



October 2024

The Last of the Sea Women

Sherry Coman

Martin Luther University College, Waterloo, ON, scoman@luther.wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Pacific Islands Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2024) "The Last of the Sea Women," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.02.18>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss2/18>

This Toronto International Film Festival Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

The Last of the Sea Women

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Last of the Sea Women* (2024), directed by Sue Kim.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator, and story editor with more than thirty years' experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



The Last of the Sea Women (2024), dir. Sue Kim
Toronto International Film Festival: World Premiere
Trailer: https://youtu.be/VHMngOUUYvc?si=EGcK9YDAYbbv9a_z

One of the first surprises in Sue Kim's documentary feature *The Last of the Sea Women*, which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, is to discover the advanced age of the women whose daily livelihood relies on diving into the Pacific. Early into the film, we follow one such nimble diver as she gathers urchins, shellfish and abalone and rises to the surface. The camera waits as she turns slowly to face us. Through the mask we see the wise and wizened features of a woman in her eighties. It's a surprise—and yet it's not unusual. Most of the women known as the 'haenyeo' are at the very least seniors, and many are in their seventies or more.

The 'haenyeo' or 'sea women' belong to an ancient and matriarchal Indigenous Korean tradition of sea diving, conservation, and harvesting that takes place at Jeju Island, off South Korea's southernmost point. The women have inherited the practice from their mothers and their mothers before them. Diving for up to two or three minutes at a time on their own breath, their

tools are simple hooks that lift items into the hand. A floating bag at the surface holds the day's catch.

The film is one of the first of a number of projects that producer Malala Yousafzai has been developing with Apple TV and A24. For the past decade plus, the Nobel Laureate has been mostly focused on advocating for education for women. More recently, however, she has turned toward telling the lesser known stories of women in community. “What I hope to bring to the table are the voices of women of colour, and debut writers and Muslim directors and writers,” Yousafzai tells *Variety*. “I hope we can have a wide range of perspectives and that we challenge some of the stereotypes we hold in our societies. And I also hope that the content is entertaining, and that people fall in love with the characters and have the best time together.”¹

Malala, Sue Kim and two of the ‘haenyeo’ themselves attended TIFF’s Toronto premiere screening. In remarks afterward, Malala helped us understand her evolving vision. “I’m an advocate for women's rights and girls education. We’re so focused on the challenges that women face that we don't often get the time to actually look at the incredible work that women are doing in different parts of the world and how strong they are,” she said. “So when I look at the incredible haenyeo I look at their resilience... the hours and the time that they give to this and how much they have this shared humanity... I know that these stories can help connect us from different parts of the world.”²

While the documentary focuses mostly on the older women who have been working all their lives, the filmmakers find two younger women who have adopted the traditional work on a neighboring island, documenting their experiences on Tiktok. The two younger women have a chance to meet the older divers at a community gathering. Soon the stories and the laughter are spilling across the table, and also a few tears upon departure. The chance for this kind of encounter

does not happen often. The older women wonder how the younger ones will do without a close community of support.

Sea water is plentiful but also holds some dangers. Although the women work close to shore, they are subject to wind and weather, and the sometimes larger swells and waves that make diving challenging. They are vulnerable as well to other and more sinister problems: the contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant in northeastern Japan, that experienced a meltdown during the 2011 earthquake, has been treated and was waiting for years to be released back into the ocean. That release began in August 2023. Some of the sea women travelled to Japan and even further afield to the UN in Geneva to protest this activity and to explain the possible impacts for them. Wastewater treatment and release is an ongoing project and will be continuing over the next thirty years. As the women anticipate generational loss of interest in the traditional work, they also know that the sea itself might be changed by this kind of activity. The impacts on the sea bed might mean that they can't continue the work.

The documentary leaves some questions unanswered. While the women say they are conservators, it would have been helpful to hear more about how that works: when they harvest some materials, or don't. The film also could have explored the impacts of this work on the body. One diver develops a challenging ankle injury and is laid up for a long time, unable to work. Nonetheless, she continues to help out on the shore however she can. Did the women dive while they were pregnant? How are their breath rhythms affected and what are the advantages or disadvantages in other ways to their health?

In the end, these gaps don't affect the film's overall impact. As a celebration of these women and their work, the movie is ultimately very fulfilling. The passion of the women, their exuberance, determination, and most of all their sense of community, offers much hope for the

survival of cultural traditions. Even if they do turn out to be the very last of the ‘haenyeo,’ their legacy will live on.

¹ Manori Ravindran, "Malala Teams With ‘Don’t Look Up ’Director Adam McKay for ‘Disorientation ’Adaptation, Unveils First Slate (EXCLUSIVE)." Variety.com, September 27, 2022. (<https://variety.com/2022/film/global/malala-apple-slate-film-tv-extracurricular-1235384724/>)

² Malala Yousafzai, recorded by the author during the Q and A after the film’s world premiere in Toronto on September 8, 2024.