Toxic Masculinity and Soft Masculinity in K-dramas

Dissertation submitted to the University of Kerala

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of **MASTER OF ARTS** in

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE



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2018-2020

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **" Toxic Masculinity and Soft Masculinity in K-dramas"** is a record of studies carried out by Judith Mathew at the Department of English, All Saints' College under the guidance of Mrs. Joveeta Justin and submitted to the University of Kerala in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature.





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DECLARATION

I, Judith Mathew, do hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **" Toxic Masculinity and Soft Masculinity in K-dramas"** is a record of studies and research conducted by me under the guidance of Mrs. Joveeta Justin at All Saints' College and submitted to the University of Kerala in the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature. No part of this dissertation has been submitted before for the award of any other degrees, diplomas, title or recognition.

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PREFACE

The term Toxic Masculinity has been bandied about a lot since the #Me Too movement began. The theme of masculinity shown in movies and TV series are quite harmful in society. In many ways, film and TV series glorify toxic masculinity. Though initially, art was inspired by life, it has evolved to a point where we are taking inspiration from art itself. Movies and TV series have the potential to leave dangerous impacts on society.

With the rise of the Hallyu Wave, a new form of masculinity arose. In the last few years, K-pop bands and K-dramas have become major influencers on young people around the world. Due to K-pop and K-dramas, the softboy culture rose in the UK and USA. The softboy culture helped to rebrand a new image for the young male heartthrob and combat toxic masculinity.

The project examines the influence of toxic masculinity and soft masculinity in K-dramas such as *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* (2017), *The Empress Ki* (2013), *Secret Garden* (2010), and *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019).

The first chapter is a general introduction to the Hallyu wave and its influence in K-pop and K-drama, and the differences between K-drama and Asian drama. The second chapter looks at how androgyny and Pop Stars have played a part in the up rise of soft masculinity in K-pop, and on how martial heroes influenced Asian toxic masculine standards. The third chapter deals with how toxic masculinity and soft masculinity is portrayed in the K-dramas mentioned above.

The conclusion focuses on the defaults of toxic masculinity and how soft masculinity helped to pave the way for softboy culture in the UK and USA.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Korean Wave and Korean Dramas (2018), Claflin University associate professor Dr Hyejung Ju writes,

> "For the past two decades, the Korean Wave has been recognized in many parts of the world. More recently, the outbound scope of K-drama and K-pop has further reached dispersed global audiences, most of whom are not Korean media consumers or fans."(2)

Korean pop culture (K-Pop), Korean culture, and Korean drama (K-drama) have become a global phenomenon. In the 90s, a phenomenon called Hallyu or the Korean Wave has successively been taking over the world. Hallyu is a Chinese term which, when translated, means "Korean Wave". It is a collective term used to signify the phenomenal growth of Korean culture and popular culture which includes K-Pop, TV shows, food, cosmetics and so on. Korean culture first won the hearts of the Chinese, when one of the first successful Korean TV series called *What is Love* aired in China in 1997 and gained over 50 million viewers. The defining event was a concert by the boyband H.O.T at the Beijing Workers Gymnasium in 2000. H.O.T sold over 12 million records in South Korea alone and was one of the successful K-Pop groups to cross into other countries. They successfully paved the way for many artists to follow their footsteps.

K-Pop is by the far the most popular cultural piece coming out of Korea. Hallyu first spread to China and Japan, later to Southeast Asia and

several countries worldwide where it continues to rule in the hearts of fans. In 2007, the girl band Wonder Girls set their eyes on the American music market and became the first Korean musical group to enter the Billboard Hot 100 Chart. The K-Pop fervour still hadn't caught on in the US, until 2012. PSY's "Gangnam Style", which was released on July 15, 2012, and immediately climbed to the top of South Korea's Music Charts. During the next several months the song gained massive popularity in America and by the end of the year, it already had 1 billion views on YouTube. His music reached the number one spot in music charts in over 30 countries including France, Germany, Spain, Canada and Australia. The success paved the way for a younger generation of K-Pop artists, who are currently breaking music records. Bands like Big Bang, GOT7, BLACKPINK, RED VELVET, BTS, and so on, have all been riding the Hallyu wave. Thus, paving a way for the Korean culture.

The more popular K-pop became, fans started shifting their attention to Korean culture, beauty, and TV series and so on. K-pop, which is predominantly performed in Korean, has garnered interest in the Korean language and culture worldwide—so much so that the South Korean government has established 130 language institutes in 50 countries. Many K-Pop idols are turning into actors and actresses, due to their international popularity. This helped in increasing the popularity of Korean dramas around the world. Seeing their idols starring in Korean dramas, global fans have become more interested in Korean dramas, leading to their rise in the world of Asian dramas.

The Hallyu wave began through K-Pop and K-drama and it has since added value to the brand "KOREA" by pleasing people from all around the world. Hallyu has become a global culture that people enjoy and share these days. Since the 1990's the popularity of Korean dramas (K-drama) has been spreading across Asia in recent years those TV series and entertainment programs have attracted an audience in the US, Middle East, Europe and parts of Africa.

The strong storytelling and thrilling plots offer many options in K-dramas. The significant ones are melodrama, romantic comedies, and historical series. But unlike US television dramas or any other countries' TV shows, which tend to go on for seasons on end, K-dramas run for 16 to 24 episodes and the shows are often only one season, which adds to the appeal. The majority of K-Dramas is G-rated and very clean compared to American movies and television. Korean dramas successfully create an emotional bond with the viewers. Characters are developed and brought through trials, hardships, problems and tribulations in such a way that the audience can connect with the characters. The Hair-raiser endings of nearly every episode leave viewers fidgeting till the next episode can resolve the conflict. These dramas are also easy to access as they can be found on streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Viki and so on.

Over the years the Korean dramas have gotten more diverse, with new hospital and police dramas popping up all the time. They have even begun making Korean versions of popular American TV shows such as *Criminal Minds* (2005). Western television executives have caught on Korea's brand of entertainment also. For instance, Fox's incredibly meme-able singing

competition series *The Masked Singer* (2019), which is the American version of Korea's *The King of Mask Singer* (2015). Adaptations of *Strong Woman Do Bong-soon* (2017), with pro wrestler Ronda Rousey attached to the project and Korean coming-of-age film *Sunny* (2011), which producer Kevin Hart has renamed *Bye Bye Bye*, are also in the works.

The first Asian dramas that became popular were the Taiwanese dramas (between 2008 and 2012) with the romantic comedy genre. After 2012, they continued to appeal to the public; but Korean dramas took over the hearts of audiences and gained immense popularity, leading to their unbeatable position in the Asian-dramas. K-dramas are often considered to be similar to Chinese, Japanese and Thai dramas and often brought in a single category. There are certain similarities among them, such as, in Asian dramas, there are some common repetitive themes, such as reincarnation, time-travel, justice and retribution (either human or divine), fate and destiny. But these themes are treated differently from country to country.

C-dramas have been gaining popularity in the past few years, but they are best known for historical and fantasy genres. One of the reasons the C-dramas are more inclined to produce historical or fantasy dramas because the fantasy or historical genre is often less censored by the government. The fantasy genre depends excessively on CGI (computer-generated imagery), which are executed poorly by the designers. Chinese dramas have good stories and experienced actors but the industry has to invest more in terms of directing, editing, sound and picture if they want to become relevant among the audience. K-dramas explore a variety of genres such as action, fantasy, historical, sci-fi etc. when compared to C-dramas. K-dramas rely mostly on

professional and critically praised writers, as opposed to adapting novels, which is a point of strength for a drama in terms of narrative cohesion. The characters and their stories are very relatable. They manage to convey their thoughts and feelings to such a degree, that the viewer cannot help but become completely immersed in the story. K-dramas are more popular than C-dramas, among the Chinese public.

Japanese and Korean dramas are two of the most popular and anticipated Asian-dramas. Japanese-dramas (J-dramas) rely mostly on popular mangas, which has a light-hearted matter and is comedic. Recently, mangas and webtoons have been adapted into the storyline of Korean dramas. K-dramas such as *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019), *Love Alarm* (2019) are examples of webtoons adapted into the storyline. Mangas such as *Bleach* (2001-2016), *Itazura Na Kiss* (1990) and so on have live-action dramas. J-dramas are known for exploring genres such as crime, mystery, detective, and so on. Although K-dramas offers a lot of genres, almost all of their dramas contain a hint of romance. Both of these Asian dramas rely on reality. J-dramas focus on the main thought of the story. They keep the drama going on without introducing another genre. K-dramas often slow down the conflict which leads to long, boring and cliché episodes. The cinematography of both these Asian dramas is quite different. K-dramas use filters that make the actors' skin more smooth and radiant. They provide a fairy-tale aspect of the frame whereas J-dramas use dark filters or grainy filters for their darker productions and a more saturated filter to make colours pop out. K-dramas promote escapism, whereas J-dramas are known for their realism. K-dramas are more conservative when it comes to comedy and romance, whereas J-dramas are more liberal as sexuality

or homosexuality are not taboo topics in Japan. Recently Chinese and Japanese dramas are slowly giving legit competition to Korean dramas in winning international fans.

Masculinity is a set of behaviours and practices that have traditionally been associated with men and manhood in our culture, which includes positive and negative things. It's the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured.

Toxic Masculinity is a loose term that is used to refer to a subset of those behaviours which are harmful or destructive. It is often used as shorthand to describe behaviours linked to domination, humiliation, and control. It is the adherence to traditional male gender roles that restrict the kinds of emotions allowable for boys and men to express, including social expectations that men seek to be dominant (the alpha male) and limit their emotional range primarily to expression of anger and violence. Toxic masculinity is driven by an overwhelming fear of emasculation, i.e., fear of being perceived by others as feminine and unmanly. This restrictive code of manhood may be self-destructive, as boys and men who are taught to subscribe to a singular vision of machismo often end up repressing their feelings to maintain a facade of strength and imperviousness.

Depictions of masculinity and femininity are one way in which the media perpetuate gender-stereotypical beliefs and behaviours. Combating versions of toxic masculinity have always been part of the K-dramas. Certain K-dramas depict certain characters that engage in at least a few of these toxic behaviours. These behaviours are often romanticized in the drama. Physical

or sexual violence against female characters in K-dramas was depicted as fun, enjoyable, and a normal expression of romantic love. K-dramas such as *The Empress-Ki* (2013), *Secret Garden* (2010) have got scenes glorifying toxic masculinity. Both dramas present a toxic male protagonist who is loved by the audience. These protagonists represent themselves as perfect ideal dominating males. They are depicted as protectors of women, macho, easily angered and irritable, independent thinkers and decision-makers.

The Empress Ki starts with a girl named Ki Seung Nyang (Ha Ji Won), who was separated from her family at a young age. To survive, she disguises herself as a boy and becomes a talented bandit-figure who helps other people reunite with their lost family members. She happens to meet the king of Goryeo, Wang Yu (Joo Jin Mo), who keeps her by his side. Although they fall in love, they are separated as Seung Nyang is taken to the Yuan palace, where she meets Ta Hwan (Ji Chang Wook) for the second time. Ta Hwan fell in love with Seung Nyang while she was posing as a boy, so when he finds her in his court and that she is a girl. The drama follows Seung Nyang as she ascends to power from a low maid to an empress.

Secret Garden is a modern retelling of the Cinderella story between Gil Ra-im (Ha Ji-won), a stuntwoman, and Kim Joo-won (Hyun Bin), a wealthy CEO. Through a misunderstanding, while trying to resolve a scandal of his cousin, Oska (Yoon Sang-Hyun), a famous singer, Ra-im and Joo-won meet. As two different worlds clash, Ra-im and Joo-won gradually learn about each other's worlds. The story gets even more complicated and dramatic when Ra-im and Joo-won magically start switching bodies. Both protagonists are

forced to survive the turmoil they face and come in terms with each other's world and also their feelings for each other.

"In the 80s and 90s, men in Korean pop content were largely portrayed as tough guys in gangster and detective films, and rebellious young men in some TV dramas," (BBC) says Sun Jung , the author of *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption: Yonsama, Rain, Oldboy, K-Pop Idols* (2011). But not now as K-Pop helped in breaking the norms of masculinity. One cannot overlook the differences in the South Korean and Western entertainment industries, one of which is the concept of soft masculinity that is associated with Korean men and which is very prominent in Korean culture. Soft Masculinity can be defined as having a soft masculine visual image of the male stars, which is highly associated with feminine aesthetics. Men who display soft masculinity in Korea are often referred to as " flower boys ". These flower boys share typical features of slender, androgynous bodies, fashion-conscious, beautiful appearances, and also being associated with being pure, innocent, and polite. Soft masculinity advocated by the South Korean entertainment industry serves as a cultural gateway in breaking the gender-oriented norms. Dramas such as *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* (2017) and *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019) break the shackles of western masculinity by presenting male protagonists that embody soft masculinity.

Strong Woman Do Bong Soon narrates the story of Do Bong-soon (Park Bo-young) was born with inhuman strength. For generations, the superhuman strength has been passed on to the women in her family. She yearns to create a video game with herself as the main character. She desperately tries to impress her crush, In Guk-doo (Ji Soo), a police officer.

Thanks to her strength, she works as a bodyguard to rich heir Ahn Min-hyuk (Park Hyung-sik), the CEO of a gaming company, Ainsoft. He is irritated by the constant stalking and receiving anonymous threats, leading him to hire Bong-soon as his bodyguard after seeing her beat up a bunch of men. Min-hyuk and Bong-soon find themselves falling in love with each other. With their budding romance, a series of kidnappings occurs in the Dobong –dong district.

The Tale of Nokdu is based on webcomic "Nokdujeon" by Hye Jin Yang which was published from 16 December 2014 to 31 July 2018. The story is set in Joseon dynasty; the series is about Jeon Nok-Du (Jang Dong-Yoon) who disguises as a woman to enter the widow village to find out who and why his family was attacked. In the village, he meets Dong-Ju (Kim So-Hyun) who is trained to become a gisaeng but does not want to become one. As the drama progresses, Nok Du ends up finding out the truth behind the attack on his family and unearths secrets that change his life forever. While facing these problems, Nok-Du and Dong-Ju start falling in love.

K-drama's representation legitimises the socially embedded toxic cultural norms and often, people perceive it as a meditation on daily life and use it as a surrogate for ordinary relationships and power dynamics. Any delineation from toxic masculine norms is seen as emasculating which makes the male characters lesser men who are then subjected to various forms of social punishment such as public shaming, being looked down upon, being outcast etc. *Secret Garden* and *Empress Ki* portray a masculinity that is considered to be harmful and violent. Men around the world are facing an identity crisis, which is often based on toxic norms of masculinity. The

emotionally complex male characters are changing the K-drama industry. With the arrival of dramas such as *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon* and *The Tale of Nokdu*, men are introduced to a new kind of masculinity that destroys the barriers of masculinity and gives hope to come in terms with their true self. These protagonists expose a realistic vulnerability that resonates with everyday struggles.

CHAPTER TWO

ANDROGYNY, POP STARS, K-POP AND MASCULINITIES

Seungri, a member of Big Bang, was questioned by police over allegations he was procuring prostitutes for his business and had embezzled funds at Burning Sun, a nightclub he part-owned in the exclusive Gangnam district of Seoul, South Korea. His downfall has rocked the Kpop industry, implicating and exposing other celebrities in the process. This sex scandal came to be known as The Burning Sun Scandal.

This scandal rocked the foundations of South Korea's beloved K-pop and K-drama industry. The transcripts of the messages exchanged between these squeaky clean looking male idols in their immaculate suits and mascara, hero-worshipped by millions of youngsters, as they talk privately about women like they are nothing more than pieces of meat. The spycam (Molka) epidemic is plaguing hyper wired South Korea. This is the manifestation of the Frankenstein monster that the so-called Korean Wave or Hallyu brand of entertainment has created.

It is not surprising given that the industry has long been defined by the rampant sexual and financial exploitations of K-pop stars themselves, beneath the superficial bling and glamour. For a country that still- justifiably - bristles at the memory of how the Japanese military forced its women into sexual slavery during the Second World War, it's quite ironic that South Korea is unable to get a grip on this modern-day scourge that terrorizes and traumatizes its female population.

These all stem from a culture of monolithic patriarchy that comes with all the baggage of male chauvinism, misogyny, and toxic masculinity. Moon Seung-Sook uses the term "hegemonic masculinity" to refer to the dominant practices of masculinity within the South Korean context of the Confucian tradition, militarization and compressed industrialization. In her article, *The Production and Subversion of Hegemonic Masculinity* (2002), Moon puts forth three components that constitute hegemonic masculinity. They are the ability to provide for the family, masculine distance from daily reproductive labour and military service (79-114). South Korean hegemonic masculinity represents patriarchal authoritarianism where men are traditionally considered to be heads of family and the main providers. Men are required by society to leave the domestic space and earn income while women are required to perform various domestic chores such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Men performing any of these domestic chores were considered to be unmanly or effeminate.

In South Korea, the classic image of the strong man has always been the ruler, the king, and five thousand years of monarchic rule. This has left an indelible imprint on the Koreans as to what it meant to take on the role of a ‘man’ and make one’s family proud as one took on this seemingly mystical mantle. To be a Korean man is to be strong, a sure-footed ruler of his domain, an authority figure that generates a full spectrum of emotions in people around him – even though these emotions are usually leaning toward the negative.

Korean militarism often drives society violent and dehumanizes Korean men. It is also one of the reasons for violent Korean masculinity. In post-war Korea, masculinity was based on militarized masculinity which was

fostered from the 1960s onwards. It created an idea of ideal masculinity concerning the nation and duty, whilst promoting characteristics such as strength, courage, loyalty, and leadership in men and the ability to negotiate successfully within the constraints of patriarchal capitalism. Men were represented as warriors, whether in the actual military or within the economic sphere battling with the market forces to bring in maximum profits for their family and the nation. Koreans tend to put warriors, military officers, on a pedestal to be worshipped and glorified among the people as ideal men. And the sad part is that young Korean men are still forced to undergo compulsory military service.

The concept of toxic masculinity was developed by Dr. Bliss in the 1980s. During this time, Bliss created the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, a movement that sought to liberate men from the ideals of the modern world regarding masculinity. This movement coined the term toxic masculinity to describe the "toxic" masculine gender roles, which the movement aimed to liberate men from.

Toxic Masculinity is a specific model of manhood geared towards complete dominance and control that devalues women and emotions and overvalued extreme self-reliance. Certain traits and behaviours such as cold-hearted, courageous, resilience, stoicism, assertiveness, strong, dominant, violent are considered to be manly. If a man doesn't show these behaviours, he will be criticized by society for being unmanly. They are made to believe that men are superior and strong while women are weak, of less value, are property of men, objects (particularly sexual objects).

The American Association has recently released a work known as *APA Guidelines for the Psychological Practice with Boys and Men* (2018). This work contains guidelines that show how boys and men face physical and mental health risks from conforming to such toxic stereotypes. Men suffer from sexist gender roles and a lack of gender equality. Certain male cultures force boys to suppress their humanity. This situation is something most men around the world face. Some have even called toxic masculinity a gateway drug to other extreme views.

Early commercials send messages about how a "real man" should be: Shave like a man or smell like a man or wash like a man or feel like a man or have the essence of a man. Earlier movies, music, and TV dramas also spread these misogynistic ideas. Men are encouraged to see women as headless body parts, sexy love interests who should be stalked, conquered and kissed even when the girl never permitted him to do so. Every coming-of-age movie, a man's worth is purely defined by whether or not he has sex.

Male vocalists, band leaders, male actors, and pop stars were often represented as macho, manly, rugged, robust, butch, brawny, handsome, mettle, daring, bold, virile, hairy-chested, hyper-masculine, strapping, hunk, red-blooded, boyish, stud, jock and so on. They were portrayed as the epitome of masculinity. But with the arrival of Elvis Presley as a gender-bending player challenged the cultural ideas of masculinity. He is also credited as the pioneer of androgyny as a concept in rock music. His eyeliner and fast-moving hips promoted the concept of androgyny. *The Observer* explained that,

> "Elvis Presley invented androgyny as the standard template for the rock/pop frontman. Elvis did not succeed because of the

> myth that he was the first white boy who sang like a Black man. Elvis succeeded because he was the first white boy singer who looked like a pretty white girl." (Sommer)

His songs "Blue Moon" and "I Don't Care If The Sun Don't Shine" have a combination of feminine touch and masculine power.

By the mid-1960s, swank young men and designers started challenging the restraining rules of masculine etiquette that had persisted since Victorian times. Circulating in the coinciding worlds of fashion, music, media, and high society, a social group known as the 'modern dandy' was formed, that was not embarrassed to wear frills, velvet, and other elements often judged to be too feminine for a man. The Peacock Revolution of the '60s and 70's thrust against gender roles and blurred the traditional distinctions between male and female representation.

After Elvis started the eyeliner trend, men in rock started dressing up and challenging the cultural idea of masculinity. Rock Stars such as Mick Jagger wore white frocks with Renaissance poet collar detailing, velvet coats, scarves, jewellery, to donning pencil skirts over jeans, and so on. His pillow lips and fop like outfits often led to people questioning his sexuality. But through his persona and outfits, he proved that one could be both camp and virile at the same time. Jagger championed the notion that masculinity and femininity could go hand in hand.

In 1970, on the record cover of "The Man Who Sold The World", David Bowie leans on a chaise longue with long wavy hair and wearing a long velvet dress referred to as the "man dress", styled with block-heeled suede boots. This dress was designed by Mr. Fish, who is also the dresser of Mick

Jagger. David Bowie frequently re-wore this "man dress" during his US tour in 1971. Bowie's exaggerated use of makeup and camp outfits were often criticized for disrupting the notions of masculinity and was more controversial than Elvis Presley, who relied on a feminine pout and eyeliner. Through his personas like Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the Thin White Duke, he expressed himself with the help of fashion and music.

Androgynous fashion or being androgynous were often only noticed in the music of David Bowie, Mick Jagger, and not in the music of black artists. Black Artists usually depicted the image of gangsters, thugs, which all in one promoted hyper-masculinity. But this all changed with the arrival of Prince. Like David Bowie, Prince toyed with the ideas of the “other”: the feminine, the alien, the blackness, the masculine. Prince broke the society's rigid idea of black masculinity by performing on the stage with high heels, bikini briefs, a neckerchief, lace gloves, thigh-high boots, and trench coats. He wanted to destroy the shackles of an obsessed society, who was keen on putting people into tightly defined categories - masculine or feminine, gay or straight. He influenced Donatella Versace, Tommy Hilfiger and Justin Bieber. Prince prompted the younger generation to be open about one's sexuality and challenged the ideals of toxic masculinity. He even changed his name to a symbol, which is a combination of the male and female symbols, which also symbolized his androgynous nature. He had full control of his sexual expression as he bared his body in numerous album covers and magazines. According to Prince (1999 interview with MTV), " Sexuality is very spiritual in nature. And that's a god-giving gift too." Prince ignited the conversation about gender that we are still having today.

With the rise of Michael Jackson's popularity, he moved further away from masculine gender norms and into androgynous pop god territory. Michael's androgynous "look", his boyish manner, use of makeup, and the exuberant dress style was often interpreted as asexual. His "You Are Not Alone" music video is the perfect picture of androgyny. His solo piece in that short film combines a sense of boyish and non-threatening innocence with sensual physicality that can't be characterized as "machismo" or even "male". Mick Jagger, David Bowie, Prince can flaunt dresses without their manhood being questioned. The same couldn't be said for ones' brother or uncle or other men.

Glam rock allowed for the broader category of masculinity and enforced the idea that one didn't have to be manly to be a man. Instead of continuing the lineage of rock stars who intended to crumble society's glorification of toxic masculinity and harsh rules on masculinity, the rock settled into a comfortable "everyman" look. But now that the days of glam rock are behind, the world seems to have forgotten these experimentations, gender performance, and expression.

Nowadays, androgyny in movies and TV shows represent a growing public that consists of gender-fluid people and is trying to destabilize gender binaries. It is quite important to show different gender expressions in media because it urges self-expression and homogenizes fluidity. Due to gender restrictions, many suffer from acceptance in their lives. Actors have also helped in breaking down the bars around gender and sexuality. They did it at a time when society was more heteronormative.

In the movie *Dallas Buyer Club* (2013), actor Jared Leto plays the role of a fictional transgender woman with HIV. Certain movies often portray women dressing as men rather than men dressing up as women. Jared Leto broke the gender barriers imposed on male actors through his critically acclaimed role in *Dallas Buyer Club*. Eddie Redmayne's role as a transgender woman in *Danish Girl* (2015) shows how actors are stepping on the boundaries imposed on gender and masculinity.

Male actors are time and again seen wearing a typical tuxedo with skinny ties to suits - whereas actors like Jaden Smith, Billy Porter are bringing a revolution in fashion. Jaden Smith takes fashion risks by wearing skirts. He urges boys not to dress as their gender dictates and experiment with how they like to express themselves. At his prom, he wore a long skirt and blazer. Billy Porter wore a tuxedo dress designed by Christian Siriano in Oscar 2019, bringing an evolution to men's red carpet fashion.

Glam rock, androgynous movies, androgynous fashion, played some part in paving the way to a new kind of masculinity (soft masculinity) that currently exists in Asia. Masculinity is a shifting social construct, its nature has mutated over the generations. Soft Masculinity is a new term to describe men who do not focus on the traditional idea of being masculine. They do not focus on traditional ideas of being handsome as a guy. The popularity of this term is due to Korean trends becoming globally known worldwide. Since ancient times, the idea of a beautiful man, or pretty boy, existed in both China and Japan, with both Beijing Opera and Kabuki theatre having young, womanish males singing and acting female parts.

Asian male beauty echoes the Western metrosexual phenomenon through the image of kkominam, meaning “flower boy”. In the 1970s, Japanese mangas popularized the image of "pretty boy" (bishōnen). A bishōnen is a male character that possesses androgynous or "feminine" physical traits. He is usually tall, slender, with no facial hair, and has large, expressive eyes. In the mangas, anime, and television series, the image of the pretty boy was being popularized.

The striking descriptions of young men who departed radically from traditional manly attributes were becoming more popular. *Otomen*, a Japanese television series that aired in 2006 can be seen as an example of this image. It is adapted from a Japanese romantic comedy manga by the young woman artist Aya Kanno. The title "Otomen" sums up the intent of the series: otomen is a pun consisting of the Japanese word otome, meaning "young girl", and the English word "men", so it is about the "girlie man". The series is translated into Chinese as *The Pink Boy*. The first episode of the series defines otomen as a type of Japanese boy, who is accomplished in both the pen and the sword, hides interests like cooking, sewing, and girlish thoughts and special skills close to his heart.

In 2007, Maki Fukasawa coined and popularized an important trend that arose in Asian Masculinity: herbivorous men (grass-eating men). According to her, an herbivore refers to a man who is gentle, quiet, and soft. He does not have the characteristics of a traditional manly man that is macho or sexual dominance. He does not treat women as sexual objects (a macho man would) but as friends. He is more interested in cooking and eating cake, which is often associated with the characteristics of a woman. Tsuyoshi

Kusanagi, a member of SMAP, is one of the most popular idols in Japanese youth culture and can be considered as an example of an herbivore. He is described by his fans as gentle and kind-hearted. The members of Japanese boy bands, who have girlish looks and manners were quite popular in Asia for a while and influenced how young Asian women perceive desirable masculinity.

The concept of masculinity can be traced back as far as 10th century Korea, where physically beautiful men were handpicked to be part of an elite group, known as ‘Hwarangs’ or ‘Flowering Knights’. This ancient boy band was known to wear makeup and accessories and were educated in arts, culture, history, religion and even combat.

The inrush of J-pop and K-pop culture has deeply influenced the growing desirability of androgynous male beauty norms in China. Men were represented as ethereal and feminine creatures in paintings that belonged to China’s Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911). The Chinese novel, *The Dream of Red Chamber* (1958), the male protagonist wears makeup and writes prose in his study instead of going to war with his enemies. Also, he wins the heart of the female protagonist.

Men who display soft masculinity in Korea are often termed as 'flower boys'. These flower boys share typical features of slender, androgynous bodies, fashion-conscious, beautiful appearances. They are also associated with characteristics such as pure, innocent and polite. Soft Masculinity advocated by the South Korean entertainment industry serves as a cultural gateway in the West. They help in breaking gender-oriented norms and have administered an understanding of Korean culture to international fans.

Flower boys who used to appear only in Japanese mangas have been brought to life thanks to K-pop. The author of the book *Korean Masculinity and Transnational Consumption: Yosnama, Rain, Oldboy, K-pop Idols* (2010), Sun Jung suggests that K-pop has profited a lot from producing and selling the flower boys' standardized beauty to the public. K-pop flower boys appear on stage, on screen, and even on cosmetic surgery advertisements in subways.

A decade later, idol groups like BTS, GOT7 are generating cultural ways that are expanding to all corners of the world. Youtube played a crucial role in marketing, distributional, advertising and promoted K-pop as a popular entertainment worldwide. Youtube drastically abused the online traffic of K-pop videos, successfully increasing the exposure of K-pop towards the Western audience.

K-pop boy bands often feature cute boys who are way different from bands in the West such as the Backstreet Boys, Westlife, Jonas Brothers and The Wanted. The coordination of K-pop male idols has served two purposes. One to accentuate an idols ultra-slender and maintain an Asian figure. And two, to portray his constructed character. Generally, these constructed images also subdivide into the kind and warm boy next door and the sexy fierce-looking boy diva. Despite the seemingly vast difference between these two types of agency, preset characters, they share one common characteristic that is, their effeminacy or soft masculinity.

Idols' costumes often portray soft masculinity. For instance, BTS's first set of Map of the Soul: 7 concept photos show all the members dressed in white from head to toe, and had tiny, white feathers gracefully falling around them. They were embodying the image of a white swan, an image often

associated with women. In their concept photoshoot version two, they embodied the image of the black swan. But what caught the attention of the media was that Jimin and Jungkook (members of BTS) were wearing leather corsets for the photoshoot. In the mid 19th century, a beautiful woman had fallen shoulders, her rib cage was compressed by a corset and her hips were wider than her shoulder line. Corsets helped the woman to get this ideal female body and it was essential to wear corsets. But K-pop is neutralizing this fashion to challenge the western ideals when donning clothes that compliment the body lines such that a woman would wear.

Glam male looks are ubiquitous in K-pop. Though South Korea is a conservative country, it doesn't question a man rocking a smokey eye look. Feminine makeup and hairstyle in the world of K-pop are a lot more acceptable for men than in the Western world. Male Kpop idols often wear very dramatic dark eyeshadow, eyeliner for performances or even in normal days. This is accepted in Korea as there is no gender discrimination on their sexuality if they do. The market and gender norms are changing, with cosmetics no longer seen as exclusively for women. And due to the rise of Hallyu, international fans have accepted the use of makeup on male idols. Their costumes, hair, and performances are way different from Western Music.

Historically, performance has been a site for transitional actions that transgressed pre-existing boundaries and social norms. K-pop idols such as Taemin are seeking to challenge the divide - choosing dance routines that are either hyper-masculine moves or cutesy, soft feminine moves. In a recent interview Billboard conducted with Taemin about his single 'Move', he voiced

a desire to " Go beyond what K-pop is typically perceived as". Taemin is a K-pop artist who often questioned the industry's norms. He tries hard to seek or create something new and different, both in terms of musicality and style.

While most male idol dances consist of "aggressive flair", Taemin tries to find a middle ground. He made it a point to mix traditionally masculine and feminine movements in his choreography. In doing so, he wanted the dance itself to transcend gender that is no longer confined by the binary markers that were recognized by society. In the interview with Billboard, he said:

> " My body shape is that of a dancer's. It is not too masculine or overly muscular and I wanted to take advantage of that. I thought I could show the soft lines like the dance movements of a ballet dance by adding subtlely to my choreography. I wanted to break the idea of what male performers are supposed to show, what performances girl groups are supposed to show. I wanted to break those labels, showing that dance is a form of art."

Even before the single 'Move', Taemin had embraced a non-traditional masculine image with songs like 'Pretty Boy', whose lyrics question " Why is being sensitive and prepared the opposite of being a man". This song is quite similar to Prince 1999 track 'Pretty Man', which celebrates a softer form of masculinity and sexuality that is not caged to the image of the toxic masculine stud. Also, VIXX's Shangri-la choreography utilizes a fan as an artistic piece. In Western culture, the use of fans is traditionally associated with women. Thus people would believe that these men are extremely feminine. However,

the fan is a gender-neutral accessory in Korea commonly used by Korean men throughout history.

K-pop sometimes enforces macho or masculine standards at times as well. Boy group dances usually consist of strong, powerful and decidedly masculine moves. In the debut of most K-pop boy bands, few of their songs have constructions of toxic masculinity in it. For instance, BTS earlier songs such as "War Hormone", "Boy in Love", "Danger"; objectify women with lyrics like: Women are like an equation, us guys are the solution or Wear them more, your high heels. Later, BTS publicly apologized for their older songs in a recent interview. They even hired a feminist lecturer to look over their lyrics to ensure that they do not promote any sexist ideas. In their newest albums, they promote themes such as self-love, mental health, depression. They are trying to fight against the toxic stereotypes imposed on society. RM, leader of BTS, promoted the song " Same Love" by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis on his twitter account. This song is about homosexuality. He stated that he liked the song even more after reading the lyrics.

Korean dramas have several shades of misogyny, machismo, toxic masculinity. Korean dramas perpetuate a liberating-suffocating nature of gender ideals and representation. K-dramas constantly tries to justify the male-chauvinism or a call for acceptance/appreciation of them. It’s important to understand the cultural differences in general, but the standard of toxic masculinity set in these dramas should not be brushed aside as a matter of culture. Several instances of misogyny, chauvinism can be found in *Empress Ki* (2013), *The Secret Garden* (2010), *Strong Woman Do Bong-Soon* (2017) and *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019).

But due to the rise of K-pop, avoidance of widespread continuance, and replication of the asymmetrical power divide between men and women in both the private and public spheres depicted in K dramas has changed. Recent K-dramas are promoting hybrid representations of both man and woman characters who contain both traditional qualities and new qualities of gender roles. *Strong Woman Do Bong-Soon* and *The Tale of Nokdu* are trying to break the traditional patterns followed by a K-drama. K-pop and K-drama trying to break down the binaries that are found in the society. They are helping to recreate a newer form of masculinity. This masculinity is being embraced by men in their twenties in particular who are less in tune with existing hegemonic discourses of hypermasculine, toxic masculinity, militarized masculinity.

CHAPTER THREE

MISOGYNY, TOXIC AND SOFT MASCULINITY IN K-DRAMAS

When the #Me Too Movement went mainstream in 2017, people started to become quite conscious of the term "toxic masculinity". Toxic Masculinity is among the most unfortunate and damaging aspects of human society. Masculinity becomes toxic when certain traits such as power and dominance are exhibited in a destructive or abusive way. This can be manifested in different ways and degrees. The most obvious iteration of toxic masculinity is the idea of a "real man" and the irrational aversion to characteristics deemed "not masculine". These ideas are drilled into our heads in various ways - family members, the way we dress, our friends, boys dormitories and locker rooms, advertisements, film industry, TV series, and so on.

Media consequently and consistently is working to represent 'real men' as powerful active agents sexually desired by women, and is trying to eradicate or denigrate any possible homoerotic or feminine aspect of masculinity. Both cinema and television are two of the strongest mass media, which reflect social values. During the 30s - 90s, most of the characters seen in movies or TV series are photocopies of male sturdiness and strength. They were conditioned to personify the traditional image of male power.

The conventional Hollywood studio picture mostly consisted of strong-jawed white action/fantasy heroes or gritty crime dramas about men behaving badly or romantic comedies which intentionally celebrated stalker behaviours and a refusal to take "no" for an answer as a sign of romantic strength or

dramas that promoted bad behaviours of heroes because at the end of the movie he saves the girl from the villain, were elements that governed and shaped the movie culture for over a century. Hollywood's representation legitimizes the socially embedded toxic cultural norms. And people view these as a meditation on daily life and use it as a substitute for ordinary relationships and power dynamics. Stalking for love is another recurring element that can be traced back to Hollywood. It's a mainstay of both Bollywood and European cinema. Movies often present stalker-like behaviour as a harmless or endearing part of romantic courtship. In most of the movies or television series, we see this familiar romance formula and how it works between the characters.

Toxic heroes like Tony Stark, Indiana Jones, Hans Solo, John Rambo are loved by audiences. Many of the popular characters such as Indiana Jones and James Bond antagonize women, disregard basic ideas of consent and ultimately force themselves on their love interests. Although each movie attempts to frame these actions as sexy or romantic, predatory is a more fitting description. Movies often reaffirm myths that women secretly want men to force themselves on them. Not much has changed in terms of Hollywood manhood as they still promote forced romance as an art of seduction or romance.

Besides, cinema television illustrates the power of mass communication to inform, educate, and influence the public. The TV landscape has changed plenty in the past few decades, and there are more diverse perspectives on screen than ever before. Still, that doesn't mean that there aren't portrayals of toxic male characters on TV — or that there haven't

been plenty of them in the past. The 90s produced a lot of good shows, and a lot of these shows still inspire nostalgia and frequent binge sessions from fans. But even the best series of the era promoted misogyny, machismo, and toxic masculine culture. *Saved By The Bell* (1989), *The Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air* (1990), and *Friends* (1994-2000) had several instances that wouldn't quite well be accepted in the modern cultural landscape. For instance, the most popular American sitcom television series *Friends* had several moments that encouraged toxic masculinity. In one of the episodes, Ross discovers that his son likes Barbie dolls and he felt offended. He spends the rest of the third season trying to force him to like GI Joes, monster trucks, and dinosaur action figures. Ross enforces the ideal of 'what is a man" to his son, thereby promoting toxic masculinity. From the 90s onwards, the protagonists/ antagonists became darker and more morally compromised. The toxic misogynistic teens of *Euphoria* (2019), to the abusive husbands of *Big Little Lies* (2017) and *Dirty John* (2018), and the assorted psychopathic killers of *Mindhunter* (2017), we have seen different shades of toxic masculinity. The writers do the most to justify the actions of these toxic characters in a sympathetic light.

Toxic stereotypes of Asian masculinity were mostly based on martial arts action stars like Bruce Lee, Jet Li, and Jackie Chan. Their films depicted Asian men as physically tough and fiercely patriotic heroes who fought to the death for their country (men) and the pride of Asian culture. Chinese cinema is a continuation of its theatre and opera tradition. And since many opera performances include actions, martial art cinema, naturally, follows the same formula. But the fights were not realistic and seemed more like a tango. But

this all changed with the arrival of Bruce Lee.

In 1970, his appearance in the TV series *Green Hornet* gained him massive fans in Hong Kong. His actions were fast and furious when compared to ballet martial art moves that Hong Kong is used to at the time. His actions were violent, realistic, and contemporary. Bruce Lee's icons such as the toplessness, one on many fights, flying kicks, the nunchucks, and his cold persona showed his dominance and masculinity. Topless scenes of Bruce Lee represent the image of a violent and ruthless alpha male, whose kicks or punches are meant to kill his enemies. Movie directors wanted to portray Bruce Lee as a virile, strong, powerful and fit man who always wins in the battle. Bruce Lee often portrayed characters that are confident, arrogant, and flawless. His influence can be seen in movies, games, and anime. Through his movies, Bruce Lee created a new form of Asian masculinity.

Due to the popularity of martial heroes, the soldiers' strong bodies and minds are touted as the ultimate male virtues, along with their fierce loyalty to the country. Movies, dramas started to promote a mix of the traditional values associated with “martial” (wu) masculinity (honour, loyalty, and physical toughness), along with newer, post socialist values (such as entrepreneurship and chauvinist patriotism). Hollywood style masculinity and Chinese martial masculinity was the ideal image promoted around Asia.

But in just a short period, South Korea became the entertainment capital of Asia. The growth of online video services and social networking on the internet provided the opportunity for K-dramas to reach a much larger audience over the world. More money and efforts were being spent on the production of dramas to attract the audience. In 2002, the drama *Winter*

Sonata premiered in both Japan and the Philippines. It became one of the highest-rated shows in both countries. The drama became an instant mega-hit, making its male hero, Yon Sama, a household name, compelling his enthusiastic fans to visit various film locations, including Namiseom Island, in Korea. Other Korean dramas released in the subsequent years, such as *Full House* (2004), *The Jewel In Palace (2003)* saw comparable levels of success. Since 2002, television programming trends in Asia began to change as series from South Korea started to fill prime time slots previously reserved for Hollywood movies. Due to the Hallyu Wave and the popularity of K-drama led to a rising interest in South Korea's entertainment industry.

With these stars' influence, hegemonic masculinity, traditional masculinity, Korean militarism, soft masculinity, all played a major role in deconstructing masculinity in many ways. Much has been said and written about the discriminatory impressions of women in Korean dramas. Korean dramas have a problematic side that ignores and perpetuates toxic masculinity and abusive relationships. *Empress Ki* (2013), *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019), *Strong Woman Do Bong-Soon* (2017), and The *Secret Garden* (2010) does not escape the patriarchal values they subscribe to as well. There are several mannerisms in these series in which sexism, misogynistic values, patriarchy, male chauvinism, toxic masculinity, play a part in gender portrayals.

K-dramas often present stalker-like behaviour as a harmless or endearing part of romantic courtship. The protagonist is typically a nice guy who doesn't quite fit the toxic masculine ideal or sometimes does fit. And for a variety of reasons, he hasn't found love. One day he meets a woman with whom he becomes infatuated. An audio-visual cue is presented to show the

audience that this is his true love. But, she doesn't return his feelings as she might have rejected him several times or she is seeing someone or she does not know he exists or she is not interested. This doesn't stop him from relentlessly pursuing her. The protagonist will do whatever it takes to convince this woman to love him back. And so, to that end, the protagonist proceeds to spy on her, pester her, and otherwise manipulate her, until he finally manages to wear down her defences. And she agrees to go out with him. This is a recurring plot element often found in Korean dramas.

In these dramas, a man's obsessive, coercive, or stalker-like behaviour is framed as an expression of his love and devotion. In *Secret Garden*, Joo-won is petty and too immature to tell Gil Ra-Im that he likes her, so Joo-won conjures up ways to remain in her life. He follows Gil Ra-im and her boss, in the beginning, fearing that something is going between them. Joo-won even can't resist taking the opportunity to peek in Ra-im's locker, taking a photo of her (without her permission). In episode 12, he lies down next to her, just quietly watching her sleep, with the happiest look in his eyes, at just being able to look at her face (creepy Edward Cullen stare). In *Strong Woman Do Bong-Soon*, Min-hyuk uses his injury as an excuse and opportunity to make Bong-soon fall in love with him. In *Empress Ki*, Ta-hwan rushes to the maid's place to get a glimpse of Seung Nyang eating the reward he sends to the maids. He sneakily peeks from a curtain to stalk her and gets disappointed when he finds she is not in the group. Later, Ta-hwan ordered Sungnyang to have dinner with him as a reward for helping Lady Park in her morning sickness. Alone in Sungnyang's room, Ta-hwan started sniffing and inhaling Sungnyang's handkerchief deeply to drink her scent (without her permission).

He even robs her Sungnyang's handkerchief as his possession and hides it in his garment. Then he lies on her bed and starts sniffing her pillow. He imagines a shy and demure Sungnyang lying on his arm. Later he gets caught by Sungnyang, who questions him. In *The Tale of Nokdu*, Nokdu sees Dong-joo walking down the street and follows Dong-joo from the rooftop. Later, Nokdu even sneaks up and stalks them from the gate, fuming at Dong-joo and Yul-moo's proximity. And even if the woman they are chasing is initially annoyed or upset by his obsessive attention, his actions are inevitably framed as a romantic compliment or gesture. In the end, all of these men get the woman, even after they stalk her, annoy her and trick her in loving them.

All these male protagonists refuse to respect women's boundaries, women's personal space, or women's privacy. These men also ignore all signals of disinterest or rejection. They refuse to take no for an answer. These dramas show that never giving up is one of the most admirable traits of all, especially for men. These gestures prove a man's love, as well as his manhood. This is the type of conduct that we expect from a villain. But K-dramas consistently frames each one of these behaviours as something romantic. But the truth is that much of this behaviour we see in these dramas could very easily land these heroes in jail. In reality, stalking is not romantic but a crime. And beyond legal laws, stalking can also have a serious emotional effect on the victims, leading to anxiety, paranoia, depression, and PTSD.

Korean men are moulded to be hardened, cold and resolute – to the point that they are expected by society to be somewhat brutish in how they deal with people. The protagonist is often a rich man who is cold and aloof, never showing any weakness, including emotions (typical masculine Asian

male). A typical romantic K-drama plot often consists of a rich or a cold-hearted man who treats the female lead horribly. He treats her like dirt on the rare occasions he acknowledges her at all. Male leads embarrass female protagonists, humiliate them, tell them they are stupid, belittle them and inform them that they aren't beautiful or aren't beautiful enough for someone like them. Over time his heart is melted by the female lead's unwavering pure-heartedness and kindness. When he becomes nicer, the female lead falls for him. She forgives and forgets his every bad deed. The female leads can also be fierce and independent instead of innocent and kind. They overcome the odds that are stacked against them, but the power imbalance is often present. Imbalance can be seen in the characters' interactions, with scenes showing the men bossing the women around and even physically controlling them. For instance, Kim Joo-Won is from a wealthy family, smart and good looking. Joo-Won is a pampered rich man who runs his family's fancy department store, while Gil Ra-Im is a hardworking stuntwoman. He is snobby, arrogant, and treats women horribly. Joo-won often embarrasses Gil Ra Im in public and destroys her self-esteem. In episode 3, Joo-won invites Gil Ra Im to a music club. Their date was friendly until Joo-won sees her well-worn bag, which has been mended with safety pins. This makes Joo-won angry and starts criticizing her for being poor that she can't even afford a bag. She gets offended and leaves the date. Instead of sticking to her decision of using her worn-out bag, she asks her friend if she can borrow her purse as she might meet Joo won. Joo-won again criticizes Gil Ra-Im when she comes to the department store to pick up her prize (free vacuum cleaner). He scoffs and belittles her coldly for not having a prestigious family or education,

> "Should I say it's a situation where a woman who briefly excited me not only has a poor education and lousy family, she has no pride?"

In *Empress Ki*, Ta-hwan uses his power to dominate, control and make Sungnyang fall in love with him. Knowing that Wang Yu is Sungnyang's first love, Ta-hwan uses his power to prevent them from seeing each other. Ta-hwan even emphasized to Wang Yu that as he is the Emperor, he controls Sungyang's fate, "I'm the emperor. Heaven or Hell, her fate is in my hands, not yours." He even promises to her that he will never give her to Wang Yu. During the Emperor's morning ritual, Ta-hwan orders Sungnyang to wash his face. But she objects to his order as she is a court lady and comments that it's the servant's job. Ta-hwan, being the emperor, orders Sungnyang to do it and orders everyone else out of the room. Gook-doo (second male lead), Bong-soon's first love often treats her rudely. He criticizes her often for being gullible and not understanding the true untrustworthy natures of men. He often shouts at her,

> "Bong-soon, you trust men too easily. Nice men are players and mean men are swindlers. Don't you know?"

Whenever he meets her, he behaves like a toxic male, not caring about her feelings or emotions.

One of the popular K-drama troupes is the constant wrist grabbing and being dragged away by men. This is often found in all popular K-dramas. This is seen as an act of establishing authority and dominance over the female protagonist. The female protagonists are constantly dragged or pulled like a rag doll by the male protagonists, without her permission. But instead of

fighting against this abuse, the female protagonist accepts this treatment. When Joo-won treats the entire crew to lunch at the store's restaurant, he grabs the wrist of a stunned Gil Ra-Im and drags her along for a date. She even tells him to stop, but he never listens. Whenever Joo-won gets angered by Gil Ra-Im he constantly grabs her wrist and drags her somewhere without her permission. In one of the episodes, Ta-hwan arranges a shadow play for Sungnyang. But as she is a servant, she moves back, so that King could enjoy the play without any disturbance. Ta-hwan noticed that Sungnyang was taking a peek at the shadow play and ordered her to come closer. She stands between Wang Yu and Ta-hwan. Ta-hwan moves a bit and forcefully holds Sungnyang's hand. Sungnyang resisted and hid her hand behind her, but Ta-hwan was persistent as he continued to reach for Sungnyang's hand. Wang Yu saw what Ta-hwan was trying to do. He decided to reach for Sungnyang's hand as well. He grabs her hand and makes her turn around to look at him. Ta-hwan notices this and grabs Sungnyang's other hand and makes her turn around to look at him instead. Both Ta-hwan and Wang Yu glared at each other while grabbing Sungnyang as a rag doll. This scene is further romanticized with a piece of beautiful background music. In *Strong Woman Do Bong-Soon*, Do Bong-soon was born with superhuman strength. She desperately wants to become a delicate and elegant woman, which is the ideal type of her crush, In Guk-doo, a police officer. Min-hyuk hires Bong-soon as his bodyguard after witnessing her beat up a bunch of construction workers when they threatened an old elementary school bus driver. From here, the love triangle between Do Bong-soon, Guk-doo and Min-hyuk start. Unable to accept the fact that Bong-soon is recklessly staying at a man's house at night,

Guk-doo grabs Bong-soon's wrist to pull her out the door, but Min-hyuk quickly grabs her other wrist and tugs her back, telling Guk-doo to let go. In *The Tale of Nokdu*, Jeon Nok Du grew up on a secluded island with his family, but after an attack on their lives, he sets out to find out who is after him. When his attacker enters a village of widows, he disguises himself as a woman to enter the village and gather information. Dong Joo is a gisaeng in training who secretly has plans for revenge on the king. She encounters Nok Du in the city as a man and then again in the widows' village believing he's a woman. She eventually finds out he's a man. They both have some big secrets remaining between them, and their developing feelings for each other complicates their individual lives. In one of the episodes, on her way home, Dong-joo sees Nokdu hiding from the guards. Dong-joo distracts the guards from Nokdu and later runs down the street searching for him. Grabbing her wrist, Nokdu forcefully pulls her into a building. She asks him to let her go, but he refuses and says, "I will not let you leave again".

Nokdu is angered by the fact that she left without a word or goodbye. Therefore, he refuses to let her go ever. Later, when Nokdu is out of danger, Dong-joo tries to leave. Nokdu grabs Dong-joo's wrist and pushes her in the direction of his place. He pulls out her IOU (monetary agreement with him) and says, 'I finally caught the person who took my money, so why should I let you go?'. He uses IOU as a source to blackmail Dong-Joo and keep her close to him.

Another popular trope often promoted in K-dramas is the romanticisation of forced kisses, rape and physical abuse or control. These male protagonists chalk their road to take what they want. Beyond their

charisma, they use physical assault to dominate the female protagonist. Men often boss the women around and even physically control them. K-dramas have a way of disguising sexual harassment as romantic. In most K-dramas, a romantic scene often consists of the man giving an unwitting or unwilling woman a surprise back hug or suddenly planting a kiss on her startled face—cue the music and slow motion. These romantic K-drama "heroes" all partake in forms of sexual harassment. For instance a scene from *Secret Garden*, Gil Ra Im is seen taking a sip of coffee and ends up with foam on her lip, which Joo-won calls out as a typical coy manoeuvre adopted by women when they are around men,

> "Look at that, look at that. Why do women do that ? They never do it when they're with each other. But whenever a man's around, they get cream on their lip and pretend not to notice."

Offended by his remarks, she reaches to wipe it off, but he grabs her hand out of the way and leans in, getting up out of his seat. With a soft kiss, he licks the foam off her startled lips. Later, when she looks after his injury, he pushes his way into her room. Before she can shove him out again, he pushes her into bed, holding her to him, and tells her firmly to go to sleep. Gil Ra-im puts up a struggle, threatening first and then pleading for him to let her go. But he ignores and disregards her. Eventually, she settles down with him. *Empress Ki* focuses on the love triangle between Sungnyang, Ta-hwan and Wang Yu. With the revelation of her identity, Ta-hwan and Wang Yu fall for her. But Seung Nyang loved Wang Yu. Knowing about her love for Wang Yu, Ta-hwan tries his best to prevent both lovers from meeting each other. When Sungnyang became Ta-hwan's consort, Ta-hwan feared that Sungnyang would

leave him for Wang Yu. While she was reading, he barged into Sungnyang's room. He tries to kiss her forcefully but she resisted his advances. Angered by her rejection, Ta-hwan commits marital rape. The drama frames the violent sexual assault committed by Ta-hwan as a form of romance.

While viewers may call these men "spoiled," "arrogant," or "mean," no one ever points out that they are abusive, coercive, and dangerous. Ta-hwan and Joo-won force the woman to give them consent under the threat of violence or power after physically attacking or trapping her in their hold. Ta-hwan and Joo-won are often faced with their internal struggles. When he was a teenager, Joo-Won was trapped in an elevator during a fire. Ra-Im's firefighter dad rescued him, sacrificing his own life for Joo-Won's. His insecurities, trauma and obsession are shown as excuses in the drama for his toxic behaviour towards Gil Ra-Im. Instead of facing that internal struggle, they reassert their power by exerting power over a woman. These scenes reinforce more dangerous ideas about courtship.

In most dramas, Korean men are portrayed as very territorial of their leading female counterparts. In K-dramas, the male protagonist constantly makes it clear that the female lead is his property, to do with as he pleases. Every K-drama promotes a toxic possessive boyfriend. Nokdu, Ta-hwan, Minhyuk, and Joo won; these men are extremely possessive of their women. Once the woman starts her relationship with the male protagonist, she is controlled and easily manipulated by him. He often intrudes on the woman's boundaries and disrespects her inherent independence. He prevents her from talking to her male friends and hates it if she talks to the opposite sex without his permission. Jealousy and possessiveness are often romanticized. It's

“romantic” when a man becomes aggressive to protect “his” woman because the only way men can express their emotions in K-dramas is through explosions of jealous rage.

The troubling implication in these dramas is that when the woman says no, they don't mean it or it's part of some courtship game where good girls play hard to get. And that manner, therefore, justifies continuing to pressure them until they finally give in. They also reinforce another idea that women's anger isn't real, instead, it is an invitation to men to continue their advances. Ta-hwan and Joo-won refuse to listen to the woman when they say no, they also use force to get what they want. Gil Ra Im and Seung Nyang are written to have positive responses to Joo-won's and Ta-hwan's aggressive behaviour. Their reaction reinforces the myth that women secretly want men to force themselves. Even and especially when they explicitly say no. These men represent the paragon of South Korea's manhood.

It becomes dangerous when these problematic things or toxic behaviour is presented as romance. K-dramas present childhood trauma or he has such trouble displaying emotions or his insecurities as reasons to justify the male protagonist's toxic behaviour towards the woman they love. Characters like these promote a toxic male who dominates over the woman by using his power and wealth. He keeps on emotionally and physically torturing and blackmailing her. The tactics of invading a woman's personal space, aggressively propositioning her multiple times and putting her in a very uncomfortable position of having to object to men; these are strategies often used by men to seduce a woman. Dramas often confuse coercion or abuse as signs of seduction or romance. K-dramas portray the actions of these

protagonists as the unabashed glorification of romantic love.

A man's deception, his lie, his trickery, his manipulation; none of these disqualifies him from a romantic relationship. In reality, the willingness to blatantly violate someone else's privacy is wrong. This behaviour connects to deep-seated issues of control and extreme levels of entitlement. The cinematic performance of the male protagonist's masculinity is portrayed by using these tropes. The conventions of toxic manhood are part of South Korean tradition in popular television shows, series, and music. As the dramas mentioned here illustrate, men are socialized to believe that it's acceptable to pressure or use physical power or stalk or coerce women.

Traditional Asian masculinity can be described as “hard” masculinity, meaning hyper-masculine, strong, and consequently, aggressive. Everything stems from the idea of strength in one way or another, and this naturally means one has to deviate from what is deemed ‘womanly,’ though these categories constantly shift, too. Men usually need to be valued because society nurtures men's usefulness. That is, the idea that men are providers in the workplace and at home. Men are usually graced with rewards, promise and power, and relevance until it's taken away. Ta Hwan is the emperor of the Yuan Empire. He becomes a king with the help of El Temür, by marrying his daughter and by betraying Seung Nyang and Wang Yu. He is spoiled and cowardly. Ta-hwan lacks most of the traits traditionally associated with hypermasculine men. He's not confident or athletic. He is a king who has no purpose, ambition or relevance. Ta-hwan's masculinity is diminished by being emotional, cowardly, or weak. He is easily controlled under the whims and wishes of El Temür (Regent). He proves his manhood by exerting his power

over others.

Ta-hwan is plagued with a wide variety of anxieties, childhood trauma, and cowardly personality quirks. Ta Hwan feared for his life as the people who were supposed to be protecting him were trying to kill him. He didn't know whom to trust. Ta-hwan constantly tries to attempt different versions of hypermasculinity, that is, by drinking or using force on a woman or playing soccer to prove his masculinity. He is shown engaging in a variety of harassing, entitled and sexist behaviour where women are concerned. Ta Hwan loves Seung Nyang and he is very possessive about her. He would stop at nothing to make her his. He consistently stalks, spy on, lie to and try to manipulate Sungnyang. He is overbearing and refuses to take no for an answer. He also ignores the basic tenets of consent. Ta-hwan also commits the act of rape to Sungnyang. His act should be understood as reprehensible. But that's not how *Empress Ki* frames it. His behaviour is framed as harmless. But this framing is designed to excuse the toxic misogyny. He goes through a slow and painful transformation as he learns to use his power and be a ruler. He is turned into a hypermasculine power male with the help of Sungnyang. He becomes good at speech, archery and becomes more courageous to face El Temur. Therefore, he becomes an alpha male.

Men are raised to be strong, both physically and emotionally, to constantly keep up with appearances of masculinity. But this puts them in opposition to their truer self that is kept hidden inside them. The pressures of toxic masculinity encourage men to conceal their affinity for the "softer" things often linked to femininity.

However, with the global success of Hallyu, people are starting to

accept the legitimacy of soft masculinity and its emphasis on the graceful sophisticated image of the flower boy rather than the conventional tough, muscular bad boy image Hollywood is familiar. The zest over Korean drama, Kpop, and other subcultures spawning from these pop culture wellsprings have undone what Koreans have thought to be the epitome of manliness. Toxic masculinity was no longer the ideal archetype. Instead, idols and actors focused on how not to be if one wanted to look and feel more global, more progressive, and ultimately, more acceptable. Soft masculinity allows men to express themselves in ways previously regarded as the terrain of queer men or gay men. Soft Masculinity in Korea is completely contrary to the rugged often narrow-minded concept of what it is to be a man in the United States. Korea is setting the bar for men's beauty and fashion, and as Korean culture, like K-pop rises in popularity in the West, it opens the door for expansion in the market of male beauty products. Toxic masculinity prohibits men from wearing makeup or taking extreme care of their skin.

The acceptance of soft masculinity has helped in combating toxic masculinity. Men who have adopted soft masculinity are seen to be more appearance-conscious: taking a liking to fashion, beauty cosmetics, makeup and accessories. The favoured personality traits of these men are often more nurturing and sensitive, in contrast to the hyper-aggressive, muscle-flexing masculine personality in the West. This phenomenon has begun to blur the line of what is masculine and feminine, allowing gender to be expressed more fluidly.

Min-hyuk is an eccentric man who is playful, a little spoiled, has no regard for rules, and he is the owner of Ainsoft. And Oh Dol-ppyeo is the

Head of Development Planning Team in Ainsoft. In *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, Oh Dol-ppyeo is introduced as the effeminate doppelgänger of Kwang-bok (Gangster in Baek Tak Party). Heels clicking and gum-snapping, are the recurring background sounds used to distinguish him from other men in drama. He even proclaims himself to be the crazy psycho of the office,

" I'm the crazy one in this area !"

He often torments Bong-soon as he is an admirer of Minhyuk and sees Bong-soon as a rival. Minhyuk and Oh Dol-ppyeo do not have the strength that is stereotypically associated with men. They are positioned in opposition to the expected norms of toxic masculinity. They are presented as a clear underdog in the manhood competition. It's the assumption that all men are supposed to be strong, unemotional, and courageous, and it's absurd if a man doesn't have these qualities. Often certain dramas show that if guys who aren't physically strong, tough, or athletic are unmanly. These men embody the exact opposite of the hegemonic ideal. But they are comfortable with their soft version of manhood.

Their version of manhood doesn't stem from physical strength or combat skills. They are sincere, emotional, and sensitive. When men express this kind of vulnerability, they are often labelled "weak". Emotions and sensitivity are things that are stereotypically associated with women and feminity. It's practically required for male heroes to hide their vulnerability. This type of soft masculinity is not often found in the qualities associated with the leading man. But in Korean drama, the male characters exhibit both feminine and masculine traits. For instance, *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, *Tale of Nokdu* frames these attributes as positive and heroic aspects of the

leading man. Later in *The Tale of Nokdu*, Dong-joo learns that Nok Du is the son of the King, the man responsible for her parent's death. She's, even more, conflicted to murder the King when she finds out that Nokdu is the King's guard. She breaks her relation with Nokdu fearing that he will start to hate her when he finds out about her assassination plan. Someone reports about Dong-joo's plot against the King and mentions her location to the King. While escaping from the King's guards, Nokdu catches up to her. His fears are confirmed when Dong-joo spins around, pointing her crossbow at him. Nokdu realises the truth and weeps at the tragedy of their situation. Nokdu is often shown as being emotional and sensitive. But these qualities make him stronger and close to his loved ones. In *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, Minhyuk has recently received anonymous threats and has even been stalked, leading him to hire Bong-soon as his bodyguard. Later, Minhyuk finds out that his second and most trusted brother, Dong-suk, is the one who terrorized his life. Unable to bear this news, he cries and crumbles as a little piece of him breaks inside.

Korean dramas started to satisfy the audiences' contradictory expectations of men, women and romance lies in the hybrid representations of both man and woman characters who contain both traditional qualities and new qualities of gender roles. The ideal representations manifest particularly in the context of a romantic relationship because there is a deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity at the same time. In K-dramas, soft masculinity is starting to become an archetype that is slowly being accepted by society.

K-dramas offer restructuring and deconstruction of masculinity and the 'male', which has been presented throughout mainstream media. With the

known fact that male actors use make-up, they defy the categorically divided and gendered beauty industry. There is an appreciation and acceptance of the softer side of human temperament in men, as opposed to always portraying them as tough, indifferent, cold and arrogant. Several plot elements, practices, tools are used in filmmaking to illustrate soft masculinity.

Costumes are one of the many tools the director uses to tell the story. Costumes communicate the details of a character's personality to the audience and help actors transform into new and believable people on screen. Costumes play a major part in representing soft masculinity. For instance, Minhyuk is often portrayed in sharply cut suits with fitted black trousers creating a sharp look. Yet the intricate designs on the introduce a sense of delicacy to the traditional suit of hegemonic masculinity. The skinny trouser further extends his long slender legs. His outfit challenges the toxic male ideals of emphasising physical prowess rather than donning clothes that complement the body lines such that a woman would wear. Nokdu and Minhyuk's outfits often serve to soften the protagonist's visual presentation. The use of colourful and pastel costumes openly brings out the softer side of the characters - Minhyuk and Nokdu. In one of the episodes, Nokdu and King Gwanghae wear a pastel pink hanbok with a hanbok hat adorned with amethyst beads. Pastel or colourful outfits are considered and may appear girly to those who fail to comprehend the Korean attraction towards soft masculinity, due to the toxic masculine ideals ingrained in society.

During the mid-90s, the choker necklace became the accessory of choice of goth, emo and riot girls. After 5 years, it started to become popular among female singers. But a man was not allowed to wear a choker, as he

would be criticized for being unmanly. This promoted the dangerous sentiment that men are supposed to adhere to hypermasculine culture. With the rise of K-pop, chockers started to become more popular among men. Men started to express themselves with styles that may be more outré and flamboyant, and their necks adorned with tightly-wound, velvet chokers. In *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, Oh Dol-ppyeo often wears a choker necklace with his black, red, and white suits.

Cinematography is the art and craft of making motion pictures by capturing a story visually. It composes each shot, considering, where everything in frame demands attention. Cinematography is another common way to portray soft masculinity. This includes slow-motion pans and facial close-ups that boast the male protagonist's flawless skin and delicate features. The fragmented and close-up shots of Nokdu and Minhyuk in the drama highlights their smooth skin, silky hair and curly eyelashes. The use of fragmented and close-up shots reiterate and highlight the masculine and feminine features of actors. In one of the episodes, Nokdu is introduced by a close-up shot of his face and the surroundings of the widow village. Then the camera focuses on his eyes, skin and pink lips. The scene emphasises his masculine and feminine beauty. K-drama actors who are presented with a more feminine aesthetic, do not necessarily adhere to the perception of toxic masculinity and are often misgendered, and mocked.

Aegyo refers to the behaviour of acting cute that denotes a particular style not only in K-pop and K-dramas but also in South Korea society in a broader sense. Aegyo is gender fluid and endearingly presents actors in line with soft masculinity. Though not a conventional form of masculinity, Aegyo

is attractive in its ability to bring down barriers between the actors and the audiences. Minhyuk and Nokdu often act cute to attract the female protagonist. In *Strong Woman Do Bong Soon*, when Bong-soon calls Minhyuk sweetly, he becomes so happy and starts acting cute. Similarly, when Dong-joo scolds Nokdu, he starts pouting cutely. This action even makes Dong-joo guilty.

The idea of masculinity is usually related to toxic masculinity, which is strong, powerful, aggressive, and dominant. However, because masculinity is a part of gender, its characteristics can be different in each place or country depending on what kind of society and culture that shape it. Not only that, but even the characteristic of masculinity in a country can also be changing along with the development. It also occurs in the characteristics of masculinity in South Korea. This country was originally a country that has the characteristics of traditional masculinity and holds patriarchy, but that characteristics are slowly changing and being replaced by other masculine traits are known as soft masculinity. For the longest time, the media space was hegemonized by western content, Hallyu opened a new avenue for Asian media to gain recognition. K-Pop and K-drama are consumed by a global audience. The music, TV industry, beauty and fashion trends that the Hallyu Wave has presented to the world have redefined masculinity.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

In her 1995 book, *Masculinities*, RW Connell lays out the theory that masculinity does not have a single form, but rather many different forms of manhood that all exist within a hierarchy. The white heterosexual hyper masculine ideal is at the top of that hierarchy, and then all other forms of masculinity are made subordinate to it (78). Forms of manhood that are in any way associated with homosexuality or feminity are pushed further down on the hierarchy. This hierarchical structure then creates a social system wherein men are encouraged to compete with other men for status and dominance, even within their peer groups and subcultures. This can be dangerous for men and those around them, both in terms of physical health and emotional well being. But, one can reject this battle for dominance, and instead embrace empathetic, supportive and softer forms of masculinity.

Toxic Masculinity is a social script that tells men and boys that the right way to be a man is to be violent, emotionally unavailable, sexually aggressive and so forth. It's a narrow confining definition of a man that shuts off a vast range of human experiences and marginalizes the men who fail to conform to the societal standard. It tells them what pursuits are worthy, what styles are acceptable, and how a man talks, walks and looks. Toxic masculinity is a traditional concept that forces men to become self-destructive in the pursuit of what society says " a real man should be and do". Toxic Masculinity destroys men like a virus and affects everyone around them. It's damaging to women. It's damaging to their sense of safety, to their well being

and their careers.

Society is structured to reward men who follow the script and marginalizes those who don't. There are systems and beliefs set up to reward the brutality of men. For example, the Ancient Greeks believed that the most gallant and bold in battle would go to Elysian Fields after death, a heavenly realm ruled by the God of time(Cronus). Often soldiers or men pay the penalty of death to maintain his masculinity and to prevent himself from being effeminate. Aggression and hostility are held up as macho standards naturally, but not desirable traits for men to have, despite their overwhelmingly negative impact on people, groups and society. Often aggression is lionized and rewarded while passivity is diminished. For example in the movie *Wolf of Wall Street (2013)*, investment banking is shown as an industry that attracts and rewards aggression.

Toxic Masculinity is the fear of appearing weak. If men exhibit any qualities deemed as "feminine" such as empathy, sympathy, sensitivity; then their manhood card is questioned or taken away by society. Passive manner, depicted as lesser, as weaker, as compromised, fake men victimised by society, and the path to self-acceptance is through the primal embrace of violence.

The people most invested in the toxic masculine identity are actively, knowingly promoting it, and defending it from change or criticism. The narrow masculine script is often presented as naturalistic, or a "bio-truth". Media makers deliberately call attention to a dissonant or overly clichéd aspect of their production. Rather than writing better plots or dialogues, writers attempt to duck any potential criticism by pointing out the sexism

inherent in their dialogues inherently. Many writers still want to use sexist, racist and homophobic jokes as an easy way to get cheap laughs. Most of the punch lines or dialogues end up making light of serious social issues like sexual harassment, abuse. Most of the K-dramas portray sexism or misogyny or toxic masculinity as harmless. Especially when these all come from the handsome male protagonist. K-dramas show writers often end up reinforcing a whole bunch of regressive ideas about what it means to be a "real man". Viewers are often accustomed to seeing men who are quick to violence and slow to diplomacy. On television, men's feelings and bruised egos are nearly always depicted as more important than women's comfort, or women's safety. The misogyny or sexist behaviour of these protagonists are tolerated by peers, girlfriends and by their employers.

Movies often normalize and glamorize the aggressive behaviour and cultural mind-set that makes men feel that they are superior to women and can do whatever they want to/with the women they encounter. Most depictions of gender roles in the films include portrayals of men as dominant, aggressive, and unemotional, and women as submissive and emotional. Movies like these often perform well in theatres. For instance, *Joker* was inspired by Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (Graphic Novel). The film is about the escalating events in the life of a weak, vulnerable man who ultimately evolves into the terrifying psychopath self-styled The Joker. Phoenix's Arthur Fleck is the victim of a vicious attack by a group of men. Due to this, Arthur takes his frustration out on the people around him in a deadly manner, in a way that can be read as a reflection of modern "incel" culture and mass shootings in America. But Director Todd Phillips doesn't necessarily present this response

as unacceptable. Rather he presents it as understandable. And *Joker* is officially the first R-rated movie in history to earn over $1 billion at the global box office.

Writers attempt to also justify stalking behaviours by framing it as necessary to keep women safe from the dangers posed by other men. Stalking for protection storylines are troubling for a whole host of reasons, but chief among them is the fact that regardless of the intentions behind it, stalking doesn't make women feel safer. Stalking isn't framed as something worthy of genuine concern in K-dramas. It is depicted as a temporary lapse in judgement fueled by passionate feelings. In some instances, the romantic hero might confess or apologise, once he's caught stalking. But rarely are there any lasting negative impacts, or meaningful forms of atonement. In the K-dramas, if the hero comes clean, his transgressions are quickly forgiven.

Regardless of the intentions of the writers, these narratives end up both excusing and romanticizing behaviour of abusive men. However, its prevalence and popularity in Korean dramas raises several questions. Dramas like these carry with them some insidious messages about men and masculinity. The most popular among them is the idea that abusive men need to meet the right woman - someone so special that the promise of her love will magically cure him of his violent ways. Sometimes these dramas are about the forgiveness and redemption of these troubled men, which in some ways they are. Unfortunately, these redemption arcs play out in ways that end up reinforcing some very pernicious myths about domestic abuse. Men with a history of violent behaviour don't spare their loved ones. On the contrary, domestic violence statistics show that intimate partners and family members

bear the brunt of their attacks. The lesson that transmits to young girls is this: no matter how bad a man treats you, if you are patient and kind enough he will change and love you with complete devotion. In the real world, this is completely untrue.

In K-dramas, we are usually expected to assume that these abusive or violent or manipulative romances will end happily ever after. But in the real world love affairs shown in the dramas mentioned would lead to abusive relationships. Violent men can change their pattern of behaviour through therapy (for years). But this rarely happens in K-dramas. In the dramas mentioned here, abusive men are miraculously transformed by finding true love, and they gain forgiveness for their crimes through a single act of heroism. They are never held accountable for the harm they inflicted on others. It is not possible to fix a violent or abusive man by loving them in the right way. What is perhaps the most disturbing part about K-dramas is their propensity to normalise abusive behaviour. Real redemption requires taking responsibility for one's actions and self-transformation. On-screen relationships can bloom from many numbers of dramatic or exciting scenarios - there is no reason for writers to continue romanticizing abusive or toxic male behaviour.

Manhood ideals are fiction. It only exists in the cultural imagination, which means that men can never actually achieve it. However, it's still a standard against which men are held and compared. The social expectations and pressures on men to try to achieve some version of it are real as is the social status either lost or gained based on a man's perceived proximity to that ideal. Men are taught how to perform their manhood, to prove that they are

closer to that fictional ideal than the other men around them. The rigorous toxic concepts of manhood promoted in these series are present in every other facet of life.

K-drama show writers often reinforce regressive ideas about what it means to be "a real man". The men's failures in the quest to prove their manhood is often made fun of in K-dramas. In dramas, men insult and belittle other men by calling them "women", this is an extension of misogyny. Their jokes often target those who, not manly enough, are steeped in a thick layer of homophobia. Anti-feminine attitudes are concerned with the ways that men police each other's presentation of manhood. In *The Tale of Nokdu* (2019), catching sight of himself in the mirror, Nokdu gets offended by his womanly appearance and tries to find a set of men’s clothes in a cabinet, before Dong-Joo's arrival.

The humour consistently codes Oh Dol-Byung and Minhyuk effeminate behaviours and interests as gay. There is an unfortunate tendency in most cultures to try to pin the blame for men's emasculation on women, but most of the time the perpetrators are men who are participating in the competition for dominance. And in doing so, they become complicit in the very structures that harm and exclude them. It's long past time for K-drama writers to retire the sexist, toxic masculinity, homophobic trope.

Another problem arises (due to toxic masculinity) when viewers start believing that male sexuality is inherently forward and that men are, by nature, unstoppable sex fiends or abusers. Not only is this limiting of men, who, say, aren't all interested in sex, or who prefer to take a more passive role in their sexual encounters or abuse. It also creates an environment of entitlement, by

imbuing sexual aggression or abuse with a sense of inevitability. Ideas like: Men always abuse woman or men can't be friends with women, because he will inevitably try to have sex with her. Or far worse ideas that trot dubiously along the boundaries of consent. This cuts both ways, demonizing men as rapists-in-training or abuser-in-training. Also dismissing the role of agency in men who commit sexual violence or physical violence. As though being raped is an inescapable, natural consequence of being off-guard around men. Whenever a man attempts to get away from the toxic society that has exploited, dehumanized and marginalized him and tries to reclaim individuality and identity, he is again criticized or judged. Passive-aggressive corporate culture is equated with a perceived feminization of society.

The beauty of the internet assisted in the momentum of the ‘Hallyu’ Wave, where K-Pop spread throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia. A concoction of washboard abs on slender bodies, beautified with slick fashion and makeup, had become the look of the new male eye candy in Asia. As a part of Hallyu, K-pop and K-drama have gained tremendous popularity not only in Asia but also in other continents, such as America, Europe, and Australia.

With the rise of K-pop and K-drama, soft masculinity gained dominance. Women were willing to spend a large amount of their time and money on popular entertainment as the result of soft masculinity. K-pop and K-drama have impacted the lifestyles of the consumers in their expression of masculinity, as well as the perception of what women find attractive in a man. Soft Masculinity has become increasingly popular, specifically in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Southeast Asia. K-pop and K-drama also kick-

started the fan culture, becoming a force in the entertainment industry. The beautiful faces of K-pop and K-dramas stars are plastered on every billboard, window shop, television and cinema screen. Many male celebrities are on beauty and skincare ads to attract the fans, getting them to buy the products endorsed.

Audiences have been conditioned to expect a type of masculine performance in films and TV series. The audience expects leading men or heroes to be autonomous, brazen and physically strong. Or witty, charismatic and boisterous. Leading men should strip themselves from emotions, and feelings. The audience often forgives aggression and arrogance in men but to take exception at presentations of humility and sensitivity. Audiences are accustomed to seeing men who are quick to violence and slow to diplomacy. Minhyuk, Nokdu and Oh Dol-Byung is a significant departure from the trend of macho men. They are the ones who are more or less okay with themselves and aren't troubled that they don't conform with the ideals of toxic masculinity. The drama's narrative doesn't require them to "toughen up" or to act like "a real man". They can be considered as the "enlightened man". By framing sensitivity and nurturing as positive and heroic aspects of a leading man, it goes a long way to challenging regressive gender expectations.

Toxic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculinity has become less appealing to women, as the ‘macho’ personality is less approachable and intimidating. They are too aggressive and cold-hearted. Despite having traits that might make them look dependable, protective and financially supportive, they do not sympathise with women about the social pressures placed upon them. Increasingly, women are looking for something

more delicate, and young men are obliging—showing emotional vulnerability, publicly crying, going to therapy, and being the little spoon. The patriarchal Asian society has pushed women to gravitate towards more sensitive men who are open with their feelings and don't see or treat women as sexual objects.

In recent years, there has been a growing obsession with a certain type of masculine culture in the West - "softboy". K-pop and K-drama have inspired the West in creating this trend. A softboy is a boy who is less stereotypically masculine and is often associated with their soft or gentle characteristics. Earlier the term was adopted by Transgenders (Trans boy), who did not fit into the strict mould of masculinity. However, over the last year, the term softboy has evolved, and now represents a very different group of men.

Softboy indicates a more tender man, someone who subverts the expectations of masculinity and claims traits that are traditionally coded as feminine. Being able to embrace their softer personality traits without the fear of being judged is an a astounding thing - for all genders. Each incarnation represents an renouncement of toxic masculinity. They display vulnerability on their social media platforms and in interviews and take on unconventional roles, while simultaneously branding a new image for the young male heartthrob.

Pop culture's love of soft boys can be seen in the popularity of contemporary entertainers like Timothée Chalamet, Cole Sprouse, Harry Styles, and Luka Sabbat. Chalamet's soft and atypical performances have redefined the Hollywood male sex symbol as a cisgender guy coded in stereotypically feminine traits. His breakout role as Elio in *Call Me By Your*

Name (2017), a film about a queer teen's sexual awakening, drew in fans and earned more than $41 million in the worldwide box office. Chalamet himself is the poster boy for softboy style. His rise to fame has been marked by curating red carpet outfits that highlight his youth, slightness, and genuine, goofy earnestness.

Due to Chalamet's popularity, popular platforms such as Netflix are focusing on featuring soft boys in the leading-man roles. Noah Centino in *To All The Boys I Loved Before* (2018), Cole Sprouse in *Riverdale* (2017) have contributed to developing the soft boy trend. A study from 2015, found that the traits most valued among men were dependability, reliability, honesty, sensitivity, and loyalty, suggesting a cultural change from the toxic male ideals of the past generations. Softboy culture is a rejection of a plague that is toxic masculinity. Society has a long history of teaching men that manhood is mastered through power, strength, athleticism, and heterosexual prowess, but K-drama is bringing a revolution around the world. They are changing the traditions and norms followed by toxic masculinity. They are paving the way for the abolition of toxic masculinity.

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