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**Changing Tides, Turbulent Times:  
The Discursive Practices of Feminism in South Korean Media and Society**

**Roxanne Tan, University of London**

**Abstract**

The concept of social empathy is a useful tool for teaching society the art of understanding one another. This paper looks to several popular media content such as web-series and TV series as formats of narratives that effectively serves the purpose of teaching social empathy. Relevant to this analysis are the issues of political correctness, especially in the feminist political movement that is seen as highly controversial in South Korea. Through social empathy, political correctness can be viewed in a positive light, in contrast to the negative connotation it carries in the current political climate.

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**Introduction**

Traditionally, Korean men have been in positions of leadership: as the head of the family, as executives in top leading positions of the corporate world, as leaders of the nation. Women would thus assume the subordinate position. This is viewed as the natural order of Korean society, especially since the *Choson* era marked by a “Confucianizing of Korea” (Yoo 2008). However, as society progresses, Korea and the world have been working towards a society that aspires for equality. Choi (2016) describes the abolition of the Family Head System (*Hojuje*) system in Korea as a “watershed event” marking the “shifting gender dynamics toward more equal and democratic relationships” in South Korean society. However, this is followed by the dismantling of a cultural patriarchal system thus undermining hegemonic masculinity and “gendered

privileges” that belonged to older men which is no longer available to young Korean men (Jeong & Kim 2018).

Entrenchment of what has been internationally dubbed as a “gender war” in South Korea may be indicative of a pivotal moment on the verge of change as tensions reach boiling point. Feminist discourse is present through conversations online and offline; it saturates the discourse of popular media and it pours out into the streets in forms of protests. However, this discourse is rife with controversial groups of individuals who occupy the opposite ends of right- and left-wing ideologies. Feminist groups such as Megalia often stir up controversies for their methods.<sup>1</sup> The controversial term “feminism” is most notable in the discursive habits of women in which they often open their conversation of relevant topics with a disclaimer such as “I’m not a feminist but...” (Babe 2018). The label “feminist” carries with it a burden that appears to outweigh most other labels in which there are people who police others, especially notable figures such as celebrities and professionals of the gaming industry, in their social media activity (D’Anatasio 2018). The issue of political correctness is a complex one and in South Korea, it is further interwoven with intricate layers of cultural and traditional values.

Korean feminist scholars have continuously debated against the retainment of Confucian traditions and values of Korean society as it is fundamentally incompatible with feminist values; the argument is that Korean Confucian values are the basis of the patriarchal system of Korean society. Conversely, many Confucian scholars (and several feminists) have invited a re-evaluation of Confucian values in order to reinterpret it to become compatible with feminist values. An analysis of both Chinese and Korean classical literature has also led to a conclusion that a re-interpretation of Confucian values can be seen as compatible with gender equality. This led to the conclusion that gender inequality and the patriarchal system is rooted in history rather than in Confucian ethics only (Koh 2008).

Through a discussion of political correctness and subsequent understanding of social empathy, these two issues will have to be viewed in light of one another. Political correctness is often used as a pejorative term to criticize groups who are overly sensitive and over-reactive to meaningless actions, gestures or words. However, in popular media, the increasing sensitivity towards such awareness raised through a political movement such as #MeToo has changed the perception of a nonchalant attitude towards a global society seeking change. Content analysis of popular media using feminist legal methods and the concept of social empathy will demonstrate how such discursive practices can be seen as an effective method of prodding a conservative society with patriarchal values to consider equality as a positive change for society. Borrowing from Martin Luther King, the methods in feminist jurisprudence and social empathy can eventually lead to a realization of King’s conception of “The Beloved Community” – a community based upon the philosophy and methods of nonviolence which eventually replaces all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice with “an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.” King has based his conception of community on Josiah Royce’s theory of community. Notably, among the conditions for attaining Royce’s conception of a “true

community” is the ability to communicate “through attentive listening to the ideas and hopes of others” and one which participates in interpretation as a form of mediation between two minds (Kegley 1980).

### **Political Correctness**

Political correctness in today’s political climate is a term of bipartisanship, a clash between values and a tool used to criticize the limits drawn to freedom of speech. The contention of the term is situated within the sphere of political correctness and the shift “to ‘cultural’ politics, the politics of recognition, identity and difference” (Fairclough 2003). In the sphere of feminist discussions, political correctness involves issues such as how women are perceived or treated in society. Claims that political correctness is inherently destructive and thus undesirable can be found in criticisms against feminism for inciting hatred and misandry, or that it “promotes gender conflicts” (Lee 2018; Steger 2018). However, as will be explored alongside the lens of social empathy conceptualized in Elizabeth Segal’s work, the concept of political correctness functions as a tool for self-examination and reflection. It questions the assumptions of our social structure and the institutionalized discrimination that has been deeply rooted in a society and culture traditionally patriarchal. This is especially subversive due to the historically patriarchal familial system in which men are breadwinners and women are subordinate to the male; presently, young women no longer subscribe to such “traditional norms of good wives and mothers” (Jeong & Lee 2018).

The #MeToo movement has reached many societies beyond the United States. East Asian societies like China, Japan and Hong Kong are branding their own form of political movement that addresses social problems that are unique and inherent in the patriarchal structure of society; these are societies where patriarchy is purportedly the main pillar that forms and sustains social cohesion. However, as with any form of discourse advocating for issues that seeks to subvert what has been perceived as normal, it evokes emotional responses. Korean feminism is seen as a result of “the intensification of online misogyny” in which a “participatory culture” by female users online allows them to have a voice that subverts the male expectation of “the docile feminine subject” (Jeong & Lee 2018).

The intention to find a middle ground or neutralize the situation in order to achieve a better outcome are more often thought of only in hindsight. The narratives that travel across the borderless virtual world – the internet – gathers individuals into different groups. It is difficult to achieve clarity in the nebulous climate of different discourses; from gender equality to nationalism and anti-migration sentiments. The idea of political correctness is muddled by the use of the very concept as a weapon: ostensibly far-right individuals are seen to use political correctness as pejorative term and thus prevent political correctness from realizing its actual potential. The subversion of political correctness as a weapon for regression (Symons 2018), a

calculated effort to stifle progression, has made the entire concept more confusing and has set social movements back.

Historically, political correctness is viewed as inherently negative and attached as a label to anything that does not fit the conservative social norm. At the pivotal moments for social changes that are taking place at any cultural period, it is difficult for distinctly different generations of people with different mindsets to see eye to eye and that is largely attributed to the demand for political correctness (Dubeau 2018). However, political correctness is seen as an over-sensitive reaction to social issues such as inequality. Yet, this is not to disregard that there are problems arising from a demand for exacting precision in political correctness, which Shpancer (2015) terms as the “hard version” of political correctness. This form of political correctness insists upon a “blanket purity and perfection” that is difficult, if not impossible, to attain in reality. The race to reform languages to become politically correct fails to achieve its actual objective if the discrimination simply takes another form under the guise of a “politically correct” term.

The movement sweeping across the globe seeks to uphold a political correctness that the time has come for the global society to re-evaluate the way in which women are treated in society. To reiterate, political correctness can function in ways that serve purposes of improving equality amongst people. While there is some deployment of radical and controversial methods in this political movement, a lens of social empathy might allow a section of society to understand the standpoint from which women depart from in voicing out against matters such as sexual harassment. Fairclough (2003) has pointed out the way feminists have been perceived as “terrorists” in contemporary discourse which seeks to discredit anti-misogyny discourse. In Korea, online and popular media discourse continue to contribute to an expanding discursive practice that uses various methods to demonstrate the inherent problems of misogyny and sexism.

In the subsequent sections, through an understanding of the concept of social empathy and social sufferings, the issue of political correctness can be considered simultaneously as inextricably linked to those concepts. In other words, political correctness forms part of any political movement despite how each generation has been disinclined to accept it.

As Martin Luther King had envisioned in his concept “The Beloved Community,” a society cannot possibly reach a state that is completely cleansed of all conflict and prejudices. However, it is through a recognition of such conflict that resolution can be introduced and implemented through non-violent methods. The concept of political correctness and feminism both carry a negative connotation to certain groups of people which is mainly attributed to the subversive nature of its dynamics. While social change is difficult without breaking boundaries and triggering certain sentiments that are antithetical to such movements, it appears that there needs to be a balance to the emotionally-charged activism, whether in political correctness or feminism.

### **South Korea Today: A Fiery Battle Against Spycam Porn and Misogyny**

In the Korean context, feminists are of the view that the traditional teachings of Confucianism (i.e. one that follows the interpretation rooted in Korean history) are fundamentally incompatible with gender equality as it advocates a tradition of patriarchy which is based upon subordination of women by men (Koh 2008); especially in familial settings and, by extension, in workplace settings and society in general whereby positions of leadership are most often male-dominated. Where there is an attempt to re-interpret Confucian teachings in order to become compatible with feminism, it cannot be read out of its historical context and neither can it be removed from the reality of which it forms the cultural foundation of Korean society. Despite no longer being barred from entering the workforce or assuming positions at the managerial level, the society at large still poses some unwritten rules and restrictions against women. There is a higher standard held against women as they must assume the role of both provider of the family and also career for husband and children. This was portrayed in the series of *Misaeng* in which the female manager struggles with balancing work life and family life, feeling inadequate due to the demanding standards posed against her as a working wife/mother; she is expected to excel and outperform male counterparts but also do equally well, especially as a mother (Cho et al. 2015).

What has been dubbed a gender war as a result of the “Isu Station incident” is a debate of feminism, the ensuing rap battle between rappers on the topic of feminism and the never-ending battle against spycam porn. The public divide can be seen in fear amongst women of spycam and revenge porn as opposed to men who ask why women do not ask for equality in all things such as paying half of the house costs, conscription in the mandatory military service and paying for dates, etc. Notably, these were all mentioned in San E’s rap lyrics, and is likely a reflection of many Korean men’s perception on gender equality. Conversely, the responses from interviewees regarding women serving in the military signals at the moderate stance taken by Korean men rather than a demand for women to be held to the exact same standards as men; in other words, while many interviewees tend to agree that women should also be mandated by law to serve in the civil service (i.e. not necessarily the military) as part of their civic duty, the general response in street interviews appear to be moderate.

The Isu Station incident<sup>2</sup> is perhaps a depiction of the ongoing gender war in South Korea, a representation of verbal abuse from both sides using derogatory terms that are meant to stereotype men and women.<sup>3</sup> While the judgment against the parties involved in the Isu Station is reserved for criminal proceedings and legal discussion, the prominent issue here is that such incidents clearly demonstrates what is likely the peak point of the “gender war”. The Gangnam murder is seen as a pivotal moment for initiating the online anti-misogyny movement as many were shocked by the “misogynistic anger expressed by the murderer” (Choi 2016). This led to a collective voice by women through Post-it notes who shared fear for their safety as women, and a murder that is symptomatic of an online and offline misogyny that make up a “socially-constructed collective discourse that resonates with broader contexts in Korea” (Kim 2018).

In order to look at discursive practices in contemporary popular media that is not centered on violent forms of verbal abuse, this paper will examine the contents of popular media such as

recent web-dramas and TV series. While online misogyny is usually concentrated in online communities (Kim 2018), it can be argued that television discourse or similar narratives can by extension form part of the response to that online misogyny; especially through online reactions to the narratives of series that depict issues of misogyny and feminist values.

### **Social Empathy**

Segal uses social empathy as a paradigm which “provides a framework with which to analyze social concerns and develop policies that reflect the lived experiences of people.” Segal’s work is focused here in policies of social welfare. However, the framework can effectively identify and analyze social concerns through media content. It follows that such media content forms part of the mainstream discourse of a social issue at any one time and thus, contribute to the necessary dialogue on the issue and the solution that can be developed in order to counter the problem. The media content also plays as a mediating role in further fostering such social empathy which Segal (2010) describes as “the capacity of people to understand and experience the conditions of others who are not like them.” In following the stories of characters in a TV series or film, it evokes emotions and sentiments of its viewers, prompting them to consider the lives of individuals who live substantially different from their own. Where there is a discussion about equality, the absence of social empathy necessarily implicates a roadblock to addressing the core problem of inequality and thus prevents the creation of equality.

Segal cites Watson to explain that empathy is vital to allow individuals the capacity to “adapt and change” according to the requirements of society at a time. Amid the #MeToo movement, the necessary ingredient would be empathy towards women and their lived experiences. That is a difficult task in that men live substantially different lives and the discourse of gender equality has constantly been plagued with the conversations that denounces inequality; discourses that claim that women now have the exact same things as men do, it becomes excessive when the gender equality movement points out certain instances of inequality that requires correcting. The discourse of equality becomes ineffective and problematic when individuals fail to appreciate the trauma in the history of the group suffering from discrimination or inequality and the pain and suffering which the group experiences. The reality of their lived experiences is obscured, and to a certain extent, erased from the view of the dominant group. Without social empathy and interpersonal empathy, it is difficult – if not impossible – for a dominant group to truly appreciate the lives of another group. Most importantly, each group of people live substantially different lives from the dominant group. In the discussions of inequality, whether it is race, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity, no dialogue can take place without social empathy. In her work, Segal cited films and books as a medium through which one can learn and teach social empathy. Through content analysis of a web-series and the Korean series *Ms. Hammurabi* (2018) and *Witch’s Court* (2017), it will be argued that popular media content serves as another form of discursive practice as part of the feminist movement and also function

effectively in addressing forms of social sufferings that ought to be given sufficient attention in order to bring about some positive change and improvements.

### Learning Social Empathy through Korean Dramas

*'[S]uffering takes place within the most intimate dramas of personal life, at the same time it almost always encompasses attitudes and commitments that comprise our wider social being.'*

— Iain Wilkinson and Arthur Kleinman in *A Passion for Society: How We Think About Human Suffering*

In a predominantly patriarchal society such as South Korea, the word “feminist” carries a negative connotation. Many women are anxious and afraid to call themselves feminists publicly (Tai 2018). It is a much-contested term as the society debates and negotiates the term in its cultural context. However, this has not prevented both national television networks such as KBS and cable TV networks such as JTBC from exploring what it means to be a feminist; this includes both female and male characters who are placed in situations that leads them to contemplate on issues of inequality and discrimination. More importantly, the selected samples also include characters that exhibit characteristics in situations that calls for both social and interpersonal empathy. The web-series provides a context in which audience can understand what sexual harassment is while simultaneously showing how there are groups of individuals who are averse to the #MeToo political movement. Both TV series and web series are analyzed to understand how characters written to actively point out what is wrong with certain actions or decisions are vehicles apt for delivering the message on social empathy.

- *It's okay to be a little sensitive* (2018) (literal translation)

A web-series by OnStyle on YouTube weaved a narrative that is aligned with the increasing discussions of MeToo in South Korea. A coming-of-age story following the lives of freshman on-campus in a Korean university demonstrates how the cultural context of South Korea is layered with a greater degree of complexity especially seen in the hierarchical structure of age and gender in a patriarchal society. Following the female lead who is unsure about feminism, the storyline threads together a series of situations which placed her in danger of being cornered by men who are older than her. The ways she has resorted to ward off unwanted sexual advances often is found in protection from her male friends by having them pretend to be her boyfriend. The repeated situation clearly identifies the dominance which places the male gender higher on the hierarchy, most notably since the Choson era (Yoo 2008). A contrast of character is established through the friend who is unashamedly a feminist. Through contextualization of situations that



were previously dismissed by men as what appears to be like a Trumpian statement of “boys will be boys,” the repeated sexual harassment suffered by these female characters demonstrates how actions, gestures and words uttered by men can be harmful and detrimental to young women.

An online Korean blog review noted the specific words used by the feminist character of the series that is associated with *Womad* and *Megalia*. The reviewer also associated feminists as those who are inevitably linked to these groups. Seventy-five percent of the comments on the actual video on NaverTV were by men, mostly in their 20s. Among the top comments, a user who appears to be a female expressed her exasperation at the inability of the audience in comprehending the message conveyed by the episode, sharing that many women do experience the derogatory remarks that the characters experience. Replies to this comment accused the author of having a victim mentality, calling them “Wom-pigs” and “Me-pigs” (portmanteau words combining “Womad” and “Megalia” with the word “pig”). Another commenter responded asking the misogynistic commenters to consider whether misogyny is merely an imagination if there are such comments. Several more comments acknowledged that it attempted to accurately portray feminism as gender equality and that those who refused to acknowledge it simply did not understand what feminism actually means.

The power of change lies in the voice of the masses and the influence to effect such change potentially begins with the teaching and learning of social empathy. While it is difficult to see that a few series are able to immediately turn public opinion around, it expands a space for online discourse through contents that discuss feminist values.

- *Witch's Court*

The character of Ma Yi Deum (played by Jung Ryeo Woon) in *Witch's Court* is an antiheroine whose personality is more akin to the typical male characters while Yeo Jin Wook (played by Yoon Hyun Min) is a male prosecutor with a very empathic personality. This may prompt audience to think about how such characters are subverting the stereotypical characters into the opposite gender. In the first episode, a case of sexual assault between a female professor and male student took a dramatic turn when it was uncovered that the male student was in fact homosexual and had been the victim in the case. Prosecutor Ma was unhesitant in disregarding the victim's plea to conceal his sexuality due to fear of being stigmatized and discriminated against. Prosecutor Yeo was unimpressed by her strategy to reveal the most decisive evidence and rebuked her for ignoring the victim's feelings, to which she replied stating she need not care for the victim's feelings as she is not a lawyer. Prosecutor Yeo is highly receptive towards the emotions of others, demonstrating high emotional intelligence that is uncommon in the legal field. In fact, as a result of bureaucratization, many institutions of today's society has witnessed a serious erosion in the element of care. Such emotions are often seen as the opposite of rationality. Arendt (1970) has pointed out that the opposite of being emotional is not rationality; rationality is not the absence of emotions. Prosecutor Yeo's inclination to care for the emotions of victims of

sexual crime is comparable to maternal care typically exhibited in female characters of legal or crime dramas.

As depicted in the empathic male character of Prosecutor Yeo, an ethics of care is not necessarily a male or female method of reasoning. Instead, the emphasis is on the capacity to depart from a point of care and empathy. In both feminist jurisprudence and Segal's social work, these are crucial characteristics individuals should possess; this is especially vital to the legal system where it adjudicates people for crimes or when victims seek reparation or restorative justice.<sup>4</sup> A male character who worked as a child psychologist capable of ethics of care and practicing empathy is rare and one which defies what is perceivably the norm.

- *Ms. Hammurabi*

Both the director and scriptwriter-cum-judge intended for the series (based on Judge Moon Yoo-Suk's novel) to address the faults in the legal system which is a legacy of the older generation (Im 2018). The plot traces the civil cases adjudicated by Department 44 comprised of three judges who hold strikingly different views on many issues but learn to negotiate these differences as cases are brought before them. The following section will discuss the characters and their personalities relevant to the discussion of social empathy and feminism. This will allow a better look at how a capacity for empathy taking place through negotiations among the three judges prove to be a method that would serve as an invaluable toolkit that allows people to assess their perspectives, especially in relation to controversial issues.

Character Judge Park Cha Oh Reum represents a subversion of the conventional judiciary. She hopes to change the legal system by maintaining her humanist outlook and emotions. It is important to her and to the entire storyline that witnesses a change in how judges view their work. Through her and her fellow judge, Judge Im Ba Reun, they debate about the function of emotions in the courtroom. They ask the crucial question of whether they should allow their emotions to play a role in their judgment.

The contrast between a character that demonstrates high empathy and one that values strict compliance of rules illustrates the problem where balance between the two judicial approach is not achieved. Through the characters in Department 44, it becomes clear that above the objective of diverting civil cases to arbitration and alternative dispute resolution (ADR), the purpose should be more humancentric: ADR should be centered on helping people seek redress by dialogue and conciliation. Creating a humancentric justice system is akin to a more pragmatic approach taken by judges although the judicial principles often seek to provide more certainty and predictability to the law by ensuring that rules are followed. Kennedy (1925) remarked: "There is a tendency to treat the law as something which is apart from life" and that neatly sums up the problem of the justice system of our time. Similarly, the aversion of judges (such as Judge Im initially) to pragmatism is demonstrated in this statement too. The law becomes nothing but letters providing for rules that people should abide, however it seeks not to uphold justice or fairness. Nevertheless, such desire for pragmatism must not displace the predictability and certainty that is

fundamental to the legal system and thus, there will always be a need to strike a healthy balance between pragmatism and certainty.

Antagonist character Judge Song Gong Choong is the epitome of the character which Judge Park fights against. He is representative of a system that relentlessly seeks to uphold conventional thinking such as misogyny and abuse of powers. Due to his ambitions, he manipulates his male subordinates to corner a female associate judge in his department who had suffered a miscarriage due to overworking and his consistent pressuring (which entails a form of stalking). His unapologetic attitude, in contrast to all the other characters who eventually recognize the faulty aspects of the court system that Judge Park fights against, remains through to the end of the series; this typifies the justice system that is slow in keeping up with the social changes and is often adamant in remaining unchanging.



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

The juxtaposition of Judge Im and Judge Park also served to symbolize the contrast between the traditional judicial thinking that is focused on objectivity and a mechanical approach as opposed to the pragmatic, rule-flexible approach guided by subjectivity (Bartlett 1990); the contrast serves as a metaphor of the approaches to judicial decision-making that has been criticized by feminist jurisprudential thought for prioritizing “predictability, certainty, and fixity of rules” and feminist legal methods are thus centered on subverting that traditional approach by taking into account human factors (Bartlett 1990). On Judge Im’s table is a small figure of lady

justice (fig. 1) and Judge Park moves into the office with a figure of *Avalokiteshvara* (fig. 2) – also known as *Kuan Yin* – the compassionate bodhisattva. The depiction of *Kuan Yin* having a thousand arms, or sometimes many heads, typifies an “unremitting intention to receive each call and prayer and cry directed toward her” (Levine 2013). This can also be seen as an allusion for Judge Park’s character who went out of her way countless times in order to lend someone a helping hand. Her decisions and actions are most often driven by compassion and empathy; conversely, most of her colleagues insist on going by the book and perceive the integrity of the organization as having the utmost importance. She represents the subversive role needed in an organization in dire need for a fundamental systemic change. Subversive acts and individuals are often, if not always, perceived as negative and problematic. The association to feminism conducted by young male judges were intended to be derogatory and is a reflection of Korean society that demonstrates animosity towards feminism.

Legal scholar Robin West notes the deficiency of a “specifically humanistic conception of legal justice that might move adjudication in a direction conducive to the well-being and just social arrangements of the species.” (West 1998) The legal justice system is devoid of humanism and the concept of justice blurs into variations such as Posner’s wealth justice or Dworkin’s conception is that law and justice are no separate. This effectively obscures the importance of the concept of justice itself. West (1988) expresses her concern over such avoidance of conceptualizing justice, allowing it to be defined into obscurity, and thus, she sees a need for an interdisciplinary approach to legal studies that draws from humanities and justice.

*Ms. Hammurabi* addresses this question and issue directly, especially for being a literary work and script written by a judge in Seoul’s East District Court. It begs the question of what a judge should be like, whether the justice system needs an overhaul and how positive change can be affected in society. Such questions on the approach taken by the legal justice system is not something confined within South Korea’s judicial system but is indeed a question to be had in every other judicial system.

Responses towards the series on the official site’s bulletin board were generally positive although there were a significant number of comments that criticized the way the judges interpreted the law, using a more subjective approach that completely subverts the traditional idea that everyone must be equal before the law and that judges must be entirely objective and emotionless. Indeed, it is difficult to instill an idea that appears subversive through one TV series. Some thought it to be unrealistic while others criticized it for a form of perversion of the legal system. Such discursive patterns (and judicial approach) might require time to become acceptable to many. The contention against such general perception that the law must be perfectly objective will need a compensation of conversations on the humanization of legal systems and the law itself. As laws and legal systems change according to the needs of a society, it follows that such changes can only take place when people take action to effect those changes.

The subversive elements and nature of these series appears to overthrow male-dominant societies. This is not something that is confined to Korean society as Korean dramas are largely consumed outside of Korea. By extension, such discursive practices also contribute to the thought processes of (predominantly female) international audience. According to Oh (2009), the large majority of Korean drama consumers are female, it can thus be argued that targeting the female groups with positive message that contains elements of feminism (although not necessarily mentioned or even announced as “feminist”) would allow the producers and investors to reap benefits from producing dramas that are well-received by women. Through the rejection of dominant male characters that used to be the typical Korean male lead, the emergence of male characters like those mentioned here serve to redefine masculinity.<sup>5</sup> Such improvements are seen as positive and is contributing to the desirability of Korean TV series overseas.

### **Discussion – Of Empathy, Care and Rationality**

In the fields of social science and jurisprudential thought, the aspect of empathy and care is becoming central to the process of inquiry. As an extension to discussions on feminist jurisprudence and social work, medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman’s work has also sparked a dialogue on caregiving. He has commented on how institutionalization or bureaucratization of many areas of human lives have displaced care as central to the work of caregiving (Kleinman 2016). By analogy, the same is witnessed in the legal institutions which were initially set up to address grievances and provide redress to individuals who has suffered losses, whether emotional or physical damage. Testimony of institutions becoming plagued with bureaucratic indifference and moral disassociation (Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016) that silently permits the continuous structural violence can be seen in these TV series. The insertion of a character designed to vocalize the fight against such indifference towards social sufferings is intended to initiate or form an extension to the conversation that has been ongoing in society; the issues raised in these series deals with tackling social issues and systemic injustice that calls for a system overhaul in order to end (or minimize) social sufferings.

Young female politician Shin Ji-ye shared her experience of campaigning as someone who openly subscribes to feminism and has endured threats and cyberbullying (Ghani 2018). However, similar to Judge Park, Shin believes that someone must begin to actively effect changes in order to see actual improvements; she believes that even if change is not possible within her lifetime, it is her duty to contribute to working towards improving society for the coming generations. Shin’s interview included a hopeful proposition to see a paradigm shift towards substantive equality for female, LGBTI, elderly trapped in poverty, and those suffering from mental health. Also reflected in Judge Moon’s statement and the series *Ms. Hammurabi*, there must be someone who takes the first step in seeking change for the better. Shin’s statement illuminates a much-needed conversation on the ostensibly, however misconceived, homogenous image casted on Korean feminism. Feminist legal scholar Bartlett (1990) noted that the word

“feminist” is not intended to be a definitive term that is “fixed, exclusionary, homogenizing and oppositional.” In fact, she noted that this is precisely what feminist legal methods strive to depart from. Indeed, to treat any group of individuals as a “single analytic category” risks obscuring differences that make individuals unique and such a framework would inevitably fail to identify the various forms of discrimination and oppression an individual would face in their identity; often, an individual’s identity is an intersection of race, class, sexual orientation and gender.<sup>6</sup> In TV series and other popular media content, a negotiation of the terms feminism and equality takes center stage. And the challenge in this lies within the central dilemma of striking a balance between acknowledging differences yet avoiding the reinforcement of stereotyped thinking stemming from the identified differences (Bartlett 1990).

Portrayal of male characters who are able to recognize the plight of women may not suddenly convert audiences into feminists, but it might lead them to ask the necessary questions; after all, asking the woman question – or asking the relevant question – is a feminist method that can ignite moments leading to social change. There is a line of argument that has pointed to “mass dissemination of the imagery of suffering via commercial forms of cultural reproduction and exchange” that eventually “normalizes” the awareness individuals have towards social suffering of any group. However, Wilkinson and Kleinman (2016) objects and are of the view that these processes are necessary in the “transformation of the self [that] holds broad significance for understanding (...) how suffering is experienced and how that embodied experience is changing in distinctive cultural periods.” Following this line of reasoning and by adopting Segal’s method in teaching empathy, a pattern of identifying, recognizing and understanding social suffering should be the first step to addressing social injustices. This extends into the academic sphere of social sciences as well:

Research and writing on social suffering incorporate an analytical practice that aims to have us attend to the ways in which cultures and societies develop in response to the uprooting of life that suffering visits upon people. Social experiences of suffering and social responses to what suffering does to people are treated as significant forces shaping interpersonal behaviors and the directions taken by institutional arrangements. Accordingly, the experience of suffering per se is treated as a dynamic element within wider processes of social and cultural change and as a circumstance in which these might be apprehended through their human effect (Wilkinson & Kleinman 2016).

Such an empathic approach to the understanding of social suffering should be seen as fundamental to not only social sciences but also to legal studies and jurisprudential thoughts. As institutions of human society and systems designed to provide redress to losses and damages suffered by individuals, or at times groups of individuals, it is only acceptable to move towards a field and process of inquiry that embraces care ethics and social empathy.

## Conclusion

Discussion of TV and web series as tools for teaching social empathy may be argued to be effective as does discussions of books. The book titled *Kim Ji Young, Born 1982* has garnered both positive and negative attention. Celebrities who have read the book and shared their reaction of reading the book included a display of empathy towards the lived experience of women. Notably, Noh Hong Chul expressed the sorrow he felt that anyone should go through what the protagonist had gone through and also admitted that he, as a man, will not be able to fully understand the gendered experiences of women living in South Korea. In this way, narratives like books and films or TV series are able to teach empathy. It evokes the emotions of sympathy and an attempt to understand the lived experiences of others. The argument is not that these Korean series are instantly successful in changing the minds of its audience overnight but that they form part of the discursive practices that portrays feminist values in both female and male characters.

This paper has examined several popular media contents for its methods that reflect and embody that of feminism and also of teaching social empathy. It is however also noted that the substantive contents of the cited TV series and web-series was not analyzed in greater length or depth due to certain limitations. There has been an increasing number of TV series that zeroes in on the details of social issues and practices of conservative South Korea. Through these formats of narrative, popular media is able to shed light on the nuances of different issues in various sections of society.

Due to the plethora of Korean TV series focused on romance, it is difficult for viewers to see male and female relationships as platonic. While romantic storylines are often the ones that generate international success (as seen in *Descendants of the Sun*, *Goblin*, *My Love from the Stars*, etc.), series focused on social issues possess an ability to push the discourse of social sufferings and injustices further within media discourse and are becoming increasingly popular (for example, *Sky Castle*). It effectively serves as a platform for its viewers to reflect upon, to hold conversations and negotiate the lived experiences portrayed through both major and minor characters in a series.

To reiterate Segal's method of teaching social empathy, film and TV are effective ways of teaching individuals to consider the plight of others and a means to an end of nurturing social empathy. Through such fictional works, we can imagine a society that is (re)constructed on an ethics of care and empathy; social science inquiry can also be reimagined as a process based upon a perspective of care and empathy. Through a multi-disciplinary approach of legal studies, character and discursive analyses, this paper was intended to achieve an effect of capturing illumination on the issues that is relevant to both the South Korean and global society today, but also to reflect upon the function of what is deemed as a production intended for popular media consumption. It is considered in length here that Korean dramas, despite its widespread view of being merely entertaining works of fiction, are also a vehicle for conveying messages and opening up conversations of social issues.

## Notes

1. Megalia is a feminist group in South Korea with a reputation for employing a method of ‘mirroring’. While the topic of Megalia and feminist groups within South Korea does not fall within the parameters of the discussion in this paper, it should be noted that Womad and Megalia appear to form the (mis)conception that Korean society holds towards feminism. Their radical and controversial methods have drawn criticisms and have stirred controversies in South Korea. The discussions of feminist discursive practices and the feminist legal methods in this paper is to be distinguished from that of methods employed by Womad and Megalia. However, this statement is not intended to disregard the works and achievements of these feminist groups in its entirety. (Singh 2016) It is noteworthy that among the radical methods deployed by Megalia, mirroring involves the act of using misandry to reflect the injurious effects of misogyny that is widespread online. Jeong and Lee (2018) argues that intolerance of online misogyny can be effectively responded to through “mirroring” as online misogyny is often remarked as humor and thus jokes are the only method of obtaining attention of misogynists. At one time, a woman expressed covetous and pedophilic thoughts online which she later claimed to be part of the “mirroring” practice. “Mirroring” is intended to reflect men and thus, she claims that it is merely to show what men online have been doing as part of the feminist movement. However, this is problematic and controversial because it directly weaponizes young children as part of the feminist method deployed by Megalians.

2. During the ongoing investigation, the women made claims online that they had been attacked for “having short hair” and “not wearing makeup”. This became the center of attention leading up to what has been dubbed as an “online gender war”. An online petition has also been filed to the Blue House, mentioning the need to distinguish women in general from “radical feminists” and a request to avoid acknowledging opinions made by radical feminists from that of the majority women. Due to the online activism initiated by Megalia, many women want to avoid being associated to radical feminism or feminism altogether.

3. Some of the examples of derogatory terms being kimchi-nyeo and hannam. Kimchi-nyeo is used to define Korean women who are financially dependent on men and spends most of her money on beautifying herself. It is intended to degrade women who are seen as selfish and manipulative of men for their money. Hannamchung is used to call Korean men insects; this forms part of the mirroring activities of Megalia’s radical feminist methods.

4. The philosophy of a justice system and punishment established in a society is a broad topic in itself, one which would not be adequately explored in-depth within the premise of this paper. However, regardless of the philosophy, the legal system is in need of characteristics as propounded in this paper as part of the humanizing process of the legal system. The justice system has often been known as cold and aloof, another issue that has been an underlying question throughout the series Ms. Hammurabi. The ethics of care is argued by Carol Gilligan



(2003) as primarily feminine, as boys experience processes of individuation and moral development separately from their mothers.

5. This was mentioned by a Chinese fan who posted her comment on the official site bulletin board. She expressed that it was a refreshing way of portraying a male character who tries to share his opinion in guiding his junior, Judge Park, rather than someone who takes all matters into his own hands. In other words, this allowed the female lead agency which is becoming more prominent and common in Korean dramas. It should be noted here that responses towards the series of Ms. Hammurabi were generally positive. However, using the search function to filter comment titles containing the word “law,” many expressed their discontent towards the subversive nature of the legal approach which Judge Park has introduced into her department; only one comment viewed this legal approach positively. However, it should be noted that such comments are limited in nature due to the fact that their demographics and academic background are unknown. It can be contended that a knowledge of feminist jurisprudence might make a significant difference to the perspective offered by the scriptwriter.

6. This has been fundamental to the study of intersectional feminism which criticizes essentialism in mainstream feminism. The misconceived notion that feminism is a political theory designed around a single type of woman inevitably excludes individuals who do not fit perfectly into a narrow definition of woman; for example, pioneers of feminism may be well-educated women of a certain race or class. To define women according to a specific group of female prevents feminism from becoming a political theory that embraces the differences each woman might possess. In a similar vein, the theory of feminism should be conceived and perceived as one that is open to groups of oppressed individuals. The objective of feminism to strive for equality and is only achievable through such openness.

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