

# A Study on Mother-daughter Relationships Analyzed from the Perspective of Feminism: Focusing on K-Drama *The Glory*

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**Abstract.** As feminism spreads from western countries to Asia, the voices of women have been heard all over the world. There is also a great deal of literary works created by women and the female roles in some works attract East Asian scholars to analyze from the perspective of feminism. Focusing on the popular Netflix drama *The Glory* in 2023, written by Kim Eun-sook, this study analyzed images and relationships of two mother-daughter pairs. It also discussed social problems hidden in such mother-daughter relationships, thus gaining a more explicit understanding of the author's way of character description from the perspective of feminism. In other words, there is the opposite mother-daughter relationship caused by social problems like the first pair and a complete mutual-aid relationship caused by social problems like the second pair. This study is expected to be conducive to the establishment of benign mother-daughter relationships in real life, propose some suggestions for the depiction of mother-daughter relationships and innovation of women's images in future literary works, and trigger authors' reflection on the balance between commercial value and conceptual expression of scripts.

**Keywords:** Feminism; mother-daughter relationships; K-drama.

## 1. Introduction

With progress in the Industrial Revolution and Enlightenment movement, more and more women began to express their own thoughts and reflect on the generation of women's dilemma, thus generating feminism. Many scholars like Beauvoir and Chizuko Ueno appeared during the development of feminism. Feminism not only penetrates into sociological research but also becomes a new perspective to study other fields. In the field of literature, people began to concern themselves with the academic contributions of women scholars. Including movies and TV series as a form of audio literacy, the roles of women and the relationships tend to be key concerns of literary works. Among them, the mother-daughter relationship is widely explored. Nancy Freddy argued that "the mother-daughter relationship is the most important relationship in human life, and it is the remarkable influence between women and women [1]". More and more scholars began to analyze mother-daughter relationships in film and TV works from the perspective of feminism. In this study, two mother-daughter relationships in *The Glory* were analyzed.

*The Glory* is a Netflix TV series with a theme of revenge written by Kim Eun-sook and directed by An Gil-ho. It is the revenge story of a teacher, Moon Dong-eun (hereinafter referred to as Moon). When Moon was a senior high school student, she dreamed of being an architect but suffered bullying from a five-person-made bully group led by Park Yeon-jin (hereinafter referred to as Park) and Jeon Jae-joon (hereinafter referred to as Jeon). When she asked for help from adults, Moon was rebuked by her head teacher and ignored by her mother. Moon was too helpless to fight against school bullying. Then, she dropped out of school. After a failed suicide attempt in the river, she decided to take revenge. Moon made great efforts over many years and finally became the head teacher of Park's daughter, which was the beginning of her revenge plan. She alienated the bully group with the weakness of human nature and destroyed them one by one. In the end, Park's bullying behavior was exposed, leading to social ostracism, while Jeon died. The other bullies also faced consequences such as imprisonment, death, and disability.

In the two years following the publication of the work, most researchers focused on perspectives of media studies and translation or emphasized the plot of the play. Analysis of character images and relationships still remains in the stage of online discussion, and no formal papers have been reported yet. This study analyzed and interpreted the mother-daughter relationships in *The Glory* from the perspective of feminism.

## 2. The Analysis of the Characters and the mother-daughter Relationships

### 2.1. Moon Dong-eun & Jung Mi-hee

Some people believe that there are always opposite mother-daughter relationships in families with an “absence of fathers,” as depicted in most associated films [2]. There is such an opposite relationship between Moon Dong-eun and Jung Mi-hee (hereinafter referred to as Jung).

As a guardian, Jung knew nothing about her daughter being bullied by classmates. When Park’s mother asked Jung to change the reason for Moon’s dropout from “school bully” to “can’t adapt to school life” in exchange for money, she quickly signed off, checked out from the monthly rental, threw away her daughter’s luggage and school uniform (the school uniform represents Moon’s dream to be an architect. Throwing away the school uniform means trampling over her daughter’s rights and dreams) and dumped her. After Moon became a primary school teacher through her own efforts, Jung privately extorted bribes from the parents of Moon’s students according to Park’s suggestion. To express her dissatisfaction with Moon’s resignation from her teaching position, Jung set fire to the monthly rental after getting drunk. Nancy said that “an unhealthy mother-daughter relationship will make both mother and daughter live in fear and anxiety for a long period, which will prevent them from experiencing emotional and cognitive freedom [1]”. Such emotional ignorance and contempt for her daughter’s dignity led to Moon’s long-term desperation. Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex* that when a girl is raised by a woman, the woman will try to mold her in her own likeness, displaying an attitude that combines both arrogance and resentment [3]. In *The Glory*, Jung overemphasized the little she did for her daughter and believed that her daughter was a barrier to her “happy life.” She also ignored her daughter’s subjectivity as an independent individual. Obviously, Jung paid more attention to romantic relationships and self-pleasure than to responsibility and family connection. She had to restrain herself after giving birth to her daughter, limiting her licentious behaviors to some extent. According to the plot, Jung was a single mother in the 1980s, and Moon might be a consequence of her unprotected sexual behaviors. Article 269 of *the Criminal Law of the Republic of Korea* stipulates that a woman who has an abortion without permission can be sentenced to up to one year in prison or fined 2 million KRW (the crime of abortion was abolished on January 1st, 2021, as it violated the Constitution). Jung neither had family members who could make the decision for abortion for her nor could afford the fine. She was even unwilling to sacrifice her freedom for an abortion and risk imprisonment. Finally, she could only give birth to the baby.

Moon, who grew up in such an environment, was timid when Joo Yeo-Jeong (hereinafter referred to as Joo), the son of a wealthy family that owns a hospital, showed kindness and love towards her. She was so consumed by revenge that she forgot how to love. In other words, she had never experienced love and may lack the ability to love others. Joo tried to persuade Moon to let go of the past and start a new life with him, but he failed. Moon said that she needed an executioner who was willing to perform the sword dance for her rather than a prince to save her. Joo was deeply touched when he saw the scars from bullying on Moon’s body and decided to help her seek revenge. It was at this moment that Moon began to accept Joo from the bottom of her heart. Chizuko Ueno, a Japanese sociologist, stated in *Misogyny* that a daughter cannot escape from her mother’s control as long as the mother is alive. The mother controls the daughter’s life regardless of whether the daughter obeys or rebels until the mother dies [4]. Moon, a woman weighed down by her mother, finally chose to send her mother, who was dependent on alcohol, to the hospital. This echoes Jung’s action of changing the reason for Moon’s dropout. This simply proves the statement, “I’m the only one who can do this to you.”

In this mother-daughter relationship, both Jung and Moon use kinship as a weapon. The mother abandons her responsibility to the daughter, while the daughter relinquishes her last expectation of her mother. Moon also had to bear the expenses of her mother's hospitalization. This is an ending influenced by the "xiao" culture in Confucianism (There is an invisible hierarchy that makes children treat their parents with kindness and respect, whether or not they deserve it) ---- the daughter not only frees herself from her mother's persecution but also becomes as cold-blooded as her mother. The opposition in the mother-daughter relationship is caused by both inadequate education and protection and laws that ignore the human rights of women.

## **2.2. Kang Hyeon-nam & Lee Seon-ah**

Kang Hyeon-nam (hereinafter referred to as Kang) is the maid of the president of a big financial group and a woman struggling with domestic violence. Her daughter, Lee Seon-ah (hereinafter referred to as Lee), is also a victim of domestic violence. However, they set up a mutual-aid relationship rather than the previous antagonistic one. Kang did not consider her daughter as an enemy, and Lee did not become an accomplice of paternity. This mother-daughter relationship is more like the relationship mentioned by some scholars that "the subversive women alliance disturbs and destroys the goal of males without ability [5]."

Being the head teacher of Park's daughter is one of the most important parts of Moon's revenge plan. In half a year, to find the bargaining chip, Moon searched for clues in garbage cans in front of the president's gate, during which she met Kang, who played a critical role in her revenge. Kang discovered the suspicious acts of Moon and collected evidence, but she did not call the police. Instead, she admired her perseverance and hoped Moon could help her to kill her husband. In the beginning, Kang agreed with the image of a great mother created in past movies—extremely unselfish, saintly, and perfect. These kinds of women endure humiliation and are the protectors of the family [2]. Although they are not supporters of paternity, they cannot find the exit to escape. After establishing a revenge alliance with Moon, Kang found a way out of her suffering—killing her husband and altering her status. The first thing that Moon asked her to do was to get a driving license. Learning to drive means not only escaping from the terrible family environment but also gaining the capability of finding a new life. She regained confidence gradually when she helped Moon to collect various information. As a result, when Park discovered that Kang was the helper of Moon and threatened her with her daughter, Kang ran away with her daughter immediately rather than cowering when she was beaten by her husband before. During this period, the romantic women who sometimes admired the beautiful sunset glow lost themselves because of life and family torture, but now she can make fun of herself and say that she fits perfectly in leather and bright lipstick, just like a woman spy in Hollywood films. Since women who are struggling with social responsibilities as mothers devote themselves to being a good mother, a good wife, and a good daughter, they pin their squashed self-actualization onto their daughters. They begin to control their daughters' lives strictly under the excuse of their selfless contributions. It is such selfless contributions that force mothers to give up themselves completely and focus on their daughters' happiness only [6]. Maybe Kang could not escape from the patriarchal environment, but she at least chose to fight against the marriage with domestic violence. This was a big progress that she made.

In analyses of other literary works, some scholars pointed out that "daughters will become strong as long as life becomes too challenging" [7]. Lee, who is only 15 years old, even comes up with the idea of killing her father in order to protect her mother. She even said, "I'm the only one who is appropriate to kill my mother because I am a juvenile, and I will be judged in the juvenile court." Moreover, she was surprised and became happy rather than angry when she saw that her mother had the ability to drive a car. Lee thought that Kang had become completely different from the person before. She said that her mother was so "cool" and she shared songs of her favorite idol with her mother. Park lured Kang's husband to gambling with money and tried to bring worse domestic violence to Kang from gambling failure. When Kang, suffering from domestic violence, failed to meet her daughter for the last time, Lee still trusted her mother and believed that there must be some reason. Some Korean scholars claim that in traditional Korean families, the father is the head of the family and he is

responsible for maintaining or elevating the family's social status, while the mother is responsible for child-rearing, ensuring that children respect and obey their father, taking care of elderly parents, and managing housework, economic, and interpersonal relationships [8]. Kang's husband has no contribution to the family, and he is a delinquent father in the traditional family structure. Kang assumed dual identities in the family. Lee saw everything and did not become a supporter of paternity for the absolute power of the father in the family. Instead, she firmly believed her mother was an ally.

When Moon got big blackmailed by one bully, she informed Kang to apply for a passport for her daughter and prepared to send Lee abroad for further study. Later, Moon asked someone she trusted to take care of Lee after Park found that Kang was her helper. This is not only Moon's countermeasure to Park's threats to Kang but also her reward for Kang's spiritual support. Moon hoped that Lee could experience youth and life. This is not only her expectation for the girl but also Kang's expectation for her daughter as a mother. However, Kang has limited abilities, and she can only "take time to have a meal with her daughter." Fouaad declared in *Ila Ibnaty* that a mother's altruism is manifested by her desire to elevate her children above all, even herself [9]. Kang hopes that her daughter can escape from the father, Kang's husband, who is an alcoholic and domestic abuser and does not live as a child of a woman who kills her husband. This mother-daughter pair is liberated after the accidental death of the domestic abuser. The daughter went to America for further study, and the mother opened a little restaurant named after her daughter. Kang helped Moon again when she needed to. The mother grew by helping Moon's revenge, and the daughter did not feel bored by the past or existing shortages of the mother. The mutual understanding and redemption of this mother-daughter pair agree with the current background that "girls help girls" and show the mutual assistance of women.

### 3. Discussion

The complicated mother-daughter relationships cover mutualism, antagonism, inversion and more, but they finally point to love [10]. The opposite relationship between Moon and Jung brings excessive humiliation to the daughter and a bad ending for the mother in old age. The mutual-aid and symbiotic relationship between Kang and Lee helps them to escape the tough environment and increases the mother's confidence.

In the script written by Kim Eun-sook, Moon is not only the representative of the group that suffers school bullying but also the epitome of girls' life in many Korean problem families. The Moons are tragic for the lack of family support and love, and they are struggling with pain from the original families. The Jungs pity the insufficient social attention and respect given to women of the last generation before they grew up, resulting in their poor education and low self-respect. Different from the above mother-daughter relationships, Kang and Lee reflect the concern for victims of domestic violence from the author of the play. The patricide of the daughter and matricide of the mother both lead to rebirth from "destruction", and mild endurance is replaced by radical resistance. This is different from traditional literary works. Of course, it is a problem that shall be further discussed whether roles like Kang and Lee will resist the power-holders of patriarchal families if they do not suffer domestic violence.

The mother-daughter relationships described in this work might give some alarm or guidance to mothers and daughters in similar dilemmas in Korea. It tells single mothers to learn to balance their private life and parenting daughters rather than attribute their own pains to single parenting. With the background that abortion crime is abolished, each woman has abortion freedom, and they can decide whether to give birth to a baby. On the contrary, children still have no right to choose their parents. Moreover, it gives women in a dilemma some enlightenment ---- women as a vulnerable group shall help each other, strengthen themselves, and form a women's alliance to create a way out of the dilemma.

Many authors of literary works have the tendency to create big conflicts and then reach a happy ending after compromise and reconciliation. However, *The Glory* gives an unusual result. This TV series ends with no compromise of daughters and mother-daughter relationships without the rigid

Electra's plots. It gives the authors of TV series a new direction: conflicts among women might be caused by the patriarchal society, but they can be unrelated to the existence of men. Women can help each other without any conflicts. It is reflected in mother-daughter relationships in *The Glory*, but it can also be reflected in student-student relations and student-teacher relationships in other works.

There is no denying that it is a male-dominated society at present. In literary works, if the expression of feminism is too extreme, it might fail to gain more commercial value. Some men possessing the right of speech might infringe on the creative rights of women by abusing their power. It is also very painful for some female authors to create featureless plots in order to cater to the public and gain approval. Their works are cut again and again, and they may even lose the opportunity for publication. This is very cruel. Hence, women authors of literary works who are fighting for the right to speech shall be given more "tolerance". Meanwhile, authors shall stick to their original intentions and pay back to others' tolerance after gaining some rights of speech.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, character images and relations of two mother-daughter pairs in *The Glory* are analyzed. It is found that there is not only an opposite and contradictory mother-daughter relationship but also a mutual-aid and symbiotic one. In the first mother-daughter pair, the adult mother is irresponsible, leading to the helplessness of the adolescent daughter. Their opposite mother-daughter relationship is caused by social and family ignorance of women's education. This further leads to the tragedy of women of the next generation. In the second mother-daughter pair, the mother is kind and active, and the daughter is thoughtful and outgoing. Their nature was inhibited by the high-pressure family environment. The symbiotic relationship is formed by mutual appreciation of women. They understand and support each other when they resist domestic violence and escape from the current status.

Under the big background of school bullying, the author of the TV play pays attention to two groups of single-parent families and victims of domestic violence. This study gives some opinions by discussing the plots and reality. For plot creation, this study advocates that "relationships among women in literary works can be positive and united, and conflicts around women can appear with no relativity with males if there are any. Female competition is no longer consistent with the development of the era." For commercial value, this study also proposes the opinion that "writers shall keep a balance of commercial value and concept expression continuously."

This paper tries to give some references to society and the academic circle. On the social level, this study is expected to help the society to improve previous mother-daughter relationships and benefit women one generation by one generation. From the perspective of literary creation, this study provides a new idea for authors.

Since *The Glory* has been published for less than two years, there is imperfect literature about it. Existing studies focus on other perspectives, which cannot give direct guidance to this paper. The study discusses mother-daughter relationships based on analysis theory in previous works. As a result, there are some limitations. However, it is still expected that this study can make some contributions to associated academic studies. It is hoped that more and more studies on *The Glory* from different perspectives will be reported to enrich relevant research.

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