

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

## Finding Neverland: Homelessness and Despair in the Urban Space

Neverland'i Bulmak: Kentsel Mekanda Evsizlik ve Umutsuzluk

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### ABSTRACT

*The centrality of the space of the home to an individual's existence has been extensively documented philosophically, anthropologically and socio-culturally. This paper plans to look at the state of homelessness and urban poverty within the postmodern spaces of cities like Hong Kong and Seoul through cinematic space. The paper is an exploration into the state of being homeless, adrift and existing within these city spaces and looking for something as a response to the rapid globalization of these cities. The centrality of the home is dissected through the fragmentary lives and spatially rootless existence that the characters in the two films under study have: Microhabitat (Jeon 2017) and Drifting (Jun Li 2021). Their urban poverty is contrasted against the towering buildings that line the sidewalks of these cities and is interrogated against the state and the accessibility of rights to the city within the state. How do placeless individuals fight for belonging and acceptance? What are the responses to urban poverty within these spaces of the city? These are some of the questions this paper will be exploring.*

**Keywords:** urban poverty, homelessness, globalization, marginalization, cinema

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## 1. Introduction

Originally, home meant the center of the world—not in a geographical, but in an ontological sense . . . home was the place from which the world could be founded. In traditional societies, everything that made sense of the world was real; the surrounding chaos existed and was threatening, but it was threatening because it was unreal . . . without a home everything was fragmentation. (Berger, 1984)

Within the contemporary urban space, the question surrounding homelessness, access to affordable housing, and who has the right to live within the city is a relevant concern in a highly postmodern and alienating space of the city. While traditionally home has been seen as the center of an individual's existence, a place one returns to so that one can get away from the anxieties of their modern existence, its interpretation has been transformed extensively over the past decades. While home as a concept continues to remain rooted in the permanence of a space one inhabits, individuals within the globalized world are challenging this by constructing and practicing alternative meanings of home. Home isn't merely about the physical materiality of a place anymore but also a mode of expression, a way through which people construct and define their identities and their ideologies.

A home isn't just a mere dwelling place, a place one inhabits, but also can also be interpreted as a place where routines and practices create and construct a sense of belonging and identity that helps anchor their existence in the physical, economic, and social fabric of the world. An individual's development isn't merely dependent on meaningful relationships with other people but also on the affective ties that they create with their immediate material environment around them as well. Home is where an individual originates from and

where one will be ending. Home is where a sense of belonging exists in tandem with people's identity and is also a place where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without issues. Within the meanings afforded to home, it becomes important to interrogate who has the right to it and who can afford it within a postmodern world. The access to housing is also access to privileges associated with having a home, and the belonging one might feel with their neighborhood, their community and their people. In the 21st century, home as a traditional, stable entity has been undone and it can no longer be a center where individuals find existential meaning.

Yi Fu Tuan considers "permanence as an important element in the idea of place (140). Home exists in a geographical space but could also be associated with "the idea of a human person as "place" or "home" (Tuan, 139). Therefore, while permanence is one of the qualities of a home, it can also be thought of in terms of movement from one space to another, the idea that we might not carry the physical space with us, but the potential of carrying the concept of home along with ourselves every time we move, as if the very existence of it is in transience. Furthermore, the sense of belonging is shifting beyond mere geographical locality (Conradson and Latham, 2005). Within a postmodern, globalized world, home moves with the inhabitant within the nomadic lifestyle that many have picked up either by choice or has been forced onto them by the state. Urban poverty, rising land prices and the impossibility of ever having a home are what have driven people in the 21st century to exist in constantly shifting kind of space.

## 2. Home in *Microhabitat*

Architecture and urban design “frames” space, both literally and discursively. In the literal sense, everyday life takes place within the spaces of rooms, buildings, streets, and cities that we inhabit. A life within a home is structured and shaped by walls, doors, windows, and objects that are within these spaces, and furthermore it is framed by decisions of urban designers, architects, the state, the inhabitants, and the hierarchy within them. The inhabitants in *Microhabitat* are confined within a handful of rooms and sometimes nothing at all, like Mi-so, with the streets being the only available home. Concentration on this physical space, in this manner, brings about a new kind of experiential meaning to the architecture that enables cinematic response to this to unravel.

*Microhabitat* revolves around Mi-so’s act of giving up on a house when the rent goes up and she is unable to catch up to all the resultant inflation. We see her spending the entire film couch surfing in friends’ houses, friends who used to be in a band together in college, and friends that she housed in their time of need when they were young. Mi-so’s character doesn’t complain about her lack of money or her job as a housekeeper instead choosing to live her life with a certain grace, dignity, and stoicism. Mi-so’s a direct threat to a capitalist system that measures an individual’s worth through social, financial, and cultural capital. Each visit to her friends is punctuated with her desire to nurture them. Mi-so’s utter disregard for any judgment towards any of her friends emphasizes her desire to not give into a system that valorizes people who give up themselves and their dreams for capitalism and society. She doesn’t blame her friends for choosing paths that have ensured financial stability, but which haven’t necessarily ensured their happiness or their peace.

Within the entirety of the film, Mi-so carries on with her routine of being a part-time housekeeper, drinking a glass of her favorite wine and smoking cigarettes. Her routine rarely wavers but within this routine, she is unable to carve out any solution for her urban poverty for none exists. Even if she is to give up on her cigarettes and her sole glass of wine, she would still be unable to make enough money to put in the safety deposit for a flat and afford a roof over her head. Her response to her lack of a house is one of resignation. However, it isn’t a passive response as much as an acceptance of the despair of living in a city and not being able to afford to house. There is a resignation to the way Seoul is and has treated her in all her life after her family’s fall from grace and money. She doesn’t have any familial support systems left. Her working-class status, her gender, and her lack of any ambition are mind-boggling to a capitalist society where an individual’s worth is connected to what they own and how much money they have. She isn’t ashamed to ask for help from people she continues to feel close to, despite years of separation. Her desire to ask for help doesn’t induce any self-pity either as much as the lingering affection she feels for them. However, her affection isn’t about entitlement either. She doesn’t feel people owe her affection either, instead understanding people’s desperation and problems better than they understand them themselves. Instead, her homeless existence becomes a tether for all her friends to become self-aware and realize the societal norms and the choices they took. In exchange for staying at people’s houses, she cooks, cleans, and labors for them before leaving. Cleaning is the only thing she can offer to her friends in transactions both emotional and financial. In the absence of her own domesticity and her lack of a home, she finds ways to perform the arrangement or semblance of a home in these spaces.

Mi-so's homelessness in the film is a comment on the altogether denial of domestic space by the city to marginalized, disenfranchised people like her. While her lack of a home is a cause of concern for her boyfriend who cannot house her as he lives in a youth hostel, everyone else also passes judgement on her lack of a home. The opening scene of the film emphasizes her separation from her immediate surroundings as she cleans inside a house belonging to another. The entire sequence emphasizes her quiet dignity in her labor and her hard work. This is immediately intercut with a shot of her walking home, carrying a borrowed bag of rice that has scattered due to a hole in the bag and her resultant disappointment with it and the real possibility that she doesn't have any ration to feed herself. This sequence then cuts to her solitary glass of wine and cigarette at a bar. While she moves in and out of other people's houses, she herself cannot rent one or perform the rituals of having a home in the entire film.

Mi-so values her romantic relationship with her boyfriend, Han-sol, and is ready to sacrifice her own hopes and dreams to support her partner. And yet, Miso loses her home and grapples with its loss in an increasingly capitalist society to hold onto the two things that are dear to her: cigarettes and whiskey. Despite keeping a strict budget, the room she inhabits at the start of the film is a room too sterile for any love to blossom. They must resort to selling their blood by the pint to be able to afford food on a date and movie tickets. Mi-so's condition is a direct result of the failure of the urban system's increased capitalization and a lack of familial connections that render her homeless. Rather than choosing to spend her salary as a part-time housekeeper on expensive housing in unsafe and highly unhygienic areas, she chooses to spend her life couch-surfing from one friend's house to another. Mi-so's later search for a house

is fraught with tension as all the prospective houses the broker shows her are located at the top of the hill or are attics with no electricity or ventilation, uninhabitable by a human being.

The claustrophobic interiors of the houses she visits are emblematic of the entire city of Seoul that's shown in the last continuous shot of the film that frames the entire city through the subway system and the road. Mi-so's houses are cramped and dehumanized spaces where the bodies are reduced to their mere function to barely survive. Mi-so's lack of a house is emblematic of a lack of space for her to materialize what she can have in her life. The end of the film sees Mi-so pitching up a tent near a river and living off the grid. Her last tether is taken away from her when her boyfriend flies to Saudi Arabia to work and save enough money to come back to South Korea and own a house with her. However, that dream remains unrealized as we see Mi-so after an undisclosed amount of time living the life of a nomad, her medical condition finally greying all her hair, signifying her inability to not just occupy and afford a space but also her inability to take care of herself in an increasingly capitalistic and cruel world that has no space for the homeless and the disadvantaged.

While we never see her directly framed in the last sequences of the film, the decision remains deliberate. It is also in a way a direct representation of how it's abundantly clear that the system has failed a woman like her and cannot account for her belonging despite her painstakingly trying, again and again, to save money and survive. Her failure to acquire a space to call her home doesn't mean she gives up. The last shot emphasizes that she continues to partake in her whiskey and her cigarettes after finally giving up on finding a home that she can afford on her meager salary. Her belonging, her sense of place is now

the tent that she has pitched on the riverbank against the dizzying lights of the city that has treated her like an abject, out of mind, out of sight. It is nature that finally gives her the belonging that she has been longing for.

Within the film, the camera never intrudes and just like Mi-so, observes the motions of her life. Director Jeon Go-woon keeps the camera close to emphasize the cramped interiors and the emotional pressures they can generate occasionally drawing back to reveal the sprawling cityscapes, like the longer take filmed from inside a subway to remind us about invisible and dispossessed souls like Mi-so living such a life. Within the film, while the camera closes in on her, it never intrudes or shows a pitying perspective. While it's the people around her who ostracize her, in subtle forms, she herself is never made to feel pity about what is happening to her, just instead resigning herself to the fate of the homeless. But within the narrative, she isn't a figure of pity but instead, at multiple points, it is her friends who become the object of pity for their extinguishment of their individuality and their dreams. While others judge her lifestyle as nomadic and therefore rebellious, something so frowned upon within the highly conformist society she doesn't hesitate to ask for the things that are necessary and never at the cost of her freedom and her sense of self, something the others have compromised on and feel proud of themselves for having settled and found a house to call their own.

Selfhood alongside urban poverty becomes harder considering how it can render one's agency null and void. Her band members have all conformed to the socio-economic-political milieu of 21<sup>st</sup> century Seoul that spares no one from patriarchal notions of marriage, gender politics at the workplace, familial obligations, and capitalism. Her friends are all part of a system that

gives the bare minimum in exchange for demanding the maximum out of an individual.

Mun-young, the first person she contacts, works for a corporate firm and her first action is to hook herself up to an IV line when she meets Mi-so during her lunch hour, which is later interrupted mid-way by her supervisor's phone call. Mun-Young states that while she doesn't consider Mi-so's lifestyle normal, she finds it cool while at the same time accusing her of living in a fantasy world of living rent-free and still smoking as she did in college.

The house and its connections to its inhabitants in South Korean culture are derived from Confucian traditions. In South Korea, doctrines like “현모양처” Hyun Mo Yang Cho —wise mother and good wife, which idealised the submissive wife and altruistic mother are important to the fabric of the house. Similarly, “남존여비” *Nam Jon Yo Bi*— respect for men but not for women— belief also originated from the Confucian concept that women were inherently inferior, and they were relegated to a life of self-sacrifice (E. Kim, 1998). In family norms, some principles like “남녀유별” *Nam Nyu Yu Byol*- men and women are originally different- and “내외법” *Nae Oe Bob*- women's place is the domestic space and men's place is the public space emphasized women's foremost duty to family and home (Y. Kim, 2005). While these Confucian ideals have been challenged and accepted as outdated, the idea of “효” (*Hyo*), which refers to filial piety, still dominate the South Korean society and considered a traditional virtue worthy to be preserved. 효 is often cited as a direct reason for the continued expectation from women to bear the responsibility for each member of their family. However, the recent democratization of South Korea in the 1990s and early 2000s did bring institutional and legal changes for gender

equality and brought scrutiny to the patriarchal society (S. KimKee, 2004).

Hyun-jung, played the keyboard in college with Mi-so, and seems uncomfortably settled into her married family routines when Mi-so visits her. She struggles with unpaid labor that is expected from her by her husband and her in-laws, a burden that exhausts her, but her duty expects of her. However, she doesn't have any right to the home that she works tirelessly for. Despite fulfilling the duties of a daughter-in-law and wife, she cannot claim any space in the house as her own. *Nae Oe Bob-* insists that the family and the domestic space come first. Similarly, Jung-mi used to play guitar in the band but is now married and saddled with a toddler and a husband whose needs she is responsible for like a child. While she has a huge bungalow that she is a mistress of, the house is framed repeatedly as intimidating, sterile, and without affection, quite like her marriage and the promises of motherhood that have failed.

These women had ambition and dreams but within the capitalist and patriarchal system, they have given up, just to survive. Jung-mi in particular feels threatened by what Mi-so represents, as an unattached woman who can live, however she wants, unlike her who's nothing but like a live-in caretaker for her husband, a role she feels is an appropriate exchange for her getting out of her urban poverty and climbing up the social ranks, nonetheless a role we clearly see she resents. Her state of mind is revealed through the constant Freudian slips as well. Hyun-jung on the other hand while understands Mi-so but is powerless to let her stay even beyond one single night for her in-laws really control the house and its space, she has none for herself. Dae-yong is emotionally ravaged from the abandonment of his new wife and a house that's mortgaged to the hilt,

depressed, and surviving on alcohol when Mi-so finds shelter in his spare bedroom. The material success does nothing to alleviate his struggles. She comes into everyone's life and sees the choices that they have made but doesn't judge them the way they judge her, instead laboring for them with her body, cooking, cleaning, taking care of them, showing a kind of gentle care that allows her friends to relax for a second from the humdrum and just exist.

Mi-so can even be seen as a figure that reminds them of what they have lost, the liberation and the freedom. Her nomadic existence only reminds them of the parts of themselves they threw away. A simple life is what she seeks and what she ultimately gets, even if the path to non-conformity means homelessness and a rootless meandering everywhere in the city. Behind the carefully cultivated façade of these people, she gets to the other layers for us to really interrogate what really is a home and belonging.

Within the entirety of the film, we do not see her trying to get a desk job or anything permanent because her options are limited. She had to drop out of college because she couldn't fund her education after her parents passed away, and the city and the urban existence are indifferent to any person. Her desire to stay away from the things her friends have accepted and settled for also speaks of a deeper decision to pursue what feels meaningful to her- supporting her partner's dream to be a cartoon artist; going on dates with him; doing her job meticulously; her cigarettes and her wine. All of these are her way to resist a slow dwindling of herself and her identity and a comfortable escape into these indulgences. Vice is indulgence, a choice, an agency that is what sustains her. However, it's also a reminder of her own younger and carefree days, college and bandmates, and the hazy drunkenness and joy of being

young, wild and free. It's also a reminder of a life without the requirement of choices that individuals make for their survival when they turn into working adults. The contrast is brought beautifully when we see her navigate the spaces of the homes of her friends. Within the houses her friends inhabit, there is a lack of love and belonging despite a house to live in, unlike her.

Watson and Austerberry's 1986 research survey revealed through survey responses, certain findings about home and homelessness. It was found that certain things were common among people like good material conditions and standards, physical and emotional well-being, intimate social relations, agency, and privacy (93-7). In contrast to home, they defined homelessness as a lack of the above conditions (97-102). However, the research also found out that 30% of the women did not consider their current accommodations as their home but refused to define themselves as homeless while 32% of the women thought the absolute opposite of this (92). These contradictions of having a home but defining oneself as homeless and vice-versa point to the larger contradictions within people's relationship to spaces that house them in the manner that is most comfortable to them.

Mun-Young states in the last section of the film the reason why Mi-so seems to have disappeared when she doesn't turn up for the funeral of a college teacher and suggests that "maybe she couldn't afford it anymore." While the cost of living in the city is too much for people on the fringes like her, the only solution left is then to give up entirely. Mi-so carries her home with her even if she doesn't have any physical space which bears her name or a legal document either. Her placelessness is also what gives her the right over her own body and her own belonging. While her belonging has been spurned by society, homelessness is

something that she becomes intimately familiar with but something that she refuses to acknowledge as a failure. Instead, her homelessness is shown as a failure of a system that cannot house her and whatever dreams she might or might not have. While she is resigned to the helplessness of a homeless existence, the despair hasn't gotten to her, unlike her spatially rooted friends. The question through the film then becomes about the dignity people like Mi-so are allowed to have and how being homeless makes them any less of a human or not. This is also a question asked in the film *Drifting*. They are homeless but not mindless.

### 3. Despair and Boredom

*Drifting*, like *Microhabitat*, also brings to notice the indifference of the system and its officials in disrupting the lives of homeless individuals that are living on the streets. It focuses on such a group in Hong Kong that is living off the street in any manner they can manage to. At the heart of the film is Fai, an inmate recently released from prison, who goes back to living on the street. The film focuses on Fai, an inmate recently released from prison who is back on the street as a homeless person. Furthermore, it focuses on Fai's court case against the government for forcefully making them vacate the streets in the middle of the night and throwing their possessions in a garbage truck and confiscating it, even his photo with his son, without any prior legal notice of eviction from the street. The film follows his struggle against the court and the legal system that refuses to acknowledge the invisible bodies of the homeless, leave alone treat them with any dignity.

The boundaries between the public and the private are eroded within the space of the street for these homeless individuals. A

street is a public space that is supposed to belong to everybody but in essence, does not. The crisis of the housing industry within Hong Kong is based on Government controlled land prices resulting in hyperdense spaces and a housing crisis that hasn't let up contemporarily. Within such a politics of space, the homeless characters only hope to find any place to settle for a short while till they are displaced again. Their life is nothing different than the nomadism of people who move from space to space as the homeless crisis and the state intervention ensures there isn't any permanency or any certainty within their lives.

The community of homeless people is at the center of *Drifting*, a title that speaks of not just the rootlessness of their lives but also how people permeate and drift in and out of these makeshift systems of families created within this transgressive space of the street and become involved in the trials and tribulations of these dispossessed people. These impermanent spaces of living have objects within them because urban poverty does not equal a lack of objects. The objects that litter these ramshackle houses are all objects that have emotional value and speaks of a deeper desire to retain the humanity that is denied to these people because of their homelessness it is almost as if by holding onto these objects they're asserting themselves and their presence against the crumbling infrastructure system, the government, and the city. They also hold onto the memories associated with these objects that make it bearable to exist in a system where they are considered a failure, worthless, and inhuman. The homeless people at one point in the film don't even have the money to take the subway, instead opting for the ferry, a much cheaper option. Their non-access to money also limits their movement within the physical spaces of the city unless they are willing to walk throughout the island. Their lack of permanent address translates

to their lack of opportunities to ever move out of their homeless status since all jobs would require identification cards and home addresses. It is an unending cycle of poverty becoming more enmeshed with the lives of the homeless.

Within the film, Muk is a teenage boy that Fai takes under his wing, seeing the image of his son in him but wanting him to stay away from the cruelty of a homeless existence at the same time. However, it is also these same people who become a makeshift family for Muk, for later it's found out that he ran away from his home, boredom combined with loneliness leading to such a thing. Muk also asks hard questions when he speaks out loud "where can poor people live?" Who has the right to possess a home? Possess a space and call it their own in the simplest way possible? Can marginalized people ever claim ownership of anything long enough to call it their place? How do they live in a city that denies them the basic human right to exist in a safe space? The rights of citizenship are outright denied to the ones on the fringes and are reserved only for the homeless, the ones who will contribute to the capitalist machinery, anything else is discarded.

Boredom is a direct result of the despair that these people find themselves in. Unlike Mi-so and her resigned but dignified response to her homelessness and despair, the people within *Drifting* resort to drugs and sex as the only response to the lack of any stimulation and sensorium. It is only through excess that they can experience anything beyond despair while living on the streets. Chaos and disorder abound in the world of *Drifting* as the unbearably slow pace of their life are also where their boredom finds its survival, teeming with the potential for destruction, just something to do, to stave off the thoughts, the despair, the hopelessness of their situation. Chain smoking, drug addiction and alco-



hol are all responses to a lack of foci within their lives, because the state repeatedly breaks down their personhood, rendering them invisible in any way that matters. It is invisibility against which Fai is really fighting for. The invisibility of what happens on the streets and the ones who treat it as their homes, how they cannot be ignored and remain unacknowledged in a system that creates them in the first place. Their despair is also a response to their entrapment in an urban system of globalization where the contrast between the high-rises and the homeless is painful and evident everywhere.

As Michel Foucault notes, letting die is not as simple as “murder as such” but is instead a form of “indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (256). These people and their lives ultimately do not matter to the state. In fact, the state is actually “letting die” these people, therefore, they are complicit in their suffering even if their presence is never even acknowledged.

When Muk leaves for his mother’s home and the Master, another character who acts like the wise elder of the makeshift family commits suicide, there isn’t anything holding Fai back apart from the acknowledgement of his utter helplessness and his refusal to give in to the only thing that has sustained him since his release: the street and his house on it. The fight is a constant fight against abject despair and Fai’s drug addiction is a response to that. Fai refuses to leave the home that he has constructed along with the help of other homeless people that make part of his family. While rootless existence is often what we have seen in the film there’s still an attachment to the place. Within the last house Fai inhabits, there is a kind of association of this space with a place. The house has turned

into a place and that is what renders any alternative housing arrangement abhorrent and insignificant, despite the threats of being forcibly moved. This house is constructed through discarded objects gathered and collected from all over the city and with the help of other characters as well. It isn’t just concrete and cardboard boxes off the street for him, but instead, it’s a place that holds memories, affection, love and desires within its temporary walls, and for all intents and purposes, is a home that anchors him when people around him are slowly dying, giving into despair, just fading away. The space of this ramshackle house is saturated with meaning for Fai, and his inability to leave it when the state wants to destroy these houses under the bridge, speaks not only to the rootedness of a house but also to its fleeting existence.

The house becomes the final straw where Fai’s despair, hopelessness, the lack of choice takes over. He is forced to choose a tragic end, without any dignity left by the state, without any space to call his own. His court case has been completed with no apology from the government only a meagre compensation. A house for people like Fai can only be a utopic dream and by its very definition doesn’t exist. Instead of abandoning this house and moving and reconstructing it somewhere else, Fai chooses to burn alongside his own house, where his photograph with his son, symbolic of his rebellion against the state, starts burning alongside everything it stood for. The stark contrast of the subway as a symbol of modernity and the house burning below it in the frame makes the question even more horrific. Development within the urban space then is always about development for whom? For what purpose? Who benefits from it?

*Drifting* while showcasing the housing crisis also shows how development continues to happen, condos and skyscrapers

continue to be built but the invisible marginalized inhabitants continue to remain invisible against the global image of Hong Kong city. The abandoned roads that Fai and others live in are socially devalued spaces, on the fringes. Within the discarded spaces of the city, boredom is the affect that is felt within the inner self where personhood is defined.

#### 4. Conclusion

What then the director Jun Li seems to be asking is the right to the city and if the urban poor, the marginalized have any right to it? Similarly, *Microhabitat's* seems to be interrogating urban poverty and choices that individuals are forced to make in Seoul. Where does one go when the city cannot and will not house these individuals? There is no answer given. Only a reality is shown where the homeless can end up nowhere but in the public space of the street until removed or in nature, for the city has no use for such individuals, discarded and thrown away.

Within the spaces that Mi-so, Fai and the others occupy, their despair takes varied and different responses. Suicide, boredom, or abject resignation is a response to a system that is indifferent, to a city that renders individuals helpless to infrastructure that is meant to alienate and keep people isolated. The sense of home and belonging to a place that these characters seek is also a desire to form a connection with any space that would receive them, without judgement. The urbanity of these cities only renders these individuals invisible. Within this invisibility, all they seek is an acknowledgement and a space to call their own, as should be their right.

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