
Romance Fantasy and Feminism Reboot in Korea

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Abstract

Romance fantasy, a leading genre of Korean web contents, is a modern version of chivalric romance where the subject of the adventure is a woman. The rise in popularity of the romance fantasy genre coincides with what has come to be termed the “feminism reboot” movement in Korea. Romance fantasy has both progressive and regressive aspects. It is a representative female genre born from the desire of female readers for women’s narratives. In particular, romance fantasy relies on pastiche to generate a fictional world where women can feel a sense of achievement, agency, and freedom that is difficult to attain in real life. However, romance fantasy also reinforces traditional gender norms because as pastiche, it continues to rely on the existing binary gender power structure. Moreover, through

commercialization of romance fantasy, women's desires are manipulated by commercial interests that back up regressive models of socially approved femininity. Yet, moving dialectically between progressive and regressive elements, romance fantasy also harbors the ideal of a female utopia. It provides an opportunity for women to experience a reversal of traditional gender roles and to engage in community discussions, including those about ideal masculinity.

Keywords: Romance fantasy, Feminism Reboot, South Korea, Pastiche, Gender, Utopia

I . Romance Fantasy and Feminism in South Korea

Gender conflict is a major problem in South Korea today. The conflict is reflected in social issues such as an extremely low birth rate, changes in the traditional ideas of family and marriage, and antagonism between young men and women. Yet, web-based romance fantasy, popularly known as rofan, has become one of the most popular genres in the country among female readers. Romance fantasy's narrative is rooted in the chivalric romance, which began to develop in twelfth-century Europe. Traditional romance is about "mystery, love, the quest, the agon, and the past," concerned with "what escapes common experience."¹⁾ Invoking the past and dealing with royal characters, romance "frees [the readers] from [their] inhibitions and preoccupations by drawing [them] entirely into its own world."²⁾ Similarly, set in a fictional world somewhat

1) Jean-Michael Ganteau (2003), "Fantastic, but Truthful: The Ethics of Romance," *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 32(3), pp. 226~227.

2) Gillian Beer (2018), *The Romance (The Critical Idiom)*, 1970. Routledge, p. 3.

resembling medieval or early modern Western Europe, romance fantasy features a female protagonist's adventure and love story. A heroine faces hardships where her own life or her family's lives are threatened. As she tries to overcome these challenges, she meets a male lead and falls in love. In this sense, romance fantasy is a modern version of chivalric romance where the subject of the adventure is a woman.

Romance fantasy first debuted as web novels, but has become increasingly popularized through webtoon (digital comic) adaptations and there are also romance fantasy webtoons that are not based on web novel originals.³⁾ These webtoons, known for their beautiful art work, have gained considerable popularity. When looking at popular works on Korean webtoon platforms such as Naver Series and KakaoPage, a significant proportion is categorized as romance fantasy. For instance, when listed in order of popularity of female readers on Naver webtoon for Friday updates, four out of nine webtoons belong to this genre (see fig.1).

Furthermore, romance fantasy webtoons are translated into many different languages, and has a global readership. For example, a TikTok challenge celebrating season two of *Sangsuri namu* area (*Under the Oak Tree*) webtoon surpassed six billion

3) Before the rise of romance fantasy, there was sunjung manhwa, a genre of South Korean comics that aimed at young female readers. Usually dealing with heterosexual romance, the genre was influenced by shoujo manga, Japanese comics targeted at young girls and imported to South Korea during the 1970 (Seo Eun-Young (2015), 'Sunjung' Jangreui Seongnipgwa Sunjungmanhwa, 『Daejungseosayeongu』, 21(3), p. 150). Unlike sunjung manhwa, romance fantasy originated from fantasy rather than romance, with romance being added later (Seo Eun-Young (2020), 『Romaenseu Pantaji Webtoonui Busanggwa Jaehyeon』, 『Aenimeisyeon Yyeongu』, 16(3), p. 99).

views and the advertising of the webtoon was showcased on five billboards in New York Times Square (“Ridi”). Romance fantasy is a leading genre of Korean web contents, attracting many readers both domestically and internationally.

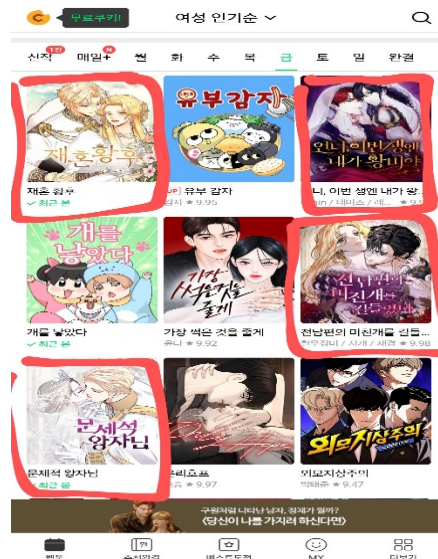


Fig. 1. A screenshot of Naver webtoon app on April 23, 2024.

Interestingly, the rise in popularity of the romance fantasy genre coincides with what has come to be termed the “feminism reboot” movement in Korea. In 2015, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) hit Korea, and misogynistic comments were directed toward two South Korean women who refused to be quarantined. This incident led to creation of “the most well-known—and the most controversial—feminist website in the country,”⁴⁾ *Megalia*. *Megalia* is a website dedicated to

4) Jung Hawon (2023), *Flowers of Fire: The Inside Story of South Korea's Feminist Movement and What It Means for Women's Rights Worldwide*,

“mirroring” misogynistic speech⁵⁾. Users of this website responded to misogynic online comments with “mirroring” remarks that insulted men. In 2016, a misogynic murder occurred in a public restroom around Gangnam station and numerous people left protest post-it notes at the station to express anger and grief. In 2018, the #MeToo movement struck Korea and the voices of women speaking out against sexual violence filled the news. This outburst of feminist activism has angered many young men who believe women have gone too far and men’s rights are being taken over by feminists. This gender antagonism was heightened in 2022 when presidential candidate YoonSuk-Yeol declared that structural gender inequality does not exist in Korea and vowed to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, eliciting an explosive reaction from young Korean men.⁶⁾ The events enumerated above help to explain why feminism has become one of the hottest issues in Korean society. Many Korean women discuss women related issues in online spaces. They direct attention to misogynic crimes through social media, engage in arguments through comments, or share their thoughts on feminism.

It is interesting that even as Korean women began to actively discuss feminism, especially online, this heterosexual

BenBella, p. 113.

5) Women are the “most common target of online hate speech in South Korea, far surpassing other usual targets of online hate like migrants or sexual minorities, according to the National Human Rights Commission”(Jung Hawon (2023), p. 114). The most-used misogynistic words are “Kimchi girl,” “soybean-paste girl” (materialistic women), “Mrs. Kim” (women drivers who are unfit to drive), and “mum-roaches” (mothers who are with unruly children).

6) Jung Hawon (2023), p. 7.

monogamy romance genre gained in popularity to the extent of establishing itself as an important presence in modern Korean women's culture. In reality, romance fantasy has both progressive and regressive aspects. It is a representative female genre born from the desire of female readers for women's narratives. In the male-dominated world of modern Korean fantasy as genre, female readers wished for fantasies where women were the protagonists, and this desire gave rise to the genre of romance fantasy.⁷⁾ Indeed, it is a genre from women, by women, and of women in this androcentric society.

At the same time however, this genre is often accused of reinforcing traditional gender norms because it relies on the existing binary gender power structure. This becomes problematic as romance fantasy's liberating aspect is undermined and the genre remains largely at the level of superficial image. This superficiality is intensified as romance fantasy webtoons occupy a significant portion of a huge cultural industry and circulates in through the society as a shallow image. This paper aims to explain how the romance fantasy genre became so popular in this kind of climate and how it reflects the political and cultural issues faced by young Korean women today. By doing so, this paper examines the dialectical development of romance fantasy, viewing it as a genre which reflects contemporary Korean women's inner conflicts in an unstable society where traditional norms are changing.

7) Kim Hwibin (2019), 「Pantajiga Romaenseuleul Mannass-eul Ttae」, Textreet, 『Bijulyu Seon-eon』, yoda, p. 222.

II. Romance Fantasy as Pastiche

Romance fantasy serves as an escape from reality for Korean women through its foreignness, creating psychological distance emphasized by background images and costumes that resemble Europe (see fig. 2 & 3).



Fig. 2. The background from episode 1 of *Gwaboho Agassi* (*An Over Protected Lady*) on Ridi books.



Fig. 3. The protagonists from episode 1 of *An Over Protected Lady* on Ridi books.

As Asian history and culture is more familiar to Korean readers, it is difficult to freely use an Asian backdrop, albeit in a fantasy world. For instance, Asian fantasy webtoons, despite their fictionality, often receives reviews questioning the historical accuracy of their representations. In contrast, readers' comparative ignorance of the West allows them to easily engage without feeling the need to pay attention to historical accuracy. The deployment of a foreign and exotic culture

affords both writers and their readers the possibility of easily immersing themselves in escapist fantasy.

One of the reasons why Europe in particular is brought into romance fantasy can be also explained by Korean women's romanticization of Europe. As Ahn Jina notes, women who are accused of seeking special treatment, even reverence, are accused of being guilty of the "Princess Syndrome." Young Korean women seek to achieve a social status where unmarried women are respected. Interestingly, they believe that Western aristocratic society can fulfill this need. They idealize the notion of Western noblewomen receiving respect and consideration not only from romantic partners but also from their families and other members of society.⁸⁾ This loose and perhaps ahistorical image of the West stems from various media sources, including Disney princesses and famous European fairy tales. Whether noblewomen in Europe in the past were truly respected doesn't matter here. Romance fantasy just recycles surface-level images of the West. In other words, what matters is the perception and pre-emption of reverence that seems particularly desirable. This superficiality is connected to the concept of pastiche.

Romance fantasy relies on pastiche to generate a fictional world where women can feel a sense of achievement, agency, and freedom that is difficult to attain in real life. According to Fredric Jameson, although pastiche imitates other styles like parody does, in contrast to parody, pastiche does this "without

8) Ahn Jina (2021), 『Eoneu nal Romaenseu Pantajireul Ilggi Sijakhaetda』, Ieum, p. 120.

parody's ulterior motive [...] without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated." That is, pastiche is a "blank parody,"⁹⁾ without the intention of critique or satire. It transforms history into a "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum,"¹⁰⁾ reflecting contemporary society's depthlessness and its loss of historical consciousness. Pastiche allows Korean women to freely bring together premodern/modern Western European and Korean cultures without considering historical context in order to make a virtual world tailored to women's tastes.

According to Arjun Appadurai, due to global cultural flows moving across national boundaries, we can have "nostalgia without memory." For example, America's colonization of the Philippines gave this nostalgia to the Filipinos, as they look back to a past that "they have never lost." The past is "not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios [...]."¹¹⁾ If the past exists in this way, people can consume images of the past that has no relation to them. Hence, nostalgia can be an "armchair nostalgia, nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory."¹²⁾ Appadurai emphasizes that this

9) Fredric Jameson (1998), "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, Fredric Jameson(ed.), Verso, p. 5.

10) Fredric Jameson (1991), *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, p. 18.

11) Arjun Appadurai (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, p. 30.

12) A. Appadurai (1996), p. 78.

kind of nostalgia is essential to contemporary marketing. In this paper, I want to extend the idea of “nostalgia without memory” to how Korean women employ and exploit the trope of the premodern Europe.¹³⁾ They are not nostalgic for a society based on class and gender distinctions, dreaming of reconstructing such a past society. In fact, they freely enjoy other cultural spheres, even those of the (imaginary) past, even without it being directly relevant to them.

Romance fantasy’s premodern setting with traditional rank and reverence for ladies provides a starkly contrasting sense of stability as compared to the contemporary unstable world. It is clearly an anachronistic and outdated world. However, it is this regressive setting that allows female readers of today to feel a sense of achievement through the female protagonist because certain obvious beliefs and ideas from our own times often yield remarkable outcomes in an antiquated society, evoking a sense of achievement that seems nearly impossible to attain in our current reality. This is also possible because most romance fantasies adopt popular cliché storyline such as *Hoegwi* (reincarnation), *Bing-ui* (possession), and *Hwangsaeng* (rebirth), which work as a safety device that makes it easier for female protagonists to succeed. For example, in *Cinderella-reul gopge kiwossseumnida* (*A Wicked Tale of Cinderella’s Stepmom*), the female protagonist is a 27-year-old Korean woman who wakes up in the body of a 37-year-old aristocratic widow from

13) The setting of Romance fantasy is ambiguous. Generally, it is a mixture of various times and places, encompassing medieval Europe to early 20th century Europe.

another world which resembles premodern Europe. She utilizes her memory and knowledge from modern society to survive in this outdated world. Moreover, her modern mindset enables her to stand out as an independent woman ahead of her time, particularly in a setting where women's lives are dependent on men. In the end, she achieves tremendous success, including making significant contribution to building a more gender equal society.

Moreover, female protagonists' high status—they are usually aristocrats or royal—serve to ensure their success and fulfill female readers' desires for upward social mobility that remains unmet in their real lives. As Kwon Kyong Mi points out, due to their high status, female protagonists can benefit from the support they receive from caring laborers, such as maids or servants, allowing them to focus more on public activities and achieving success.¹⁴⁾ Furthermore, since male protagonists are often high-ranking nobles such as dukes or even kings or emperors, female protagonists also need to have a certain level of status for the story to progress easily. By the end of the story, female protagonists achieve love, safety, freedom, their men, power, and even higher social rank. In Korean contemporary society, where social mobility is often perceived as nearly impossible, readers derive vicarious pleasure from the status of these heroines and feel satisfied seeing their successful social advancement.

14) Kwon Kyong Mi (2022), 「Romaenseu Pantaji Websosolui Singyegeupjuuiwa Seosa Teukjing - Chaekbinguimulgwa Hoegwuimulgwa Jungsimeuro-」, 『Inmun gwaha』, 84, pp. 132~133.

Romance fantasy is a female-centered entertainment genre, “a creative respite for women, an imaginative play space to roll around in the files of fantasy with sister readers of the genre.”¹⁵⁾ Living in an unstable modern society where fierce struggles between the sexes persist and questions of gender, sexuality, and femininity are constantly raised, Korean women are able to find order, freedom, and a sense of achievement in this imaginary playground. The female lead’s ultimate success accompanied by a happy union with the male lead gives a sense of satisfaction that is hard to achieve in real life. In a way, readers too can feel empowered in this alternative space. Therefore, the story of a beautiful, independent, and capable female protagonist’s adventure (which almost always concludes with a happy ending) consistently satisfies the desires of female readers.

III. Limitations of Romance Fantasy

However, while fulfilling desires, romance fantasy also reinforces traditional gender norms because as pastiche, it continues to rely on the existing binary gender power structure. That is, romance fantasy ends in going back to traditional gender norms as it engages in portraying conventional gender roles. In fact, romance fantasy’s display of male characters for female readers’ tastes often relies on traditional clichés of

15) Catherine M. Roach (2016), *Happily Ever After*, Indiana University Press, p. 13.

masculinity. Popular romance novels are often accused of representing “hegemonic masculinity made possible by the structure of heteropatriarchal capitalism.”¹⁶⁾ In other words, “the male body in romance [...] contributes to a very particular version of masculinity that is hegemonic, heterosexual, and deeply committed to capitalist and bourgeois success.” This can be applied to the romance fantasy genre as well, where a male lead is always tied to traditional masculinity. His physicality, wealth, power and high social rank emphasize strong masculinity. A popular male lead type is *Bukbudaegong (Northern Duke)*, characterized by dark hair, a warrior’s physique, proficiency in sword fighting, and living in a cold and barren region (see fig. 4 & 5)¹⁷⁾. Even though a hero may not follow the traditional masculine type, “his masculinity, at least at the level of this body, is assured.”¹⁸⁾ That is, despite his traditional unmasculine features, the hero’s masculinity is secured due to his physicality. This traditional masculinity is highlighted through webtoons’ visual representations. Ironically, women’s pursuit of their desires serves only to reinforce older gender norms.

16) Jonathan A. Allan (2020), *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance*, Routledge, p. 13.

17) Figure 4 is an image of the Northern Duke from romance fantasy webtoon, *Like Wind On a Dry Branch*. Figure 5 is an image of him holding the female lead.

18) J. A. Allan (2020), p. 39.



Fig. 4. *Mareun gajje baramch eoreom* (*Like Wind On a Dry Branch*) episode 16 from Naver webtoon.



Fig. 5. *Like Wind On a Dry Branch* episode 75 from Naver webtoon.

The hyper-masculinity of the male protagonists stands out even more when set against the physique of female figures. Romance fantasy webtoon's emphasis on dazzling images emphasizes the romanticization of the idealized, depthless past of the West peopled by (mostly aristocratic) female figures with long, pretty hair, luxurious dresses with corsets, and fragile bodies. Without any awareness of the oppressive history of the corset In Western history, Korean women can enjoy these hyper-feminine representations merely as "pretty" images. The portrayal of a beautiful female protagonist with heightened femininity merely serves to redouble traditional gender differences and social norms.¹⁹⁾ The stylized representation of gendered bodies naturalizes the older binary concept of gender. Webtoons even exaggerate the binary, portraying hyper masculinity and hyper femininity that are accentuated through each other (see fig. 6 & 7).

19) Seo eunyeong (2020), p. 104.



Fig. 6. The female lead and the male lead in episode 78 of *Under the Oak Tree* on Ridi books.



Fig. 7. The male lead's hand holding the female lead's hand in episode 10 of *Under the Oak Tree* on Ridi books.

Moreover, romance fantasy webtoons lead readers to overly focus on female figures' appearances including their costumes. Since romance fantasy is a pastiche of various times and cultures, female characters' style can be endlessly and dazzlingly exaggerated. In other words, webtoon artists can draw upon various aspects of traditional femininity from different eras such as the Baroque, Rococo, and Victorian periods, to decorate their characters. Moreover, they use the fantasy aspect of romance fantasy to draw costumes and accessories without any historical authenticity. Thus, although romance fantasy may address women-centered issues, these are often overshadowed by glamorous female figure images. One of the important themes of the popular *Aknyeo-neun* Marionette (*The Villainess is a Marionette*) is that beauty cannot translate to real power. The female lead, Kayena, is a naïve princess

known as the most beautiful woman in the empire. After being manipulated by her brother, who later becomes the next emperor, she meets a miserable ending. She then returns to the past when her brother is still a prince. Realizing that her beauty can't become true power, Kayena decides to live a different life where she is no longer another's pawn and actively participates in politics. She is tagged as *#Neunglyeognyeo* (a capable woman), reflecting readers' desires to see a smart and an independent female lead. However, the webtoon's dazzling and detailed art style encourages readers to praise how beautiful Kayena is and pay close attention to her gorgeous dresses. By doing so, female readers are led to consume images of familiar and conventional femininity that is beautifully packaged (see fig. 8 & 9).



Fig. 8. Kayena from episode 3 of *The Villainess is a Marionette* on KakaoPage.

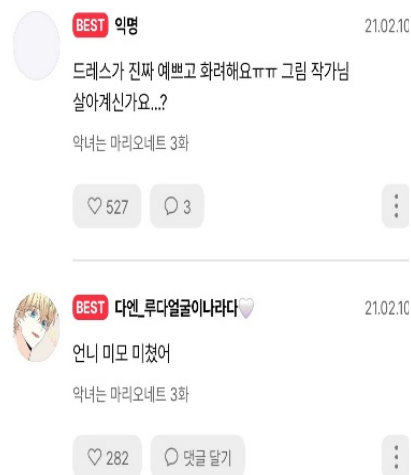


Fig. 9. Comments on episode 3 of *The Villainess is a Marionette*.²⁰⁾

Even more serious is the frequent failure of romance fantasy's female leads to resolve structural inequalities and remain content with personal achievements and freedom. This can be seen in the story lines of the genre's most representative tropes such as *Hoegwi*, *Bing-ui*, and *Hwangsaeng*. These narratives not only serve as safety nets through which female protagonists can easily succeed but also reveal a logic of "self-help," suggesting that there is no one else but oneself to save.²¹⁾ The emphasis is on the ethos of self-improvement.²²⁾ The female protagonists mostly noble women, try hard to restore what they lost before regression (*Hoegwi*), or strive to maintain the power of the original body's owner whom they have possessed (*Bing-ui*), or endeavor to live a better life than previous lives (*Hwangsaeng*). Although this kind of story seems to positively value the individual's efforts, as long as the system remains the same, it ends up preserving the status quo. Moreover, the fact that the female lead's personal success is often supported by her high social rank, the help she receives from her inferiors, portrayed as caring laborers, is often neglected. As a result, romance fantasy, despite its liberating and progressive aspects, normalizes a conservative and even regressive world order.

20) Translation: "The dress is so beautiful and gorgeous. Is the artist still alive?" "Unnie(Kayena)'s beauty is stunning."

21) Ahn Sang-Won (2020). 'Hanguk Websosorui 'Chaekbinguimul'ui Teukseong Yeongu - Romaenseupantaji Jangreureul Jungsimeuro', 『Daejungseosayeong』, 26(3), p. 108.

22) Ahn Sang-won (2020), p. 94 .

IV. Commercialization of Romance Fantasy

The problem of regression is compounded as romance fantasy webtoons occupy an important segment of the culture industry and circulate superficial images of female desire and success. For instance, a pop-up store selling romance fantasy goods opened in Shinchon Hyundai department store in August 2023, and the funding for necklace and hairpin goods inspired by the jewelry worn by the female protagonist of *Ibeon saengeun gajuga doegetseumnida* (*I Shall Master this Family*) raised over 60 million won (about \$60,000) on the crowdfunding website Tumblbug (see fig. 10 & 11).



Fig. 10. An image of the female protagonist from the funding project of *I Shall Master this Family*.



Fig. 11. A hairpin goods of *I Shall Master this Family*.

There are even business ventures that enable women to recreate the image of an extremely feminine romance fantasy

lady by providing similar dresses and accessories for photo shoots. In May 2023, *The Remarried Empress* collaborated with Dream on Studio, hosting an event where female readers could dress up as Navier, the female lead, and take photos (see fig. 12 & 13). Such excessive commercialization of webtoon narratives indicates that romance fantasy's initial political impetus to represent a feminocentric world is negated as readers are reduced to mere consumers who pay to recreate images of extravagant conventional femininity. Style without meaning, or blank parody in Jameson's terms, is a mark of the postmodern order of late capitalism.



Fig. 12. Navier from *The Remarried Empress*.



Fig. 13. A concept photo of Navier by Dream on Studio. 16 Dec. 2023.²³⁾

The promotion trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette* provides us with another famous example. Young popular Korean actors such as Han So-hee, Cha Eun-woo and Lee

23) The source of fig. 3 is as follows: (<https://dreamonstudio.co.kr/portfolio/117>).

Soo-hyuk acted the parts of the main characters. Created by the content platform KakaoPage, owned by a major Korean company, its casting of popular celebrities, gorgeous backgrounds, props, and visual effects prove how romance fantasy is part of a huge culture industry. Wearing blue lenses and adorned with accessories and dresses that are rarely seen in real life, a Korean actress performs the role of a virtual blonde princess. Romance fantasy's use of pastiche is well manifested in her room and castle, which strangely resemble those of Europe, although their location is unclear (see fig. 14 & 15).



Fig. 14. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:01:03.



Fig. 15. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:09:00.

She has tea time with the male lead, performed by a popular Korean actor, and reenacts a romantic scene from the webtoon (see fig. 16 & 17).



Fig. 16. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:00:39.



Fig. 17. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:02:34.

As of December 25, 2023, the views of this video had surpassed four million. Many comments are from foreigners, indicating that the genre is popular both domestically and internationally. Fans across from the world actively express their opinions and feelings about this adaption. Moreover, advertising this romance fantasy as “Gajang hwaksilhan girl crush” (“the most perfect girl crush”) (“The Villainess is a Marionette” 00: 03:13), the video seems to highlight the empowerment of women. The actress/female lead declares that she will ascend and transform the palace. The actor who plays the male lead kisses her hand with respect and says that he will always be hers. Nevertheless, the actor/male lead draws his sword like a traditional hero, while the actress/female lead displays extreme conventional femininity, sporting a form-revealing and glamorous dress and glittery accessories (see fig. 18 & 19). She says “Areumdaum ttawin gwonryeogi doel su eopseo” (“beauty cannot become true power” (00:00:57), but

many comments focus on the appearance of the actress and praise her beauty. At the end of the clip, the actress speaks the title of the work and says it is on KakaoPage exclusively, reminding us that this beautiful trailer is an advertisement made by a large corporation. After the release of this trailer, Kakao entertainment opened a crowdfunding campaign for *The Villainess is a Marionette* goods. The list of promotional goods included a tea cup set, tea gold, fabric poster, photo cards, and an acrylic stand of Cha Eun-woo in costume. This funding successfully raised over 40 million won (ca. 40,000 dollars).



Fig. 18. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:00:20.



Fig. 19. A trailer of *The Villainess is a Marionette*, 00:03:07.

Through the commercialization of Rofan narratives and images, women's desires are manipulated by commercial interests that back up regressive models of socially approved femininity: a young woman who is beautiful, slender, and ultimately marries a handsome, muscular and rich man and raises his children. Rather than the heroine's abilities or narratives, her appearance and her attractive male partner, who ultimately becomes a husband

and, get much more attention. As a result, romance fantasy participates in reinforcing the heteronormative hegemony.

V. Female Utopia

Nevertheless, it is too simple to reduce romance fantasy to merely a cultural commodity that represents only a backlash. Jameson's idea on popular culture helps us to approach this genre in a more complex manner. In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," Jameson criticizes traditional theories of mass culture and high culture, arguing that "we must rethink the opposition high culture/mass culture" and take a "dialectical approach" that sees them as "interdependent phenomena" under late capitalism.²⁴⁾ Criticizing the Frankfurt School's valorization only of modernist high art as critical and autonomous, Jameson insists that like mass culture, it also depends on the process of reification, where "everything [...] has become a commodity."²⁵⁾ He further examines how "the works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well." That is, popular culture often contains a "Utopian or transcendent potential"²⁶⁾ despite its reified nature. Even if mass culture products serve to legitimize the status quo, they express collective hopes for a different world. Moving

24) Fredric Jameson (1979), "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *Social Text*, 1(Winter), p. 133.

25) F. Jameson (1979), p. 131.

26) F. Jameson (1979), p. 144.

dialectically between progressive and regressive elements, romance fantasy also harbors the ideal of a female utopia.

Although romance fantasy portrays traditional gender norms, it also provides an opportunity for women to experience the reverse of actual gender roles due to its distance from the real world. According to Lee Tobin-McClain, as paranormal romances describe characters who are separated from the real world and sometimes bestowed with supernatural abilities, and hence present “a safe play in which to explore gender role reversals.”²⁷⁾ Although romance fantasy and paranormal romance are not the same genre, they share a common element—a fictional world which gives play to a more flexible imagination. Like paranormal romance, the distance created by the fantasy setting of romance fantasy allows women to freely explore gender identity and relationships. One trope within the genre is gender-mirrored romance. That is, the male protagonist shows submissive attitudes toward the female protagonist and takes a role of supporting the female protagonist. This is type of male figure, called *Joshinnam* is a popular recent trend. Conventionally, the word *Joshin* was used for women, indicating a cautious and modest attitude. By using this word to describe male figures and assigning them the role typically imposed on women, romance fantasy gives a sense of empowerment to female readers. Moreover, some romance fantasy puts the female protagonist in the position of traditional male power. The strong heroine is portrayed as a

27) Lee Tobin-McClain (2000), “Paranormal Romances: Secrets of the Female Fantastic.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 11(3), p. 300.

powerful agent with the authority to choose her male partners, who are waiting to be chosen by her. For instance, in *Harem-ui Namjadeul (Men of the Harem)*, the female lead is an emperor who refuses to take a Royal Consort. Instead, she takes five men into her harem and rationalizes her choice by mentioning that other male emperors before her, including her father, also had several concubines. Through this kind of gender reversed relationship, female readers can enjoy agency and freedom that are prohibited in the real world.

Furthermore, this women-centered virtual world provides an online environment for women to express their sexual desires and objectify male characters. Rofan webtoons satisfy these desires by sexualizing the bodies of male characters with explicit graphic images. *Ending hu seobnam-eul juwossda (Happily Ever Afterwards)* is a famous webtoon known for its sexualization of the male lead with a big chest. He is often called as *Wanganam*, a term for a man with a large chest. This representation is interesting considering that traditionally women's breasts have been sexualized. Romance fantasy presents an upside world where women actively objectify men (see figure 20 & 21).

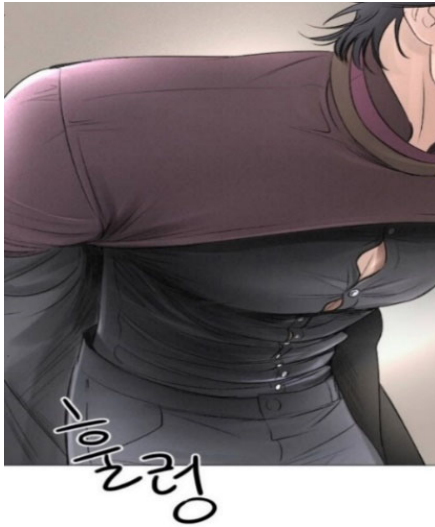


Fig. 20. The male lead from episode 17 of *Happily Ever Afterwards* on Naver webtoon.

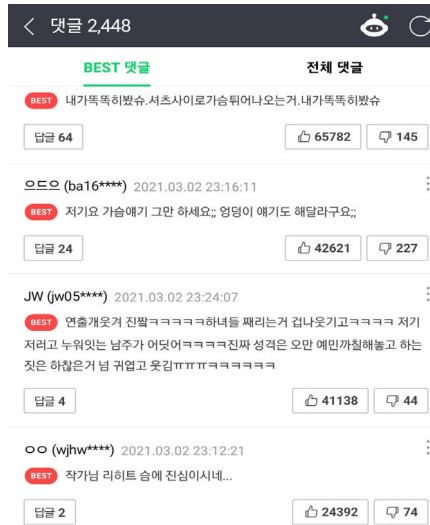


Fig. 21. Comments on episode 17 of *Happily Ever Afterwards*.

As figure 21 shows, the readers write comments such as “I saw it clearly. I saw his chest sticking out through the gap in the shirts,” “Stop talking about his chest. Let’s also talk about his hips,” “The artist is serious about his chest.” In this way, romance fantasy offers a chance for women to experience the reverse of gender roles by foregrounding the female gaze and positioning female readers as sexually active.

Moreover, romance fantasy allows female readers to engage in community discussions. In analysis of Chinese web romance, Jin Feng argues that web romance facilitates “lively circulation of thoughts and feelings”²⁸⁾ among fellow readers. Reading and commenting is a “social process by which individual interpretations are reshaped and reinforced through ongoing

28) Jin Feng (2013), *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*, Brill, p. 3.

discussion with other readers.”²⁹⁾ These discussions, often based on personal experience, help readers express their fears and desires that are hard to voice in a patriarchal society.³⁰⁾ In a similar vein, Han Hyewon claims that “Korean women's online community can speculate on each other's identity and build trust among members through romance web novels as a medium.”³¹⁾ Through such a process, readers can share their opinions about the injustices or prejudices that they experience as women in Korean society.³²⁾ Romance fantasy often engages with women-related social issues such as son preference, postpartum depression, sexism, and lookism. Such topics allow female readers to share their experiences or thoughts through comments on social media. For instance, in *Aknyeoneun Dubeon Sanda (The Villainess Lives Again)*, the female lead, Artezia, suffers from her family— a mother who only cares about her son and a brother who exploits her. Readers empathize with Artezia, commenting that her story reflects the Korean society where son preference still prevails (see figure 22 & 23)³³⁾.

29) Jin Feng (2013), pp. 45~46.

30) Jin Feng (2013), p. 46.

31) Han Hyewon (2017), 「Digitteol Seutoritelringeul Tonghan Yeoseongui Changjak - Romaenseu Websosoreul Jungsimeuro -」, 『Inganyeongu』, 34, p. 53.

32) Han Hyewon (2017), pp. 53~54.

33) Translation: “I've been thinking this since the first episode: the things the mother says seem like the kind of things our society says to daughters, and the gaslighting daughters experience.” “It's realistic and therefore sad. A mother who dedicates everything to her son and forces her daughter to make sacrifices. These mothers are victims but also perpetrators at the same time. From my perspective, the mother character seems the worst, but the female protagonist's brother is actually the worst. He enjoys all the benefits without needing to show any concern.”

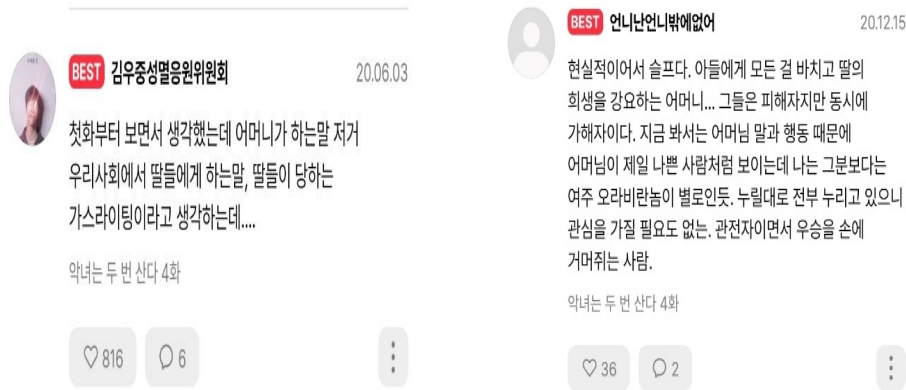


Fig. 22& 23. Comments on episode 14 of *The Villainess Lives Again* on KakaoPage.

Furthermore, romance fantasy provides a space where women can freely discuss ideal masculinity. As Sarah S.G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak emphasize, female writers have constructed men in their fictional worlds, “imagining alternative masculinities that are desirable from a woman’s perspective.”³⁴⁾ Rofan writers also present various types of male figures. Since this genre belongs to fantasy, it can show more diverse backgrounds and male protagonists than contemporary romance novels set in the real world. A male lead can be an aristocrat from much more patriarchal society or a great magician from a magical world. Fans can compare and criticize these various male figures through comments. For example, comments on *Uleobwa bileodo johgo* (*Cry, or Better Yet, Beg*) criticize the male lead, an arrogant duke who is oppressive toward the

34) Sarah S.G. Frantz and Katharina Rennhak (eds. 2011), “Introduction,” *Women Constructing men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750-2000*, Lexington Books, p. 2.

commoner female lead, claiming that is not suited for an ideal hero type. In contrast, some comments support a foil male character who is kind and gentle, insisting that he should be the female lead's man. As we can see, romance fantasy readers participate in "active negotiation with and appropriation of gender ideology."³⁵⁾

In this sense, rather than an "empty distraction or 'mere' false consciousness," romance fantasy can be viewed as "transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed."³⁶⁾ As a genre that both reinforces and challenges social norms, this dialectical aspect of romance fantasy reflects Korean women's inner conflicts in an unstable society where traditional norms are changing. Although the idea that marriage and childbirth are essential aspects of women's lives, they have become less prevalent when compared to the past, indicating perhaps a weakening of the ideology of the conventional heteronormative family still persists. As the number of women who continue working after marriage increases, many face conflicts between their careers and childcare responsibilities. In the meantime, while the idea that appearance is not everything for women has spread, it is still hard for women to escape lookism. Given this complex context, even women themselves find it difficult to provide clear answers to questions like "What does it mean to be an

35) S. Frantz and K. Rennhak (eds. 2011), p. 3.

36) F. Jameson (1979), p. 14.

empowered woman?” and “What does freedom mean for women?”

VI. Conclusion

To sum up, romance fantasy has emerged as a liberating genre for Korean women. By creating a fictional world where women can enjoy freedom and fulfill their desires, this genre has become an integral part of Korean popular culture. However, as we have seen, it cannot escape the charge of reinforcing traditional gender norms. As pastiche, it relies on repeating and recycling existing binary gender power structures. Moreover, the genre occupies a large part of the contemporary culture industry and circulates through society as superficial images for easy consumption, resulting in enhancing heteronormative hegemony. Yet, women's utopian desires are encoded in romance fantasy. Readers can experience the reverse of gender roles, interact with each other through online, and freely discuss ideas about masculinity. Hence, romance fantasy offers a glimpse of a utopia for women.

Popular culture is marked by “the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it.”³⁷⁾ Romance fantasy also oscillate between resistance and conformity to social norms. This oscillation reflects the

37) Stuart Hall (2011), “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’,” *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy(eds.), Wiley-Blackwell, p. 73.

confusion of Korean women in response to a rapidly changing world. An intriguing question remains: how will this beautiful “fantasy,” a mixture of various layers of times and cultures, evolve in the future?

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국문초록

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하유림 (이화여자대학교, 박사과정)

한국 웹 콘텐츠의 주요 장르 중 하나인 로맨스 판타지는 한국에서 ‘페미니즘 리부트’ 운동이 시작되던 시기에 인기를 얻기 시작했다. 이 장르는 진보적이면서도 퇴행적인 측면을 동시에 가지고 있다. 로맨스 판타지는 패스티시를 통해 여성들이 현실에서는 얻기 어려운 성취감, 주체성, 자유를 느낄 수 있는 허구의 세계를 창출한다. 그러나 기존의 이분법적 성별 권력 구조에 의존하고 있어 전통적인 성 역할 규범을 강화하기도 한다. 또한, 로맨스 판타지의 상업화를 통해 여성들의 욕망은 상업적 이해관계에 의해 조작되고, 사회적으로 승인된 여성성의 퇴행적 모델을 따르게 되기도 한다. 그럼에도 불구하고 로맨스 판타지는 진보적 요소와 퇴행적 요소 사이를 변증법적으로 오가면서 여성 유토피아의 이상을 내포하고 있다.

주제어 : 로맨스 판타지, 페미니즘 리부트, 한국, 패스티시, 젠더, 유토피아

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