

Women in Doubt: Women's Representation in K-Drama Series Search: WWW

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ABSTRACT

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Korean film and drama serve as powerful mediums of mass communication, capable of portraying and depicting the realities inherent in the cultural and social fabric of Korean society. "Search: WWW," a Korean drama released in 2019, delves into the conflicts, triumphs, and setbacks experienced by its female protagonists in the workplace. This study aims to examine the portrayal and representation of women in "Search: WWW." Employing a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach, the author seeks to identify and analyze signs of patriarchal culture manifested in the female characters using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method, encompassing denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings of this research underscore the significant role of media in shaping the perception of women in "Search: WWW." Despite featuring female characters with successful careers, characterized by self-reliance, intelligence, rationality, and determination, the study reveals underlying narratives cautioning women against certain pursuits, such as prioritizing independence and solitude, seeking divorce for freedom, and acquiescing to figures of greater power. Thus, the drama continues to reflect the patriarchal norms prevalent in Korean society.

1. Introduction

Film and drama serve as potent forms of mass media capable of portraying the realities of cultural and social life in Korean society with authenticity. In the contemporary landscape of communication and media, South Korean culture has gained significant global visibility. Particularly, the consumption of Korean dramas is prevalent among both teenagers and adults, with enthusiasts eagerly anticipating show schedules or indulging in marathon viewing sessions via online platforms.

One factor that has propelled South Korea onto the global stage in the 21st century is the proliferation of Korean cultural products, epitomized by the Korean Wave or Hallyu. The term "Hallyu" was initially coined by Chinese journalists in the late 1990s to describe the surge in popularity of Korean culture (Herlina, 2018). K Central to the appeal of Hallyu is the widespread popularity of Korean dramas, which serve as potent vehicles for disseminating Korean culture worldwide.

Korean dramas often revolve around romantic narratives that feature male protagonists exerting dominance over female characters, akin to the archetypal Cinderella Story where a wealthy prince falls in love with a humble woman (Wulandari, 2018). In many popular dramas, women are portrayed as secondary figures whose happiness ostensibly hinges on marriage and motherhood. Such portrayals perpetuate unfair stereotypes about women, underscoring the enduring influence of patriarchal ideologies within Korean society.

According to Todur, Confucianism holds significant sway over Korean societal values, having permeated Korean culture during the era of the Three Kingdoms: Silla, Goguryeo, and Baekje. The tenets of Confucianism reinforce patriarchal structures, with male dominance pervading societal norms (Todur on Herlina, 2018). Patriarchy, as a social system, subjugates and exploits women while elevating men to positions of power and authority (Nisa & Catur, 2019).

Unlike the popular K-drama stories, which position men as aggressive and initiative-driven figures and leaders, certain productions challenge gender norms by portraying women as assertive and empowered figures. One such example is the K-drama "Search: WWW," which debuted in 2019 with 16 episodes aired on TVN. The drama chronicles the professional challenges and personal choices of its female protagonists who prioritize their careers over marriage. The central characters in "Search: WWW" are depicted as self-reliant, affluent, and influential—a departure from the conventional portrayal of women as meek and disadvantaged in Korean dramas.

According to IDN Times (<https://www.idntimes.com/hype/entertainment/s-m-fatimah/alasan-kenapa-harus-nonton-kdrama-search-www-c1c2?page=all>), "Search: WWW" is hailed as a woman-centered drama, featuring three resilient female leads navigating the complexities of their professional lives. The series delves into themes of women's careers and the challenges they encounter, presenting its female characters as resilient and inspiring figures. The portrayal of strong, independent, and intelligent women in "Search: WWW" offers a refreshing departure from traditional K-Drama narratives. However, the consistency of these representations warrants scrutiny, as they contribute to shaping broader discourse surrounding Korean women.

Before investigating into the content of the K-drama "Search: WWW," it is pertinent to introduce the directors of the drama, Jung Ji Hyun and Kwon Young Il, produced by Yoon Ha Rim under the production house Hwa&Dam Pictures. This introduction will provide a broad overview of the storyline and the characters discussed in this analysis. The drama revolves around three central characters:

1. Bae Tami is portrayed as a strong, independent, and reluctant woman in the face of injustice in her career and loneliness due to her principles of not wanting to marry.
2. Song Ga Kyeong, depicted as the director of a successful company he developed named Unicon and the wife of Cha Jung Sook, but ended up divorced.
3. Jang Hee Eun, described as the President of the Directorate of the KU Group and the mother-in-law has always tried to control his niece Song Ga Kyeong and does not accept if her niece settles her.

Through this research, using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach, the researchers will explore dialogue and scenes in the K-drama Search: WWW and find the meaning of denotations, connotations, and myths. In addition, the author also wants to identify and confirm how women are represented through the patriarchal cultural mark experienced by female figures in the K-drama Search: WWW.

2. Method

The study adopts a constructivist paradigm as the researchers aim to elucidate how the media shapes and constructs new perspectives through the viewing experience of the K-drama "Search: WWW." Within a constructivist paradigm, it is acknowledged that the truth of social reality is relative and emerges as a result of social construction (Hakim, 2023). This qualitative research utilizes semiotic analysis methods, which delve into the interpretation of signs to understand the construction of meaning within messages (Prasetya, 2019: 5).

Primary data sources for the study are derived from the K-drama "Search: WWW," which aired on TVN in 2019. Secondary data, sourced from books, the internet, literature, and previous research on semiotics analyzing themes of patriarchy and women, complement the primary sources. The researchers employ Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis approach in the data analysis phase to delve into the deeper layers of meaning within the text.

3. Result and Discussion

The researchers will present the findings of their study on the representation of women in the K-drama "Search: WWW" using Roland Barthes' semiotics. Through an exploration of dialogues and scenes within the drama, the study aims to decipher the meanings of denotations, connotations, and myths. Additionally, the researchers seek to ascertain how women are portrayed within the context of the patriarchal cultural framework depicted in the drama.

The results obtained from the analysis of the representation of women in "Search: WWW" will shed light on the nuanced ways in which female characters are depicted and perceived within the narrative. By delving into the layers of meaning embedded in the dialogue and scenes, the study will offer insights into the construction of gender roles and identities within the context of South Korean society as portrayed in the drama.

3.1 Semiotics Roland Barthes

In this study, the researchers employed Roland Barthes' semiotics to elucidate the meaning behind the Korean drama "Search: WWW." Roland Barthes' semiotics was heavily influenced by the work of Ferdinand De Saussure, whose theories laid the groundwork for understanding signs and their meanings. At the core of Barthes' semiotic framework are the concepts of denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal, physical interpretation of a sign—what it looks like, sounds like, or smells like. However, at the connotative stage, the meaning of a sign extends beyond its physical attributes to encompass the cultural and ideological associations attached to it. These connotations are shaped by the perceptions and intentions of the sign-maker, as well as the broader socio-cultural context (Prasetya, 2019: 12-13).

1. SIGNIFIER (Penanda)	2. SIGNIFIED (Petanda)
3. DENOTATIVE SIGN (Tanda Denotatif)	
I. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER (Penanda Konotatif)	II. CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED (Petanda Konotatif)
III. CONNOTATIVE SIGN (Tanda Konotatif)	

Figure 1. Roland Barthes's Semiotic Model

In addition to denotation and connotation, Barthes introduced the concept of myth. Myth occurs when connotations become widely accepted and entrenched within society, leading to the formation of a cultural narrative or belief system around the sign. Myth represents the collective interpretation of signs within a culture, reflecting and reinforcing societal norms, values, and ideologies. It is through myth that signs become imbued with cultural significance and contribute to the construction of meaning within a society (Prasetya, 2019: 21). Here is the analysis the researchers found in consolidating discoveries in the K-drama Search: WWW.

3.2 Strong and Self-Sufficient Yet Lonely Woman

Women are not always weak, but many are strong and self-reliant women. The stereotype of women as inherently weak limits their opportunities for participation across diverse domains. In modern South Korean society, women no longer face the same level of oppression experienced in eras where education, employment, and political representation were inaccessible to them. However, the enduring influence of Confucian teachings, deeply ingrained within cultural norms, has perpetuated a robust patriarchal framework, persisting even into the era of Korean modernization (Herlina, 2018).

In the K-drama "Search: WWW," researchers examined the portrayal of women as individuals who, while portrayed as strong and independent, ultimately grapple with loneliness. This portrayal is evident through various channels, including language, body language, vocal intonation, and settings. One such example is depicted through the character of Bae Tami, also known as Tammy, portrayed by Im Soo Jung. The following scene encapsulates the depiction of a strong, independent yet lonely woman.

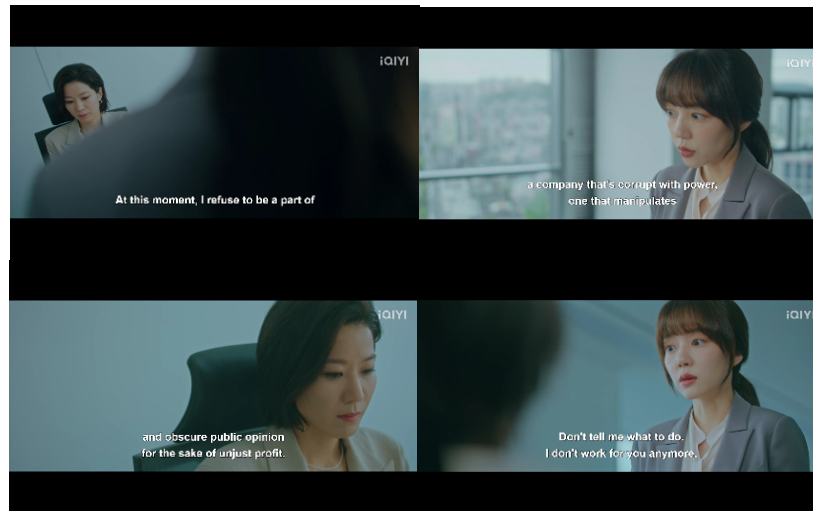


Figure 2. Cut Scene Episode 2

Denotatively, the above scenes can be treated from the technique of taking such images using the Close-Up technique. The visual in this scene shows Bae Tami standing in a room, putting a resignation letter on the table. She wears a gray-and-a-blue dress and a white blouse, and a short-haired woman sitting and wearing a cream dress.

Connotatively, the imaging technique used in this scene is Close Up (CU), that is, taking an intimate picture of the top of the hair until the part right under the chin or a little of the upper shoulder is visible. The function is to show the whole detail to the eye and this approach enables the audience to discern subtle emotions conveyed through the characters' facial expressions, particularly their eyes and mouth, fostering a deeper connection with the characters (Thompson & Bowen, 2009: 17-18).

In this scene, Bae Tami's expression appears angry as she engages in dialogue with the woman before her. Feeling aggrieved, she opts to resign, vehemently expressing her refusal to be complicit in a company tainted by corruption and injustice. Bae Tami says a dialogue, *"At this moment, I refuse to be a part of a company that's corrupt with power. One that manipulates and obscure public opinion for the sake of unjust profit. Don't tell me what to do. I don't work for you anymore"*. This means that Bae Tami is a strong woman who is not easily oppressed by injustice and is an independent woman who is reluctant to surrender and can get out of her quiet zone.

The myth I want to convey in this scene is that in Korea, work or a career is generally dominated by men (Rahmawati, 2024). However, this K-drama shows that women can work or have a career. Women in this drama are also shown to experience the bitter likeness of life at work.

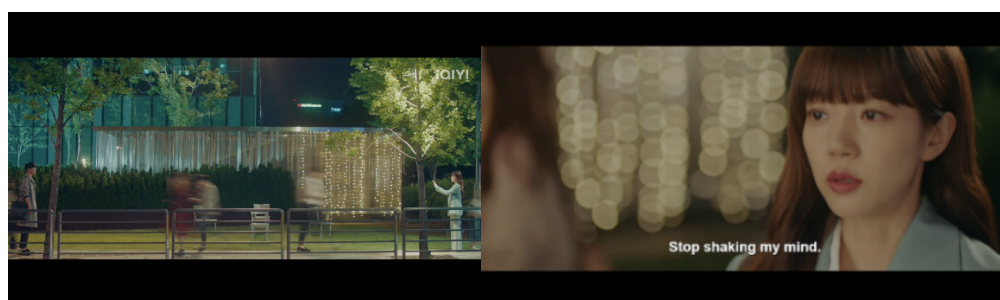


Figure 3. Cut Scene Episode 6

You can see the picture-taking technique using the eye level technique in the scenes above. Visual in this scene shows Bae Tami standing on the sidewalk and shaking one arm. In this scene, Bae Tami wears a young blue suit, and a man is standing right across from Bae Tami and wearing a young brown coat.

Connotatively, the image-taking technique used in this scene is Eye Level (EL), a photographing technique where the camera position is parallel to the eye of the character. This technique aims to make the character's eye act as a magnet, and the viewer senses the emotional or mental state perceived by the characters (Thompson & Bowen, 2009: 111).

The above scene can be seen from Bae Tami's expressions, gestures, and dialogues with the men around him. The scene above tells about Bae Tami meeting a guy named Park Morgan walking on the sidewalk. Bae Tami, who realized Park Morgan was about to approach him, quickly gestured to stop. He asked Park Morgan not to approach him. The expression shown by Bae Tami looks sad and dilemma. There's a dialogue that Bae Tami says, *"Stop shaking my mind."* This means that Bae Tami feels she's starting to tremble and begins to want the presence of Park Morgan that's burst into her mind.

The myth of this scene is the apparent dependency of women on men due to the confusion of culture in South Korea. In the culture of Confucianism, men usually have power and domination, thus reflecting the patriarchal solid culture construction and indirectly creating the dependence of women on men (Herlina, 2018). It is also shown that women with strong and self-reliant careers are useless and feel lonely without a partner. This word describes a negative stereotype of women with careers (Harahap, 2022).

3.3 A Woman Who is Intelligent and Rational but Fails in Love

Gender equality is a central objective of the feminist movement. Feminism represents an awareness of the oppression and exploitation of women in society, the workplace, and the family, coupled with conscious actions—by both women and men—to effect change (Rahmawati, 2024).

The character of Song Ga Kyeong is portrayed as intelligent and rational. She maintains composure and rationality even when mistreated by her mother-in-law. However, she is capable of rebellion when her family is humiliated and subjugated by her mother-in-law's actions. Unable to endure this mistreatment, Song Ga Kyeong ultimately decides to divorce.

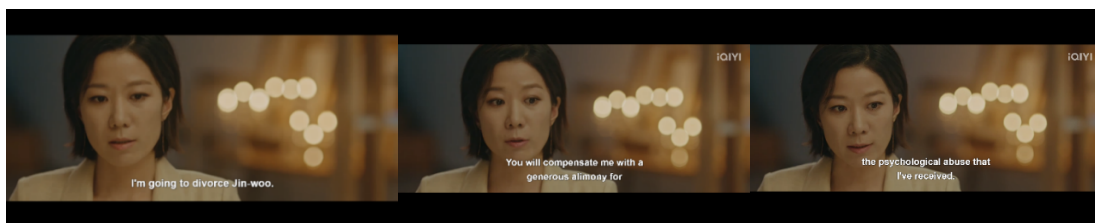


Figure 4. Cut Scene Episode 10

In the depicted scene, the use of the Eye Level (EL) technique is evident. Visually, the scene shows Song Ga Kyeong in a room bathed in orange light, dressed in cream-colored clothes. Connotatively, the Eye Level technique involves positioning the camera parallel to the character's eyes. This technique aims to make the character's eyes act as a magnet, drawing the viewer in to sense the character's emotional or mental state (Thompson & Bowen, 2009: 111).

The above scene can be seen from the expression, gestures, and dialogue of Song Ga Kyeong with his interlocutor, who is nothing but his mother-in-law. The scene above tells about Song Ga Kyeong being angry with her mother-in-law for humiliating her parents and making her parents bow, *"I'm going to divorce Jin Woo. You will compensate me with a generous alimony for the psychological abuse that I have received."* This means that Song Ga Kyeong has reached her limit and finally decided to surrender to her marriage. Still, she also claims responsibility for what she has experienced with her mother-in-law.

The myth embedded in this scene challenges the stereotype of women's decision-making abilities in South Korea. Traditionally, South Korean culture has viewed women as better suited for supportive and nurturing roles, with men making decisions (Saragi & Agustina, 2022). Song Ga Kyeong's character seeks to dismantle this stereotype, even if it means facing failure in her love life. This portrayal highlights the struggle against entrenched gender roles and the quest for personal agency and equality.



Figure 5. Cut Scene Episode 16

Denotatively, the above scene employs the Big Close-Up (BCU) technique, showing Song Ga Kyeong in a room, wearing a white shirt and a brown scarf. Connotatively, the BCU technique captures the character's face from the top of the head to the shoulders. This method emphasizes the character's facial details, drawing the audience directly to the face and capturing every nuance of expression (Thompson & Bowen, 2009: 19).

In this scene, Song Ga Kyeong's expression and dialogue are pivotal. She appears on a Korean TV broadcast, surprising her mother-in-law by exposing her crimes against the government. Song Ga Kyeong states, *"She tried to permit access of the portal's personal data to the government. All evidence was put online because nothing ever gets erased on there"*. This dialogue underscores her intelligence and rationality, showcasing her problem-solving abilities.

The myth conveyed in this scene is the idea that men and women should have equal opportunities to occupy strategic leadership positions within companies or organizations. However, it also highlights the challenges many women face in achieving these positions (Saragi & Agustina, 2022). This portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for gender equality in professional settings.

3.4 Strong Woman as Antagonist/Evil Character

According to Abrams, story characters are individuals depicted in a drama or narrative with distinct moral characteristics and tendencies, expressed through their speech and actions, allowing readers to understand them. Characters in fiction are typically categorized as protagonists, antagonists, main characters, evil characters, and supporting characters. The protagonist is a commendable figure, often regarded as a hero, embodying ideal standards and principles for the reader. The antagonist, on the other hand, is the character that creates conflict, opposing the protagonist both physically and internally. Antagonist characters are often labeled as evil and are seen as obstacles to the protagonist (Nurgiyantoro, 1995: 179).

In the Korean drama "Search: WWW," researchers examined how women were represented, focusing on their portrayal as antagonistic figures. This depiction was explored through various forms, including language, body movements, voices, environments, and more. Specifically, the researchers identified Jang Hee Eun, the KU President, played by Yee Soo Jung, as an antagonist. Below is a scene illustrating the actions of a prominent female character in her role as an antagonist.

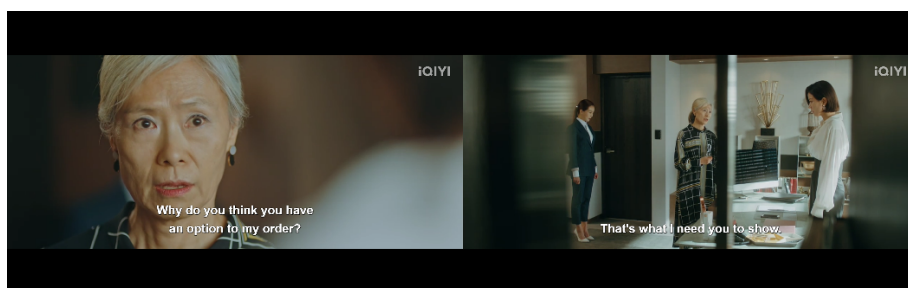


Figure 6. Cut Scene Episode 8

This scene exemplifies the complex characterization of female antagonists in "Search: WWW," showcasing how they are represented through different narrative elements and visual techniques. Denotatively, the scene uses the Eye Level (EL) technique to capture the visuals. This scene shows

Jang Hee Eun, her niece, and a woman standing apart from them. Jang Hee Eun is wearing a black shirt with white lines, her niece is in a white blouse, and the woman in the background is dressed in a dark blue blazer suit. The three characters are standing in a room filled with files. Connotatively, the Eye Level technique places the camera parallel to the characters' eyes, making their eyes act as a focal point to draw the viewer in and convey the characters' emotional or mental states (Saputra & Dwiningtyas, 2018).

In this scene, Jang Hee Eun's expression, gestures, and dialogue convey her authoritative demeanor towards her niece. She enters her niece's office, expecting her to publish the articles she has prepared. Jang Hee Eun asserts her dominance with the dialogue, *"Why do you think you have an option to my order? That's what I need you to show."* This indicates that Jang Hee Eun perceives herself as more powerful than her niece and believes she can control her actions.

The myth conveyed in this scene is that women can also hold dominant and powerful positions, a concept traditionally aligned with Confucian cultural values in South Korean society, where men typically wield power and dominance (Herlina, 2018). This portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the potential for women to occupy significant roles of authority.

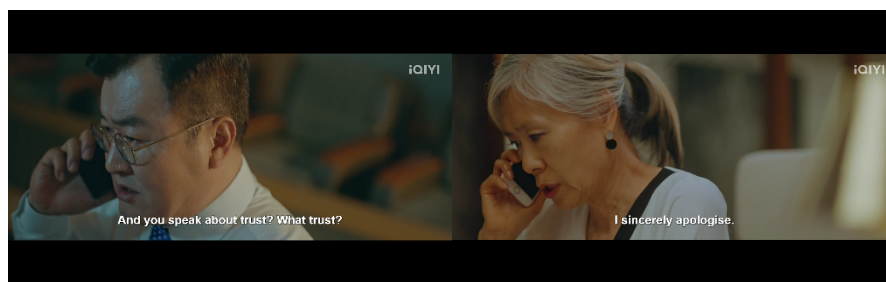


Figure 7. Cut Scene Episode 9

Denotatively, the scene above employs the Close-Up (CU) technique. The visual captures Jang Hee Eun making a phone call to a man wearing glasses. Jang Hee Eun is dressed in a white suit, while the man is wearing a white shirt and a tie. Connotatively, the Close-Up (CU) technique frames the characters intimately, capturing details from the top of the head to just below the chin or upper shoulder. This method emphasizes the character's facial details, allowing the audience to focus on subtle emotions conveyed through the eyes, mouth, and facial muscles (Thompson & Bowen, 2009:8).

In this scene, Jang Hee Eun's expression and dialogue are pivotal. She receives a phone call from the President of South Korea, who instructs her to publish an article as previously promised. This interaction highlights Jang Hee Eun's influential position and her ability to communicate directly with high-ranking officials.

The myth conveyed in this scene challenges traditional gender roles by depicting a woman in a powerful and influential role. In a society deeply influenced by Confucian values, where men typically dominate positions of power, Jang Hee Eun's character demonstrates that women can also hold significant authority and make critical decisions. This portrayal emphasizes the evolving landscape of gender roles in modern South Korean society. There's a dialogue between them:

President : *"And you speak about trust? What trust?"*
Jang Hee Eun : *"I sincerely apologise."*

This scene illustrates that Jang Hee Eun is being pressured by someone more powerful, specifically a man with the position of President. The myth conveyed in this scene is that in Korea, powerful men often exert control over those in lower positions. This reveals a patriarchal culture where women's subordination is perceived as secondary, implying that women are weaker or inferior to men in terms of their positions, functions, and roles (Harahap, 2022).

Although this drama features many women with solid careers who are self-reliant, intelligent, rational, and determined, the research indicates that there are challenges women should avoid when pursuing their dreams and careers. These include isolation, loneliness, and the need to divorce for

freedom or submit to someone more powerful. The findings and data analysis reveal that a patriarchal culture is still embedded in the K-drama series "Search: WWW".

4. Conclusion

The representation of women in the K-drama series "Search: WWW" shows women as strong, self-reliant, intelligent, rational, and determined. However, the presence of male roles in this drama underscores the persistence of patriarchal culture in their social lives. This suggests that women should avoid certain pitfalls in pursuing their dreams and careers, such as isolation, loneliness, and the need to divorce for freedom or submit to someone more powerful. Despite the notion that men and women have equal opportunities to occupy strategic or leadership positions in a company or organization, many women still face significant challenges in reaching these positions..

5. Acknowledgement

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