

Old Wine in New Bottles: Analyzing how Western Literary Tropes have been Repurposed in South Korean Television Dramas from a Feminist Perspective.

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Abstract: It is not unknown that the western cultural domination has always had a homogenising impact on other cultures. Postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha (1994), Roland Robertson (1992), and Joseph Straubhaar (2007) have introduced the idea of hybridization which states that when two cultures engage with each other, a “third space” for culture is created (Bhabha 1994, 217). This third space can be observed in the realm of Korean feminism too. This paper will aim to explore the emergence of a new kind of femininity in South Korea through an analysis of three extremely popular South Korean television dramas, released in 2009, 2016 and 2020, which interact significantly with western literary tropes, namely: *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (2016) and *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020). While *Boys Over Flowers* repurposes the ‘Cinderella’ motif, *The Legend of the Blue Sea* reworks “The Little Mermaid” by Hans Christian Andersen and *The King: Eternal Monarch* heavily borrows from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Each of these fairy literary works, either produced or popularized in the West, feature damsels in distress who need to be rescued by a third person, usually a male entity. However, when these tales have been adapted by South Korean filmmakers, we see the presence of very strong and independent female leads in each and every one of them. Mapping out the trajectory of k-dramas from the release of *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) that took the world by a storm to the release of *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020), we see a new kind of femininity has emerged in the Korean landscape over a decade, evolving every year with the steady proliferation of the ‘hallyu wave’ across continents. A qualitative analysis of the plot, characters, motifs and specific events of these dramas relevant to the research question shall be provided in order to find out in what ways they throw light on the new emerging femininity, and how a “third space” which supports the coexistence of both Confucian familism and Western feminism is eventually created in the k-drama landscape.

Keywords: feminism, culture, korean dramas, hallyu, book adaptations, western literary tropes.

1. Introduction

When it comes to South Korean culture, one can notice a mixture of Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist and Shamanistic traditions. Jung-Soon Shim (1999) states that of these four traditions, the Confucian and Taoist world-views are generally more influential and more deeply inscribed in the Korean mentality. “Thus, traditionally in the Korean world-view, behavioural principles defining social relations between ruler/ruled, father/son, and man/wife take precedence over abstract ontological theories or concepts.” (Shim, 1999) This essentializing of the universe in terms of the dual, oppositional yet complementary forces of the yin and yang, has led to the creation of an oppressive patriarchal ideology in Korea where male predominance and female submission have been glorified as the norm from time immemorial. The Confucian principles stated that all women should observe the “Three Obediences and the Four Virtues. Women were to be obedient to the father and elder brothers when young, to the husband when married, and to the sons when widowed” (Palley, 1990). Thus, Korean women were controlled and dominated by men from the cradle to the grave before things started to change from the mid-1900s with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Shim further explains that from 1970 onwards, the Korean Women’s movements that emerged were largely spearheaded by intellectuals who had studied feminism in the West but there were certain long-held norms and beliefs that they could not subvert. The idea of motherhood as a woman’s biological destiny became the hallmark of Korean feminism, “As if carrying out a mother’s role

successfully is a prerequisite to becoming a feminist, successful rearing of her own children as a mother is an important common agenda to many Korean feminists” (Cho Un, 1997). Jung-Soon Shim comments that the “curious marriage between feminism and Confucian-patriarchal familism” with its emphasis on the “domesticity of women” (Shim, 1999) brings Korean contemporary feminism close to the western concept of domestic feminism which emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century.

However, with the eventual rise in globalization, Korean filmmakers started to look at Hollywood for inspiration, drawing upon tropes, motifs and genres that would cater to audiences all across the world. As a result, Korean attitudes towards gender and sexuality started to undergo conspicuous changes. Dal Yong Jin argues that the mixing of cultures always has political ramifications and that dominant ideologies may eventually suppress alternative philosophies (Jin 2016, 14-17). Postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Roland Robertson (1992), and Joseph Straubhaar (2007) have introduced the idea of hybridization which states that when two cultures engage with each other, a “third space” for culture is created (Bhabha 1994, 217). This third space can be observed in the realm of Korean feminism too. Since the early 2000s, several k-dramas have borrowed generously from well-known fairy tales, folklores and children’s literature that have enjoyed considerable popularity in Europe and by extension in the colonies. They not only been hailed worldwide as some of the best k-dramas but they have also received critical acclaim and have been subjected to scholarly scrutiny. Mapping out the trajectory of k-dramas from the release of *Boys Over Flowers* (2009), a reworking of the oppressive tale of Cinderella that took the world by a storm, *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (2016) with its intertextual references to Andersen's famous tale "The Little Mermaid" to the release of *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020) which was based on Lewis Carroll's famous novel "Alice in Wonderland" (1865) and deals with a coming-of-age story, we see a new kind of femininity has emerged in the Korean landscape over the whole decade from 2009-2020, and it has evolved every year with the steady proliferation of the ‘hallyu wave’. That is precisely what my paper seeks to explore.

2. Tracing the Cinderella motif in *Boys Over Flowers* (2009)

“Cinderella” is widely perceived as a tale of oppression, the tale of a girl reduced to the status of an object, having no autonomy of her own. Critics, reviewers and scholars from all over the world like Jung (2010) and Hong (2014) have noticed the Cinderella motif being reworked in the famous South Korean television drama *Boys Over Flowers* (2009). This drama changed the landscape of the Korean drama industry forever with its earth-shattering popularity and accelerated the ‘hallyu wave’ which challenged the Western hegemonic media dominance and transformed the idea of masculinity. The plot of *Boys Over Flowers* follows a simple narrative pattern- a very rich boy falls in love with a poor girl and after braving several obstacles they finally get married and live happily ever after. Geum Jan-di, the dry cleaner's daughter, is the protagonist. Gu Jun-Pyo, the male lead is the heir of the Shinhwa group, the largest business conglomerate in South Korea. Gu Jun-Pyo, together with his three sidekicks, the “F4”, indulges in bullying the students of Shinhwa High. However, the turning point of their lives is precipitated by the headstrong Geum Jan-di who offers a strong resistance to Gu-Jun-Pyo’s tyranny and he eventually falls in love with her. Miyose (2013) observes that when it comes to personality, Jan-di is shown to participate “in mainly gender-neutral activities, her favourite being swimming.” She defends her friend, Min-ji, takes Jun-Pyo down with the full force of her iconic flying kick, has a loud, raucous voice and no table manners, which all seems to situate her very far away from the conventionally feminine, delicate figure of Perrault's Cinderella who is “sugar-sweet and insipidly good” (Bettelheim, 1976). Going against the Confucian stereotype that women are supposed to work within the house, Jan-di mostly works outside the house making deliveries, distributing newspapers and milk, working at a gas station and so on, thus taking up roles that have traditionally been gendered ‘male’.

The one thing that remains constant in every version of the fairytale is the stepmother’s mistreatment of Cinderella. In *Boys Over Flowers*, it might seem like Jan-di and her mother share an affectionate relationship but certain behaviors displayed by her mother prove to be immensely problematic. She fat shames Jan-di frequently, makes her feel guilty for eating hungrily after an exhausting day and obsesses about her appearance because she wants her to impress some wealthy heir at Shinhwa High and secure their family against all financial adversities. When Jan-di is going through problems with Jun-Pyo, her mother never offers her emotional support, rather she frets that her dreams of living a luxurious life would crumble to dust if they break up. When Jan-di finally breaks up, her mother immediately shifts her attention to Gu Jun-pyo’s best friend Ji-hoo as a potential mate for Jan-di. This parallels the desire of Cinderella’s stepmother to get one of her daughters

married to the prince which is why she constantly fussed about their appearance and made them dress up lavishly for the balls. Geum Jan-di has no stepsisters to make her life miserable. However, we find stepsister equivalents in three particular characters namely Ginger, Sunny, Miranda and later Min-ji, who leave no stone unturned in making her academic life a living hell. This reminds us of the kind of treatment meted out to Cinderella in Brothers Grimm's "Aschenputtel" (1812) "her sisters did everything imaginable to cause her grief and make her look ridiculous. They poured peas and lentils into the ashes of the hearth so she had to sit there the entire day and separate them." From spreading pregnancy rumors about her, embarrassing her at the ball, slut-shaming her, hiding or damaging her belongings to egging her with the other students, the sole purpose of their lives seems to revolve around getting rid of Geum Jan-di.

In Brothers Grimm's version of Cinderella, towards the end of the story, the stepmother, knowing that her daughters' feet were too big for the tiny slipper, made one of them cut off her toes and the other cut off parts of her heels in order to fit into the slipper. "It will hurt a bit. But what does that matter? It will soon pass, and one of you will become queen." (Grimm, 1812) This gruesome mutilation of their feet can be interpreted as an equivalent of modern-day plastic surgery. Most of the female students in Shinhwa High, most noticeably Min-Ji, Ginger, Sunny and Miranda resort to plastic surgery to look conventionally beautiful and impress wealthy men. Jan-di reveals the fanatic obsession with plastic surgery which has made Seoul the "World's Plastic Surgery Capital" (Marx, 2015). She neither advocates nor decries the practice of plastic surgery but questions how the girls who underwent plastic surgery themselves could ridicule someone else for the same. Coming to the motif of the shoe, when Gu Jun-pyo leaves the ballroom in a jealous fit and falls into the swimming pool. Jan-di rushes out of the ball, takes off her shoes, dives into the pool and saves his life. Cinderella thus becomes the woman who doesn't leave a slipper back at the ball by mistake but deliberately takes them off so that she can save the prince's life. Moving on, the fairy Godmother figures in Charles Perrault's (1697) version most prominently "Her godmother just touched her with her wand, and her clothes were changed at once into a dress made from cloth of gold and silver, gleaming with jewels. Next she gave her a pair of slippers made of glass, as pretty as could be" (Betts, 2009). In *Boys Over Flowers*, we find Min Seo-hyun, the fashion "goddess" of South Korea, who gives Jan-di a complete makeover right after the Gin-Sun-Mi trio spoil her dress. Seo-hyun dresses her in one of her gorgeous white frocks, lends her a gleaming pair of shoes and gets Ji-hoo to dance with her.

The women in *Boys Over Flowers* put up very strong resistances and certainly don't conform to the traditional image of meek and docile Korean women in keeping with the Confucian standards. However, *Boys Over Flowers* (2009) has also been severely criticized for the way women have been depicted in the drama. Starting from the characters of the mean girls, the greedy, materialistic mother figures, to even the characters of Jan-di and her best friend Ga-Eul, the female characters have been portrayed in a negative light. Jan-di specifically has been dismissed by feminists as lacking agency and eventually succumbing to her male counterpart despite facing abuse. When the pictures of Jan-di in a hotel room are leaked, her peers immediately start slut-shaming her without even bothering to inquire if she had been sexually harassed or assaulted. While the men proudly proclaim themselves to be "playboys" and "casanovas" and their errors are brushed under the carpet through redemption arcs, women are punished severely based on flimsy grounds. At the end of the drama, we find that Jan-di has failed her medical exams whereas Jun-pyo has flourished immensely, taken Shinhwa to greater heights and is now at the head of the company. Jun-pyo's 'evil' mother who would stop at nothing to get what she wanted, has stepped down from her position as the CEO of Shinhwa and handed over the reins of the company to Jun-pyo. She is now a subdued woman, sitting right next to her sick husband, pouring him a cup of tea while watching Jun-pyo's interview on the television. Ga-Eul, just like Jan-di, gets paired up with an F4 member Yi-Jeong at the end of the drama and that becomes the primary source of their contentment. Marriage becomes the ultimate goal of their existence and looking after their husbands and sons becomes their sole purpose. So, what we find in *Boys Over Flowers* is an uncomfortable, incompatible mix of Confucian familism and Western feminism, a society trying to be progressive, to erase the distinction between the sexes but failing to do so because it is still steeped neck-deep in patriarchy. In such a society there are limits to what women can achieve because they are allowed to be ambitious only in a way that doesn't threaten the ambitions or societal worth of their male counterparts.

3. *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (2016) v/s Andersen's "The Little Mermaid."

Jin Hyuk, the director of the drama, indirectly refuted the connection between *The Legend of the Blue Sea* and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" (1837) by declaring in a press conference, "We have our own ancient mermaid stories. The drama has been created from the imagination of one of those surviving mermaids just walked into the modern day Seoul one day" (Park, 2016). The drama is partially based on a classic folktale from Yu Mong-In's *Eou Yadam* ('Eou's Unofficial Histories') (1559-1623), and it blends local elements with aspects of Hans Christian Andersen's famous short story 'The Little Mermaid' (1837) Andersen's text features in the eighth episode of the drama when Shim Cheong finds a picture book adaptation of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" in the library. She reads the story and she cries pearls at the sorry fate of the mermaid. Later in the nineteenth episode of the drama, while discussing Andersen's story with Joon-Jae's mother, Yu-ran tells her the story of the Korean mermaid who came to the shore out of her love for the man she saved, and how they lived happily ever after. This makes Keith and Lee (2018) remark, "This blend of Korean ineo and mermaid stories positions the mermaid not as a tragic character trapped by her otherness, but one with sufficient agency to transcend it." Both Se-hwa and Shim Cheong were accidentally cast ashore by sea storms. Johansen (2000) writes, "the little mermaid is a sorry member of her species. While her sisters are shaping their gardens in the forms taken from their own lifeworld, she is yearning both for the human world above and for the sun..." While Se-hwa takes a step towards maintaining the boundaries between the human world and the mermaid world by deleting human memories and using her other powers, the little mermaid transgresses those boundaries by sacrificing a vital part of herself, her voice. As a mermaid on land, the latter has absolutely no power apart from her mesmerizing movements which relegated her to the status of an object. Even the ability to walk on her legs gave her immense pain. She trades away her voice to the sea witch to grow a pair of legs. In *The Legend of the Blue Sea*, however, adult mermaids have the natural ability to grow legs on land and change back into their mermaid form once their legs touch water. In addition to that, they have superhuman strength, the ability to learn human language very quickly, the ability to heal from injuries and the power to erase human memories just by touching them. It is with her unimaginable physical strength that Cheong defends Joon-jae against his mortal enemies multiple times.

Johansen (2000) further writes, "The entrance into the symbolic order, primarily the acquisition of language, is decisive, because it not only means the subject's ability to express itself, but also the possibility of reacting to the way in which others define it... If the access to speech is blocked, then the subject is referred to being defined by others; not only its majority, but even its identity is harmed." From the very beginning, the little mermaid's relationship with the prince is determined by her muteness. This lack is countered in *The Legend of the Blue Sea* and the image of the little mermaid as a helpless, disenfranchised, mute creature is subverted by the loquacious Shim Cheong. At the outset, Shim Cheong has no voice which is what makes Joon-jae think she is speech impaired. However, we soon realize that she was silent because she doesn't know the human language. With her marvelous learning capacity, Shim Cheong learns Hangul from watching sentimental dramas on Joon-Jae's laptop all night and shocks him the next day with her newly developed skill. This creates comedic effect but the implications go deeper than that. Shim Cheong's speech removes the gaps and ambiguities that we find in "The Little Mermaid" which was a result of the mermaid's silence. Unlike the little mermaid, Shim Cheong has a voice and she uses it. Furthermore, Joon-jae is informed of the state of her feelings, her needs and desires at all times since he is rewarded with the additional advantage of being able to read her mind. She is a talkative mermaid with an insatiable appetite and idiosyncratic mannerisms, absolutely comfortable in her own skin and confident in her own abilities. Once Shim Cheong realizes the value of her precious tears, she becomes financially independent too. The only commonality between the depictions of the little mermaid and Shim Cheong is that their hearts would harden and if their love was not reciprocated and their bodies would turn into a mass of foamy bubbles and then disappear. However, here too there is a slight difference. The little mermaid would die whether she was on land or in water unless she stabbed the prince she so dearly loved with the knife given to her by the sea witch, but Shim Cheong could live on normally if she just went back into the water where she belonged. In *The Legend of the Blue Sea*, however, both Dam-ryeong and Joon-Jae have been extremely single-minded in the pursuit of love. The relationship between Heo Joon-Jae and Shim Cheong is the epitome of a healthy relationship where both partners are equally invested in each other, unlike the Prince who loved the little mermaid only as a slave. This is a welcome change from the mindless harassment and toxicity that was normalized as love in *Boys Over Flowers*.

Released seven years after *Boys Over Flowers*, we see a significant erasure of the pre-existing customs that men and women had to adhere to. While the male lead Gu Jun-pyo in *Boys Over Flowers* had a natural predisposition towards physical violence, the male lead Heo Joon-jae uses hypnotism to disarm his enemies and his physical strength is reserved only for dire situations. He is gentle and empathetic, sensitive to the needs of Shim Cheong and encourages her to make her own choices in life unlike Jun-pyo who always found a way to coerce Jan-di into agreeing with him. Jun-pyo restricted Jan-di, Joon-Jae liberated Shim Cheong. Even when Shim Cheong wants to go back to the ocean and erase Joon-jae's memories, he calmly allows her to do it even though it causes him enormous pain. When she comes back to him from the ocean three years later, it is purely out of her own choice that she does so. However, here too we notice certain events that subtly hark back to the conservative Korean past. The instances of a dress code and a curfew imposed on a woman who was over thirty years old, come off as rather odd. Furthermore, the conventional custom of impressing the mother-in-law in order to win the man's heart can very well be detected in this drama. Shim Cheong has been typified as the ideal daughter-in-law figure as opposed to the outspoken and independent Cha Si-ah. The very last scene of the drama shows the couple living their dream life as husband and wife. Shim Cheong is pregnant and they have moved to a small cottage near the sea. Getting married and having children have been glorified as the ideal life, something both Seh-wa as well as Shim Cheong wanted. To look at *The Legend of the Blue Sea* more critically, Shim Cheong the mermaid has been vested with too many powers that made her life extremely easy. She has been raised to the realm of the extraordinary so much that at certain points of the drama viewers find it rather difficult to connect with her. Without these powers, Shim Cheong would perhaps be even more helpless than the little mermaid in the modern, bustling city of Seoul, fall into the wrong hands and be severely exploited by other human beings. One must not forget that the very reason why Joon-jae held on to her in the first place was to steal the expensive jadeite bracelet she had on her. The portrayal of Shim Cheong further seems to suggest that only a woman with superpowers is a woman worthy of praise and adoration. Despite being the perfect wife, the humble and affectionate Mo Yu-ran is soon replaced by Kang Seo-hee. Similarly, despite being an independent, hardworking, opinionated woman Cha Si-ah is turned down by Joon-jae. The only woman in the drama who reigns supreme is the breathtakingly beautiful mermaid blessed with super powers which situate her very far away from what a real, human woman is supposed to be like. This leads to the exoticization of the figure of Shim Cheong as an 'Other' which is once again extremely anti-feminist.

4. Emancipated Female Figures in *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020)

Written by Kim Eun-sook, *The King Eternal Monarch* (2020) uniquely reworks Lewis Carroll's famous novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). Set in two parallel worlds, the Republic of Korea and the Kingdom of Coreia, the series follows Emperor Lee Gon of Kingdom of Coreia, chasing someone in a black rabbit jumper and discovering a mythical door that leads to an alternate reality. This door was opened by Lee Lim, his half-uncle twenty five years ago, after he killed Emperor Lee Gon's father and stole the 'manpasikjeok', a flute which was a portal between the two worlds. He intended to kill the little prince too but the latter is rescued by a mysterious person dressed in black. As his savior is about to leave, Lee Gon catches hold of the person's ID and then he spends the next twenty-five years of his life trying to track her down but learns that she never existed in his kingdom. There are several direct references to Carroll's text in the drama. In the very first episode there is a scene in which Emperor Lee Gon reads out a passage from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to a gathering of children. Later when Jeong Tae-eul, the female lead, finally visits the Kingdom of Coreia, she says she feels like Alice in Wonderland. What is interesting about this drama is that Alice has primarily been gendered male. This story becomes the coming-of-age narrative of the king as he grows up an orphan and then finally finds what he has spent years looking for in Wonderland, his savior, Lieutenant Jeong Tae-Eul. She finds it hard to believe Lee Gon when he first introduces her to the idea of the parallel universe but interestingly Lee Gon analyzes the situation with remarkable clarity referring to various mathematical calculations and theories by eminent scientists in order to strengthen his convictions. He goes around learning more about the new world, reading its history, following its various rules just like Alice who always followed the instructions "Eat me" (Carroll, 1865) and "Drink me" (ibid) and allowed herself to be transformed in various ways.

Even though it is Lee Gon the King who is at the forefront, Jeong Tae-eul becomes the pivot around which most of Lee Gon's actions revolve. Jeong Tae-Eul, the woman, instead of being cast into the mould of Alice, functions as the quintessential driving force which helps Lee Gon grow up to become a benevolent king despite his childhood trauma and constantly endangered circumstances. Even the Court Lady Noh tells her, "Since the moment your ID card fell into the

hands of His Majesty, you have been the one guiding him to his fate.” (Episode 13) When she first visits the Kingdom of Corea, she too is as clueless as Alice was. She meets various faces she can recognize from her own world, but none of them behave in ways that she can predict. At various points we see her questioning her sanity, wondering if it is all just a very elaborate dream. It reminds one of the Cheshire Cat’s words from the novel, “We are all mad here!” (Carroll, 1865) She is a consummate detective working in the Crime Bureau. She is not only intelligent and observant but also proficient in Taekwondo. But neither her physical prowess nor her intellectual powers are unrealistic. She can take down multiple people but she also has her limitations. We see her getting injured, bested by powerful opponents and even mortally wounded on various occasions. Unlike Shim Cheong, she is a flesh and blood human being who is imperfect, who doesn’t know much about Quantum Mechanics and wants an early leave from her work, who loses her temper every now and then and makes mistakes in her assessments. She has several layers to her personality. Luna, her double, too is a multidimensional human being. She is a criminal, always on the run, she lives from hand to mouth, she suffers from cancer and lives on borrowed time yet she appears extremely tough on the outside, the kind of person who isn’t afraid of anything because she has nothing to lose. But deep down, she too craves to belong somewhere. She feeds stray cats, is empathetic towards children and eventually ends up helping Jeong Tae-eul. Both Luna and Jeong Tae-eul have been given realistic backstories which further lend a lot of depth to their characters as real women from two very different walks of life.

It is very difficult to cast characters into specific archetypes in *The King: Eternal Monarch*. For instance, even though the king largely resembles Alice in the way he discovers his Wonderland and the occasional displays of childlike innocence that shines through his otherwise regal attitude, he constantly mock-threatens other characters with “You will be beheaded!” (The King: Eternal Monarch). This situates him close to the Queen of Hearts who frequently erupted into “Off with their heads!” (Carroll, 1865) and whose orders too were never carried out. The Prime Minister of Corea, however, can be typecast into the role of the Queen of Hearts in more prominent ways. First of all she wields all the authoritative powers as the head of the state. She also wants to become the Queen of Corea, so she has her eyes set on the king and makes strategic moves in order to influence the citizens to believe that she was to become the Queen of Corea very soon. When she appears in the drama for the first time, she is wearing a bright red dress and an equally bright red shade of lipstick in a striking semblance of the Red Queen and the Queen of Hearts in Carroll’s novels. The Queen of Hearts rules over Wonderland like a tyrant. She has a violent temper, a condescending personality and everyone in Wonderland is afraid of her fury. Prime Minister Koo sports a very similar personality. But she is a tremendously capable and efficient woman who is fearless and who through her sheer hard work has risen from the lower echelons of society to become the Prime Minister. When a party member tries to be sarcastic to her saying that she is too preoccupied with her makeup and physical appearance, she snaps at him with “Mr. Park, if this position can be kept by dressing up and putting on makeup, then you can do the same as well” (Episode 3). She thus challenges the old stereotype that beauty and brains are somehow incompatible in the case of women. Even though she has been endowed with some really negative character traits, they are not typical to her identity as a woman. It is not unusual for a person in a position of immense power to lust for more power and become exploitative and corrupt like Prime Minister Koo.

Moving on to old Head Court Lady Noh, her character is specifically interesting because one one hand she is extremely superstitious, performed various safety rituals and consults shamans regularly to get talismans for her beloved king, on the other hand, she is extremely modern, reads fanfictions written by young authors, perfectly understands the utility of social media in image management, the functions of “After Effects and Photoshop” (ibid) and the importance of “beautiful stories and touching hashtags” (ibid). She is an old but extremely emancipated woman, inordinately loyal, fiercely protective of the king, the woman who even the king fears her let alone the rest of the royal court. In many ways she is a paradox, which explains why one never comes across her dual self. She embodies in herself an amalgamation of extremely opposite natures. Keeping all these factors in mind, one can safely conclude that the female characters in *The King: Eternal Monarch* are all very well-rounded, realistic and believable. Physical and intellectual prowess, intelligence and cunning are all extremely subjective traits and they cannot be categorized as male or female. The prominent lines between masculine and feminine which have been so characteristic of the earlier k-dramas have been blurred in *The King: Eternal Monarch* through the depiction of diametrically opposite personalities of the same core character in two different worlds. Furthermore, the relationship between the King and Jeong Tae-eul has also been portrayed as a relationship of equals even though they are situated far apart in terms of social hierarchy. Gu Jun-pyo and Geum Jan-di too came from two very different walks of life, but it was always the former whose desires would always be privileged over the latter. In *The King: Eternal Monarch* we find a strong female lead with individual autonomy and agency even though she was soon to be the Queen of Corea. All

Lee Gon is ever concerned about his her security and does everything he could to ensure that Jeong Tae-eul's is safe in his kingdom. This was a necessary step because being associated with the king romantically made her extremely vulnerable to the king's murderous enemies.

5. Conclusion

Choosing *Boys over Flowers* (2009) as the starting point and then coming down to *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020) presents a clear picture of how western literary tropes continue to be reworked in South Korea television dramas. But what becomes significant is the fact that the process of reworking and repurposing these tropes have gone through extremely conspicuous changes, most primarily when it comes to the treatment of women in these dramas and the relationship dynamics between the male leads and the female leads. The toxicity that was romanticized in *Boys over Flowers* in 2009 with the figure of Cinderella as Geum Jan-di, being initially represented in an emancipated light only to succumb to submission and subordination at the end, was done away with in *The Legend of the Blue Sea* to a great extent. However, even in this 2016 drama, what stands out is the glorification of a woman endowed with supernatural abilities. Shim Cheong is a woman but from a different species possessing a kind of femininity that no real woman can ever match up to. As a result, what happens here is a fetishization and exoticization of Shim Cheong as a mermaid. But *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020) is a self-consciously written and meticulously crafted show. Here, emancipated women have been characterized in a way which doesn't situate them beyond the realm of their natural capacities and this is where the "third space" blending both Korean and Western influences comes to the fore most prominently. It signifies a break with all the oppressiveness in the native cultural traditions while at the same time upholding a distinct cultural flavor, thus showing how the Korean entertainment industry has come a long way since 2009.

Why the emergence of a new kind of femininity is found to be most conspicuous in these dramas is probably because basing the dramas on the age-old fairy tales where women have either been portrayed as oppressed damsels or conniving witches and men as either bloodthirsty predators or benevolent protectors gives the screenplay writers an easy opportunity to subvert these exact tropes and influence the pre-existing discourse around these characters. The idea of love too has been subjected to a certain kind of transformation, moving away from a traditional, collectivistic love for the family as per Confucian ideology to a passionate, individualistic love between two people separate from the family. Thus, the Western, hegemonic portrayals of love seem to overpower the traditional ideals of Confucian familialism (Lin, 2002). Even though the structure of these dramas seems simple, it "affords great opportunities to explore complex social issues and critique institutional power structures" (Hartzell, 2019). These polarizations depicted in the dramas instantly serve as a source of identification for Korean viewers who have literally been brought up on the principles of yin and yang, and a subversion of the polarity helps highlight the changing worldview of the Korean population.

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