

RESISTING PATRIARCHY THROUGH POP CULTURE: STEREOTYPES OF KOREAN WOMEN IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Btari Anya Safira

Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

Email: btarianya@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

KEYWORDS

women, stereotypes,
resistance, Korean
drama, South Korea

Korean dramas have made significant strides in gender representation in the past decade. However, South Korea continues to grapple with the deeply ingrained roots of misogyny and patriarchy. The study aims to explore how Korean women challenge stereotypes through pop culture of Korean women in a global perspective. The research employs a qualitative approach following Lawrence W. Neuman's framework, aiming to explore the underlying mechanisms and reasons behind the phenomenon. Through this approach, the research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how Korea's dramas contribute to the evolving discourse on gender roles in the globalized world. Specifically, the study examines how South Korean women confront stereotypes, particularly through the medium of Korean drama. The results of this study reveal that, despite the complexities within these narratives, Korean women continue to struggle with the challenge of capturing the full spectrum of female realities. In addition, the analysis reveals that women's experiences in Korean drama are shaped by a combination of relatable themes and an engaged audience, paving the way for Korean drama to act as powerful agents of social change, subtly dismantling long-held stereotypes via captivating storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

The depiction of gender dynamics in Korean dramas reveals a mix of progress and the endurance of patriarchal norms. Scholars Herlina (2018), and Riyadi & Fauziah (2022) highlight the persistence of patriarchy and traditional gender roles in South Korean media. They emphasize how women are still confined to submissive positions, reflecting deeply entrenched societal norms. However, others such as Leksmono (2016) and Shim (2007) demonstrate how Korean dramas can serve as tools for challenging stereotypes and empowering individuals, especially women. Despite the complexities within these portrayals, the widespread popularity of Korean dramas underscores their significant impact on shaping global perceptions and attitudes.

These findings stress the ongoing importance of researching the influence of Korean dramas on audiences worldwide. By gaining insight into how these narratives shape cultural norms and societal dynamics, people can strive towards promoting more inclusive storylines and advancing gender equality. Furthermore, examining the role of media in confronting or perpetuating patriarchal norms contributes to broader conversations about social change and progress (Fairbairn, 2020; Robnett & Vierra, 2023). Ultimately, through critical analysis of how gender is portrayed in Korean dramas and its implications for viewers, we can aspire towards creating a fairer and more just society.

This research builds on previous studies by exploring two central puzzles. The first puzzle examines the stereotype of Korean women as submissive due to the patriarchal culture in South Korea. Even with the possibility of a modernized patriarchy, Korean women still face the global stereotype of submissiveness. The second puzzle explores the forms of resistance Korean women employ against this stereotype. There is a desire to be seen as

individuals who are not entirely dependent on men. Korean women even utilize Korean dramas as a form of hidden resistance to reject this stereotype. However, this raises a question for the author: why, out of all the available tools of resistance, do Korean women choose to use Korean dramas?

The perception of South Korean women has been rooted way back in their history. South Korea's history is well known with their patriarchy system, where they enforce women to become subservient and dependent on men (Palley, 1990). Regarding the situation, this system has been brought to modern practices, causing certain stereotypes on women. This practice also became a step back for South Korea, since many countries are moving away from this oppressive structure and redefining gender roles - giving a chance for women to have equality (Park, 1993).

Korean dramas became a powerful form of resistance to patriarchy in South Korea. Korean dramas were first introduced through TV, and took longer time to get access by the global world. With their purposes to have connections to the global world, South Korea started giving access and distributing the contents across the globe. It became a powerful tool for reaching out to new audiences while understanding the culture of South Korea, both traditional and modern (Hoffman, 1995).

Korean dramas tackle the very stereotypes that marginalize women. They address the issues of submissiveness, forced femininity, and the societal expectation of women being lesser than men. This not only empowers women who defy these stereotypes but also challenges the limitations placed on those who may conform to them. The rejection of these stereotypes signifies a crucial shift. Women are not seeking to simply mirror men or achieve complete equality. Instead, they strive for a more advantageous position within the existing social structure. Korean dramas become a platform for this resistance, offering narratives that redefine femininity and showcase the strength and agency of women.

Korean dramas not only work as the act and tools of resistance, but also because of individual empowerment for women. While several still showed the traditional role and stereotype of women, they started to challenge a bigger picture in gender roles. This causes conversations and arguments regarding women's identity and societal expectations based on their cultures. Korean dramas still brought the unrealistic scenes and story to the global world, but they started to see different points of view, which brought a chance to change the stereotypical image of the "Submissive Korean woman" and redefine the perception for women (Kim, 2019; Philipp, 2022).

This resistance extends beyond individual empowerment. Korean dramas are a global phenomenon, reaching a vast international audience. As these dramas challenge traditional gender roles, they spark conversations about female identity and societal expectations across cultures. This global reach has the potential to dismantle the stereotypical image of the submissive Korean woman and redefine the perception of women in general. However, it's important to acknowledge that Korean dramas, while a powerful tool, are not without limitations. They can sometimes fall back on stereotypical tropes or portray unrealistic scenarios. Furthermore, the focus on female empowerment within a patriarchal structure might not be enough for some viewers who seek a more radical dismantling of the system itself (Hasanah & Ratnaningtyas, 2022; Pinedha et al., 2022).

Korean dramas keep moving forward with significant steps. They provide a platform and access for women to challenge the limitations they have and redefine their roles through society. Having a global reach to these dramas, giving the potential to not only empower Korean's women but also giving broader influence about gender equality, a more advantageous position, not trying to equalize their position with the opposite sex, and not trying to become the same as men. However, the existing gender construction and the

stereotypes that follow have pushed women to move and in this case use Korean dramas as a tool for resistance (Lee & Chin, 2007; Safira & Badaruddin, 2020).

Based on the above background, the author sees that there is a global stereotype of South Korean women as submissive women. Rejection of stereotypes continues to occur in various countries, but the patriarchal culture that binds South Korean women makes it a global stereotype that they are indeed submissive and submissive individuals. So the author raises a research question, "why do South Korean women use Korean dramas as a means of resistance to the emerging global stereotypes?"

The research aims to explore resisting patriarchy through pop culture of Korean women in a global perspective. It is expected to broaden readers' insight on gender resistance and become a reference for future research on the same field.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research employs James C. Scott's theory of resistance as a theoretical framework, acknowledging its versatility in various studies, including feminism, culture, queer theory, and post-culture. This theory highlights that resistance need not be overt or collective; it can manifest subtly in everyday actions and ideologies. The research distinguishes between public resistance, which is overtly visible, and hidden resistance, which is more veiled or implicit. By applying this framework, the study seeks to understand how South Korean women challenge stereotypes, particularly through the medium of Korean dramas. Korean dramas are identified as a form of hidden resistance, allowing women to subtly reject traditional gender roles and assert their agency within a global context.

To investigate the impact of Korean dramas on women's stereotypes, the research adopts a qualitative approach following Lawrence W. Neuman's framework. This method prioritizes in-depth exploration over numerical analysis, aiming to understand the underlying mechanisms and reasons behind the phenomenon. Through this approach, the research delves into the feminist perspective, examining how Korean dramas empower women and reshape societal perceptions. The data collection strategy involves a combination of primary and secondary sources, utilizing document studies and triangulation to ensure comprehensive and accurate insights. By meticulously analyzing the data, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Korean dramas contribute to the evolving discourse on gender roles in the globalized world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons Behind the Use of Women Stereotypes in Korean Dramas

When discussing Korean dramas, consumers often encounter the issue of patriarchy, which is deeply embedded in South Korean culture. South Korea already well known on how they implementing misogyny and patriarchy in their history and present time.

The Issue of Patriarchy is a Constructed Gender Problem

Despite significant strides towards progress, South Korea continues to grapple with the deeply ingrained roots of misogyny and patriarchy. This reality is starkly reflected in Korean dramas, both historical and modern. While historical dramas depict women bound by strict societal expectations and patriarchal norms, their modern counterparts reveal that these issues haven't simply vanished – they've adapted to the contemporary landscape.

One of the most glaring examples of this is the persistent pressure placed on women to take on domestic responsibilities. Historical dramas often portray women confined to the home, solely responsible for childcare and household chores. While modern dramas might portray women pursuing careers, the expectation of them also managing domestic duties

often remains. This creates a double burden, highlighting the slow pace of change when it comes to gender roles within the household (Kim, 2019).

This portrayal, however, is not without its challenges. By showcasing the struggles of navigating these expectations, modern dramas can spark conversations about gender equality and the need for a fairer distribution of domestic responsibilities.

However, the comparison between historical and modern dramas reveals a crucial point – the issues themselves have evolved alongside society. While historical dramas might focus on arranged marriages and societal expectations of female subservience, modern dramas might explore the pressure to conform to unrealistic beauty standards or the challenges women face in the workplace. This shift in focus demonstrates that the fight for gender equality is an ongoing battle, where new challenges emerge alongside victories.

The analysis of Korean dramas, therefore, provides a valuable lens through which to examine the complex relationship between societal expectations and the evolving role of women in South Korea. While the fight for equality is far from over, these dramas offer a powerful platform for raising awareness, sparking dialogue, and highlighting the need for continued progress towards a more equitable future.

Showing Women's Strength Beyond the Stereotypes

The author delves into the potential of pop culture, particularly Korean dramas, to challenge and dismantle the deeply ingrained stereotypes that hold women back. While acknowledging the broader impact of pop culture on gender roles, the focus here is on Korean dramas' deliberate effort to showcase women's strength and potential beyond the limitations imposed by South Korea's patriarchal society.

These dramas move beyond simply defying stereotypes; they actively push boundaries. They portray women not just as equals to men but as individuals who can excel and surpass them in various fields. The key here is that these portrayals are not unrealistic exaggerations. Korean dramas strive to present a nuanced picture, acknowledging women's struggles within a patriarchal system while simultaneously highlighting their capabilities and ambitions.

By showcasing a diverse range of female characters – CEOs, doctors, lawyers, athletes – Korean dramas present a powerful counter-narrative to the one perpetuated by patriarchy. They demonstrate that women can not only occupy traditionally male-dominated positions but also thrive in them. This shift in representation challenges viewers' perceptions and encourages them to question the very foundation of gender-based limitations.

Ultimately, Korean dramas act as a catalyst for social change. By offering a compelling alternative to the existing patriarchal narrative, they inspire women to embrace their strength and pursue their dreams. They empower viewers to see beyond the limitations imposed by stereotypes and envision a future where women can reach their full potential.

Showing the Representation of Women in Various Situations

The complexity of women's experiences defies easy categorization. Korean dramas, while making significant strides in representation, still grapple with the challenge of capturing the full spectrum of female realities. Each woman's journey is shaped by her unique background, and sometimes, dramas fall short of mirroring the specific struggles faced by certain demographics.

However, Korean dramas exhibit a commendable willingness to tackle new and pressing societal issues. They push the boundaries of conventional storytelling by addressing topics that are often overlooked or considered taboo. Take for instance, "Extraordinary Attorney Woo," a drama that shines a light on the double burden of discrimination faced by women with disabilities. The drama challenges the public's preconceived notions about a female lawyer on the autism spectrum. The protagonist, Woo Young Woo, encounters

stereotypes that deem her incapable based solely on her disability, despite her impressive legal education and skills (Philipp, 2022).

By bringing such underrepresented narratives to the forefront, Korean dramas foster empathy and understanding. Audience witness Woo Young Woo navigate a world rife with prejudice, showcasing the resilience and determination of women who defy limitations. This approach not only broadens representation but also sparks crucial conversations about inclusion and equal opportunities for all. While the journey towards truly encompassing all female experiences is ongoing, Korean dramas are making significant strides by tackling previously unexplored themes and paving the way for more diverse storytelling.

New Stereotypes Introduced by Korean Dramas

In addition to providing negative stereotypes for women, Korean dramas are also able to introduce new stereotypes that support women's struggle for freedom.

Women as Rational and Independent Individuals

For far too long, women have been burdened by a web of stereotypes. Images of weakness, dependence on men, and relegation to the domestic sphere have dominated societal perceptions. However, a new wave of Korean dramas is actively dismantling these outdated ideas and showcasing the diverse realities of women's lives. This shift in storytelling represents a critical step towards empowering women and fostering a more equitable future.

One of the most damaging stereotypes is the notion that women are inherently weak and incapable. Korean dramas are actively challenging this narrative by portraying female characters who are strong, both physically and emotionally. Dramas like "My Name" serve as powerful examples. Here, the protagonist, having endured violence throughout her childhood, makes a conscious choice to become a strong and independent individual. Her journey is a testament to women's resilience and their ability to rise above adversity (Hasanah & Ratnaningtyas, 2022).

Beyond physical strength, Korean dramas emphasize the importance of a woman's intellect and rationality. Many female characters are depicted as skilled problem solvers, strategists, and decision-makers. They navigate complex situations with logic and determination, defying the stereotype that paints them as overly emotional or irrational. This portrayal resonates with the female audience, reminding them of their own intellectual capacity and encouraging them to embrace their analytical minds.

The shift in representation extends beyond individual traits. Korean dramas are actively deconstructing the idea that women are confined to the domestic sphere and marginalized from public life. We see female characters breaking into traditionally male-dominated fields, achieving success in business, politics, and even the criminal justice system. Dramas like "Vincenzo" showcase female lawyers challenging the status quo and "Hospital Playlist" features talented female doctors saving lives. This on-screen presence shatters the stereotype that relegates women to the background and instead, shows them as active participants shaping the world around them.

By dismantling stereotypes and showcasing the multifaceted nature of women's experiences, Korean dramas offer a powerful tool for empowerment. They inspire women to embrace their strength, intellect, and independence. They provide a platform for women to see themselves reflected in successful characters, proving that success is not a gendered concept. This shift in storytelling paves the way for a future where women are no longer defined by stereotypes, but rather by their own ambitions and achievements.

Women are Capable of Achieving Their Dreams

The landscape of Korean dramas is undergoing a refreshing transformation. No longer content with presenting idealized, one-dimensional female characters, these dramas are tackling the complex realities women face today. In a world brimming with obstacles that can hinder a woman's journey towards her dreams, Korean dramas are emerging as beacons of hope and inspiration.

One of the most significant contributions of these dramas is their ability to expose a wider audience to the diverse challenges women encounter. By showcasing these struggles in compelling narratives, the dramas spark dialogues and raise awareness about societal issues that often go unaddressed. This exposure serves as a powerful motivator for the female audience. Seeing characters grapple with and overcome similar obstacles can ignite a fire within them, encouraging them to pursue their own aspirations.

Furthermore, Korean dramas are actively dismantling the harmful stereotype that relegates women to a secondary role in society. These narratives depict women not just as capable individuals, but as ambitious go-getters who refuse to be limited by outdated gender norms. We see female characters thriving in diverse fields, from business executives and medical professionals to artists and athletes. This on-screen representation fosters a sense of empowerment in the female audience, challenging the traditional prioritization of men and demonstrating that women hold the potential to excel in any domain they choose to pursue.

This shift in storytelling is not merely about showcasing strong female characters; it's about redefining success itself. Korean dramas are moving away from a singular, male-centric vision of achievement and embracing a more inclusive perspective. By highlighting the struggles, triumphs, and multifaceted lives of female characters, these dramas inspire women to define success on their own terms. They encourage them to break free from societal pressures and carve their own path, proving that achieving their dreams is not just a possibility but a reality within their grasp.

The power of Korean dramas lies in their ability to not just entertain, but to spark conversations, inspire change, and empower women to rewrite the script of their own lives. As these narratives continue to evolve, they offer a powerful message of hope and a roadmap for achieving true gender equality in the real world.

Women are Strong Individuals

Korean dramas have undergone a significant shift in recent years, moving away from portraying women as solely passive or dependent on men. Today's dramas are actively challenging these outdated stereotypes and promoting a powerful message: women are strong, independent individuals who deserve equal opportunities and respect.

One prominent example is the drama "Strong Woman Do Bong Soon." This show throws a spotlight on the titular character, Do Bong Soon, a woman with superhuman strength. Throughout the narrative, Do Bong Soon navigates a world that often views her strength as unusual or even threatening. The drama masterfully portrays her struggle to not only embrace her own power but also to change societal perceptions that limit women (Pinedha et al., 2022).

This shift in representation is crucial. When Korean dramas showcase women like Do Bong Soon, it sends a ripple effect beyond the screen. It normalizes the idea of strong, independent female characters, paving the way for more women to break free from traditional gender roles. As these empowering portrayals become commonplace, it opens doors for real-life changes. Women who identify with these characters are emboldened to pursue their own goals, knowing they don't need to conform to the limitations placed upon them by outdated stereotypes.

Furthermore, dismantling these stereotypes can lead to a more equitable society. When women are seen as capable and deserving, the opportunities available to them naturally expand. They can access the same resources and facilities as men, fostering a more level playing field. Additionally, the ingrained biases that lead to discrimination based on gender begin to erode. As dramas continue to portray strong female leads, viewers are subconsciously challenged to re-evaluate their own prejudices, promoting a society that treats all individuals with fairness and respect.

The impact of Korean dramas extends far beyond entertainment. They serve as a powerful platform for social commentary and positive change. By showcasing the strength and resilience of women, these dramas are actively dismantling harmful stereotypes and paving the way for a more equitable future.

Korean Dramas as a Tool of Resistance

Based on the two previous subchapters that the author has tried to explain, the author will try to discuss several important points that make Korean dramas used as a tool of resistance.

First, South Korean women, like many women around the world, face the hurdle of underestimation and limiting stereotypes. When they attempt to resist these ingrained beliefs, they have two main options. They can use social movements, that have traditionally been a tool for change. They raise awareness and challenge the status quo, aiming for a more equitable future. However, the author acknowledges research by Lee and Chin (2007) that highlights the limitations of this approach. The ideal form a movement should take to achieve lasting change remains under debate. Additionally, even successful social movements often have a primarily local impact, struggling to resonate on a global scale and dismantle stereotypes held worldwide.

This is where Korean dramas emerge as a surprisingly powerful tool for resistance. Unlike social movements, Korean dramas boast a built-in global audience. They transcend geographical barriers, allowing their messages to reach viewers worldwide. This global reach empowers South Korean women to showcase their resistance to stereotypes on a massive platform. Through compelling narratives and relatable characters, Korean dramas can subtly challenge outdated beliefs and introduce a new perspective on womanhood.

Second, Korean dramas leverage realism as another weapon in their fight against stereotypes. By tackling issues grounded in the everyday lives of South Koreans, these dramas foster a sense of familiarity and connection with viewers. This relatability makes the messages of resistance embedded within the narratives more readily absorbed by the audience (Safira & Badaruddin, 2020).

Furthermore, contemporary Korean dramas are adept at choosing themes that resonate deeply with viewers. They address issues of high social urgency, tapping into a wellspring of existing concerns. This not only bolsters audience engagement but also creates a fertile ground for the acceptance of further resistance messages in the future. By addressing relevant and relatable themes, Korean dramas create a receptive environment for viewers to embrace the challenges to stereotypes woven into their narratives.

Essentially, the combination of relatable themes and an engaged audience paves the way for Korean dramas to act as powerful agents of social change, subtly dismantling long-held stereotypes through captivating storytelling.

Third, Korean dramas go beyond mere entertainment; they wield emotions as a powerful weapon in their fight against stereotypes. By crafting narratives that resonate deeply with viewers, these dramas foster a sense of emotional connection. As viewers become invested in the stories, they experience the characters' joys, sorrows, and frustrations

firsthand. This emotional connection allows Korean dramas to subtly introduce viewers to the challenges faced by South Korean women.

The dramas don't shy away from portraying the anger, sadness, and even discrimination women encounter due to ingrained stereotypes. By experiencing these emotions alongside the characters, viewers develop a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. This emotional investment paves the way for the acceptance of new narratives – narratives that challenge and reject the limitations placed on women by outdated stereotypes.

Korean dramas do not simply dismantle stereotypes; they actively introduce new ones. But these new stereotypes are not constricting or marginalizing. Instead, they depict women as strong, independent, and capable individuals, defying societal expectations. By showcasing these positive portrayals, Korean dramas not only raise awareness about the limitations placed on women but also subtly shift audience perceptions. Viewers begin to question existing stereotypes and become more receptive to the idea of women breaking free from traditional roles.

The emotional power of Korean dramas, therefore, lies in their ability to bridge the gap between viewers and the experiences of South Korean women. By fostering empathy and understanding, they create an environment where new, empowering narratives about women can flourish, paving the way for a more equitable future.

CONCLUSION

The author's research suggests that Korean dramas can serve as a tool for resistance against stereotypes of submissiveness towards Korean women, affecting the global community. They can reveal the emotions and conditions women experience and offer solutions to change these stereotypes. Korean dramas indirectly influence consumers to support the actions needed to change their views on Korean women's lives. They also raise the issue of patriarchy, binding their emotions and encouraging change. However, the author acknowledges that measuring the success of these dramas is challenging. The strong patriarchy in Korean culture may hinder the implementation of change, and as pop culture, Korean dramas cannot cover all issues based on patriarchy, making it time-consuming to provide solutions.

REFERENCES

- Fairbairn, J. (2020). Before #metoo: Violence against women social media work, bystander intervention, and social change. *Societies*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10030051>
- Hasanah, R. R., & Ratnaningtyas, R. P. (2022). Representasi Maskulinitas Perempuan dalam Drama Korea My Name. *Komunikasiana: Journal of Communication Studies*, 4(1). <https://doi.org/10.24014/kjcs.v4i1.17792>
- Herlina, E. (2018). Representasi Ideologi Gender di Korea Selatan dalam Drama Korea "Because This Is My First Life." *Pantun Jurnal Ilmiah Seni Budaya*, 3(2).
- Hoffman, D. M. (1995). Blurred genders: the cultural construction of male and female in South Korea. *Korean Studies*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ks.1995.0019>
- Kim, H. E. (2019). *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982: Feminist film reignites tensions in South Korea*. BBC News.
- Lee, A. R., & Chin, M. (2007). The women's movement in South Korea. *Social Science Quarterly*, 88(5). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2007.00499.x>
- Leksmono, D. L. D. (2016). The process of audience involvement with the media personae on the film of "Descendants of the Sun" among young female Indonesian viewers. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, 4, 219–224.

- Palley, M. L. (1990). Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change. *Asian Survey*, 30(12). <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644990>
- Park, K. A. (1993). Women and Development: The Case of South Korea. *Comparative Politics*, 25(2). <https://doi.org/10.2307/422348>
- Philipp, J. (2022). "Extraordinary Attorney Woo" Sheds Light on Disabilities in South Korea. The Borgen Project.
- Pinedha, A. T., Wati, H. A. K., & Setiansyah, M. (2022). Dekonstruksi Stereotipe Gender dalam Drama Korea Strong Woman Do Bong Soon. *Jurnal Empirika*, 7(2), 67–88. <https://doi.org/10.47753/je.v7i2.126>
- Riyadi, S. D., & Fauziah, N. (2022). Representasi Budaya Patriarki Di Korea Selatan Dalam Film Kim Ji Young Born 1982. *Kinesik*, 09(1).
- Robnett, R. D., & Vierra, K. D. (2023). Gender Development Within Patriarchal Social Systems. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Power, Gender, and Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41531-9_18
- Safira, B. A., & Badaruddin, M. (2020). Consuming Korea: Global Branding and Soft Diplomacy from the Lens of K-Drama Cyber Travelers. *Jobmark: Journal of Branding and Marketing Communication*, 2(1).
- Shim, D. (2007). Korean wave and Korean women television viewers in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2007.11666025>

Copyright holders:

Btari Anya Safira (2024)

First publication right:

Devotion - Journal of Research and Community Service



This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)