

VILLAINESS PROTAGONISTS' PERFORMATIVE ACTS AS THE REPRESENTATION OF MODERN FEMININITY

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ABSTRACT

The research discussed a different representations of femininity through the villainesses and heroines in two Korean webtoons (web cartoons). Traditionally, villainesses were depicted as undesirable antagonists as they did not fit into the frame of traditional femininity or were merely viewed as sexually attractive. However, the traditional aspects of femininity were now contested by the villainess protagonists. Utilizing Butler's theory of gender performativity along with Kress and van Leeuwen's visual analysis, the protagonists' and antagonists' thoughts, actions, and appearance were analyzed. A descriptive qualitative analysis was conducted on two webtoons, The Villainess Reverses the Hourglass, and It Looks Like I've Fallen into the World of a Reverse Harem Game. The studied data are selected from chapters 1-45 in each webtoon. The results show that the villainess protagonists are depicted as more independent, have more power, and occasionally dress in a masculine way, while the heroines-turned-antagonists are illustrated as a dependent, lack power, and always dressed femininely. In this case, the heroines-turned-antagonists' traits represent Korea's traditional notion of femininity. Meanwhile, the villainess protagonists possess traits opposing the heroines' traits. Positioning the villainesses as protagonists and heroines as antagonists show a clash of modern vs. traditional notion of femininity, and putting the 'villainesses' as the desirable protagonists imply how their representation of femininity is considered more favorable in the modern context.

Keywords: villain protagonist, performative act, modern femininity, shojo webtoon

INTRODUCTION

Webtoons or Web Cartoons are illustrated narratives that have been growing rapidly in international popularity. Its development could be traced back to the 1990s when personal web pages became a trend among the public due to technological development. Cartoonists draw cartoon essays on their own homepage, usually conveying a particular message implicitly, and visitors would leave feedback through comments or messages. As the trend developed, webtoons became even more commercial, with major portals such as Daum and Naver providing a space for the creators to gain income through their works, as well as provide opportunities for newer cartoonists to share their comics without having to approach agencies or

publishers first. Nowadays, webtoons feature an array of stories in different genres, with pictures drawn panel to panel in a long vertical strip for scroll-down viewing on tablets or cellphones (Jeong, 2020; Jin, 2015).

Among the diverse genres of the webtoon, *shojo* webtoons targeting young female audiences and featuring villainesses as the protagonists have become a trend, similar to how the latest Disney movies also positioned villainess figures from Disney's classics as the protagonist (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018). This rising trend is a fascinating phenomenon to investigate as it moves away from conventional stories that feature non-villainess protagonists. Moreover, there is a notable shift in the notion of femininity that comes along with the positioning of a villainess as the protagonist of a story.

Taking Disney movies as examples, the protagonists in Disney classics, i.e., the Disney princesses (e.g., Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora), are portrayed as “ultra-feminine” with traits such as being young, having a slender body, fair skin, and expertise in singing, dancing, and doing household chores. These traits are considered a “standardized portrayal of femininity and beauty” (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018), an ideal portrait of femininity. Meanwhile, the female villains (e.g., The Queen/Witch, Stepmother, Maleficent) are depicted as less attractive (deformed or wrinkled faces, unnatural skin color such as green). This associates villainy with unattractiveness as opposed to the portrayal of the protagonists as the standard of beauty and desirable femininity. Moreover, the villainesses’ evil acts tend to be based on the feeling of beauty inferiority to the protagonists or ‘simply evil’ in nature (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018).

However, recent Disney villainesses, such as Maleficent, are depicted differently. She is portrayed as a beautiful woman, a fairy who controls the magic forest, is given a backstory of betrayal that explains her villainous attitude and has a gentle side. Unlike before, the villainess now possesses beauty and power to a certain extent. Though Disney’s example is taken from a different media (i.e., movies), recently published webtoons that feature villainess protagonists also echo a similar theme.

Two examples of webtoons that followed this theme are *The Villainess Reverses the Hourglass* (henceforth *Hourglass*), and *It Looks Like I’ve Fallen into the World of a Reverse Harem Game* (henceforth *Reverse Harem*). Both webtoons share a similarity in that there are two timelines involved in the story. The timeline before the story plot started positions the villainesses as antagonists in their respective stories (henceforth called the original timeline). However, the villainesses move to another timeline where the true story plot has started (henceforth called the current timeline). In the current timeline, the villains become the protagonists, while the heroines become the antagonists of the story.

The *Hourglass* webtoon follows the story of Aria Roscente, the daughter of a prostitute who married into the family of Count Roscente. In the original timeline of the story, Aria has a terrible reputation in the noble society because her stepsister, Mielle, continually attempts to discredit her. As Aria is surrounded by hatred and envy, she becomes despised by many and eventually is executed to death. With a strong desire to go back in time to enact revenge on Mielle on the brink of death, Aria is magically sent back to ten years before her execution. Thus, the story of Aria’s revenge against Mielle begins in the new timeline.

Meanwhile, *Reverse Harem* webtoon features a nameless woman who is teleported into a dating simulation game as the antagonist princess, Yeldyria Viotte Cecilia, after receiving a mysterious phone call. In the original timeline, Yeldyria is supposed to die of execution after her misconduct is exposed. In the new timeline (i.e., after the nameless woman becomes

Yeldyria herself), Yeldyria gains the opportunity to change her actions. However, it turns out that another woman has also teleported into the game as Yuriel, the main character and original protagonist of the game. The Yuriel in the new timeline aims to eradicate Yeldyria as part of receiving the game’s happy end. Realizing her fate is doomed unless she does something, Yeldyria attempts to find a way to survive in the game world while doing her work as the royal princess and managing her relationship with her concubines to avoid her demise.

Though differing slightly in the background stories, in the original timeline of both stories (before the prologue where the space/time travel happened), the main characters, Aria and Yeldyria, are known as the antagonists in the original timeline. In the current, they become the protagonists instead. Moreover, as the story progresses, it is revealed that the characters considered kind heroines in the original timeline are the true villainesses plotting evil deeds in the current timeline. In other words, the protagonists and antagonists have shifted in the current timeline.

Additionally, in the original timeline, the ‘heroines’ would defeat the villainesses and gain the love and attention of the male supporting characters. However, in the current timeline, the villainesses receive the affection of the male supporting characters instead, while the heroine’s fate becomes miserable. It is interesting to look into as the heroines/original protagonists are generally portrayed as the ideal woman that receives the happy end, and the villainess receives the bad end, as exemplified in the case of the classic Disney villainesses (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018). In these webtoons, however, the opposite applies. There is a distinction in personality traits between the heroine and the villainess protagonist, particularly concerning traits associated with the notion of the ideal woman.

Butler (2010, 2021), in her theory of gender performativity, has suggested that gender is shaped through repetitive acts, which include outer physical appearance, gestures, or mannerisms. Specific acts could mark or associate a person with being a “man” or “woman”, and perpetuating such acts created an illusion of stable identities on what is considered “man” or “woman”. As the acts become widely accepted by society, persons who identify with particular genders and follow the commonly acknowledged acts are considered ideal. Following these notions, it could be said that women who follow the acts socially accepted for women make them considered as feminine.

Regarding femininity itself, there are several notions proposed by different researchers. The traditional notion of femininity positions women as the ‘object’ of men’s sexual pleasure, being sexually innocent and acting as the passive partner. Possessing these aspects is considered acceptable and ideal for women to have (Minowa, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2019). This notion of femininity is a part of cultural construction that assigns passivity, subordination, and tenderness to women while establishing men’s dominance in society (Windsor, 2015). Thus, the

'beauty myth', as Wolf suggested in Windsor (2015), arises and demands that women need to conform to conventional standards of attractiveness with an emphasis on maintaining aesthetically pleasing faces, bodies, dresses, and mannerisms. Women who do not conform to the 'standard' of femininity could be viewed as unattractive, lazy, or apathetic. They are also deemed lonelier, less popular, and less sexually experienced than the women who adhere to the 'normative' attractiveness. Femininity, in this case, is subject to stereotyping and existing patriarchal norms (Dahl in Hoskin & Blair, 2022).

Genz and Brabon (2018) have quoted Wolf in criticizing this traditional notion of femininity, which comes along with the active positioning of women as victims in the early feminist movements. It is dubbed as a demonstration of powerlessness as the discourse of women being 'sexually pure and mystically nurturing', which still adheres to traditional femininity, remains in such movements. Clavel-Vazquez (2018) has pointed this out when talking about antiheroines as a symbol of resistance, in which existing gender norms for females are exploited for narrative means. She mentions that several antiheroines and *femme fatales* who have motherly instincts or sexual violence experience are still subject to being viewed as carers, victims, or objects of sexual gratification. Kim (2020) has echoed this in her discussion about the media's representation of female soldiers and their femininity. Taking the Korean webtoon *Beautiful Gunbari* as the studied case, Kim (2020) has pointed out that despite the female soldiers' depiction as subjects of gender equality, they are still connected to fetishism and insinuate the existing hegemonic masculinity.

Along with the abundant reactions and criticisms towards second-wave feminism comes another notion of femininity from a postfeminist perspective. Gill in McKay, Moore, and Kubik (2019), for instance, has mentioned the shift from objectification to subjectification in the representation of women in regard to femininity. There is an increasing focus on individualism, personal choice, and empowerment, along with more sexual freedom. Women take actions for their own pleasure or happiness, not to gain men's approval. Sim (2020) has added by noting how female heroes in Korean movies are depicted as dressing in a masculine way, being confident, self-accepting, independent, and strong, reflecting modern femininity and having the potential to oppose patriarchal narratives and eroticized representations of women.

In the real world, what is deemed feminine could be shaped through 'ideas' produced and circulated through texts and practices. This could be understood as ideology. Ideology could also refer to 'ideological forms', which view texts (words and images found in songs, novels, fiction, or movies) as always presenting a particular image of the world (Storey, 2018). Particular words and images could assign attributes concerned with physical characteristics, role behaviors (such as taking care of children or working for women), or occupations (Eisend, 2019). Through

these definitions, it could be said that texts (words and images) disseminated in a medium, webtoon included, could reveal what actions are considered ideal regarding men and women in the real world. In this case, there are underlying perceptions of ideal femininity that could be traced within webtoons.

It is in line with the idea regarding different dimensions within visual modes that Kress and van Leeuwen have suggested (Ali, 2021; Tehseem, Sibtain, & Obaid, 2018). Adapting Halliday's notion of metalanguage, Kress and van Leeuwen have elaborated that meanings delivered through visual elements are highlighted in representational, interactive, and compositional dimensions. The representational dimension, in particular, deals with the representations of things and their relations to the surrounding real world. In the context of webtoons and within this dimension, visual elements found in webtoons, such as characters, things, objects, or places, are called represented participants. Further, under this dimension, there are narrative and conceptual representations.

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's notion of representational dimension in Tehseem, Sibtain, and Obaid (2018), narrative representation is the dynamic process that involves actions and events where participants are engaged in doing something to or for each other. These processes included action, reactional, speech, and mental processes. The action process is a narrative process where a character performs an action towards a 'goal', the receptor of the action. It can be transactional, in which the goal is present, or it can be non-transactional, in which the actor only exists in the process.

Another process is the reactional process, in which the action involves sight or glancing in a particular direction. In this context, there is a reactor (the participant who glances or looks at) and a phenomenon (the participant who or which receives the gaze). Like the action process, the reactional process can be transactional (where the phenomenon exists) or non-transactional (Ali, 2021).

Lastly, there are speech and mental processes. According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the mental process takes the form of 'thought bubbles', which show what the participants are thinking. On the other hand, the speech process could be seen from 'dialogue/speech bubbles', which show verbal interactions between the involved participants (Ali, 2021).

Kress and van Leeuwen (in Ali, 2021) have also suggested another type of representation called conceptual representation that represents the participants' class, structure, or meaning. Included in it is the symbolic processes. Symbolic processes view the represented participants as either the carrier or symbolic attribute. The carrier is the participant that carries specific values or attributes, while the symbolic attribute is the traits, values, or features that provide specific meaning or identity about the carrier. Symbolic attributes tend to be salient, e.g., placed in the foreground, has exaggerated size, highly detailed, sharp focus, or outstanding color and tone. It could

also stand out compared to other elements found in the same frame and frequently possess symbolic values (Ali, 2021).

The utilization of Kress and Leeuwen’s visual analysis could be exemplified in research by Ali (2021) on the representation and relation between the main characters in the *Remarried Empress* webtoon. By using the visual grammar framework, Ali (2021) has found in his research that the narrative processes in the webtoon are dominant in the selected data (webtoon chapter) as it aims to engage the viewers (readers) aside from narrating the story. There are also other studies analyzing webtoons, one of which included a study by Khan et al. (2020). Using the critical race theory, the research focuses on discussing racism and inclusivity as reflected in the society’s treatment of supernatural beings in *Days of Hana* and *Orange Marmalade* webtoons. Another research by Park (2019) has described how the representations of comfort women in manhwa narratives exhibited during the Angoulême Comics Festival reflect the controversies in the history and politics between Japan and Korea.

Previous studies provide different insights on how webtoons could reflect a variety of underlying ideas or issues existing in real life. However, the research discusses villainesses as protagonists, which is currently trending, is still lacking. Additionally, discussions about villainesses featured in movies, television, and novels are abundant, but only some could be seen about villainesses in webtoons. Through the research, the researcher wants to provide broader insight into how the representation of characters in webtoons could represent the issues found in real life, particularly regarding femininity. The research also wants to bring a fresh understanding and perspective about villainesses featured in webtoons based on the current trend, filling the existing gap in the discussion about villainesses in creative works. Hence, the research looks into how modern femininity is represented through the villainess protagonists from two selected Korean webtoons (*Hourglass* and *Reverse Harem* webtoons) based on gender performativity.

METHODS

Using Butler’s gender performativity theory and Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual analysis, a descriptive qualitative analysis is conducted on two webtoons, *The Villainess Reverses the Hourglass*, and *It Looks Like I’ve Fallen into the World of a Reverse Harem Game*. The studied data are selected from chapters 1-45 in each webtoon. Firstly, a thorough reading of the selected chapters is conducted. Throughout the reading, the researcher has recorded significant differences in the narrative and conceptual representations of the characters. The aspects include the characters’ acts (e.g., physical appearance and mannerisms), which are recorded in a note. The data are then interpreted based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual analysis theory to delve into the representation of modern femininity in

the two webtoons.

In this research, the represented participants analyzed are limited to the main protagonists (‘villainesses’) and antagonists (‘heroines’) of each respective webtoon, i.e., Aria and Mielle (*Hourglass*) along with Yeldriya and Yuri (*Reverse Harem*). The elaboration of the analysis would cover significant implications found in both the narrative and conceptual aspects. The narrative aspect would discuss significant acts or reactions between the represented participants, while the conceptual aspect would assess the meanings behind the represented participants’ traits or attributes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From the data collected, three prominent processes imply the differences in the femininity of the villainesses (Aria and Yeldyria – henceforth called protagonists) and heroines (Mielle and Yuriel – henceforth called antagonists). The contrasts could be seen majorly from the thought process (thoughts in the protagonists’ and antagonists’ minds), speech process (what the protagonists and antagonists uttered), and symbolic process (the protagonists and antagonists as carriers of specific values with certain traits). To understand the implications of femininity, firstly, the motives of the protagonists and antagonists should be understood. This could be found by analyzing their thoughts and speech process. Starting with the example from the *Hourglass* webtoon, thought bubbles and utterances are frequently used to explain the reasons and background story of both Aria and Mielle’s actions. It can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Comparison of Aria and Mielle’s Backgrounds through Narrative Representations

| Aria | Mielle |
|---|---|
| “I will, definitely...live a life without any regrets this time. I swear it! To everyone who made me like this, I’ll make so they’d rather die. I will make it happen.” (Thought - ch. 2) | “Your maids were actually all mine, you know? They told you to torment me, right? They were all... orders given by me, you dumb little girl. Do you want to know why? The reason is very simple~ When you came into our house holding your lowly mother’s hand...I wanted to kill you.” (Speech - ch. 1) |

In the original timeline, Aria is executed to death under the accusation of attempting to murder Mielle. The first chapter of the webtoon reveals that Mielle purposely stages the incidents so that she can get rid of Aria out of hatred, as exemplified above. Aria’s knowledge of this leads to the thought of enacting vengeance upon getting the chance to live once more, as expressed by her thought in chapter 2.

Moreover, Mielle can be seen thinking about how much she despises Aria. Mielle views Aria as lowly, as Aria is born from a prostitute mother. Furthermore, since Aria climbs to the high-class hierarchy through her mother's marriage to the Roscente family (Mielle's family), Mielle perceives it as an act of meddling with her family's affair and blemishes the family's and her reputation. Originating from the feeling of disgust, Mielle then attempts to ruin Aria's reputation.

The thoughts would then result in a series of actions where Aria and Mielle try to demonstrate their intelligence in different situations, but there is a significant difference between them. It could be exemplified through the comparison in Table 2.

Aria is shown to possess a degree of intelligence and sharp observation. It is first demonstrated when she is aware of the true meaning behind a poem that she and Mielle recite, while Mielle is unaware of it in the data (1). In another example, when Aria and Mielle are asked their opinions about reopening a closed casino, Aria could provide detailed considerations

from the economic and the commoners' perspectives. On the other hand, Mielle only briefly expresses her opinion without going into details, with her suggestion even being criticized by Aria later on for lacking the commoners' perspective, as seen in data (2).

The difference in intelligence could also be seen in how they attempt to achieve power. From data (3) in Table 2, Aria decides to invest in a prospective business so that she can gain money and a degree of power for herself. While doing so, she mostly acts independently and does not rely heavily on help from other characters. On the other hand, Mielle heavily relies on Lady Isis, the leading figure of the Aristocratic Faction and the sister of her love interest, to secure a higher position and power in the nobility. However, in doing so, she is mostly on the receiving end instead of taking more actions on her own.

Meanwhile, in the *Reverse Harem* webtoon, the thought and speech processes mainly show the differences in motives and actions between Yeldyria and Yuriel. It can be seen in Table 3.

Table 2 Comparison of Aria and Mielle's Intelligence through Narrative Representations

| Aria | Mielle |
|---|--|
| (1) "That was a beautiful poem, Mielle. However, you don't seem to know...that the reply poem is actually, composed by the first Count's younger brother, who tried to murder the Count." (Speech - ch. 2) | "It's the famous poem from the first Count. I learned it when I was 4. However, you may not know that there's a reply to that poem...it's not famous, so you probably do not know. I'll recite it for you." (Speech - ch. 2) |
| (2) "I believe that the casino should be shut down. It would be a legal gambling house since it's managed by the empire, would it not? And it would be difficult to impose restrictions on a place connected to the imperial treasury. Those who visit will put their trust in the empire, but gambling is gambling. There will definitely be people who lose money, and most of them will be poor commoners who're attempting to hit jackpot." | "I'm in favor of reopening the casino. Since it will be run by the empire, I think it would be a good idea if we invest in it and turn it into a famous tourist attraction that will be well known across the land." |
| "When all those bankrupt commoners, chased out of the casino with only their undergarments left to spare, they would finally see it. The Crown Prince's statue! ...'The one who pushed me into this mire of poverty was that Crown Prince!' Wouldn't that be what they think?" (Speech - c. 25) | "It'd also be a good idea to build a huge statue at the entrance of the casino in honor of the Crown Prince." (Speech - ch. 25) |
| (3) "I remember the fashion trend among nobles at that time was perfumed hair-oil...at that time, Baron Burboom's family business was perfumed hair-oil. ...Alright. Baron Burboom. I'll give you an opportunity this time. You have to use it well. ... Baron, you're good at making a profit even when you've only given a small investment..." (Thought - ch. 40) | "I will become Mielle Frederick and live as a perfect, unblemished noble lady." (Thought - ch. 28) "..., Sir Oscar must be reciprocating my feelings. I'm sure Lady Isis helped me out a bit too." (Thought - ch. 30) |

Table 3 Comparison of Yeldyria and Yuriel's Thought Process in Reverse Harem Webtoon

| Yeldyria | Yuriel |
|--|---|
| "The owner of this body is this empire's princess, the main antagonist of the story, the one who must be killed. Yeldyria Viotte Cecilia." | "Not even once did I hear the sound of his affection rising. ...At this rate, Robia's route will close soon." |
| "If my fate really is death, then as a 'villainess', I need to escape this and find a way to survive." (Thought - ch. 2) | "There's no way this is happening! I am this game's heroine!" (Thought - ch. 9) |

Yeldyria's thoughts are centered on her attempt to survive and prevent Yuriel from killing her. On the other hand, Yuriel's thoughts are centered on winning the affection of Yeldyria's concubines (in the example, Robia). These thoughts manifest in different actions for each character. Yeldyria uses her power as the heir of the throne and her ability to foresee several of Yuriel's actions to dismiss Yuriel from the castle. Meanwhile, in Yuriel's course of action, she relies mostly on other characters to act on Yeldyria. The comparison can be exemplified in Table 4.

Table 4 Comparison of Yeldyria and Yuriel's Narrative Processes

| Yeldyria | Yuriel |
|---|---|
| <p>"Although at one point, I tried to imitate the Princess, but I realized that I wouldn't be able to prevent the Princess' death by continuing to do so. I have to maintain the Princess' position using my own methods." (Thought - ch. 27)</p> <p>"Nadricka. You belong to yourself. So you're free to do as you wish, and act as you see fit."</p> <p>"But to order you around and make you obedient towards me is something that I do not want to do." (Speech - ch. 11)</p> | <p>"You know, Robia...I-want to meet the Princess."</p> <p>"I'm begging you! Without you, I have no way of meeting her." (Speech - ch. 9)</p> <p>"Just how long am I supposed to wait? Why should I trust someone who didn't do anything despite promising to help me? If you can't do it, just say so. Do you really think I have no other methods besides you?" (Speech - ch. 13)</p> |

Yeldyria mostly keeps her thoughts to herself and acts independently. It could be exemplified by how she does not wish to force obedience on one of her concubines, Nadricka, and entrusts him to act as he desires. Meanwhile, in Yuriel's course of action, she relies heavily on other male characters to act against Yeldyria, even to the point of bashing them if they fail. Her dependence is caused by Yuriel's lack of power to act directly against Yeldyria, as she is only a maid in the castle.

In the aspect of the symbolic process, the protagonists, Aria and Yeldyria, are seen wearing trousers at least once throughout the story. Specifically, in the *Hourglass* webtoon, it is when Aria sets out to discuss her business investment with Baron Burboom (*Hourglass* webtoon chapter 40). In the *Reverse Harem* webtoon, it is when Yeldyria was working on administrative duties (chapter 29). This is opposed to the antagonists, Mielle and Yuriel, who would always wear dresses and are never depicted wearing pants throughout the story. This is where Aria and Yeldyria's representations as carriers could be seen carrying a specific meaning when connected to their thought and

speech processes so far.

Despite being South Korean webtoons, both stories are situated in a European monarchy setting with the Western noble hierarchy as the applicable social hierarchy. Though not stated, it is implied that the story took place in c. 1940s when very few women started to wear pants (Akdemir, 2018). Aria and Yeldyria wearing pants while being engaged in economic and administrative activities, respectively, each with their intelligence and power as the successor of the throne, hint at their dominance and courage to look different.

On the contrary, Mielle and Yuriel, who constantly wear the dress, seem to hold less dominance despite having their own advantages. In Mielle's case, she is supposed to have greater influence as the legitimate daughter of the Count. She also has a close relationship with Lady Isis, who holds significant influence in the noble society and helps her get engaged with the heir of the Frederick dukedom, Oscar. Yuriel has major potential to threaten Yeldyria's safety as her decisions could change the course of the in-game story and allow her to dig into Yeldyria's past misconduct. However, in their actions and speeches, most of the time, they end up relying on other characters with more power to realize their plans. Mielle and Yuriel's dependency on other characters, especially male characters, to reach their end goals is opposed to Aria and Yeldyria's independent approach to achieving their goals.

On the conceptual level, the depiction of the characters in such ways represents Mielle and Yuriel as the carriers of traditional femininity, while Aria and Yeldyria represent modern femininity. Despite the stories' European setting, the notion of femininity in the South Korean context could be reflected in this case. According to Elfving-Hwang (2010), the philosophical basis for the Korean femininity concept is derived from the Neo-Confucian interpretation of the *yin/yang* binaries. *Yin* and *yang* are related to earth and heaven, respectively, while earth and heaven are associated with females and males. The earth is said to complement the sky, and the sky (*yang*) is perceived as hierarchically superior to the earth (*yin*). In the Joseon dynasty, Neo-Confucianism is viewed as the official social and political philosophy. To establish a balanced society, it is believed that men and women should adhere to their respective roles, and men should keep women in check. Hence, both sexes are expected to follow clear gender-based rules of behavior (Elfving-Hwang, 2010).

The Joseon dynasty demands 'virtue' as the epitome of femininity for Korean women. A woman is considered 'virtuous' if they can fulfill their role as a chaste mother capable of bearing sons, is not heavily concerned with external matters (matters not of the immediate family), and is content with performing domestic or maternal duties. Furthermore, supporting the male family members to achieve success is vital to becoming the ideal, desirable woman. This 'virtuous femininity' also sets upper-class women apart from

lower-class women (Elfvig-Hwang, 2010). Aside from motherhood and domesticity, ‘chastity’ is another crucial aspect in shaping the ideal woman, referring to absolute passivity. Considering how males should stay as the dominant party in balancing society, women’s social, sexual, and intellectual freedom are seen as threats to society. Therefore, women who engage in multiple sexual relationships (socially active/considered very active in external matters), for instance, are socially frowned upon (Elfvig-Hwang, 2010).

Korea’s traditional notion of femininity is best reflected in the *Hourglass* webtoon, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5 Comparison of Aria and Mielle’s Views

| Aria | Mielle |
|---|---|
| <p>“He was just tossing me some meat for bringing him what he wanted, like a dog? And of course, all the credit...would go to his real daughter!” (ch. 25)</p> <p>“As I thought, he thinks that the investor (me) is a man...” (Thought – ch. 40)</p> | <p>“Pardon? You’re doing work? Why would you do that? Can’t you just hire a professional instead?”</p> <p>“You shouldn’t. It’s your duty as the Baroness to manage your household.” (Speech – ch. 44)</p> |

The data shows that Count Roscente gives all the credit to Mielle for providing suggestions for the family business, despite Aria being the one who does so. Aria’s anger represents the disagreement towards a such notion of supporting male family members to achieve success. On another occasion, when she invested in a business, she was mistaken for a man. Meanwhile, in a different context, when she heard that a baroness worked first-hand to assist her husband, Mielle believed that women should have prioritized household management.

When combined with how they dressed (Aria ever wearing trousers and Mielle always wearing dresses), it implied that Aria embodied traits commonly associated with masculinity and went against the traditional ideal of femininity, while Mielle embodied the traditional epitome of femininity. Moreover, considering that Aria came from an ‘unchaste’ and lower-class background, Aria would then be heavily considered as an unideal woman traditionally. It would also then explain Mielle’s strong hatred and opposition to Aria.

In Yuriel’s case, Yeldriya is opposed because she possesses sexual and intellectual freedom as the kingdom’s princess, demonstrated through Yeldriya’s harem and control over several administrative or military aspects of the kingdom. Again, freedom in these aspects is deemed unruly in the traditional belief of femininity, which Yuriel could not possess since she is a maid with no significant power and deals primarily with domestic assignments.

Aria and Yeldriya’s traits that contradicted the traditional femininity causes them to be positioned as the ‘evil’ in the original timeline, those who need to be disposed of because they do not adhere to the mainstream social norms. However, when Aria time travel and Yeldriya gain a new consciousness from the nameless woman, they become the protagonists. Mielle and Yuriel, in turn, become the new villainesses in their respective stories. As previously mentioned, Aria and Yeldriya are independent women capable of taking their own actions and do not rely solely on others to achieve their goals. It is opposed to Mielle and Yuriel’s tendency to rely on other parties. They are positioning Aria and Yeldriya, who possess the traits deemed unruly in the traditional feminine ideals, as the protagonists in these stories is a form of contestation towards the traditional femininity. It implicitly promotes modern notions of femininity that emphasize independence and allow more social, intellectual, and sexual freedom. Furthermore, it implies how women who possess social, intellectual, and sexual power are more favorable than those who uphold traditional feminine ideals. Modern femininity as the new ideal is attempted to be established, especially through Aria and Yeldriya’s success in their endeavors thus far in the stories. Aria is capable of formulating her revenge plans with her ability to socialize and retrieve information outside the house, while Yeldriya is capable of surviving by utilizing her power as a princess.

CONCLUSIONS

From the two Korean webtoons analyzed, it could be seen that the current villainesses’ traits are shifting from the conventional traits they tend to possess in the past. What is considered the ideal feminine, the domestic, passive, and submissive women, as represented by the original heroines of the story, becomes the new villainy or the unideal feminine. Meanwhile, the original villainesses in the story who become the protagonists are celebrated as the new ideal feminine, the free, empowered, independent women, as they demonstrate aspects that are heavily restricted in Korean traditional beliefs. In this case, the two webtoons featuring the villainesses serve as a soft critique of the traditional femininity still prevailing in South Korean culture. Even so, from another perspective, it seems that the modern femininity encouraged through Aria and Yeldriya’s representation still circulates around the traditional notion of masculinity, as demonstrated by their clothing or activities that are commonly considered as masculine acts, i.e., trousers/pants and dealing with non-domestic matters of business and government.

This research covers only two webtoons among the various webtoons that feature a villainess as the protagonist. Studying different villainesses with different stories and nuances in future research would allow new understandings regarding the phenomenon

to develop. Furthermore, there are plenty of aspects that could still be explored, both in only one webtoon title and by comparing different titles. For instance, as the research does not elaborate on the role of the supporting characters (both male and female), future research could concentrate on the discussion of these topics as the primary focus. Moreover, both webtoon titles have their respective online novels. Hence, future research may look into the distinctions between the novel and webtoon's representations from different aspects. It is also possible for future research to look into other elements in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual analysis that has not been discussed in-depth in the research, such as the reactional processes among the involved characters.

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