a flourishing of television shows centering on the lives of different minority groups. *Kim's Convenience* gained immense popularity since its inception in 2016, followed by international success two years later. The news of the show ending after its fifth season in 2021 came as a surprise to many as renewal for the sixth season had already been announced. Soon after this, members of the main cast began speaking out about their experiences of working on set, detailing their treatment, disinclusion in character development and lack of diversity in the writers' room. This raised a question whether the representation of Koreans in *Kim's Convenience* deserved the praise the show was receiving. The present thesis aims to analyse the television series in the framework of Kyle Conway's terms of 'cultural translation' and 'saleable diversity' and how the excessive implementation of the 'saleable diversity' strategy without concern for cultural accuracy caused the partial misrepresentation of Korean culture in *Kim's Convenience*.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an empirical analysis of the television series, and a conclusion.

The introduction gives the necessary background information on Koreans in Canada and a synopsis of *Kim's Convenience* as a play and a television series. It also defines the key terms in the thesis – Conway's 'cultural translation,' 'saleable diversity,' and Hamamoto's 'controlling images.'

The literature review outlines some of the reception of the original play that the series is based on in terms of its relevance to the analysis of the television series. It also discusses the reception of the television series.

The empirical part of the thesis provides a thematic analysis of Season Three through Season Five of the show. The analysis has been divided into two parts according to the main themes of Perpetual Other and Heterogenous Koreans: Diversity Within, derived from Sherry S. Yu.

The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past fifteen years the Canadian television industry has responded to the demand for representing minority groups in media with a burgeoning production of television series that depict the experiences of minorities for a wider audience (Yu 2021: 2). The following thesis discusses the case of *Kim's Convenience*, a comedy television series featuring the experiences of Korean Canadian immigrants in contemporary Canada.

Korean immigration to Canada is a fairly recent phenomenon. An official larger scale of immigration of Koreans to Canada began in 1963 when Canada abolished prejudicial policies and initiated a diplomatic relationship with the Republic of Korea, increasing even further with the implementation of the 'point system' for accepting immigrants in 1967 (Noh et al 2012: 124-125). After that, the groups of Korean immigrants became increasingly more noticeable, especially in Toronto; in 1967 the Toronto Korean United Church (originally named the Toronto Korean Church) held its first service at St. Luke's United Church and in 1973 the Ontario Korean Businessmen's Association (OKBA) was established, an organisation aimed to help small and mostly Korean business owners by offering group purchasing of goods normally sold in convenience stores. Both the Toronto Korean United Church and OKBA contributed to nurturing a welcoming community that would help any new immigrant adjust to their life in Canada. The second-generation Korean Canadians growing up in this community would often become skilled workers, such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and help provide income for their family and thus improve the quality of life (Choi 2016: 7-8; Bai 2019).

*Kim's Convenience* was originally a play written by Ins Choi (b. 1974), which premiered on 6th July 2011 at the Toronto Fringe Festival after winning the Festival's New Play Contest. The play was restaged by Soulpepper Theatre in 2012 with Weyni Mengesha as the director. Despite the fact that *Kim's Convenience* was the author's debut as a playwright,

the play itself was an immediate success among theatre-goers as well as the critics (Zarum 2021). In 2015, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) announced that the play was being adapted into a television series of the same title (CBC News 2015). Sherry S. Yu (2021: 1-2) explains that the news of the forthcoming adaptation to be broadcast on CBC was widely welcomed and celebrated as it would be the first Canadian television show to have a mostly Asian main cast. *Kim's Convenience* was also an addition to the then growing trend of minority-led productions about numerous hyphenated Canadians (Yu 2021: 2).

Both the play and the television series revolve around a Korean Canadian immigrant family, who run a convenience store in Toronto's downtown neighbourhood. The patriarch of the family, Appa, 'dad' in Korean, (portrayed by Paul Sun-Hyung Lee in both the theatre and the television productions), is a first-generation Korean immigrant, who moved to Canada with his wife, Umma, 'mum' in Korean, (portrayed by Jean Yoon in both the theatre and the television productions) in the 60s and early 70s (in the play) or the 80s (in the television show). The couple has two children – Jung (originally portrayed by Ins Choi in the play and by Simu Liu in the television show), who has moved out of the family home and, due to past conflict with Appa, is not directly affiliated with the family and the store, and Janet (originally portrayed by Esther Jun in the play and by Andrea Bang in the television show), who still lives at home and is studying photography at Ontario College of Art & Design University (Choi 2016: 17-18, 59, 114-115; Zarum 2021). The central conflict of the story in both the stage production and the television show is the tumultuous relationship between Appa and Jung – what happened in the past, and how the two will reconcile and rebuild the family dynamic. There is also the question of the future of the store that can be considered to be a background conflict in the play and the series.

The first episode of *Kim's Convenience* aired in the autumn of 2016 (Zarum 2021), premiering after *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, a comedy about a Muslim family, and *Da Kink*

*in My Hair*, a sitcom about Jamaican-Canadians, and alongside with *Second Jen*, a comedy about second-generation Asian Canadians. The first two seasons proved to be so popular locally that the show debuted internationally on Netflix in 2018 (Zarum 2021). The television show was highly regarded, praised for being able to depict various racial and ethnical stereotypes of both the majority and minority in a comical and unprecedented way (Yu 2021). In addition to this, the fact that the main cast almost solely consisted of Asian characters was also heavily lauded as up until recently, Asian actors have only been cast in specific roles, such as martial art masters, gangsters or exotic objects of sexual desires (Ty 2017: para. 2, 6). The depiction of an ordinary Asian family interacting with the multicultural world around them, while also dealing with their own personal issues and relationships, was refreshing and a change much welcomed. The immense popularity was followed by *Kim's Convenience* being awarded Best Comedy Series at the 2018 Canadian Screen Awards and Best Music, Comedy, or Variety Program or Series at the 2018 and the 2020 Leo Awards (Yu 2021; Zarum 2021). The show concluded in the spring of 2021, having run for five seasons altogether (Zarum 2021).

The news of the series concluding its production after the fifth season came abruptly to viewers and, as it was revealed later, to the actors themselves as well. Some members of the cast, such as Simu Liu and Jean Yoon, posted statements concerning their experiences on social media, detailing their mistreatment as minorities on the set, the lack of representation of minorities in the writers' room and problematic plotlines among other things (Pangilinan 2021, Yoon 2021). Both the news and the following statements became the cause of discussion around the true representative value of the show and gave way to further conversation around the topic of minority representation in media as well as the treatment of minority workers in the entertainment industry (Carras 2021, Chow 2021, Doyle 2021, Krishna 2021, Wang 2021).

In Western media, Asian immigrants are often portrayed as the ‘model minority,’ presented as an example to other minority groups by the majority group, while simultaneously also being viewed as an economic, social and sexual threat to that very same majority group (Lee 1999: 8). Although Darrell Y. Hamamoto’s (1994) *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation* discusses the controlling images of Asian Americans, due to geographic proximity and cultural trade, these images can also be applied to Asian Canadians and their representation in local media. Hamamoto (1994: 4-5) argues that both sides of the political spectrum often ignore race and racism and how it interferes with certain groups’ ability to succeed in a consumerist society. Instead, nonwhite ethnic groups are placed in a separate category of ‘other’ by the dominant culture, based on one’s physical attributes and social behaviour (Hamamoto 1994: 5). The representation of ‘other’ in media is dictated by ‘controlling images,’ a term introduced by Hamamoto (1994: 2) to describe stereotypes applied to Asian characters in media to ‘help justify economic exploitation and social oppression on the basis of an interlocking system comprising race, class, and gender.’

The scholarship on *Kim’s Convenience* as a television series is scant. Two academic articles could be found to date. One journal publication is by Judit Nagy and Mátyás Bánhegyi (2019) entitled “Korean Diasporic Perceptions of Canada in the Light of the CBC TV Series *Kim’s Convenience*” and another one is Sherry S. Yu’s (2021) article “Cultural Diversity in Canadian Television: The Case of CBC’s *Kim’s Convenience*.” While Nagy and Bánhegyi (2019) focus solely on the first season, and Yu’s (2021) article analyses Season One and Season Two, there seem to be no articles analysing the later seasons of the series or the show as a whole. Aside from Yu’s (2021), there are little to no articles discussing the impact of *Kim’s Convenience* as a television series. Moreover, no study mentioning the controversy surrounding the show’s conclusion and the statements made by cast members on social media could be found.

The present thesis relies on Yu's (2021) study in terms of terminology and methodology, but also engages with it critically. Yu (2021: 2-3) introduces the terms 'cultural translation' and 'saleable diversity' via Kyle Conway (2017: 4-5) and examines *Kim's Convenience* as part of an industry where these two would ideally be in balance. Conway's (2017: 21) *Little Mosque on the Prairie and the Paradoxes of Cultural Translation* defines 'cultural translation' as 'a negotiation over the meaning where one group of participants tries to understand how the other group sees the world,' and while he does note the different definitions of this term, he treats 'cultural translation' as a negotiation where creators of the television show seek to represent a culture, but also make a profitable project. This definition of 'cultural translation' that Conway (2017: 21) has proposed is also the definition of the term when it is used in this thesis. Another term introduced that is suggested by Conway (2017: 5), and used also in this study, is 'saleable diversity,' which is defined as the process of erasing 'visible signs of difference in the name of diversity.' Yu (2021) conducted a thematic analysis of the show, focusing on the themes that emerge from the interactions between the racial and social majority and minority as well as amongst different minority groups themselves.

Though Yu (2021) is somewhat critical in her analysis of the depiction of minorities, immigrants and the problems of these two groups in contemporary Canadian society in *Kim's Convenience*, her article overall highly praises the television show for its clever and light-hearted depiction of the aforementioned issues. This thesis serves as a response to her article. In her study, based on the first two seasons, Yu comes to the conclusion that the depiction of minorities that *Kim's Convenience* offers is new and refreshing in terms of finding a new way to portray familiar stereotypes. The aim of the present thesis, focusing on Seasons Three through Five, is to analyse how the continuously tactless implementation of the 'saleable diversity' strategy caused cultural inaccuracies and misrepresentations of Korean culture in *Kim's Convenience*. The first, literature review chapter of the thesis is devoted to

the reception of *Kim's Convenience* and it begins with giving an overview of the relevant research on *Kim's Convenience* as a play since critics, such as Yana Meerzon (2018, 2019), have pointed out problematic aspects apparent in the play that have been amplified in the television series, as is argued in this study. The second subchapter of the literature review discusses the articles written on the television series as well as other sources of its reception, specifically what were published after the show's conclusion. The second chapter includes a thematic analysis of Season Three through Season Five where the scenes are categorised under two key themes: Perpetual Other and Heterogenous Koreans: Diversity Within, which derive from Yu's study. The last subchapter of the literature review summarises the findings of the thematic analysis and discusses them in the context of previous analyses.

# 1. *KIM'S CONVENIENCE AS A PLAY AND A TELEVISION SERIES:*

## A LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1. Reception of the Play

Although this thesis will solely deal with the television show in its empirical part, both the process of staging the play and its reception are relevant when analysing the universalisation of Korean Canadian immigrant experience in *Kim's Convenience*.

*Kim's Convenience*, as mentioned before, was highly regarded as a play and quickly became successful as a television series after its debut in 2011. Many critics praise it for its light-hearted way of dealing with social issues and depicting generational conflicts within the family that many, even those belonging to the white mainstream, can relate to. Joff Schmidt (2014: para. 12), a theatre reviewer for CBC, ends his review by saying that although *Kim's Convenience* does not feature an in-depth analysis into generational conflict and conciliation, it did not seem to be the aim in the first place as it is simply honest, genuine and 'laugh-out-loud funny.' Schmidt (2014: para. 8) admits in his review that the only fully rounded character in the play is Appa while the others 'serve mainly to illuminate facets of Mr. Kim's character.' However, he (2014: para. 9-10) notes that Ins Choi likely intended to have the character of Appa as central to the play, telling the story from his perspective. He also praises Paul Sun-Hyung Lee for his performance in this role, saying that Lee is able to express the complexity of Appa's character, both his stubborn and bigoted as well as his tender and loving side, while also having excellent comedic timing. The same article also includes a section of quotes taken from an interview with a theatre-goer, Young Bae, who owns his own convenience store in Winnipeg. He (Schmidt 2014: subpara. 2) says that, contrary to Appa in the play, he never wished for his children to take over the store; they were free to do whatever they wanted. Bae (Schmidt 2014: subpara. 3-4) also explains that the reason why restaurant and grocery store businesses were so popular among Korean

immigrants might be the Korean War, which caused a famine. By opening a convenience store, they were able to sell food, but also would always have something for themselves. What Bae (Schmidt 2014: subpara. 5-6) also points out is the fact that though he can feel a sense of familiarity in Appa's experiences despite not mirroring his own, it may seem 'very odd or different to a general audience' (quoted in Schmidt 2014: subpara. 6). However, from other reviews of the play, it becomes clear that even if the experiences portrayed in the play differ from those of the critics, *Kim's Convenience* seems to evoke a sense of familiarity among its audience members.

At the end of his review, Jesse Green (2017) writes that by the finale of the play, he found a part of the story of *Kim's Convenience* to be his own as his grandparents had also emigrated to North America and owned a convenience store, where his mother used to work. What he related to was not the racial and ethnic problems that the Kims faced, since he himself is not Asian, as well as not the comedy aspect, but the sadness created by the intergenerational conflict that existed in every character. In that sense, it can be said that *Kim's Convenience* is written in a way that welcomes even those who cannot fully relate to the struggles of the family by portraying a story that almost everyone can sympathise with.

However, there are some critics who say that *Kim's Convenience* may be too simple in its depiction of socio-cultural issues. Yana Meerzon (2018, 2019) is one of the few theatre scholars who has written critical analyses of *Kim's Convenience* as a play and she has done it from the stance of its contribution to the depiction and representation of immigrants and members of minority groups in theatre. In her article "Multiculturalism, (Im)Migration, Theatre: The National Arts Centre, Ottawa, a Case of Staging Canadian Nationalism" Meerzon (2018: 122) argues that the play is an example of 'national mimesis,' aimed to create a hero out of Appa by writing his character to invoke 'feelings of sentimentality, populism and uncritical inclusivity.' National mimesis, as defined by Erin Hurley (2011: 24) is 'the

activity of representing the nation as well as the result of it (an image of the nation).’ Meerzon (2018: 122-123) continues that one of the sources of humour in the play is Appa’s accent, which, though uncomfortable with it at first, Paul Sun-Hyung Lee put on for the play, imitating his own father, likens the character of Appa to a theatrical simpleton. Meerzon (2018: 123) states that the decision to make the immigrant figure central to his play the main comedic device may be evidence to the fact that Choi could have been trying to accommodate a wider audience at the expense of his main character.

In theatre, those different from the vast majority, such as people with illnesses, deformities etc, have often been used as comic relief in the roles of theatrical simpletons, tracing back to Roman comedy, employed by Shakespeare and his peers and through the naturalistic plays reaches present day by way of comedies and television sitcoms (Meerzon 2019: 24-25). Rather than being part of the nobility’s court, the contemporary simpleton has evolved into the comedic migrant; someone who is presented as unable to communicate, simple-minded and glaringly different from the majority group in terms of social norms and cultural mannerisms. Meerzon (2018: 123-124) criticises Choi’s choice of playing into the stereotype and making his immigrant protagonist the comedic relief of the play while also portraying him as opposing the political correctness that many are sensitive to in contemporary Canadian society. This leads Meerzon (2018: 123-124) to wonder if the aforementioned factors are also the reason why Appa’s ignorance of certain social norms and usage of racist remarks are forgiven because he is created to be othered and perhaps even deemed too simple-minded to understand these concepts.

Additionally, the aforementioned problematics of the play pointed out by Meerzon in her article also exist in the television show in a more amplified state. Before going into an analysis of these aspects, it is also important to discuss the reception of *Kim’s Convenience* as a television series.

## 1.2. Reception of the Television Series

The reception of the television series is vital to the empirical part of the thesis as it emphasises the relevance of this topic. This chapter will discuss the reception of the show when it first began broadcasting in 2016 and the academic articles that followed when the series became known internationally after it was made available to stream on Netflix in 2018. It will also detail the statements made by cast members after the show ended. The core of the reception for this thesis specifically is Sherry S. Yu's (2021) article.

The news of *Kim's Convenience* receiving an adaptation offer were warmly welcomed. Ins Choi details his experience of bringing the play to the television screen in an interview with Maclean's Magazine (Lee 2016); he was cautious to ruin the good reputation that the play had garnered, with the fear of not being able to capture the essence of *Kim's Convenience* in the long-form media that the television show would be. He decided to gain more experience creating television shows as well as tour the play nationally and allowed for the actors to grow within their roles. This choice would turn out to be beneficial as both Paul Sun-Hyung Lee and Jean Yoon, who played Appa and Umma respectively, would join the production of the television show as the characters that they were in the play. Lee (2016) also notes that the reason why *Kim's Convenience* is so successful is that although the main characters are Korean and the show is tied with the heritage of the characters, what is being portrayed can be applied to anyone. The audience is not being led through the growth of a single character from a certain cultural background but rather introduced to characters who have universally relatable experiences.

When *Kim's Convenience* won two prizes at the 2017 ACTRA (Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists) Awards, the success and popularity of the television show was undeniable. Eleanor Ty (2017: para. 6) writes in her article for *The Toronto Star* that this type of recognition shows that the experiences of a minority group can be adapted to be

liked by all audiences. Ty (2017: para. 6) praises *Kim's Convenience* for showing that Asian actors can be cast as the main characters, and not as just sidekicks and villains or, as Ty calls them, 'stereotypical Orientalist roles,' such as exotic objects of desire or criminal masterminds. The future seemed bright for *Kim's Convenience* as a monumental piece of media in a predominantly white entertainment industry, especially after gaining global recognition when it debuted on Netflix in 2018 (Zarum 2021). The first two seasons proved to be extremely popular as it derived a lot of the plot and punchlines from the original play, which had already been introduced to the wider audiences on stage. This also gave way for academic articles to be written about the television show.

Judit Nagy and Mátyás Bánhegyi's (2019) analysis of Season One is based on two topics. The first aspect that Nagy and Bánhegyi (2019: 48) investigate is the differences between the perception of first-generation and second-generation Korean immigrants of Canada and the misunderstandings that these contrasting views can create. The section is divided into subsections based on themes, each of which examines one example. Perhaps due to the limited scope of the article, the analysis of each scene is condensed to a paragraph and therefore the arguments that the article makes remain shallow. Subsection 1.5 (Nagy and Bánhegyi 2019: 53) entitled *Nayoung's clothes* analyses a scene in Season one Episode four, where Umma and Janet discuss Janet's cousin, Nayoung, and the way she dresses. To Umma, her clothes are too short and she calls Nayoung a 'slut.' Nagy and Bánhegyi (2019: 53) state that Umma does not know the negative connotations of the word, however, when looking at the full scene, it becomes clear that Umma is very aware of the connotations. To Umma's statement, Janet exclaims in shock 'Did you just call Nayoung a slut?' Umma replies that she did not call Nayoung a slut, but compared her style of clothing to that of a stereotypical sex worker. Umma clearly makes the distinction between actually being a sex worker and dressing in revealing clothes, however, due to her upbringing, she, although narrow-mindedly,

relates the two. This is an example of some of the shortcomings that this article has.

The second aspect discussed is transnational features that the television show has. Nagy and Bánhegyi (2019: 54) first define the term ‘transnationalism’ in a broader sense, simply as something that involves aspects from multiple nations, and in a more narrow sense, a process in which immigrants create relationships and other connections between their community of origin and settlement. The following section (Nagy and Bánhegyi 2019: 54-59) is divided into subsections based on different transnationalist features that the television show has in its Season one, however, similarly to the first section, there is little to no analysis of these scenes apart from an explanation of how the particular scene fits with the authors’ proposed definitions of ‘transnationalism.’ As was the case with the previous section, this one also seems too desultory and descriptive, leaving potential arguments unmade. For example, subsection 2.1 entitled *Insam Energy Beverage* (Nagy and Bánhegyi 2019: 55) uses a scene from Season one Episode six, where Appa is trying to sell a customer Insam Energy Beverage, a Korean energy drink made from ginseng root. The scene is used as an example of Korean import to Canada, some of which ended up being sold at Korean convenience stores, similarly to *Kim’s Convenience*. Though the full dialogue between the customer and Appa is not displayed fully, there is still an additional point to be made from this scene. ‘Insam’ (인삼) is Korean word for ginseng, while ‘ginseng’ itself is of Chinese origin. As Appa has been notoriously portrayed as patriotic, he continues to use the Korean word even in English, however, the customer is unaware of the meaning of insam and points out that the bottle has a picture of ginseng. The two bicker over the real name of the root. The etymology of the word ‘ginseng’ is also a transnationalistic feature as the word was borrowed from Chinese into English. Although there are some shortcomings in this article, it does show that there are aspects to *Kim’s Convenience* worth analysing.

The other article specifically discussing *Kim’s Convenience*, the television show is

Sherry S. Yu's (2021) which conducts a thematic analysis of Seasons one and two. She approaches the television series as a product of cultural translation. Yu (2021: 2) introduces the term 'cultural translation' via Kyle Conway (2017: 21). Yu states that her objective for the article is to examine how a minority producer, Ins Choi, perceives and interprets the world around them at a particular time of production and places their piece of work in that context. For this, she conducts a thematic analysis of Seasons one and two, treating each episode as a unit of analysis, a total of twenty-six units. The section entitled Findings details Yu's analysis of Seasons one and two and is divided into subsections based on themes found in the television series. Each section discusses a couple of scenes, usually from the same episode, and analyses how *Kim's Convenience* portrays different social situations and how the Kim family reacts to them. In her analysis, Yu (2021: 7-8, 10, 12) praises *Kim's Convenience* for how it has been able to interpret and present complicated issues and, at times, uncomfortable situations, such as racism, social injustice and intergenerational conflict. In the final section of her article, Discussion and Conclusion, Yu (2021: 12-13) states that part of the reason why *Kim's Convenience* is such a success is because it contributed to filling the gap both in the entertainment industry and general discussion of the true meaning and representation of diversity in contemporary Canada. According to Yu (2021: 13), *Kim's Convenience* is able to place well-known stereotypes in new contexts and give them a new meaning. Both positive and negative stereotypes have been assigned to specific people, characterising an individual rather than a whole group. This is a tactic that Yu connects with Conway's 'saleable diversity' and goes further to discuss how the television show's interpretation of Canadian society has made it so 'saleable.' When it comes to creating popular media about and including minorities, the creators have the choice between perfect and semi-realistic representation and, despite the fact that the latter may also serve to reinforce stereotypes and harmful images, the last-mentioned strategy is often chosen. Yu, however, does not see this as a negative, as *Kim's*

*Convenience* has been able to introduce the mainstream culture to Korean customs, language, culture, cuisine as well as giving a platform to Asian actors, both Korean actors, such as Paul Sun-Hyung Lee and Jean Yoon, but also non-Korean Asian actors, like Simu Liu and Andrew Phung. Yu (2021: 14-15) concludes her findings that despite some of the shortcomings of *Kim's Convenience*, her analysis has shown that the television series serves as a vital gateway to discussion around minority depiction and representation in the western entertainment industry.

The news of the television show being cancelled, revealed in Spring 2021, came as a shock to viewers, but also to cast members (Haupt 2021). The year before, after the conclusion of Season four, *Kim's Convenience* had been confirmed for two more seasons because of its immense international popularity and Simu Liu being cast as Marvel's *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. The reason for the show's cancellation is complicated and there are details that have still not been disclosed to the public. While Ins Choi, the creator of the original play and co-creator of the television series, has not spoken out on the issue, Ivan Fecan, the show's producer, did make a statement, saying that Choi had decided to depart after the conclusion of Season five. 'You can't blame the guy. / ... / This is a show about a guy's life story. It's his life. It's people he met or imagined as he grew up. It's his truth, and he is the heart of the show,' Fecan (Haupt 2021, para. 12) says, indicating that Choi should not face backlash for his decision. The fact that *Kim's Convenience* was so personal to Choi also became the reason why Fecan ultimately decided to end the series after Season five and allow both Choi and other creators move on to other projects. What makes the situation even more complicated, however, is the fact that both Fecan and White, a co-creator of *Kim's Convenience*, had been working simultaneously on a spin-off show, featuring the only white character among the main cast, Shannon, played by Nicole Power. Haupt (2021, para. 18) points out how this may come across to the public – cancelling the

only Asian-Canadian show on CBC and replacing with a show that is created by the white co-creator of the original, as Choi is not involved in the spin-off, and featuring the sole white member of cast.

This fact was also pointed out by Simu Liu in his statement on Facebook in Summer 2021 (Pangilinan 2021). He also voiced his grievances of how he had been treated on set – he had grown increasingly frustrated with the direction his character was being taken and how little of a say he, as well as his fellow cast members, had in the matter, stating that ‘/ ... / our producers were overwhelmingly white and we were a cast of Asian Canadians who had a plethora of lived experiences to draw from and offer to writers.’ In addition to this, he also revealed that despite the show’s immense popularity, the cast themselves received an extremely low rate, among other things. His statement faced backlash as some viewed it as personal criticism towards Nicole Power and thus Liu removed his original post on Facebook and posted clarifications on both Facebook and Instagram, saying that his first statement was just an expression of grief on what happened with *Kim’s Convenience* as a project. This is the reason why citing the original post is impossible as it has been removed as of now. Kris Pangilinan (2021) posted screenshots of all of Liu’s statements as a thread on Twitter, which will be cited in relation to Liu’s posts on this matter.

One of the critics of Liu’s statement, John Doyle (2021) wrote an article on the issue for *The Globe and Mail*, criticising the actor and finding the original statement to be an emotional outburst, which caused for Liu’s fans to attack others involved, particularly Nicole Power and Ins Choi. Doyle’s article comes across as mean-spirited as the author clearly thinks that Liu has taken his role on *Kim’s Convenience* for granted. He also disagrees with Liu’s opinion of there being a lack of gender and racial diversity among the crew and writers' room. While, as Doyle (2021: para. 12) argues, *Kim’s Convenience* credits 13 female writers over the course of five seasons, a vast majority of the episodes were written by men, such as Ins Choi and Kevin

White, but also Matt Kippen, Garry Campbell and Kurt Smeaton (IMDb). In terms of racial diversity, Doyle (2021: para. 12) poses a question for Liu: ‘Further, the writing credits do indicate diversity – does an Iranian-Canadian not count?’ While there are people of colour, including Ins Choi, credited as writers on the television show, Choi was the only Korean-Canadian, and even the sole East Asian, in the writers’ room. Whether Doyle chose to purposefully misunderstand or simply did not realise the importance of having Korean writers for a show of a Korean family, remains unclear.

Doyle posted a link to his article on his Twitter account, creating a way for social media users to directly comment on his article and opinions. One of the more notable people to reply to him was Jean Yoon, who wrote her response to him as a Twitter thread. Yoon (2021) revealed that although Ins Choi and Kevin White are seen as co-creators of the show, White was the one in charge in the writers' room. She details an offensive storyline that was cut from the final script due to Yoon’s personal request as well as how she had spoken up about the mistakes that the showrunners had made of the depiction of Korean food and its creation in the television show, but maintains that most of the time, her opinion, as a Korean Canadian woman, was not taken into account. She concludes her statement by stating that her time of crisis in particular as an actor on the television show was during Seasons three and four, and while there was an improvement in treatment during the production of Season five as Choi returned control of the series. ‘And the more successfully I advocated for my character, the more resistance and suspicion I earned from the Writers/Producers,’ she adds, concluding her statement on 6 June 2021.

On 20 July 2021, the first interview with Jean Yoon since the end of *Kim’s Convenience* was published on NBC News (Wang 2021). In it, she (Wang 2021: para. 10-11) elaborated on her original response to John Doyle, saying that she felt as if she had to speak up in defence of Liu and voice her disagreement with the notion that ‘actors are not stewards of their

characters.’ She also revealed that the off-screen dynamic between the cast and the writers' room was close to non-existent, despite the fact that the actors had been requesting it since the end of Season one (Wang 2021: para. 14-15). Yoon points out some of the shortcomings where the show could have or did benefit from the input of the cast; due to the lack of a Korean female writer in the writers' room, Yoon believes that the dynamics of Umma and Janet's relationship suffered. An aspect that Yoon (Wang 2021: para. 19-20) did raise an objection was the portrayal of Korean food, particularly mentioning an episode of Season one, where Umma brought galbijjim (braised beef short ribs) to a church potluck, which made Janet and Appa sick. Yoon reveals that the original script had had kimchi as the dish brought to the potluck. Being a fermented dish with added garlic and red pepper, kimchi is meant to be antibacterial and acidic and therefore it could not make anyone sick, unless it is purposefully tampered with. The interview reveals that Yoon deeply cared for *Kim's Convenience* as it, as well as the role of Umma, was very personal to her, however she had grown increasingly disappointed with how the television show was ran and decided to speak out against it in order to emphasise some of the flaws that the Canadian entertainment industry still has.

However, not all responses to the end of *Kim's Convenience* were negative. CBC Kids News (2021) conducted an interview with a 14-year-old Audrey Cheng, who, being half-Korean, details how and why *Kim's Convenience* resonated with her. She, along with numerous viewers, praised the television show for familiarising the mainstream with Korean culture and food. Additionally, because the show features a solely Asian main cast and a largely BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) supporting cast, it became a catalyst for a majority of them, such as Paul Sun-Hyung Lee being cast in *The Mandalorian* (2019-), Nicole Power starring in *Strays* (2021-) and Andrew Phung co-creating and starring in *Run the Burbs* (2022-) (CBC Kids News 2021; Houpt 2021).

While the reception to *Kim's Convenience*, both as a play and a television series, has

been largely positive, there have been mentions of criticism in some academic articles and media outlets, specifically on the issue of accents and the scarcity of spoken Korean, as pointed out by Meerzon (2018: 122-124) and Yu (2021: 14). The ending of the show and the subsequent statements made by cast members Simu Liu and Jean Yoon reveal the problematics of the production of the television series. These statements detail the dismissal of the actors' opinions in terms of their own characters and their progression throughout seasons as well as the lack of diversity in the writers' room. It is particularly the latter aspect that translates to the screen as well in the form of cultural inaccuracies and badly written female characters. Both aspects are relevant to mention as they will be the basis of the analysis that will take place in empirical part.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF IMAGES OF KOREANS IN THE TELEVISION SERIES *KIM'S CONVENIENCE*

### 2.1. Methodology

As the aim of this thesis is to conduct a similar analysis to what Sherry S. Yu has done of the last three seasons of *Kim's Convenience*, the methodology of identifying key scenes and themes in the show is the same. During her analysis, Yu (2021: 6) paid special attention 'to interactions between the cultural and linguistic majority and minority, as well as among minorities' and those are characterised by other social categories, such as ethnicity and race, gender, class, sexuality etc. While working through each episode, this thesis includes the scenes that were chosen on the basis of the three key themes that Yu (2021: 6) identified in her analysis: perpetual *Other*, heterogeneous Koreans: diversity within and bicultural/subcultural Canadians: diversity across. In addition, particular attention was also given to the scenes which featured discussion around topics that were deemed problematic by the cast members after the series was cancelled (Pangilinan 2021, Yoon 2021) as well as instances where the process of achieving 'saleable diversity' was utilised to the point that the scene became culturally shallow, problematic or factually wrong. By the end of the analysis, the third theme identified by Yu, bicultural/subcultural Canadians: diversity across, was omitted because of the scope and topic of the thesis. Where this thesis differs from Yu's article, is the subchapters under each theme; the subchapters used by Yu are named after the scenes that are analysed in that chapter, for example 'Chinese, "you people,"' 'Korean Canadian versus Korean.' Therefore, the titles for the subchapters in this thesis will be named differently, but using the same logic. The scenes, which were omitted from the final analysis, simply included mistakes about Koreans as well as Korea's geography and culture, for example, Umma being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in Season Five, Episode One, which is an incredibly rare diagnosis among Koreans and other East Asians (Kurtzke et al 1968).

However, these mistakes are evidence of the fact that cultural correctness was not a priority for the showmakers, despite Ins Choi being one of them. This analysis explores the text (Forever Dreaming 2021), but because the script cited was compiled by volunteers, the analysis was conducted using the script and the visuals of the television show simultaneously. The analysis for the thesis is executed using thematic analysis, where the data is analysed to identify major recurring themes and draw conclusions based on them (Tight 2019: 158-159).

Each episode is regarded as a unit of analysis. There are thirteen episodes, all of which are approximately twenty-one minutes long. This analysis covers Seasons Three, Four and Five, making a total of thirty-nine episodes.

## **2.2. Perpetual Other**

Similarly to other minority groups, Asian have been viewed as the Other among the majority mainstream or named as the model minority by the cultural majority for other immigrant groups. Both of these portrayals are present in *Kim's Convenience*. For the first two seasons of the show, as Yu (2021: 6) notes, the exchanges between the Kims and members of the majority group are mostly positive, while some scenes explicitly depict the Kims experiencing racism and other forms of discrimination based on class and gender. In order to sustain 'saleable diversity,' the offenders are always emphasised as individuals so that their disagreeable traits would be only applicable to them and not the group that they identify with.

This is also the case for the latter three seasons, however, the solution offered for these awkward and offensive situations are often left open for interpretation and the wrongdoers are not confronted.

### **2.2.1. White Guilt**

One of the episodes pointed out as 'problematic' by the media was an episode on Season four entitled 'The Help' (Season Four, Episode Three) (Kim 2021). In it, Janet and

Umma attend Janet's university art competition and Umma is mistaken to be a server by a white member of the jury, Mrs. Taylor. Umma considers the reason for the mistake to be her outfit, as she was, similarly to the caterers of the event, wearing a white shirt with black trousers. She is not offended by the situation, but rather finds it humorous. Janet is shocked and points out that the mistake was made because of Mrs. Taylor's unconscious bias that Asian women, standing by the buffet table and wearing white shirts, cannot be in attendance of the event but rather working at it. Janet confronts her teacher, Ms. Murray and she and Mrs. Taylor visit Kim's Convenience in order to apologise to Umma for the mistake. Umma accepts the apology and states that she is just happy that her daughter is the finalist for the main prize. Ms. Murray and Mrs. Taylor interpret the conversation as a demand in order to compensate for the mistake. At the end of the episode, Janet receives the medal, but is unsure whether she won because of the quality of her work or white guilt. When asked, Ms. Murray tells Janet that, in the end, it does not matter as Janet won the medal anyway. This is where the plotline ends, essentially insinuating that Janet should be satisfied with receiving the reward, even if on the basis of white guilt. The concept of white guilt and race-based pity is a complicated one and seems to be a phenomenon from the previous mid-century where members of the dominant culture grant those from the non-dominant culture special benefits, awards and other privileges out of pity and guilt in order to somehow repent for misjustice of an entire group by upraising an individual (Steele 1990: 497-499). In this case, *Kim's Convenience's* approach to this social phenomenon remains insubstantial and misleading as, by the end of the episode, the impression left on the viewer is the same as it was on Janet – no matter whether Janet deserved the praise or not, she should be glad to receive it.

### **2.2.2. Sexism**

Although rapid social change has taken place during the 21st century, South Korean society still remains largely conservative and patriarchal (Park 2001: 43). Therefore it is of no

surprise that some of the male characters from the older generation in *Kim's Convenience* at times act in a sexist way towards female characters. In an episode entitled 'Hit 'n' Fun' (Season Three, Episode Twelve), Appa and Umma are at their local church, preparing for a bake sale in order to raise money to repair the church roof. While having a conversation with their pastor, Pastor Nina, a churchgoer named Jimmy Young enters the room. He makes a donation in the form of a large cheque to the church, feeling superior as he is able to directly donate, while 'you ladies sell little cookies.' He laughs and looks to Appa, as the only other man in the conversation, for approval, who also laughs. Pastor Nina reprimands Jimmy, reminding him that they have discussed comments like this before. Jimmy laughs it off, saying that he is just joking and proceeds to make more sexist comments. In the next scene, Umma is upset by Appa's compliance in the situation, explaining that if Appa does not directly disapprove of Jimmy's 'jokes,' he will continue to think that it is acceptable to talk like this. As a sort of challenge, Umma tells Appa to make goods for the bake sale himself, which he accepts and is surprisingly competitive about. Appa decides to bake Nanaimo bars, which prove to be so popular at the bake sale that women begin to crowd around his table. Jimmy approaches the group and makes another sexist comment towards the women near him, saying that there are '[s]o many sweet things to look at' and then pretending to notice the baked treats. Appa speaks up and tells Jimmy that he should not talk about women in this way. Jimmy seems somewhat taken aback and, once again, says that he is just joking. A woman enters the conversation and Jimmy realises that Appa was the one who baked the Nanaimo bars that he is selling. Jimmy sees another opportunity to make a 'joke' and says: 'Well, tell your husband they're delicious,' indicating that because Appa had baked the treats, he is the 'woman' in his marriage as Jimmy thinks that cooking and baking is a 'woman's job.' Appa shuts Jimmy down with a clever retort, making him the victim of the joke, similarly to what he had been doing throughout the episode to the women around him.

Jimmy's character appears as unlikable, since in every scene, he makes offensive remarks towards the women in the conversation and creates an awkward situation in the process. Since he is a rarely recurring character, Jimmy is largely characterised by his sexist behaviour and therefore created to be disliked by both viewers and the characters interacting with him alike.

While Jimmy's actions are portrayed as unforgivable, Appa also makes some sexist comments towards Umma. In Season Three, Episode One, Umma asks Appa to buy the family a new dishwasher. Appa exclaims that they do not have enough money to buy a new one at that moment, but Umma has done her research and presents him an advertisement. Appa, unconvinced, embraces Umma from behind and says '[b]ut... We already have a most beautiful dishwasher right here,' insinuating that Umma could do the dishes by hand. Even if Umma has the role of taking care of the meals and the cleaning up, this kind of comment is still unwarranted and inappropriate. When analysing Appa as a character from the theatrical simpleton perspective, as Meerzon (2019: 29-31) theorises, his ignorance towards the equalitarian treatment of women can be excused. This may be because the showmakers view the character as someone who does not have the capability of understanding why and in what ways his behaviour is wrong. On the other hand, it can be argued that Appa, in fact, is able to evolve and change his behaviour in some ways, as evidenced by, at first, his passiveness towards Jimmy's sexist jokes, and then, his rebuttal of Jimmy's comments and an additional witty retort. Moreover, the viewers are shown the conversation between Appa and Umma, where the latter makes it clear that she disapproves of idleness in these types of situations and shuts down Appa's, as well as Jimmy's, attempt to assign certain gender roles (cooking, baking) to women. This is to note that, however small, there is some personal growth of characters that the viewers may pick up while watching the show. On the contrary, it should also be mentioned that the only character to go through this type of character development is Appa, reiterating the notion that he remains the central part of the series, similarly to the play.

This would not be a problem if the showmakers had not stated that when creating the show, they wished to broaden all the members of the family as characters (Choi 2016: 112-114). This is where it becomes apparent that the writers' room did indeed suffer from a lack of a female Korean writer, who would have been able to offer insight and experiences of what it is like to be a Korean woman in Canada, and so make the female characters of *Kim's Convenience* more rounded as well.

### **2.2.3. Perpetuating the Frugal Stereotype**

One of the plotlines in the episode entitled 'New Appa-liance' (Season Three, Episode One) is that the Kim's dishwasher is broken and Umma is pestering Appa to purchase a new one. Appa is apprehensive because he does not want to spend a lot of money and proceeds to create a fake poster of someone selling a dishwasher for a rather low price. His idea is that if he is able to create a convincing poster, he would be able to scam the store's price-match policy and get a much better price. This scam is not discouraged, if only gently by Umma, but only because she had already ordered a new dishwasher on clearance and had it delivered. However, when Appa promises to buy the appliance for even cheaper and save 200 dollars with this scheme, Umma decides to let Appa do what he wants. Furthermore, he discusses this scheme with Mr. Mehta, who is of Indian descent. Similarly to Umma, Mr. Mehta does not disapprove of Appa's action, instead urging Appa on by saying that clearance sale prices are 'a gimmick. Like our "all you can eat" buffet. He revealed that although '[e]veryone thinks it's a bargain,' they actually put less meat in the curry. Mr. Mehta chuckles and adds that he enjoys seeing people searching for a single piece of curry in their meals. Though this serves as a punchline for the scene, it additionally makes the two business owners, Appa and Mr. Mehta, appear as swindlers, trying to skimp on as much as possible. This plotline ends with Appa and Jung working together, so that Appa would be able to take advantage of the price match policy. In the process, the men have to destroy the door of the dishwasher, much to the

dismay of Umma, who was initially glad to see the two working together, despite their strained relationship. In order to avoid upsetting Umma, Appa decides to emphasise that he and his son are working together and getting along. The episode ends there and it remains unsure whether Appa followed through with the scam or not. In a subsection of Yu's (2021: 6-7) Perpetual *Other* chapter, entitled Chinese, "you people," she describes an episode entitled 'Date Night' (Season Two, Episode Five), where Shannon and Jung meet up with an online seller. The seller turns out to be extremely bigoted and tells Jung that 'you people like pinching your pennies,' indicating that people of Asian descent are overly frugal. In that episode, the stereotype was directly challenged as Jung was not trying to haggle with the seller and was willing to pay the offered price, however, two seasons later, this stereotype is perpetuated as Appa desperately tries to save money by morally questionable ways.

### **2.3. Heterogenous Koreans: Diversity Within**

The notion of 'model minority' is often applied to Asian immigrants, however it deliberately ignores the diversity within the Asian community not only in terms of financial success and acquisition of a higher education, but also regarding aspirations, gender expression and sexual orientation among other things (Yu 2021: 8). In her Heterogeneous Koreans: Diversity Within section, Yu (2021: 8-10) argues that while mainstream media tends to ignore the diversity within the Asian community, *Kim's Convenience* does a good job of portraying Asian characters of different values in the show's first and second season. Not only do these characters have different aspirations, they also have their own difficulties and insecurities. Although identity struggles of varying degrees do appear in the later seasons, they are reduced to a plotline in a single episode rather than something that the character undertakes in the span of multiple episodes or even a season. This is where the lack of Korean perspectives, specifically female ones, in the writers' room becomes evident as the following

analysis discusses the character of Janet, who is depicted as struggling with similar problems that people her age do. Instead of opening the conversation on nuanced topics such as questioning one's sexual orientation or dealing with identity complication as a second generation immigrant, the latter seasons of *Kim's Convenience* offer a superficial representation of the aforementioned issues.

### **2.3.1. Misrepresentation of Korean Names**

In an episode entitled 'New Appa-liance' (Season Three, Episode One), Janet's professor searches for Janet's online photography portfolio in a search engine. However, it appears that the name Janet Kim is a popular name and the professor remarks that if Janet's portfolio is not easily discoverable, it will be hard for her clients to find her work as well. Janet, wishing to stand out amongst the crowd, decides to take on a Korean name, Kim Eiu Kyung (김의경), which she says means 'justice treasure.' Appa is confused as he and Umma had settled on Janet because '[j]ust to be safe, we not give you a name people make fun of,' and adds that Jung had been called numerous nicknames, such as 'dumb dumb Jung' and 'ping pong Jung.' The joke is that the ones to tease Jung were Appa and Umma, rather than ignorant children or bigoted adults. Janet states that since she is now Eiu Kyung, Appa may tease her if he wishes. Appa tries to correct Janet's pronunciation of Eiu, as it is pronounced /ɥi/ [eu-i] rather than /ɔi/ [o-i], but Janet is unable to pronounce it as a native Korean speaker would. In a later scene, Janet is at an exhibition and introduces herself as Kim Eiu Kyung to her professor and two visitors, saying that she has rebranded herself. Interestingly enough, when one of the visitor addresses her with the correct pronunciation, the other visitor corrects them to pronounce it wrongly. She offers them a business card so that they can see the spelling, however it is pointed out that the spelling differs from what is written on the poster and also from what is written on the website. This indicates that Janet herself is confused by the spelling of her given name. In addition, one of the viewers point out that the name is

difficult to remember, frustrating Janet even further. In a later scene, Janet discusses the origins of her name with Umma, who reveals that she was named after a woman, who had helped the Kims when they first came to Canada. When the woman passed, the family decided to name their newborn daughter after her as she had been a very kind person. While the storyline concludes in a heartwarming manner, there are some issues to be pointed out. Firstly, one of the reasons that Janet starts to doubt her decision to rebrand is because the two visitors of her booth comment that although her name is unique, it is very hard to remember. Here it is important to mention that one of the visitors is a male person of colour while the other is a white woman. While remembering names can be difficult for many, it is incredibly rude to dismiss someone just because their name does not usually appear in the dominant culture. Ultimately, to the two visitors, the person in front of them has always been called Eui Kyeong.

Another mistake that the show makes is the usual structure of Korean names. Korean names usually consist of three syllables, such as Kim Eui Kyeong in which Kim is the surname and Eui Kyeong the given name (Cultural Atlas n.d.: para. 2). In almost every case, if the person is referred to by their given name, both syllables are used, rather than one. Therefore, referring to someone as simply Eui or Kyeong is extremely unconventional. In multiple cases, Janet is referred to as just Eui. For example, after the conversation with Janet, Appa exits the store with a dishwasher, which he intends to return and while pushing the trolley over the door frame, he lets out a sound of exhaustion, '[o]i!', which sounds similar to the way Janet had insisted that Eui should be pronounced. Janet reacts as if her name had been called, responding with '[y]eah?' Though humorous, this interaction shows that Janet as a character, or the showmakers, do not understand how Korean given names are structured. In addition, Janet also tells both Appa and the exhibition visitors that Eui Kyeong stands for 'justice treasure,' a phenomenon that is not at all uncommon with Korean given names

(Cultural Atlas n.d.: para 19-20). As the two words are not collocations, it would be fair to assume that ‘Eui’ stood for justice and ‘Kyeong’ for treasure. While ‘Eui’ (의) can indeed mean ‘justice’ or ‘righteousness,’ there is no translation for ‘Kyeong’ (경) that can mean or be a synonym for ‘treasure’ (Naver English-Korean Dictionary). Naver Dictionary translates ‘경’ as ‘Sir’ or ‘Lord,’ while Behind the Name offers the translation of ‘capital city,’ ‘scenery, view’ or ‘respect, honour’ (Naver English-Korean Dictionary, Behind the Name 2019). It is interesting to point out that although the translation for the first syllable is correct, the translation for the second syllable may only be correct indirectly. Moreover, ‘Eui Kyeong’ (의경) as a two-syllable word can also be translated to ‘conscripted policeman’ (Naver English-Korean Dictionary). Moreover, Eui Kyeong as a name is an extremely uncommon given name, with only 19 babies being given the name between 2008 and 2022 (Korean Name Information, n.d.). While choosing a name such as Seul Gi (슬기), meaning ‘wisdom,’ or Ha Neul (하늘), meaning ‘sky,’ would have helped avoid some of these mistakes, it seems that the name Eui Kyeong was chosen to serve the plot as Janet’s pronunciation of ‘Eui’ can be homophonous to exclamations such as ‘oh!’ or ‘oi!’

### **2.3.2. Second Generation Immigrant’s Relationship with Origin Country**

This would not be the last time that Janet attempts to connect with her Korean roots. In an episode entitled ‘Birds of a Feather’ (Season Four, Episode Eleven), Janet is making summer plans, wanting to go somewhere abroad. She is looking up pictures and information on South Korea, thinking about going there to teach English for the summer. Janet shares these plans with her roommate’s Gerald’s girlfriend Chelsea, whom the former finds somewhat annoying. Chelsea sees the photos and exclaims ‘[o]h, my God. Who knew Korea was so cute?’ Janet expresses an idea that she wishes to ‘[g]et away’ and ‘[r]einvent,’ indicating that she is feeling somewhat lost and perhaps visiting her parents’ origin country would help her. In a later scene, Janet finds out that Chelsea had convinced Gerald to travel to

Korea together in order to teach English, which makes Janet visibly upset. In the end, this becomes the sole reason why Janet decides to not go. While Chelsea and Gerald were planning to apply to work at the same academy Janet was looking at, she could have also applied to teach in a different part of the country. The topic of possibly connecting with her roots in Korea is essentially dismissed completely and she ends up travelling to Tanzania instead. While there is nothing inherently wrong with choosing to have Janet travel to Africa instead, it is a missed opportunity to depict a second generation immigrant's wish to reconnect with the origin country and discuss how that character views it depending on their personal experiences and traits.

### **2.3.3. Uncertainties with Sexual Identity**

Janet visits Tanzania during the time that elapses between Season Four and Season Five and the last season of *Kim's Convenience* begins with Janet returning from her trip. In an episode entitled 'Who's Pranking Who?' (Season Five, Episode Ten), Janet brings a friend she met in Tanzania to the basement of Kim's Convenience, where she moved after returning from her summer trip. During the episode, Janet and Appa have engaged in a prank war and in the scene, Appa is hiding under Janet's bed when Janet and her friend Tamson enter the room. The two reveal that they have missed one another and Tamson kisses Janet. Appa, shocked at what he is seeing, crawls out from under the bed and tries to get the two girls to stop. In order to avoid any sort of conflict, Janet thinks quickly and tells Appa that she was just pranking him, at which Appa is relieved. Though Janet apologises profusely after Appa leaves the room, Tamson decides to go home. In a later scene, Janet tries to talk to Appa about her confusion regarding her sexuality, however, Appa is too busy planning a practical joke on Janet to pay attention to what she is saying. When Tamson comes to visit Janet again, the two talk and Janet admits that although she is unsure of what label she identifies with, she really likes Tamson and wants to explore their feelings further. Oddly enough, Tamson dismisses

Janet by asking whether they were not just having fun. Janet, although visibly uncomfortable, changes the subject. From the scene with Appa, where Janet tries to confide in her father about her thoughts, it is clear that this is something that she wants to talk about. This plotline ends in a somewhat unsatisfying way, with Janet's feelings being dismissed, and the topic is never discussed in the show again. While this depiction is, once again, superficial, it can be argued that because the episode is towards the end of the very last season of *Kim's Convenience*, it is possible that the showrunners were planning to explore this topic further in Season Six, though that is just speculation.

#### **2.4. Discussion**

The thematic analysis of Season Three through Season Five of *Kim's Convenience* discovered that while it does contribute to filling the gap of minority and Asian representation in the Canadian entertainment industry (Yu 2021: 12), in the latter seasons of the television series the attention to cultural accuracy diminished, perpetuating old stereotypes and creating incomplete characters. From previous research and analysis of the television show, it is clear that both the premise as well as the characters had potential to tell a nuanced and meaningful story, representing and giving a voice to Korean Canadian immigrants. However, it is the process of creating *Kim's Convenience* that became its eventual undoing as the voices of minority actors and cast members were largely ignored. Having a more diverse writers' room would have benefitted the show greatly, as different perspectives, opinions and ideas would have allowed for better character development, plotlines and jokes.

While Yu's (2021: 6-8, 13) analysis of the first two seasons of *Kim's Convenience* accentuates scenes, where the showmakers have been able to present the act of othering in an innovative and inoffensive yet realistic manner, the later seasons include scenes where harmful stereotypes against Asians were perpetuated. The analysis conducted in chapter 2.3.

Heterogenous Koreans: Diversity Within notes the numerous misconceptions that were presented to viewers regarding the diversity of opinions and experiences of members in the Korean community in Canada. In addition, matters such as sexuality and identity were covered superficially and therefore failed to bring an alternative perspective to these issues.

In her analysis, Yu (2021: 12-13) observed that the first two seasons of *Kim's Convenience* introduced new perspectives on familiar themes as well as stereotypes about both the minority and the majority, such as racism and sexism, but also family relations and intergenerational conflict. Yu (2021: 13) also points out that rather than focusing on a certain characteristic and applying it to a whole group, problematic behaviour and character traits are assigned to a singular character, which can be considered to be a tactic of 'saleable diversity' (Conway 2017: 5) and therefore discusses race relations without attacking a collective. This is because Season One and Season Two discuss racism and other race-related issues with such nuance that it did not affect the 'saleability' of the show, but rather helped it gain more popularity. Yu (2021: 13) states that 'proper cultural translation – by challenging stereotypes and simultaneously revealing new images – promotes rather than hinders saleability in an increasingly multicultural society' and that is what makes *Kim's Convenience* such a success. The reason for the show's decline in cultural quality is not because it was not 'saleable' enough, but rather the fact that the showmakers stopped doing what worked so well for them before – challenge old and problematic images and present them in a new, nuanced and inventive way.

Yu (2021: 14) additionally discusses the downsides of the 'saleable diversity,' (Conway 2017: 5) one being that the production of the television show consists of multiple aspects, such as producers and writers, but also commercial logic and different policies. For example, the fact that although the Kims are a Korean family, they speak English with one another. Yu (2021: 14) cites an interview with Paul Sun-Hyung Lee (Wong 2016) and expresses hope that

the future seasons would include more spoken Korean. However, this appears not to be the case as the main cast's Korean identity diminished as the seasons progressed, the mentioning of aspects specific to Korean culture became more scarce and what was there, was often incorrect.

Yu (2021: 14) also mentions the dilemma between cultural accuracy and 'saleable diversity' and how in most cases the showmakers have to choose in favour of one. However, it is when producers decide to prioritise 'saleability' at the expense of cultural accuracy that the intentions of those involved should be questioned.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the thesis was to analyse how the implementation of the ‘saleable diversity’ strategy without concern for cultural accuracy had diminished the cultural value of *Kim’s Convenience* by the time the show stopped production after its fifth season. After the series ended, members of the main cast began voicing their opinions on how the show was produced behind-the-scenes and the lack of diversity in the writers' room, which, according to them, eventually led to problematic plotlines and jokes as well as incomplete character arcs.

The creation process of a television show is complicated and made up of different factors that need to work together in the end for the series to succeed. A show discussing social issues requires another layer of tact. One of the theories presented on what would make this type of media a success commercially is Kyle Conway’s (2017: 5) strategy of ‘saleable diversity,’ which entails careful decision making by the show creators to ensure that while representing a certain minority group and their experiences, the television series will not alienate other groups, making it unwatchable for them and therefore unprofitable. Yu (2021: 14) describes the relationship between cultural accuracy and ‘saleable diversity’ as a dilemma, where the producers have to choose whether to prefer one or the other. However, since it would be commercially illogical to create a television show in a way that represents a culture, a minority group or an ethnicity culturally perfectly, since it would isolate other groups, the optimal solution would be a balance between the two – representing a group accurately while making decisions that would make the show more appealing to the mainstream.

The analysis conducted in this thesis concludes that the quality of the representation of Korean culture and Koreans, but also Asians in general diminished in favour of creating a show that is able to attract various different audiences. While that in essence is not a bad thing, cultural inaccuracies can create misconceptions and misunderstandings as well as perpetuate old and construct new harmful stereotypes. The analysis found that, aside from

presenting Asians as harmful stereotypes, the representations of questioning one's sexuality and being unsure of one's ethnical background were condensed into singular episodes and not elaborated further, failing to open up these kinds of conversations to a wider audience.

As the production of the show has ended and both the show creators and actors have moved on to other projects, the *Kim's Convenience* franchise is completed and there will not be another season wherein the showrunners would be able to take criticism into consideration. However, the success of *Kim's Convenience* may be something that numerous producers and writers want to recreate and therefore the discussion around the problematic aspects of the show is still important so that future television series would not make the same mistakes. *Kim's Convenience* has demonstrated that a show around the lives, problems and experiences of Asians, as well as other minority groups, can be immensely popular even amongst the predominantly white mainstream. Therefore, it will hopefully allow for more media around this premise in order to educate the majority on minority cultures as well as create conversation around the issues that these groups may face. *Kim's Convenience* as a television series has been academically researched on a very small scale, despite its potential as a basis for a study. Future research could include a comparison between scenes from the play and the television series using adaptation theory or an analysis of the reception of the show as the ending of it became a very controversial topic. Moreover, the BIPOC actors who were involved with *Kim's Convenience* have been able to move on to bigger and more prominent projects, likely partly owing to the television series' immense popularity.

While *Kim's Convenience* has its many shortcomings as a television show aimed to represent the experiences of Korean immigrants in Canada, it did help make this genre of minority focused sitcoms more popular, which undoubtedly helps bring awareness to the lives of these groups.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Anna Maria Laumets**

**The Representation of Korean Culture by Way of Cultural Translation and Saleable Diversity in *Kim's Convenience***

**Korea kultuuri kujutamine kultuurilise tõlgenduse ja müügikõlbliku mitmekesisuse kaudu telesarjas *Kim's Convenience***

Bakalaureusetöö

2022

Lehekülgede arv: 43

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaureusetöö analüüsib korea kultuuri kujutamist telesarjas *Kim's Convenience* kultuurilise tõlgenduse ja müügikõlbliku mitmekesisuse raamistikus. Töö peamiseks eesmärgiks on arutleda, kuidas liigne müügikõlbliku mitmekesisuse strateegia kasutamine ja kultuurilistest vigadest mitte hoolimine põhjustas telesarjas *Kim's Convenience* korea kultuuri väärsti kujutamise.

Töö koosneb neljast osast: sissejuhatuses, kirjanduse ülevaatest, empiirilise analüüsist ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatus annab lühiülevaate korealastest Kanadas, tutvustab *Kim's Convenience*'i süžeed ja loomislugu ning defineerib töö võtmemõisted. Kirjanduse ülevaade käsitleb *Kim's Convenience*'i näidendi ja telesarja retseptiooni. Empiiriline osa koosneb telesarja *Kim's Convenience* kolmanda, neljanda ja viienda hooaja temaatilisest analüüsist ning metodoloogia ja arutelu alapeatükist.

Bakalaureusetöö kokkuvõtteks võib öelda, et müügikõlbliku mitmekesisuse strateegia liigse rakendamise tõttu esines teleseriaali *Kim's Convenience* hilisemates hooaegades kultuurilisi vigu ning korea kultuuri väärkujutamist, kuid sellest hoolimata oli telesari edukas ning tõenäoliselt eelkäijaks teistele immigrante ja vähemusrahvaid kujutavatele telesarjadele.

Märksõnad: kanada kirjandus, kanada televisioon, situatsioonikomöödia, kultuuriline tõlgendus, müügikõlblik mitmekesisus, temaatiline analüüs, Ins Choi, *Kim's Convenience*

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