# WOMEN ON SCREEN: K-DRAMAS AND GENDER REWRITINGS (2015-2025).
## From Webtoon to Television; Female Authorship, Graphic Adaptation, and Transnational Reception

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# 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the so-called *Hallyu*, or Korean cultural wave, has reshaped the map of cultural flows. K-dramas now occupy a central place in the global media ecosystem, driven by distribution agreements and branding strategies on platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, Hulu and Viki (Schaffer, 2021; Spherical Insights & Consulting, 2022; Statista Research Department, 2023). This rise coexists with a persistent reality: the representation of women in audiovisual media has historically been subordinate, objectified and/or stereotyped, a symptom of broader tensions between gender, power and corporate interests (Chenault, 2007; Cocca, 2016; Robbins, 2013; Turberville, 2016). K-dramas are no strangers to this inertia, and recent literature identifies stereotypes and biases in female characters and story arcs (Tahreb et al., 2024). Despite partial advances since the 1990s, the persistence of systemic resistance in the comic book industry continues to modulate authorship and narratives (Cocca, 2020).

At the same time, international feminist frameworks have given legitimacy and guidelines for action to the media equality agenda. The Beijing Platform for Action and the Global Alliance on Media and Gender have promoted the presence and participation of women in institutions and content (United Nations, 1995; UNESCO, 2019). In South Korea, this framework has coincided with intense feminist activism, with a clear digital imprint, demanding political representation, legal reforms and a redefinition of gender roles; a momentum that, in turn, has generated anti-feminist reactions and growing public polarisation around the issue of gender (Gong, 2024; Khil, 2022; Yeonseo, 2019; Yun, 2022).

In this arena of symbolic dispute, female authorship in *webtoons* has burst onto the scene, producing narratives capable of connecting with local and international audiences by articulating women's experiences, frustrations and aspirations with a recognisable voice (Kim, 2022; Lee y Kyungran, 2018). For this article, it is particularly relevant that a growing number of *webtoons* created by women are becoming intellectual property benchmarks in the audiovisual series market, especially through their adaptation to K-drama. The convergence of reading via mobile applications, attention economies and the expansion of *streaming* has accelerated this transfer and institutionalised it through corporate operations and catalogue strategies, with K-drama as a transnational showcase for Korean narrative (Grand View Research, 2022; Jobst, 2022; Kim y Lim, 2021; KOCCA, 2021; Spherical Insights & Consulting, 2022).

This industrial growth overlaps with changes in gender dynamics. There is greater visibility of female *webtoon* creators and female protagonists on television, although gaps persist in pay, leadership and access to film directing (Noh, 2018; OCDE, 2022; World Economic Forum, 2023; Yoon, 2023). As a result, adaptations of *webtoons* created by women reflect changes in the cultural economy, emerging as artefacts in which television negotiates, rewrites and makes local narratives of South Korean women legible to transnational audiences.

This article analyses how the rise and international projection of South Korean female *webtoon* authors affect the representation of women's narratives in their adaptations to K-dramas with wide international circulation. The overall objective is to examine how these television adaptations rewrite gender narratives in the transition from *webtoon* to screen. Three specific objectives derive from this objective: (1) to contextualise the place of female *webtoon* authors in the industrial ecosystem of K-drama and *streaming* platforms; (2) to analyse how female figures, affective masculinities and gender relations are transformed in the selected adaptations; and (3) to assess the extent to which these rewritings contribute to broadening repertoires of female agency and diversifying contemporary audiovisual imaginaries.

The working hypothesis argues that, even under the commercial and narrative constraints of the serialised industry, adaptations of female-authored *webtoons* open up scope for the reformulation of gender narratives in K-dramas. In line with this, the research question guiding this study is: how do television adaptations of *webtoons* by female authors influence the representation of women's narratives in K-dramas with wide international circulation?

Before moving on to the analysis and methodological proposal, it is worth situating this study within the recent academic debate in order to contextualise the platform logic, the attention economy and the gender inertia that condition the television rewriting of these stories.

## 2. State of the Art

The global expansion of K-dramas is now a structural feature of media flows, sustained by narrative and visual sophistication with transnational resonance (Schaffer, 2021). Co-production agreements between South Korean networks and platforms, especially Netflix, have reinforced the visibility of K-dramas through the *Originals* brand, adjusting the narrative and aesthetic conventions of transnational consumption (Noh, 2022). This dynamic is positive for K-dramas based on *webtoons* created by women, as it opens up wider channels of circulation for them. However, inequalities marked by a "male hegemony" persist, continuing to limit the presence and creative autonomy of female screenwriters and directors (Howson and Yecies, 2015) and reinforcing stereotypes in popular titles (Tahreb et al., 2024).

Feminist film theory and cinefeminism offer tools for interpreting these tensions as interventions of authorship and audiovisual grammar capable of destabilising patriarchal norms (Park, 2020). In parallel, *webtoons* have established themselves as transmedia laboratories and spaces for identity negotiation, with an ecosystem that articulates digital production, platform circulation, and participation logics (Jin, 2019; Kim and Yu, 2019; Lynn, 2023). This digital environment has favoured the emergence of female authors with complex narratives and gender awareness (Lee and Kyungran, 2018), as well as affective masculinities that reconfigure melodramatic codes (Park, 2020). Recent studies also highlight parasocial links that stabilise audiences and reduce the risk of adaptation (Benatti, 2024), as well as debates about beauty and authenticity (Kwon, 2019). Complementarily, research on television fiction and series in other contexts has highlighted both the persistence of normative imaginaries and the emergence of narratives that are more sensitive to gender and sexual diversity, as shown by panoramic analyses of the representation of women in Spanish television fiction (Hidalgo-Marí, 2017) and studies on the reception of diversity in contemporary series (Lomas Martínez et al., 2025).

Overall, there is still a need for a systematic examination of how, when the author is female, television adaptation acts as a rewriting capable of displacing dominant audiovisual repertoires. This article situates itself at this intersection. On this basis, the following section defines the analytical lens based on feminist studies of film and media, in particular the female gaze, otherness, performativity and film feminism, which guide the reading of adaptations and the evaluation of their transformative scope.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

This research draws on feminist film and media studies to examine how power relations are negotiated, questioned, or reinforced in K-dramas adapted from *webtoons* authored by women. Adaptation is understood as a space of dispute where decisions about authorship, staging, and narrative design can reinscribe patriarchal norms or, conversely, open up possibilities for agency and symbolic refiguration.

On an epistemological and cultural level, the notion of situated knowledge allows us to understand that all artistic production is inscribed from a specific position of enunciation, traversed by its material, technological and affective conditions; this perspective emphasises that both creators and their audience participate from specific social points that determine what is seen, said and circulated (Haraway, 1988). Read in this way, female authorship does not operate as an exception or anecdote, but as a point of view that illuminates structures of exclusion and practices of resistance.

From the perspective of feminist film criticism, Lauretis (2007) contributes gender technologies and the idea of female otherness as frameworks that produce and regulate subjectivities. Transferred to the field of television adaptation, these categories help to identify how the centre of enunciation is relocated and how the gaze is distributed when graphic works created by women are transferred to the screen. They allow us to observe whether the protagonist maintains her point of view, whether she moves to peripheral positions, or whether the series reconfigures the regime of visibility that the original text had proposed.

In dialogue with Kaplan (1983) and subsequent reformulations, the female gaze is not presented as a symmetrical inversion of the male gaze, but rather as an aesthetic and ethical regime that refocuses embodied experience, promotes empathy, and restores narrative agency to female characters. Soloway (2016) emphasises, in this vein, the capacity of this gaze to recompose hierarchies between subject and object and to situate affect as a structuring principle.

As a practical proposal, Park (2020) formulates cinefeminism to consider interventions that operate in the audiovisual grammar of industrial circuits (point of view, affective editing, directing actors and sound design). This notion is useful for analysing K-dramas which, despite being part of the commercial

and *mainstream* industry, introduce friction with melodramatic tropes and enable more affective masculinities.

For its part, Butler's (1990) gender performativity offers tools for observing how normative scripts (romance, aesthetic conformity, and affective restraint) are repeated, strained, or deviated from in the translation from comic strip to screen. Understanding adaptation as a regulated iteration, but one that is open to disruption, allows us to identify where the feminist impulse of the source text is preserved, diluted, or transformed.

To understand the translation from *webtoon* to K-drama in terms of the politics of form, contributions from intermediality (Rajewsky, 2005; Elleström, 2010), remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) and adaptation (Hutcheon, 2013), which shift the question of literal fidelity towards the functional equivalence of effects, such as focalisation, agency or interiority. In dialogue with convergence and transmedia studies (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2013), this articulation allows us to read adaptation as an operation situated in industrial ecologies that condition, but do not determine, the female gaze, gender technologies and cinefeminism already outlined.

Together, this framework articulates four vectors: situated knowledge, otherness and gender technologies, the female gaze and cinefeminism, and performativity. These will be used to evaluate how adaptations of *webtoons* created by women rewrite gender representation in K-dramas and what transformative scope can be attributed to them.

## 4. Methodology

The methodological strategy is designed in line with the objectives and research question set out in the introduction. To this end, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach that combines a qualitative content analysis of K-dramas adapted from *webtoons* created by women in South Korea with a descriptive quantitative component based on systematic observation and secondary sources (media organisations, government records, and statistical reports). The focus is on television adaptation: we are interested in how the gender narratives of *the webtoon* are translated, reconfigured or expanded in the series format, taking into account industrial constraints and authorial decisions. This choice is in line with the tradition of feminist research, which integrates qualitative methods with quantitative contributions as complementary approaches and which, when practised rigorously, allows assumptions to be denaturalised and power structures to be revealed (Hesse-Biber and Griffin, 2015).

The corpus was constructed using three inclusion criteria: that the original *webtoon* was created by a female or non-binary author, that the television adaptation had a female protagonist, and that its international distribution was carried out on platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ or Viki, thus guaranteeing its transnational reach. Using these parameters, a sample of twenty-three webtoon/K-drama pairs released between 2015 and 2025 was formed, with series ranging from sixteen to twenty-six episodes. Given the frequency of pseudonyms and initials in the *webtoon* industry, the authorial gender was verified through triangulation (databases, interviews, and public presence on social media), recording any residual uncertainty. For the complete list of works that make up the corpus, see Appendix 1 at the end of the text.

The qualitative analysis was structured as a close reading of each series as a narrative and aesthetic whole, with attention to symbolic frameworks, metaphors, and visual strategies that shape the subjectivity and agency of the characters. Based on recurring patterns and feminist media theory, a thematic framework with eight categories was operationalised: social pressures, gender relational dynamics, challenging gender roles, equality at work, beauty standards, sexual harassment, empowerment, and mental health. Each category was coded on two levels, with a value of 1 when the theme is present and a value of 2 when it is central to the story. The consistency of the process was ensured through a common protocol, decision memos, and cross-checking; where appropriate, agreement between codings was estimated in a subsample.

Following qualitative analysis by category and in order to perform the narrative comparison between *webtoons* and K-dramas, three intermedial equivalence protocols (focalisation, affective recalibration and romantic normalisation) were applied with descriptive indicators (e.g., percentage of face time, duration of *close-ups*, pauses without dialogue, locus of resolution). The development and application are detailed in the results (section 5.4).

To contextualise the scope and reception, the presence of the series on distribution platforms was recorded and IMDb ratings were surveyed for all South Korean K-dramas released between 2015 and

2025 (N = 343), with specific attention to the fifty titles adapted from *webtoons*. An operational threshold of 7/10 was adopted as an indicator of significant reception, and proportions were calculated to estimate the possible overrepresentation of these adaptations in the highest-rated titles. These metrics are assumed to be *proxy* indicators that do not replace viewing data, so their results are interpreted with analytical caution.

With the thematic framework and corpus defined, the following section presents the results in order to contextualise how these narratives circulate and are legitimised in *streaming* markets, and how they evolve in their translation to the screen.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Reception and Performance (2015–2025)

Out of a set of 343 South Korean K-dramas released between 2015 and 2025, 50 titles are identified as adaptations of *webtoons*. If 7/10 on IMDb is adopted as the operational threshold for significant reception, 41 of those 50 adaptations exceed it (82%). Although they represent 14.6% of the total productions in the sample, they account for 17.5% of the highest-rated segment, indicating a relative overrepresentation of approximately 20% above their production weight and a stable fit with transnational *streaming* audiences. In the overall set of K-dramas for the period, 83.4% exceed the threshold (286/343). The difference in "success rate" between adaptations and the total is small, but the proportional shift in the upper range suggests remarkable consistency in the performance of IP originating from *webtoons*. This evidence, indicative and dependent on a *proxy* metric, supports the hypothesis that stories created by female authors find commercial traction when transferred to television and engage with international markets. In terms of *cinefeminism* (Park, 2020), this performance challenges the cliché of "women's stories" as a niche and opens up the possibility that their circulation contributes, at least partially, to reordering hegemonic narrative repertoires. Against this backdrop, the following section explores, at a textual and visual level, how these dynamics materialise in gender narratives.

### 5.2. Gender Narratives in K-drama Adaptations

Based on the previous quantitative findings, the qualitative analysis confirms a consistent narrative pattern: romantic and friendship relationships act as the core of the action, but they are inscribed in broader social critiques and situated gender experiences. Thematic mapping (see Figure 1) shows the centrality of gender relational dynamics (23.9%) and social pressures (21.9%), categories that frame expectations of marriage, professional concessions, class hierarchies, and emotional restraint. As So (2023) points out, these dynamics dialogue with entrenched inequalities in South Korea, particularly the sexual division of labour and rigid family roles, which strain the autonomy of the protagonists.

Alongside this backdrop, empowerment (14.2%) and challenging roles (13.5%) take on greater significance, with the protagonists testing the boundaries of the norm: *Mystic Pop-up Bar* (2020) reverses codes by portraying an emotionally reserved and spiritually powerful female character opposite a male character with greater emotional sensitivity; *Summer Strike* (2022) dramatises withdrawal from a toxic work environment as a gesture of repair and personal reconnection. Equality at work (10.3%) appears in the form of structural friction — harassment, wage gaps and glass ceilings — with modulations in tone ranging from the dramatic to the comical; *Business Proposal* (2022), based on Hae Hwa's *webtoon*, uses humour to highlight power imbalances and visibility of support networks among women (Delhaye, 2023).

Although less frequent, mental health (7.1%) and sexual harassment (6.5%) emerge strongly wherever they appear. *Daily Dose of Sunshine* (2023) and *Tomorrow* (2022) shift the emphasis from stigma to empathetic frameworks of care, grief and vulnerability, a significant shift in the *post-#MeToo* context (Dilip, 2022). At the opposite end of the thematic spectrum is the challenge to beauty standards (2.6%), which appears comparatively rare despite the widely documented cultural pressure on beauty and bodies in Korea (Lin and Raval, 2020). *True Beauty* (2020) tensions criticism and complicity by narrating the transition from dependence on makeup to a form of self-acceptance that does not completely cancel out the normative imaginary.

**Figure 1.** Comparative thematic analysis: gender and social issues in *webtoons* created by South Korean women and their television adaptations.
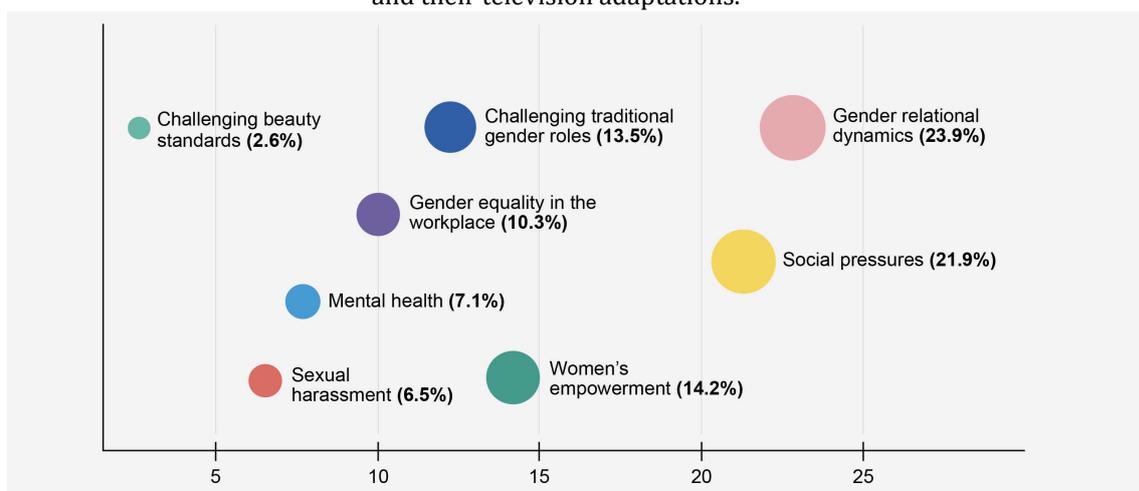


Source: Roca Vera et al., 2025.

Taken together, these adaptations depict the dual condition of pressure and possibility that permeates the lives of women in contemporary Korea. The series do not operate from binary oppositions, but from situated negotiations (social, economic and affective) where the female gaze (Kaplan, 1983; Soloway, 2016) and cinefeminism (Park, 2020) materialise in decisions regarding point of view, affective editing and direction of actors that redistribute agency. Read with otherness and *gender technologies* (de Lauretis, 2007) and performativity (Butler, 1990), these recurrences suggest that the television rewriting of *webtoons* produces narratives capable of transcending normative scripts, while also making visible, from situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), the conditions that make them possible and the commercial limits that still constrain them.

## 5.3. Intermedial Translation, Remediation and Transmedia Ecology

The translation of *the webtoon* into K-drama is not merely a technical change of medium, but a modal reconfiguration that alters how female subjectivity is produced, perceived and legitimised on screen. From the perspective of intermediality (Elleström, 2010; Rajewsky, 2005), it is interesting to distinguish between modalities and operations: the verticality of *the scroll*, the expressive whitespace and the graphic markers of affection (kinetic lines, emotional typographies) of *the webtoon* are remade on television as shot scale, editing tempo and sound design, shifting the emphasis from graphic gesture to audiovisual rhythm and listening. This passage can be described as *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999), in which the visual lexicon of comics finds non-literal functional equivalents capable of maintaining the effects of focus and agency.

In terms of adaptation, it is appropriate to adopt the notion of *repetition without replication* (Hutcheon, 2013): rather than literal fidelity, what is of interest is the constancy of the effects that sustain the protagonist's interiority and her point of view. Through this lens, sustained *close-ups*, meaningful silences, editing that punctuates doubt, and sound design that prioritises attention to the body and breathing over musical underscoring are analytically central. When these resources are weakened, the translation tends towards romantic normalisation; when they are intensified, they restore agency even if the macro-plot returns to melodramatic tropes.

This operation is part of a transmedia ecology (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2013), where *webtoons* act as IP laboratories, testing seriality without the high audiovisual cost, consolidating *fandoms*, and generating paratexts that facilitate their migration to television. Platforms optimise the transnational readability of these stories and push for formal solutions with high *engagement*: close-ups, readable tempo, affective choreography. The result, as our cases show, is a productive tension between movements of normalisation (romanticisation, stylisation) and areas of formal resistance (focus on interiority, affective masculinities), which the feminist framework allows us to read as politics of form.

In short, thinking of adaptation as intermedial translation enables an operational criterion for evaluating functional equivalences between *webtoon* resources and K-drama audiovisual decisions. This guideline will guide the following subsection, which proposes an operational taxonomy for measuring such translation in observable terms. To ensure that this notion of functional equivalence does not

remain abstract, three operational protocols with observable indicators are explained below, which will guide the reading of the scenes analysed in section 5.5.

## 5.4. Intermedial Equivalence Protocols (applied reading guide)

If intermedial translation refers to the transition from panel to screen, these protocols indicate how to view it. Rather than demanding literal translations, it questions what function each resource fulfils in the *webtoon* and how it is recreated in the series, through three lenses that turn intermedial theory into a practical tool for comparative reading:

(1) *Shift in focus.* In the *webtoon*, interiority is usually made visible through the first-person panel or texts that speak from within the frame itself. On screen, this intimacy is reconstructed with POV/reverse shots and, above all, with sustained close-ups that allow time for doubt and minimal gestures. The operative question is not whether "the scene is maintained," but how much of the decisive time is allocated to the protagonist's face and how long that close-up lasts when something changes for her. The indicators: (i) percentage of time the protagonist's face is in front of the love interest during the key decision; (ii) average duration of the close-up at the climax.

(2) *Affective recalibration.* The kinetic lines, emotional typography, and expressive whitespace of *the webtoon* condense intensities that, when transferred to television, are reassigned to tempo, micro-gestures, and sound design. What was once a graphic mark is now heard and breathed: silences, pauses, audible breaths, a slight suspension of the editing. Here, it is interesting to note how much silence protects the twist and whether the non-diegetic music pushes or allows the scene to breathe. The indicators are: (i) seconds without dialogue immediately before and after the decisive line; (ii) presence/absence of non-diegetic music in the affective twist.

(3) *Romantic normalisation.* Many conflicts that the *webtoon* plots around self-image, work or care are rewritten on television as matchmaking *set pieces*. This is not a "betrayal" of the original text, but rather a relocation of the locus of resolution, asking where the arc closes (in the couple, in self-care, in the support network, etc.). In addition, certain conventions (jealousy, destiny, sacrifice) tend to become denser in the adaptation. The indicators are: (i) locus of resolution (couple, self-care or network); (ii) density of tropes.

These protocols are applied to the same scenes already identified in the qualitative analysis and are computed descriptively (not inferentially). Their usefulness is twofold: on the one hand, they standardise comparative reading and facilitate the traceability of decisions; on the other, they allow us to visualise whether the intermedial translation preserves, modulates or dilutes the feminist impulse detected.

**Table 1.** Intermedial translation matrix (application model)

| Resource in *webtoon* | Audiovisual equivalent (K-drama) | Quick indicator |
|---|---|---|
| Expressive target at climax | Editing pause + silence | Seconds without dialogue ±2 s from the twist |
| Emotional typography | *Close-up* + micro-gesture/breathing | Number of *close-ups* > 2 s in the scene |
| Kinetic lines | Editing variation / shutter speed | Number of cuts per 10 seconds at the climax |
| First-person panel | POV/reverse shot with face retention | Percentage of time showing the protagonist's face during the key decision |
| Intimate mapping of space | Slow-motion wide shots + soundscapes | Average shot duration in "self-care" scenes |
| Typed interior monologue | Silence + audible breathing + minimal gestures | Window of silence before response |
| Emotional onomatopoeia ("gulp", etc.) | Specific sound design (Foley, *room tone*) | Presence yes/no + brief qualitative note |

Source: Roca Vera et al., 2025.

## 5.5. Transformation of Gender Narratives from Webtoons to K-dramas

The adaptation of *webtoons* created by women into K-dramas triggers a constant negotiation between artistic fidelity and market constraints. In this transition, the feminist impulses of the source text can be simplified, reframed or diluted as they are integrated into television conventions and industrial routines. A visible pattern is the romanticisation of socio-political conflicts and the consequent reduction of the protagonist's agency. Thus, *True Beauty* (2020) shifts the *webtoon's* sustained critique of beauty standards, reaching a resolution that ultimately rewards aesthetic conformity in a romantic key. Similarly, *Nevertheless* (2021) softens the original's frankness about desire and casual relationships to conform to a more conventional melodramatisation of the emotional bond. In terms of intermedial protocols, this shift is visible in: (i) the redistribution of screen time during key decisions, with the camera spending less time on close-ups of the protagonist and shifting attention to the love interest; and (ii) the contraction of windows of silence at climaxes, which reduces the space for doubt and interiority. Similarly, the locus of resolution tends to shift from self-care to the couple, increasing the density of romantic tropes.

These operations are accompanied by visual recalibrations that align the protagonists with the dominant norms of K-beauty. *Mystic Pop-up Bar* (2020) is paradigmatic: where the *webtoon* proposed an androgynous and deliberately non-sexualised stylisation for a non-normative shaman, the series opts for a glamorised finish and a lighting, costume and music device that orients the reading towards the emotionally attractive rather than the disruptive, as can be seen in Figure 2. According to the indicators, there is a decrease in sustained *close-ups* on the protagonist and an increase in non-diegetic music during emotional twists, while the editing is accelerated (more cuts per 10 seconds), which refocuses the romantic readability over the androgynous strangeness of the original. The depoliticisation of systemic criticism through its translation into individual itineraries is also recurrent. In *Summer Strike* (2022), work exhaustion, with an obvious structural background, is redirected to the intimate story of self-healing; in *Tomorrow* (2022), the series privileges the emotional approach to crisis and grief over the explicitness of the regimes of masculinity that the *webtoon* problematised more forcefully. In both cases, the emotional tempo varies: *Summer Strike* slows down and opens up dialogue-free pauses in scenes of self-care, while *Tomorrow* fills in with musical underscores and reduces the protagonist's screen time during the twist. The location of the ending confirms the shift: from structural conflict to individual progress.

**Figure 2.** *Mystic Pop-up Bar* (K-drama, JTBC/Netflix, 2020) and its source in Bae Hye Soo's *webtoon* (Daum *Webtoon / WEBTOON*, 2019).



Source: K-drama poster/promotion (JTBC/Netflix) and *webtoon* panel (Daum *Webtoon/WEBTOON*).

Another frequent shift is the refocusing of male perspectives. *Cheese in the Trap* (2016) is illustrative: the psychological complexity that the *webtoon* gives to the female lead is overshadowed in the series by the expansion of the male character's arc, with the consequent deprioritisation of her point of view (a case commented on and discussed by the fan community itself). This deprioritisation is accompanied by a reduction in the percentage of screen time given to the female protagonist in key decisions and shorter *close-ups*, with an increase in cuts that refocus on the male arc. At the opposite extreme, when female

creators retain agency in the adaptation chain, thematic integrity is preserved more clearly. *Our Beloved Summer* (2021) maintains the relational subtlety of the source material and avoids falling back into rigid roles. *Daily Dose of Sunshine* (2023) maintains an ethical approach to mental health and care, and *Little Women* (2022) and *The Good Bad Mother* (2023), both directed by women, show how an audiovisual grammar more attentive to affection, with sustained close-ups, editing that matches the interiority, and a non-invasive soundtrack, can open space for affective masculinities and redistribute female agency. In terms of indicators, these titles exceed the threshold of 2–2.5 seconds in decisive close-ups, open windows of silence prior to the reply, and contain non-diegetic music in the twist; moreover, the locus of resolution is unanchored from the couple and relies on self-care or networks.

Read with Lauretis' theory (1987, 2007), these rewritings show how the protagonist can move to peripheral positions when television normalisation refocuses the patriarchal order; with Butler (1990), the repetition of normative scripts (romantic success, visual conformity, emotional restraint) reinscribes gender expectations, except where an authorship that challenges the mould intervenes. From the female gaze (Kaplan, 1983; Soloway, 2016) and cinefeminism (Park, 2020), however, areas of resistance are recognised: when the creators' signature participates in decisions of re-conceptualisation, staging or directing actors, the series sustains the subjectivity of the protagonists and overflows objectification. In terms of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), these choices are not mere styles, but material positions within a specific industrial ecology. Read according to protocols, these staging gestures translate into observable measures (face time, pauses, music, locus) that materialise the dispute between normalisation and resistance in audiovisual grammar.

Overall, the trajectory of change is not linear: romanticisation and aestheticisation coexist with the preservation of agency and affective openings. This back-and-forth paves the way for observing, in the following section, the trends from 2016 to 2023 as a background movement in which the industry and audiences learn to read and sustain narratives that complexify the female experience.

### 5.6. Trends 2015-2025

The notion of female otherness refers to a long history of marginalisation in the creative industries, where women's experiences are displaced or codified under alien narrative regimes. The rise of South Korean female *webtoon* creators has strained this distribution and generated narratives that put into words and images affections, work and resistance neglected by the *mainstream*. The international reception of these works and their derivative K-dramas suggests a cultural shift: diverse narratives not only find a space for circulation but also contribute to expanding it.

An annual reading of the corpus points to two concurrent vectors. On the one hand, the number of K-dramas adapted from *webtoons* by female authors is growing steadily. On the other hand, the exploration of gender issues is becoming more intense, shifting from timid acknowledgements to more complex treatments. The first milestones, *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim?* (2018) and *True Beauty* (2020), alternate between highlighting social pressures and romantic resolutions, without completely breaking with conventional tropes. In contrast, more recent adaptations intensify the friction with the norm: *Summer Strike* (2022) stages the rejection of labour exploitation as a gesture of reparation and agency; *Tomorrow* (2022) uses fantasy to address trauma and grief without punitive moralising; *Daily Dose of Sunshine* (2023) and *Doona!* (2023) delve into mental health, the body, and marginality without resorting to stereotypical conclusions. The continuum is not linear; romanticisation and aestheticisation coexist with critical openings, but the balance suggests learning on the part of the industry and audiences, rehearsing affective grammars that sustain female subjectivity and enable more porous masculinities.

Taken together, these trajectories point to a cautious but sustained reconfiguration of the field. Television not only translates *webtoons* by female authors but also learns to make their debates legible to transnational audiences. The warm reception on global platforms reinforces the idea that these stories have an appeal that transcends the local and that their circulation can have an impact, albeit incremental, on the dominant repertoires of representation. This reading aligns with cinefeminism (Park, 2020) and performativity (Butler, 1990): normative repetitions do not disappear, but they encounter significant interruptions where female authorship or direction intervenes in audiovisual grammar.

In light of these trends, the discussion and conclusions assess the transformative scope of these television rewritings and specify which conditions of authorship, production, and reception are decisive

in sustaining it over time. Observed through descriptive indicators, the most recent works tend to prolong the duration of the close-up at the climax, widen the windows of silence and moderate the musical underlining, while relocating the resolution of conflicts towards self-care and the network. Although this is not a constant upward trend, these variations suggest a formal learning process that favours focus and agency in the translation of *webtoons* to K-dramas.

## 6. Discussion

The findings suggest that the adaptation of *webtoons* to K-drama functions as a device of cultural translation where movements of normalisation (romanticisation, aesthetic stylisation) coexist with areas of resistance (sustained agency, affective masculinities, ethics of care). From the perspective of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), this balance should be read not as a failure of coherence, but as an effect of material conditions (funding, distribution windows, format) that delimit and, at the same time, enable the transnational circulation of stories with a feminist imprint. The result is an incremental transformation of the melodramatic repertoire that reorders who watches, whom, and how.

In terms of the female gaze (Kaplan, 1983; Soloway, 2016), evidence indicates that the shift does not depend so much on "strong characters" as on focusing decisions: close-ups that sustain interiority, editing rhythms that allow time for doubt, and sound designs that prioritise listening over emotional emphasis. Read through the intermedial protocol, series that sustain *close-ups* and pauses in the twists and turns, with a locus not necessarily centred on the couple, erode objectification even within melodramatic frameworks; while the reduction of these same formal marks is associated with normalisations that reframe conflicts in a romantic key. These micro-decisions anchor agency and erode objectification, even when the macro-plot returns to pairing tropes. To the extent that we understand cinefeminism as a politics of form in a permeable *mainstream*, the tension observed moves away from niche exceptionality and towards a progressive readjustment of the regime of visibility (see also de Lauretis, 1987).

Performativity (Butler, 1990) illuminates another shift: adaptation repeats normative scripts (romantic success, aesthetic conformity) but enables performative failures that reiterate in other ways: sororal friendships with dramatic weight, explicit negotiation of consent, men who provide care without comical penalisation. These "small frictions" rewrite the conditions of legibility of the female experience on screen.

Read in their transmedia ecology (Jenkins, 2006; Scolari, 2013), the transformations we observe are not aesthetic anomalies, but effects of convergence: the consolidation of IP in *webtoons*, optimisation for platforms, and the search for *engagement* lead to romantic normalisations, but also open up areas of formal experimentation (sustained *close-ups*, silences, rhythms of care) that restore interiority to the centre of the regime of visibility. The notion of functional equivalence allows us to distinguish when intermedial translation preserves the feminist impulse (focalisation, agency) and when it dilutes it in the choreography of pairing.

The proposed methodology and operational process (focalisation, affective recalibration, romantic normalisation) are transferable to other flows (manga → anime, graphic novel → series, *visual novel* → *live-action*). In future studies, the empirical basis can be expanded by incorporating more robust image and sound metrics, as well as authorship variables (script and direction credits, continuity of the creators in the adaptation). This will clarify how certain material conditions of production facilitate the persistence of the female gaze and practices close to cinema feminism in the *mainstream*.

## 7. Conclusions

South Korean *webtoon* authors have significantly influenced the representation of women's narratives in K-dramas with wide international circulation. Their authorship introduces repertoires of female agency, complicates gender conflicts, and enables affective masculinities, effects that television translates with heterogeneous but recognisable results.

The hypothesis is confirmed with nuances. The adaptations broaden and diversify the imagery on screen, although this impulse coexists with commercial tensions that favour romanticisation, aestheticisation and, at times, depoliticisation of conflicts. When women's involvement in scriptwriting, *showrunning* or directing is maintained throughout the adaptation chain, the thematic integrity of the original is preserved more clearly, and the series maintains the subjectivity of its protagonists.

From a quantitative perspective, *webtoon* adaptations show a stable fit with transnational audiences (82% of titles with ≥ 7/10 on IMDb and overrepresentation in the high range relative to their productive weight). This performance challenges the cliché that stories created by women are niche and suggests the commercial viability of stories with a gender perspective. Qualitatively, thematic mapping confirms the centrality of gender relational dynamics and social pressures, along with focuses on empowerment, role challenges, and equality in the workplace. Less frequently, but with high thematic density in the plot, mental health and sexual harassment emerge, addressed from empathetic frameworks that displace punitive approaches. These patterns dialogue with a female gaze that redistributes agency and with practices close to cinefeminism, without completely erasing returns to normative scripts.

The transformation of *the webtoon* to the screen does not follow a linear trajectory. Dilution operations coexist with areas of resistance in which audiovisual grammar, point of view, affective editing and direction of actors align with the authorship of the creators. In this intermediate terrain, television makes local debates on gender developed in the original medium legible to transnational audiences and, on occasion, reformulates them in registers compatible with the *mainstream* without losing their critical tone.

In short, adaptations of K-dramas based on *webtoons* created by women contribute to displacing two-dimensional and hegemonic stereotypes and broadening the field of representation of women on the transnational screen. The transformative scope depends, above all, on conditions of authorship and creative control within the adaptation process, as well as on industrial environments that allow these decisions to be sustained over time.

The study is limited to twenty-three cases. Future work could expand the corpus and chronology, incorporate viewing metrics, and conduct comparative analyses with other Asian production hubs.

## 8. Compliance and Ethics

Inclusive and non-sexist language is used, in accordance with the recommendations of VisualCOM Scientific Publications; androcentric formulations and biases in tables and figures are avoided. The gender perspective is integrated throughout the study (corpus design, analytical categories, and discussion). The reception analysis uses aggregate indicators (IMDb) without personal data; as it is based on public works and sources, no ethics committee approval is required.

## 9. Acknowledgements

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## Appendix 1. Analysis corpus.
List of webtoons/K-dramas with author, year and platforms. Source: own elaboration.

| K-drama | Year (series) | Webtoon | Year (comic) | Webtoon creator (female or non-binary female) | Female protagonist | International Webtoon Platforms | International Streaming Platforms |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Cheese in the Trap* | 2016 | *Cheese in the Trap* | 2010 | Soonkki | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV, Disney+ |
| *The Bride of Habaek* | 2017 | *Bride of the Water God (manhwa)* | 2006 | Yoon Mi-kyung | X | Daum Webtoon, Netcomics | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV |
| *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim* | 2018 | *What's Wrong with Secretary Kim* | 2015 | Jung Kyung-Yoon | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV |
| *My ID Is Gangnam Beauty* | 2018 | *My ID Is Gangnam Beauty* | 2017 | Maenggi KI | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV, Prime Video, Disney+ |
| *Mama Fairy and the Woodcutter* | 2018 | *Tale of Gyeryong Fairy* | 2018 | Dolbae Jakka | X | Naver Webtoon, Tappytoon | Viki |
| *Her Private Life* | 2019 | *Noona Fan Dot Com* | 2017 | Kim Sung-yeon | X | Lezhin Comics | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV, Prime Video, Disney+ |
| *Extraordinary You* | 2019 | *July Found by Chance* | 2018 | Moo Ryoo | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki |
| *Love Alarm* | 2019 | *Johahamyeon Ullineun* | 2019 | Chun Kye Young | X | Naver Webtoon, WEBTOON | Netflix |
| *True Beauty* | 2020 | *True Beauty* | 2018 | Yoo Gwae-ja (Yaongyi) | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki, Netflix, Apple TV |
| *Mystic Pop-Up Bar* | 2020 | *Mystic Pop-Up Bar* | 2019 | Bae Hye-soo | X | Daum Webtoon, WEBTOON | Netflix |
| *Nevertheless* | 2021 | *Nevertheless* | 2020 | Jung Seo | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Netflix |
| *She Would Never Know* | 2021 | *Senior, Don't Put on That Lipstick* | 2019 | Elise | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Netflix, Prime Video |
| *How to Be Thirty* | 2021 | *Born in 85* | 2018 | Hye Won | X | Naver Webtoon, Tappytoon | Viki |
| *Our Beloved Summer* | 2021 | *Our Beloved Summer* | 2021 | Lee Naeun and Han Kyoung Chal | X | Naver Webtoon, WEBTOON | Netflix |
| *Must You Go?* | 2021 | *It's Thorny* | 2020 | Ra Hee (Female) and Park Sun Jae (Male) | X | Naver Webtoon, Manta | Viki |

| The King's Affection | 2022 | Yeonmo (manhwa) | 2016 | Lee So Young | X | Naver Webtoon, Tappytoon | Netflix |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Business Proposal | 2022 | The Office Blind Date (web novel) | 2018 | Hae Hwa | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Netflix |
| Summer Strike | 2022 | I Don't Feel Like Doing Anything | 2019 | Joo Young-hyun | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki, Netflix |
| Tomorrow | 2022 | Tomorrow | 2017 | Flame | X | Naver Webtoon, WEBTOON | Netflix |
| See You in My 19th Life | 2023 | See You in My 19th Life | 2020 | Lee Hye | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Netflix |
| A Good Day to be a Dog | 2023 | A Good Day to be a Dog | 2018 | Lee Hye | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Viki |
| Daily Dose of Sunshine | 2023 | Morning Comes to Psychiatric Wards Too | 2018 | Lee Ra-ha | X | Naver Webtoon, LINE Webtoon | Netflix |
| Donna! | 2023 | The Girl Downstairs | 2017 | Min Song Ah | X | Naver Webtoon, WEBTOON | Netflix |

**Data collection carried out by the first author of the article.**