


From 'Damsel in Distress' to 'Strong Female Lead': the Evolution Of Female Representation in Korean Dramas

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Keywords: female representation, Korean drama, gender, content analysis, popular culture	This study examines the revolution in the representation of women in Korean dramas from 2010 to 2024, focusing on how female characters are portrayed across three different periods: 2010–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2024. Employing a qualitative approach with content analysis, six popular Korean dramas were selected for in-depth examination. The findings reveal a transformation in female representation—from passive figures conforming to patriarchal norms to active, complex characters with full narrative agency. In the early period, characters like Geum Jan-di and Cha Eun-sang were depicted as weak romantic objects reliant on male protagonists. During the transitional period, characters such as Kang Mo Yeon and Do Bong Soon began to exhibit empowerment, although still framed within aesthetics and narratives that compromise with patriarchy. In contrast, the contemporary period presents characters like Moon Dong-eun and Hwang Do Hee as agents of change who control the narrative, challenge gender stereotypes, and enact new forms of gender performativity. These findings suggest that popular media, including Korean dramas, can function as ideological spaces that both construct and deconstruct gender identities. This research contributes to media studies, popular culture, and gender studies in the postfeminist era.
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INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in mass media has become the focus of important studies in cultural and communication studies, especially in the context of the development of popular media such as television dramas. Media not only reflects social realities, but also shapes and reproduces social constructs, including gender roles. Hall (1997) states that representation is the practice of producing meaning through language, symbols, and images used in the media. Therefore, how women are portrayed in the media is not just a reflection of reality, but an ideological form that influences the way society views women.

One of the forms of popular media that is very influential in the Asian region and globally is Korean drama. Along with the increasing expansion of Korean popular culture or Hallyu Wave, Korean dramas have not only become entertainment consumption, but also become an ideological medium that brings cultural, social, and gender values to the global realm. According to Kim (2013), Korean dramas are one of the most influential cultural products in

spreading Korean cultural values and identities globally. Korean dramas have become a phenomenon that not only dominates the Asian entertainment market, but also gains popularity in many countries thanks to streaming platforms such as Netflix to Disney (Jin, 2020; Lee, 2021). This shows how digital media has strengthened the reach of cultural and gender representation from South Korea to global audiences.

In this context, Korean dramas play an important role in shaping women's representation. For many years, the representation of women in Korean dramas has often been limited to traditional roles that place them in subordinate positions, either as "*damsel in distress*" or women in need of rescue, or as objects dominated by male characters. Women in Korean dramas are often represented through traditional lenses that emphasize tenderness, sacrifice, and subordination to men. According to Mulvey (1975), female characters in film narratives are often positioned as companions or objects for male protagonists who are active and dominant in the storyline. This is also in line with the findings of Lee (2018), who stated that female characters in early 2000s Korean dramas are mostly positioned as passive objects in romantic relationships and tend to be structurally and symbolically weakened. However, as social changes and gender awareness in South Korean society increased, this representation began to shift. Korean dramas began to feature female characters who were more complex, active, and empowered in various spheres of life, including professional, political, and even in romantic relationships.

In the last two decades, the change in the representation of women in Korean dramas has been significant. Therefore, it is important to trace how these representations undergo transformation over time. This study aims to analyze how the construction of women's representation in Korean dramas has changed since 2010, by selecting six drama titles that reflect different decades and different aesthetic and ideological trends, namely: *Boys Before Flowers* (2009), *The Heirs* (2013), *Descendants of the Sun* (2016), *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* (2017), *The Glory* (2022), and *Queenmaker* (2023). This study aims to examine the shift in the representation of women in Korean dramas from around the early 2010s to 2024, focusing on comparisons between female characters in popular dramas representing three different periods: 2010–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2024. This study aims to understand how the representation of women in Korean dramas has changed during the period and how these changes reflect the broader social, political, and cultural dynamics in South Korea. Using *the content analysis* method, this study will identify key themes related to women's representation, such as dependence, empowerment, professionalism, and independence, as well as how female characters in Korean dramas cope with long-standing traditional roles. This method was chosen because it allows researchers to identify patterns, themes, and changes in women's representation in Korean dramas systematically and objectively over a period of time. By analyzing elements such as dialogue, characterization, and storyline.

In addition, this analysis will explore whether shifting representations of women reflect changes in social norms. This research is important because it provides new insights into the role of media in shaping gender representation and social change in South Korea. As a country with great influence in the global entertainment industry, South Korea is an important example in seeing how the media can champion or challenge existing gender stereotypes.

The results of this study are expected to make a significant contribution to the understanding of gender in the media, particularly in the context of Korean dramas, and how women's representation in the media can continue to evolve in line with larger social changes.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with the content analysis method developed by Krippendorff (2004), who proposes that content analysis is a method to identify and analyze the themes, patterns, and meanings that exist in texts or media. This method allows researchers to understand how content in media shapes social and cultural representations. This study aims to examine the shift in women's representation in Korean dramas from 2010 to 2024.

Content analysis was carried out by assessing elements such as dialogue, characterization, and storyline development to identify key themes related to women's representation, such as dependence, empowerment, professionalism, and independence. Using this method, the research will explore how changes in women's representation reflect broader social, political, and cultural dynamics in South Korea. This approach makes it possible to detect patterns of change in women's representation in Korean dramas that depict the social transformations that are taking place in South Korean society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Passive-Traditional Character Era (2009–2013): Geum Jan-di (*Boys Over Flowers*) and Cha Eun-sang (*The Heirs*)

In the drama *Boys Before Flowers* (2009), Geum Jan-Di is the main female character in this Korean drama. She is a simple and passionate girl from a poor family who enters the elite environment at Shinwa's school. Geum Jan-Di is often portrayed as a passive and dependent figure on men, especially Goo Jun-Pyo, the main male character. She is often rescued and protected by male figures, both physically and emotionally. Similarly in *The Heirs*, Cha Eun-Sang is the son of a housekeeper who lives in Kim Tan's family home who is the main character. Both are placed as *outsiders* in an upper-class environment dominated by rich and powerful men. This representation shows how women from the lower classes become objects of empathy and compassion, rather than as subjects who have control over their lives (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Geum Jan-Di and Cha Eun-Sang are portrayed as romance objects that need to be protected, rather than as independent or empowered people. Most of the big decisions made by the two characters in this story are driven by the male character's role in their lives. They are described as "*modern Cinderella*" who is brave but narratively always needs the rescue of the male characters, especially the main character.

Geum Jan-Di and Cha Eun-Sang are also represented as female characters with passive and traditional characteristics that fit conventional gender constructs. They appear as a symbol of "good women" who are described as simple, emotional, and self-sacrificing figures. These two characters are placed as figures who experience pressure and suffering, but still survive with patience and loyalty. It also reflects the classic stereotype of women in East Asian

media, namely women as objects of suffering, passive, full of sacrifice, and bound to norms of politeness and obedience.

Both main characters are portrayed as parties in need of male protection. Geum Jan-Di is rescued by Gu Jun-Pyo from violence and bullying, while Cha Eun-Sang is helped by Kim Tan several times in emotional and social situations.



Figure 1. Rescue Scene of Geum Jan-di

This scene shows how the media represents women as victims who have to bear the burden without physical resistance, reinforcing the passive image that is typical of traditional gender representation. Geum Jan-Di is often shown as a visual object that elicits empathy and a sense of protection from the audience, especially men. In this rescue scene, it confirms the traditional representation of women as weak, in need of protection, and dependent on men. Women are often represented as objects seen and controlled by male figures, rather than as active and controlling subjects (Mulvey: 1975).

Goo Jun-Pyo appears as a dominant figure, standing tall and in full control, reinforcing the masculine role as protector and control of the situation. It becomes the center of visual and narrative attention, while women become the setting that requires action. It reflects a patriarchal structure in visual narratives that places men at the center of agency.



Figure 2. The Story of Cha Eun-sang

Likewise, in the scene of the Korean drama *The Heirs* in the picture above which indicates that Cha Eun-Sang is in a condition controlled by another party or by a system outside of him. It represents a socially and structurally subordinate position of women, where women are portrayed as figures who do not have agency or complete control over their lives. *This is in line with the idea of Tuchman (1978) where women in the media are often shown*

as beings who have no control, especially in the realm of big decisions. The patriarchal social system has limited a woman's space of movement so that she has no alternative options. The scene also shows the position of the dilemmatic and helpless female character while showing how the female character is often forced to act in accordance with social expectations, even if it is against her wishes. This scene also shows the gender representation of women who are still trapped within the framework of limited choices and agency. The female character is not shown as an independent decision-maker, but as someone who must submit to the situation or other parties. This shows that although women are present as the main characters, their position is still limited by conservative gender norms that place them as weak figures and not free to determine the direction of their own lives.

The scenes above can be read as a reproduction of the archetype of women who are passive and dependent on male decisions or protection. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female (Mulvey: 1975). Women are often portrayed as passive parties or victims of circumstances. Expressions of sadness, helplessness, and a position of helplessness as in the scene reinforce the position of women as "the ones who are seen", not "the ones who act". These two female characters are also represented as good women: simple, gentle, and full of sacrifice. They do not show personal ambition or strength in determining the direction of their lives. Their role is limited to romantic narratives as objects of male love. This reflects that women are forced to repeat behaviors that are considered feminine in patriarchal cultures.

In addition to being passive in the storyline, Geum Jan-di and Cha Eun-sang also experience symbolic annihilation, which is the elimination of women's active roles in other realms outside of romance. Their identity as individuals with other potentials is barely shown. Tuchman (1978) stated that women are often absent or only appear as stereotypes in the media, thus limiting the space for diverse representation.

Transition Era: Tough but Limited Characters (2016-2020): Kang Mo Yeon (Descendants of the Sun) and Do Bong Soon (Strong Woman Do Bong Soon)

Kang Mo Yeon is the female main character in the drama Descendants of the Sun. He is a smart surgeon who works in a private hospital. Kang Mo Yeon is described as a professional woman, with high integrity, and dedicated to her work. In her romantic relationship with Captain Yoo Si Jin, she comes across as an independent woman who does not directly succumb to male charms, but rather considers her values and principles in life. This shows a stronger form of agency than the female characters in previous plays. However, even though Kang Mo Yeon has a profession and autonomy, the narrative still places her in a gender-unequal relationship. In many scenes, she remains the one who is physically and emotionally saved by the man. However, in some parts of the story, the characters are still tied to the conventional framework of women who are emotional and in need of protection, especially in the context of military conflict. In addition, despite being shown as a highly educated female character with a good career, Kang Mo Yeon is still judged based on her body and physical appearance.



Figure 3. Character Objective Scene Kang Mo Yeon

The words of the main male character Yoo Si Jin are a form of sexual objectification of women's professional identities. Here, Kang Mo Yeon's abilities and competencies as a surgeon are reduced to physical appearances that trigger male desires and attractions. It also reflects that when women show their professionalism, they will still be constructed within the frame of sexual attraction.

"Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a doing rather than abeing." (Judith Butler: 1990). In this part, the female character is undergoing a performance as a doctor, but the male character's speech seems to "repeat" the social construct that women should always be associated with visual appeal. In fact, in clinical spaces that are supposed to be sterile from gender bias. Yoo Si Jin's words also form a performative expectation of women where even when working, women must remain attractive in the eyes of men. Mo Yeon's character reflects the transition of women in Korean media, namely women are still shown as objects of visual attraction even in professional roles. It is part of *gender performativity* that normalizes patriarchal views of women's bodies and identities.

In the Korean drama titled *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, starring Park Bo Young as Do Bong Soon and Park Hyung Sik as Ahn Min Hyuk, also showed a similar discovery. This drama tells the story of a young woman named Do Bong Soon who was born with extraordinary physical strength and abilities. Despite having superpowers, Do Bong Soon is represented as a cute and cute woman whose powers are often framed in a comedic context. This is actually considered a form of patriarchal compromise mechanism so that women's power does not "threaten" traditional gender norms too much. As Gill (2007) points out, the representation of strong women in the media is often kept in place so as not to "threaten" the dominant gender system, for example by placing them in funny or unrealistic situations. Therefore, although *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* appears to be a form of female empowerment, the representation still negotiates with patriarchal boundaries, making the main character's power something acceptable for being "bandaged" in the romantic comedy genre.



Figure 4. Scene of Do Bong Soon Using His Superpowers

One of the most striking scenes in the drama appears in the first episode, when Do Bong Soon easily incapacitates a group of male thugs who are troubling the residents. This scene explicitly shows a reversal of the traditional stereotype of women as weak and passive parties. Do Bong Soon still wears a pink coat that reflects the feminine aesthetic starting from the color, the cut of her clothes, and the hairstyle still shows the feminine code visually. However, at the same time, it displays actions traditionally associated with masculinity: strength, confrontation, and protection. This challenges the idea that attributes such as strength are inherent only in men." *There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results*" (Butler: 1990). Do Bong Soon's character breaks the social expectations of the "ideal" woman in Korean culture who are meek and in need of protection.

But Bong Soon's strength in this narrative is often presented in comedic and eccentric nuances, for example, he acts with exaggerated facial expressions or in ridiculous situations that can be read as a symbolic strategy to neutralize potential threats to the dominant gender order. This is in line with Gill's (2007) argument that the representation of strong women in the mass media is often ironically packaged or symbolically weakened to conform to patriarchal norms. Therefore, although this drama shows a strong and independent female figure, its representation remains in a corridor that does not completely break down the hegemonic gender structure. The characters in *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* do seem at first glance to be a form of female empowerment, but the representation still negotiates with patriarchal boundaries, making the main character's strength something acceptable because it is "wrapped" in the romantic comedy genre

The Contemporary Era (2021-2024): Women as Agents of Change: Moon Dong Eun (The Glory) and Hwang Do Hee (Queenmaker)

In this era, the representation of women in Korean dramas is increasingly showing a shift. The female protagonist begins to be presented as active subjects who have control over their lives and goals, not just a plot-driven object or male character as appeared in previous Korean dramas.

This shift in representation is very visible in several drama titles, including *The Glory* and *Queenmaker*. In the Korean drama titled *The Glory*, the character of Moon Dong-Eun, played by Song Hee Kyo, tells the story of a victim of school-age violence who builds her life with

the determination to take revenge on the bullies. He chooses a very strategic and intellectual path: become a teacher at the school of the perpetrator's children, reach out to their families, and prepare a series of revenge acts.

The female characters in this drama are portrayed as having the capacity to devise tactics, control emotions, and navigate the power system for the sake of justice. Her role blurs the boundaries between "good women" and "bad women", presenting a complexity of characters that are human, strong, and refuse to be constrained by gender stereotypes.



Figure 5. Scene of Apologizing to Moon Dong Eun

This speech marks a shift in power from the usually passive and oppressed position of women to active, dominant, and even frightening. Moon Dong-eun stood up straight with a cold, flat, and determined facial expression. It is different from the typical female expression in Korean dramas which is generally *gentle, sweet, full of tears, or full of doubt*. In this scene, Moon Dong Eun appears assertive and intimidating like the depiction of men in *revenge* or political dramas, complete with formal and dark clothes. Far from being feminine or fashionable, this also confirms that its strength does not come from physical attractiveness. Moon Dong Eun's emotionless flat facial expression reflects good self-control and goes against the stereotype of emotional women.

Moon Dong-Eun is represented *beyond* conventional gender performance. She no longer plays the role of "woman" as determined by the social construction, i.e. gentle, resigned, loving, supportive. Instead, she appears as a strong, controlling, and unwavering woman. In Korean drama narratives, women victims of violence are often shown as figures who finally accept fate or rely on men as saviors. However, *The Glory* reverses this construction: Dong-eun is not just a victim, but becomes the main actor in her revenge scenario. She takes complete control of the narrative of her own life which shows that power is not synonymous with masculinity. She also rejects romantic relationships as a solution, unlike many female characters in other Korean dramas. This also challenges the myth that women can only be "whole" if they love or are loved by men.

The shift in women's representation in Korean dramas is also seen in a drama titled *Queenmaker* (2023). This drama raises the story of politics and power with the female protagonist, Hwang Do Hee (played by Kim Hee Ae), a political strategist and public relations. After betrayal and manipulation at her workplace, Hwang Do Hee decides to quit the corporation and use her skills to help Kyung Sook run for mayor of Seoul. This drama

highlights power, corruption, and the role of women in the political arena that has been dominated by men.



Figure 6. Hwang Do Hee's Leadership Scene

This scene shows Hwang Do Hee, the main character in the drama *Queenmaker*, while giving strict instructions to the political campaign team he leads. This phrase marks a pivotal moment that represents the takeover of narrative control by women, while also challenging gender stereotypes in leadership and political contexts. In patriarchal cultures, political space and strategy are often associated with masculine qualities: rational, assertive, dominant, and strong. In contrast, women in media representation are often attached to soft, passive, or supportive nature (Gill, 2007). But in this scene, Hwang Do Hee appears as a dominant figure. His statement is a form of claim of full authority over the political narrative, something that has always been associated with male power. This scene challenges the dominant stereotype about women in the media who are often portrayed as supportive, emotional, or on the margins of power. Hwang Do Hee appears as *a narrative authority*, the holder of the control of meaning or those who can determine the truth through the power over discourse. In this context, women are not only the object of political discourse, but also the producers.

Gender is not inherently attached to the individual, but is constructed through the repetition of actions and speech in a particular social context. Hwang Do Hee's assertiveness, direct leadership style, and decision to steer the political narrative are not imitations of masculine traits, but a new gender performance that blurs the dichotomous boundaries between masculine and feminine: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (Butler: 1990). In this scene, Hwang Do Hee's gender expression actually blurs these boundaries. She is not a "woman who behaves like a man," but a woman who articulates power through a way that does not submit to dominant feminine norms such as gentleness, patience, or subordination.

The dramas *Queenmaker* and *The Glory* represent a significant shift in the representation of women in Korean dramas, where female protagonists are no longer portrayed as passive or subordinate figures, but as active subjects who have control over their own lives and narratives. Hwang Do Hee in *Queenmaker* appears as a strategic political figure

who leads a campaign team with authority, while Moon Dong Eun in *The Glory* reverses the stereotype of the victim by designing revenge intellectually and systematically. Both reject traditional roles as soft, emotional, or dependent on men, and instead present a gender performance that transcends the boundaries of the feminine-masculine dichotomy. This representation reflects how popular media began to respond to social change by presenting strong, complex, and autonomous female characters, as well as expanding the scope of women's narratives beyond romantic love into the realm of power, justice, and self-control.

CONCLUSION

The representation of women in Korean dramas has undergone a significant shift over time. If in the early era (2009–2013) female figures such as Geum Jan-di and Cha Eun-sang were represented as passive figures who needed male protection, then in the transition era (2016–2020), figures such as Kang Mo Yeon and Do Bong Soon began to show independence, although they were still framed in patriarchal and aesthetic narratives that neutralized their power. Women's representation in this period still retains elements of feminine visualization and emotional attachment that limit women's agency as a whole. This reflects how the media often still reproduces conventional stereotypes even though narratively they show change. However, in the contemporary era (2021–2024), there has been a huge leap in gender narrative and representation. Characters like Moon Dong-eun (*The Glory*) and Hwang Do Hee (*Queenmaker*) are no longer portrayed as objects of suffering or visual appeal, but rather as active subjects who control their own narratives and strategies. Both show that women can be agents of change, decision-makers, and holders of control over political and personal power. Through theoretical approaches such as *gender performativity* (Butler) and *the regime of truth* (Foucault), it can be seen that these representations not only offer an alternative image of women in popular culture, but also become a reflection of broader social changes regarding gender roles and power in contemporary society.

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