

Misogyny in Hell-Joseon: An Intersectional Approach to the Misogyny of South Korean Society

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Abstract

This study aims to explain the recent misogynistic atmosphere of South Korean society through intersectionality theory. While misogynistic hate speech and resulting feminist movement increase, the generalized binary framework, which regards men as offenders and women as victims, maintains the fight between men and women. Black feminism, which emphasizes identity politics, provides an alternative framework for analyzing the misogyny of Korean society. Therefore, this research focuses on the intersectional identities of Korean men and women, thereby identifying the misogyny of Korea as a result of the gender sensitivity formed by dialectical interaction between colonial history and contemporary social contexts. The so-called “Hell-Joseon” discourse, which compares Korea to hell, summarizes this dialectical interaction. Looking back on the genealogy of misogyny in Joseon/Korea in the 20th century, this paper reveals that Korean misogyny discourse has been formed by men who have attributed the cause of national crisis to women who are thought to have polluted the essence of the nation. While Korean men have established themselves as the owners of the nation, they have also formed a repressed identity through colonial experience. This intersectional identity constitutes a particular pathos among men and results in double oppression of women. This profoundly rooted colonialism and the resulting distorted nationalism, intertwined with widespread defeatism of young people, form the basis of today’s misogyny. Analyzing the dynamics of the misogyny in a broader context, this study discusses in what ways Korean feminist movement and cultural studies can challenge the gender imaginary created by colonialism.

Keywords: misogyny, South Korea, intersectionality, black feminism, colonialism, nationalism

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Introduction: after a murder at Gangnam station

On May 17, 2016, a young woman was stabbed to death in a bar restroom near Gangnam station. The murderer said that he had committed the crime because women had always ignored him. Therefore many women viewed this tragic incident not as any other murder but as a misogynistic criminal act. They flocked to Gangnam station and put up Post-its on one of the station exits. Most of the Post-its communicated the message “I have #survived.” “#survived” – implying “If I were there instead of her, I would have been killed only because I am a woman” – became slogan for women who wanted to accuse Korean society permeated with misogyny. They started to give testimonies on the misogyny they experienced in their lives, from the gender inequality structure in the workplace to physical or sexual violence from men. The Gangnam station murder definitely marked a turning point in Korean feminism.

The more popular feminism has become, the more backlash has occurred. Some men showed displeasure about the “#survived” movement. They claimed that the murder was just one of many murders and it was very rude for women to accuse innocent men as being potential criminals. One man even likened men to carnivores who kill herbivores, which became controversial since this statement implies that a natural hierarchy exists between men and women.

The murder at Gangnam station triggered a broad-scale gender war. The binary framework, men as offenders and women as victims, was a generalized assumption sustaining this gender war. To solve this conflict, we need alternative frameworks to view this phenomenon. This paper draws an answer from black feminism, which emphasizes identity politics. This paper focuses on the intersectional identities of Korean men and women, thereby examining the misogyny in Korea as a result of the gender sensitivity manifested from these particular identities. There is a dialectical interaction between colonial history and contemporary social contexts. The so-called “Hell-Joseon” discourse, which compares the socioeconomic crisis in Korea to hell, summarizes this dialectical interaction.

Looking back on the genealogy of misogyny in Joseon/Korea, this study reveals that Korean misogyny discourse has been formed by men who have attributed the cause of national crisis to women who are thought to have polluted the essence of the nation. While Korean men have established themselves as the owners of the nation, they have also formed a repressed identity as a result of colonial experience. This intersectional identity constitutes a particular pathos among men and results in the double oppression of women.

The profoundly rooted colonialism and the resulting distorted nationalism, intertwined with the widespread defeatism of young people, form the basis of today’s misogyny. Analyzing the dynamics of the misogyny in a broader context, this study aims to shed light on disregarded aspects of Korean misogyny and feminism. Finally, this research gives attention to how the Korean feminist movement and cultural studies can challenge the gender imaginary created by colonialism.

Incorporating intersectionality theory into Korean gender studies

Intersectionality describes overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). One's identity is constituted of diverse dimensions such as gender, race, nationality, religion, and so on. These identities are not "unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins, 2015). Thus an intersectional perspective on identity politics helps understand how social inequality has been created on a multidimensional basis.

The most significant aspect of intersectionality theory is that it provides an alternative to the binary frame of men and women. When people discuss feminism, they are prone to bring up this binary frame, thereby generalizing and denouncing men as inflictors, misogynists, or social evils. This is why discussions about feminism often rouse antipathy, especially from men. However, intersectionality theory provides a theoretical frame to examine not only minorities', but also majorities' standpoints in broader contexts as to understand how a certain structure of oppression has been formed.

In Korean research, not much attention has been given to the intersectional perspective. It was just mentioned in quantitative researches that categorize gender as one's identity (Kim, 2011; Kim, 2015). Or it was just introduced at the theoretical level while explaining black feminism or the feminism movement in Western countries (Park, 2014; Bae, 2016).

There are, however, some researches based on the intersectional perspective. For example, some researches on gender inequality in the labor market (Bae, 2009; Seok, 2004), difficulties working mothers face (Kim, 2010, 2014), and female prostitutes (Won, 2011) discuss the intersection of gender and class. Researches on multicultural families (Lee, 2014; Jung, 2015) and comfort women (Moon, 2014) touch on the intersection of gender and race, or gender and nationality.

However, unlike Western countries' diversity of ethnic and national backgrounds, Korea has been considered as ethnically homogenous. Thus only the distinction or hierarchy between men and women has been visibly discussed, while diversity within a certain gender or one's intersectional identity has been less discussed.

This paper attempts to discuss Korean men's hatred of Korean women by examining the intersection of gender and nationality. Nationalism and colonialism have been strong ideologies that permeate Korean culture due to people's historical experience, and they have also constituted misogyny in Korea.

Women with dragon tattoos: double-suppression upon Korean women

It is not a new phenomenon for certain Korean men to detest or express rage toward Korean women. To be more precise, there have always been men who disapprove of certain women being "Korean" women. While men have stood as creators or owners of the nation and have striven to establish the honorable history of the nation, they have felt ashamed of certain women who seemed to contaminate the essence of the nation and alienated them. This chapter will review the history of misogyny in Korea.

“Hwanyang-nyon(화양년)” is a bad word indicating immoral women, usually used by the elderly. It is said that this word stems from the Qing invasion of Joseon that occurred in the 17th century. When the newly established Manchu Qing dynasty invaded Korea’s Joseon kingdom, the Qing troops abducted many Joseon people for forced labor. After the war, the Joseon people returned to their hometown. However, “hwan-hyang-nyo(환향녀, “returned women” in Korean)” had to live the rest of their lives in misery because people, including their husbands, condemned them and accused them of losing their chastity to the Qing people. So hwanyang-nyo¹ became a derogatory word and is still used as a misogynistic word.²

As Joseon entered the 20th century, some women received high education, had careers, cut their hair in modern styles, and engaged in free relationship. They were called “new women.” However, some found these women repulsive since these women transgressed the traditional patriarchal discipline. People thought that new women had abandoned the “Joseon-ness” and ideal femininity of Joseon, and accused them as being slaves to vanity (Joo et al, 2013).

Similar responses existed toward “yang-gongju,”³ prostitutes who serviced members of the U.S. military during the 1950~80s. While South Korea exploited them, calling them patriots for earning dollars from the US, Korean men were ashamed of them (Joo et al, 2013). A newspaper column proves the hatred toward yang-gongju by stating:

Those women who ride cars with Americans, who wander the street chewing gum, who wear strange make-up and hairstyles! Their vanity contaminates Joseon’s beautiful and fine customs, destroys our nation’s morality, and disregards our dignity. Using national surveillance, we should expel them from our beautiful country. *Chosunilbo* (1947. 1. 21)

People did not have a problem with men who wore modern styles, hung out with Americans, and chewed gum. Neither the term “new man” nor “yang-wangja”⁴ existed. Only women were regarded as troublemakers who polluted the “dignity” of “our beautiful country”.

In 1990, comfort women became a political issue for the first time in Korea. Comfort women were sexual slaves during the Japanese colonial period. Forty years passed before the past existence of comfort women could become an openly politicized issue. Japan has tried to cover up their past and Korea somewhat abetted its concealment because many people were ashamed of comfort women having existed. When Hak-Sun Kim, the first woman to come forward about the plight of comfort women, had a press conference, some people were reluctant to make this known to the international

¹ In Korean, “nyo” means “a woman”, and “nyon” is roughly equivalent to “bitch.”

² It has turned out that this origin is a fabricated story, not historical fact. Nevertheless, it is true that women who returned from Qing suffered persecution.

³ “Yang” indicates “Western”, especially related to the US, and “gongju” means “princess.”

⁴ “Wangja” means “prince.”

community. They felt it was Korea's disgrace that Korean women had lost their chastity to Japanese men, and felt their masculinity was disgraced since they had failed to protect their own "sisters" and so they wanted to silence the comfort women (Ueno, 1999)

At the end of this lineage comes "kimchinyo."⁵ "Kimchinyo" is the most common misogynistic word today. It refers to a young Korean woman who is shallow, loves expensive designer bags and jewelry, and who expects her boyfriend to pay for dates and their future wedding. Although there are some women of vanity who actually caused the birth of this word, the problem is that some people use this word to indicate Korean women in general. They think Korean women are morally inferior to foreign women. Furthermore, anti-feminists and misogynists accuse Korean feminists of being kimchinyo.

As such, the "Koreanness" of Korean women forms the core of Korean misogyny. Misogynists think that Korean women are embarrassing the country while Korean men are citizens who are fulfilling their duty to sustain the nation's honorable history. This view shows that nationalism is an ideology at the basis of Korean misogyny. Thus it is not surprising that people, even journalists, note the president's gender when a political scandal broke out in Korea recently. They said: "The female president has ruined Korea."

Pathos of male surplusage: the intersectional position of Korean men in a neoliberal society

Throughout history, Korean men have been privileged in deep-rooted patriarchy. On the other hand, they have felt the burden of their privileges. As the breadwinners of the family and the owners of the nation, they have been obliged to protect their family and nation. Although they failed to do so during the colonial period, their sense of ownership has been an important part of their identity constructed throughout history.

However, the recent economic structure and economic crisis have resulted in a crack in the hegemonic masculinity. Along with the global current, Korean society has developed neo-liberalism. Neo-liberalism in Korea is contextualized as "developmental neo-liberalism" through which the flexibility of labor, political and economic polarization, and the winner-take-all effect has been aggravated (Yoon, 2009). In response to this social transformation, a new subjectivity has been encouraged as a way of surviving – the self-empowering subject (Seo, 2010). People are called upon to cultivate and control themselves to be the flexible labor sources that a neo-liberal system requires.

By combining the generation theory with this social atmosphere, a new generation discourse on contemporary Korean youth has arisen. The impactful terms indicating the youth today are "880 thousand won generation," meaning the youth earn very small salaries from their unstable jobs and "n-po generation"⁶ meaning the youth have

⁵ Kimchi is a traditional food of Korea. The fact that "kimchi" is included in this misogynistic word indicates that misogyny is directed toward Korean women.

⁶ The word "po" means "giving up". In the late 2000s, the word "3-po" appeared which means that young people give up dating, marriage, and giving birth due to economic difficulties. And as young

given up some parts of their life due to economic reasons. According to these terms, the Korean youth today are represented as subjects lacking hope for the future due to their economically and socially unstable status. Kim(2015) says that existence today in Korea can be defined as “survivalism” in which people relentlessly struggle to survive the harsh competition of life almost every moment, and this survivalism has become a strong regime in the minds of youths.

This is the context from which “Hell-Joseon” has emerged. Hell-Joseon is a newly coined term that indicates the harsh reality for young people after the economic crisis in the late 2000s. People refer to Korea as “Hell” and even “Hell-Joseon” because they feel that a person’s economic status seems predetermined at birth and class mobility is almost impossible just like it was in the Joseon dynasty. In addition, Hell-Joseon also recalls colonialism. The term “Hell-Joseon” originated from an online history community that depreciated the Joseon Dynasty. They compared Joseon in the 19th century with Japan, which had already achieved phenomenal modernization at that time and justified its colonization. So Hell-Joseon means that Korea is Hell compared to other countries, especially Japan.

In Hell-Joseon, many young people fail to find jobs, lose their jobs or give up finding jobs so they become NEET - Not in Education, Employment, or Training. This hopeless defeatism may be more prevalent among men because they have been holding economic hegemony throughout history. Although the recent socioeconomic situation is not favorable to both men and women, people only talk about the crisis of young “men”. The economic crisis is not linked to women because the “economy” is not considered to be of much concern for women, and “crisis” has been a basic condition for women’s lives in the patriarchy hierarchy. Thus the recent economic crisis is reduced to a “crisis of masculinity”.

Actually, a reconfiguration of the gender order has occurred. Despite the harsh economic conditions, more and more women are receiving higher education and entering into professional careers compared to the past. With the “masculinization of women’s life” (Esping-Anderson, 2009), the modern family—which consisted of the breadwinner husband and the homemaker wife—breaks down. The gender division of labor, which was considered as the most ideal family system of the modern era, no longer works, thus indicating that men are losing their economic hegemony.

Furthermore, some young men think like “women’s lives are easier and better than men’s.” In Korea, men must serve in the military for about two years. Korean men in their early twenties think that while they are wasting two years, women in their age can spend those years seeking a job, building up a career, or enjoying the world. In addition, as gender inequality in the labor market has been brought into question, several workplaces are adopting a quota system for female employees, which can seem like reverse discrimination for young men who are struggling to find employment.

The so-called “surplusage” is a subjectivity that has emerged based on these changes. This is not exactly a male identity, but it is more noticeable among men. Surplusage

people give up more and more aspects of their lives such as housing, car, relationship, appearance, dream and even hope, the prefixed number increases and finally becomes an indefinite number “n.”

refers to a “useless” person who does not create socioeconomic value, and is therefore perceived as a “loser” who fails to meet social standards or fails in social survival. These surplusages gather in online communities. While they are recognized as creators of a unique online subculture, some of them show politically incorrect behaviors by expressing their anger toward society in a distorted way.

“Ilbe” is an online community that exhibits an irrational attitude toward politics, females, and minorities. It is at the center of online hate speech. Several studies have tried to explicate the misogyny of Ilbe (Yoon, 2013; Eom, 2016). What distinguishes Ilbe from the traditional patriarchal perspective is that it claims the existence of absolute equality between men and women. Ilbe users think that Korean women receive too much protection and privileges. They ignore the sociohistorical structure where women have been marginalized and claim that it is men who are marginalized today. So they justify their misogyny and enjoy mocking and objectifying women. Users of Ilbe also share the Hell-Joseon discourse, and this serves as a context for their gender sensitivity. Just as people think that Korea is hell compared to other countries, Ilbe users think that Korean women are hell compared to foreign women, especially Japanese women.

To sum up, “a crisis of masculinity in Hell-Joseon” is the dominant pathos among men and affects their gender sensitivity. While they struggle to survive, women have not only risen as competitors in the labor market, but women’s lives also seem much easier than theirs. The anxiety and anger that stem from the precarious socioeconomic structure transform into their anger toward women.

Misogyny in Hell-Joseon

As mentioned above, “kimchi-nyo” is the most commonly and casually used misogynistic term, and it sums up misogynistic discourse in Korean society. Misogynists say that Korean women deserve their hatred since they are kimchi-nyos. Especially Ilbe users try their best to prove that Korean women are kimchi-nyo, and there are several issues that they have grounds for claiming that Korean women are kimchi-nyo.

The first one is regarding the army. In Korea, men are required to fulfill their military duty. Many men accuse women for free-riding on the nation’s security that they provide, and this is one of the reasons that misogynists accuse Korean women of being kimchi-nyo. They say “women don’t pay us for our efforts to protect the country.”

The second issue is regarding dating and marriage. Men accuse Korean women of not sharing enough of the economic burden in dating or marriage. One TV show on which foreign female guests talk about Korean culture became an issue when some guests from Western countries said they could not understand why men pay more for dating or marriage in Korea and said that going Dutch is regarded normal in their countries. There are some women who actually take for granted that men pay more. However, we should not generalize that all women have this view. We should also note that there has been a patriarchal order where women had no or less economic power in the past and even today. However, misogynists ignore this and accuse women.

Thirdly, misogynists compare Korean women's bodies to foreign women's bodies, especially those of Western women. They complain that Korean women have small breasts and hips, and they try to justify that it is okay to hate Korean women since they lack sexual appeal. It is their logic that women who fail to fulfill men's sexual desire deserve their hatred.

As we can see from these three issues, comparison between Korean women and foreign women is at the core of Korean misogyny. In other words, Korean misogyny is based on an obsequious idea. In addition, combined with the Hell-Joseon discourse, Korean women are pointed out as the very reason that Korea is hellish. Misogynists think that Korea is inferior to Western countries due to some uncivilized women.

More interestingly, Japan is a major country used for comparison despite the fact that it is an Asian country. A term that has the opposite meaning of "kimchi-nyo" is "sushi-nyo," which refers to Japanese women because misogynists tend to think Japanese women are much more favorable. They say that sushi-nyo value equality between genders, try to make a happy family, and love their husband sincerely.

Why do Korean misogynists compare Korean women to Japanese women? Japan is represented as Western in Asia or whiteness (Ashikari, 2005). But more crucially, Japan was the country that colonized Korea. It's been more than 70 years since Korea retrieved its independence from Japan, but tensions remain between the two countries. On the one hand, Koreans show extreme antipathy toward Japan and on the other hand Japanese culture is an object of envy for some Koreans. Korea, as a country with colonial experience, has discussed colonialism as a problematic ideology for some time now. But concerning feminism, only the comfort woman issue has been emphasized on the level of colonialism. However, colonialism is much more than that. It is widespread and deep-rooted in our daily life thereby affecting gender sensitivity.

The newly coined term "sam-il-han" is a striking example of Korean misogyny embodying a colonial view. It means that woman should be beaten every third day. The concept behind this term originates from the idea of Japanese people during the oppressive colonial period that, "Josenjin(朝鮮人)s⁷ don't listen unless they are beaten." When Korean people today point out the backward aspects of Korean ethnicity, they call themselves "Josenjin" either jokingly or self-mockingly. This self-mocking term is used much more frequently among young people who consider Korea to be hellish. And in the eye of misogynists, Korean women are the most primitive ones who should be beaten.

Another interesting aspect concerning colonialism of misogyny is detected from Ilbe. In Ilbe, some men show off that they are dating, or married to a Japanese woman. For example, one man posted a photo that shows a notebook with Korean words written in it. He explained that his wife is Japanese and currently working hard on learning Korean. He boasted that he would "bang" his wife that night. His post was followed by comments expressing envy of him. Ilbe users sexually objectify Japanese women as well, but at the same time, they share a desire to conquer Japanese women.

⁷ It is a Japanese word to indicate "people from Joseon" literally, but as this word was used in the oppressive colonial period, it has a negative connotation.

As such, Korean misogyny has developed through the intertwining of nationalism, toadyism, and colonialism. As the owners of a weak country in the Far East, Korean men have identified their masculinity with the dignity of their nation. Colonial experience has brought the failure of masculinity to Korean men who had to bow to the more authoritative masculinity of Japanese men. The colonial mentality from this traumatic experience was inherited and has been reflected onto the field of gender.

Conclusion: beyond the binary gender war

This paper has examined of misogyny in Korea from the perspectives of nationalism and colonialism. There is a history of Korean men hating Korean women. From hwanyang-nyon to yang-gongju, men detested that these women were “Korean/Joseon” women and that they disgraced the nation by selling themselves to foreign men. More recently, people who hate their own country and refer to it as “Hell-Joseon” accuse women as being one of the factors that make Korea hellish. Korean men who suffer from the economic crisis and a reconfiguration of the gender order are apt to be carried away by misogynistic discourse. Their anger or disappointment toward their country is projected onto women because they view women as being the ones who have always disgraced their country throughout history. As such, nationalism and colonialism are intertwined with underlying Korean misogyny.

Concluding the discussion, I want to mention a recent controversy in the Korean feminist movement. In 2015, an online feminist community named “Megalia” was created. Some Megalians, members of Megalia, identify themselves as radical feminists and they began to “mirror” the misogynistic comments. They appropriate the misogynistic terms created by Ilbe and mock Korean men just as Ilbe mock Korean women. It has been debated whether the Megalians’ actions can be viewed as man-hating ones or not. Their strategy is a kind of counterattack to vicious misogynistic practices and was definitely effective in raising feminism to the surface. However, in light of this research, such actions should not be continued anymore, for this movement is actually based on misogyny. Megalia’s mirroring is based on misogynistic terms. Thus their feminism ends up being rooted in the colonial perspective.

As can be seen from the murder at Gangnam station and Megalia, the recent feminism debate has been framed too much as “misogyny vs. misandry,” and “men vs. women.” To broaden our discussion in the sociohistorical context, I suggest that we examine this phenomenon as a matter of “intersectionality” where gender, nationality and socioeconomic class meet. The specific masculinity and misogynistic stereotype built through Korean history have shaped Korean misogyny. And the Hell-Joseon discourse should be discussed as a major background for this. The recent misogynistic atmosphere might be an aspect of Korea that failed to decolonize.

To cope with deep-rooted misogyny, we should develop a multi-dimensional and broader perspective to look into what is rooted in this phenomenon. Also, we should keep discussing whether recent online and offline debates, or even a gender war can be constructive conflicts to develop a more harmonious society or if such lead to the ghettofication of feminism in Korea.

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