

# Power Dynamics & Binary Opposition in K-drama

## Project Report

Submitted by

Priscilla Martin (SB22CE023)

Under the guidance of

Ms. Neena George

*In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree*

*Of Bachelor of Arts*

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for

Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++'

Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

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## Declaration

I do affirm that the project “Power Dynamics & Binary Opposition In K-drama” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Priscilla Martin

Date :20-03-2025

SB22CE023

B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

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Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Power Dynamics & Binary Opposition In K-drama" by Priscilla Martin is a record of Bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

*Neena George*  
25/3/25

Ernakulam

Neena George

Date.20-03-2025

Department of Communicative English

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## Abstract

This research explores the interplay between binary opposition and power structures in Korean dramas through the theoretical lenses of Claude Levi Strauss binary oppositions and power dynamics theory by Michel Foucault. Levi Strauss's structuralist approach emphasizes how narratives in K-drama rely on fundamental opposition like good vs evil, rich vs poor, traditional vs modernity to construct.

These binaries shape character relationships, conflicts and resolution reinforcing cultural ideologies and social norms. They play a crucial role in K-drama narratives. However, as Foucault's theories on power and discourse suggest, these opposition are not static; rather they, operate within the shifting power dynamics that continuously operate which side of the binary holds authority and legitimacy.

Foucault's concept of power as decentralized and fluid reveals how power is negotiated within these oppositions—whether through resistance, subversion, or reinforcement of social hierarchies. For instance, gendered power structures in K-dramas often present traditional femininity as subordinate to masculinity, yet some narratives reframe these roles, complicating the binary.

This research ultimately argues that while K-dramas rely on binary oppositions for narrative coherence, they simultaneously expose the instability of these structures, offering both reinforcement and critique of prevailing power systems. By integrating structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives, this study

contributes to a deeper understanding of how K-dramas both shape and reflect cultural discourses on power and identity.

## Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction .....	2
Chapter-2 Theoretical framework.....	7
Chapter 3 Understanding Binary Opposition and Power Structure In Korean Drama .....	10
Chapter-4 Methodology .....	14
Conclusion .....	17
Bibliography .....	19



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Today, the K-wave is global. This popularity can be attributed to numerous factors. Unexpected turns and climaxes occur in the narratives. People quickly binge-watch entire seasons as a result. Viewers can learn about Korean customs, culture, and lifestyles from Korean dramas. *"Crash Landing on You"* is a popular film that depicts Korean living. The language, fashion, and lifestyle of Korea, as well as their culinary culture, draw people in. These K-dramas' relatable plots and characters are the reason they have gained popularity worldwide.

Additionally, it displays social problems like racism, mental health, gender inequity, and bullying. There is reason why these K-drama differ from others movies and drama. K-drama often challenges traditional norms which attract the younger generation to think differently.

*"It's Okay to Not be Okay"* narrates the story of women who has mental issues of some past trauma. *"Strong Women Do Bong Soon"* challenges gender role through a female character who has superhuman strength. *"Nevertheless"* and *"Itaewon class"* highlights themes of acceptance and self-identity, making it one of the more prominent LGBTQ+ representations in mainstream Korean dramas.

Historical K-dramas frequently combine imagined or actual historical events. They explore themes of justice, power struggles, societal expectations, and traditions while portraying the hardships of everyday people through these narratives. Historical

drama characters' outfits serve to promote traditional Korean dress, or Hanbok, as well as customary rituals, historical lifestyles, and hairstyles.

A few notable dramas have effectively represented Korean culture. For example, *Jewel in the Palace* (2003) increased interest in Korean history and food around the world. K-drama became a bridge between the Korean tradition, values and the blend of emotional storytelling, high quality production and story line, captivates the people all around the world.

### Relevance of Binary Opposition in Media Representation

An idea with opposing meanings is called binary opposition. It is employed in literature to depict characters with opposing characteristics. One character might be innocent and kind, for instance, while the antagonist is aggressive, evil, or alluring. This is especially common when portraying women. Binary opposition is also used in literature to group characters into opposing categories.

This frequently dismantles any possible rivalries between them. In real life, similar divisions exist, leading to the oppression of certain groups based on societal norms. The concept comes from Structuralism. The main objective of binary opposition is to create a meaningful story, boost morale among the audience, also help the others know the struggles they are facing.

Making a meaningful story is the primary goal of binary opposition. It draws attention to the difficulties faced by specific characters and serves to raise audience morale. Character dynamics are defined in large part by the media. It builds suspense and humanizes stories by presenting heroes and antagonists. Additionally, it clarifies social problems and solutions. For a long time, strong male characters have been

presented in traditional media as being in charge and women as submissive.

Additionally, it simplifies complicated topics by portraying characters as either virtuous or bad. Entire communities are occasionally vilified and misrepresented.

Modern media has become more inclusive and thought-provoking, shifting the focus of storytelling to real-world challenges and identities. The media is in charge of how it is portrayed and how the public understands it. Certain K-dramas maintain traditional values by using these binary characters.

#### The Portrayal of Power in K-drama

Power refers to the ability to influence and control the behavioural change of a group of people or individuals. Power exists in different forms, like political power, economic power, psychological power, social power, and so on. Power can be used for good and bad things like justice and protection, as well as corruption and inequality.

When it comes to Korean drama, explore how the power is obtained and maintained, and how challenging it often reflects the real-world struggles. In Korean drama, power is portrayed in different ways, with most power portrayals based on political corruption and misusing power for their greed for power and money.

In historical drama, it depicts the political power within the Joseon dynasty, where the kings, queens, and nobles manipulate and betray to preserve or overthrow the authority. The economic power can be seen through the drama. *The heirs*, *boys over flowers* highlights how the students from elite families treat each other students based on social and economic status. In particular, *Boys Over Flowers* portrays four wealthy high school students who misuse their wealth, power and privilege, engaging in bullying and discrimination against those who do not belong to the elite classes.

The school itself gives priority to these rich kids. Social power is defined as social expectation from a society. Through the drama *Sky Castle*, we can see how the elite class uses their social reputation to secure their children's future in prestigious universities.

*The glory* also portrays how a woman can become powerful in the meantime, becoming a victim of bullying, the protagonist reclaiming the power she lost, which helps to empower the women in the community. The significance of power portrayal in Korean drama reflects the societal realities while portraying these power divisions in K-drama, like political corruption, gender roles, and class struggles, and also gives an awareness to the audience that justice prevails always and the powerless rise against the oppression.

#### Objective of the Study

The objective of this research is to analyse how gender roles, representation of women, and intersectional feminism are portrayed through K-dramas, examining the messages they convey to society. It explores How female characters are depicted, how they get empowered, gaining freedom, how their aspirations extend beyond traditional roles, such as being a housewife to include career ambitions and personal growth.

Other objectives include How intersectional feminism intersects with discrimination based on class, race, gender, and sexuality, especially in K-drama, is clearly seen in films and dramas, portraying class oppression and gender oppression based on disability, social class, and mental and cultural expectations.

## Methodology Overview

Data representation of the evolution of female occupations in K-drama, like the status as a student, housewife, office worker, CEO, doctor, lawyer, or detective. The data representation of binary opposition in female K-drama characters over time, the data representation evolution of female character types in K-drama, like women in distress, independent women, career-oriented women, strong action heroines, CEOs, or entrepreneurs. data representation of power representation of women in K-drama also data representation about power representation in K-drama.

## Scope and Limitation of the Study

The scope of this study is how the structuralist theory analyses contrasting elements like rich/poor and good/evil to create meaning in K-drama. Also exploring power dynamics using media and intersectional feminism, especially towards women. The limitation of this study is that the language of this drama is Korean, so when it comes into translation, cultural representation may not be fully captured. Also does not analyse web series or historical context; only television dramas are considered.

## Chapter-2

### Theoretical Framework

Claude Levi Strauss, a French anthropologist and structuralist, proposed a theory named binary oppositions that entails how the binary characters in media, books, and films are portrayed. These binary oppositions help to create complicated plots; through these characters, we can portray real-life people and characters and how their attitudes affect the others. He argued that human thought perceives the world through structured contrasts such as good vs. evil, male vs. female, and life vs. death. These oppositions shape myths, literature, language, and societal norms.

“What is important is not the identity of any individual unit but the relation between any two units compared in a binary pair” (stilesmedia,2017). When it comes to gender stereotypes, these binary oppositions support negative stereotypes like men portrayed as strong and women portrayed as damsels in distress. Sometimes portraying on women character who is independent and other women character who lives with traditional norms and goes with flow this character creates negative stereotype in society as it's their duty and women who is independent seen as who has no values.

Claude developed this theory by analyzing the myths and folklore across different cultures. He observed variations in storytelling; universal structures existed within the narrative's myths. One of the examples often revolves around the conflicts between opposing forces that ultimately help societies understand their values and beliefs.

A key aspect of Levi Strauss's theory is that binary oppositions are not neutral; they often reflect power hierarchies. In traditional Western narratives, emotion is often valued over civilization, and civilization is seen as superior to nature. Structuralist analysis does not merely identify these oppositions but also reveals the underlying ideologies.

Claude Levi Strauss theory in media studies, particularly in films, television and literature. In Korean dramas binary oppositions like rich vs poor, good vs evil creates tension and character development, helping the audience engage with narratives while reflecting the societal issues. He had to face criticism Post structuralists criticize that meaning is not fixed and the binary oppositions are too rigid. But this theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing the culture, language and narratives. This theory remains essential for understanding how societies organize their beliefs and values.

Paul-Michel Foucault was a French historian of ideas, philosopher, and social theorist who understood power through his concept of power dynamics. Unlike the tradition, he argued that power is diffused, rational, and embedded in social structures. He argues that power is not essentially repressive but productive. He believes that power doesn't only exist in government bodies but also in daily interactions, shaping the knowledge, behaviour, and identity of the public. His theory of power provides a critical lens for analyzing politics, media, education, and social norms.

Power is not just repressive but also a productive key contribution of Foucault's power dynamic theory, explained as the traditional power portraying as it limits freedom, putting rules and regulations in everything. But Foucault argues that power also creates knowledge, norms, and identities.

If we take a look at the example of schools, they created certain rules and regulations; if anyone dares to violate them, they face the consequence. This punishment doesn't make the kid spoil it, shaping the behaviour to fit societal expectations, just like this media establishes ideas about gender, race, and morality, influencing how people see themselves and others. Another key aspect of his theory is power and resistance, arguing that where there is power, there is resistance. Power is constantly challenged and negotiated when we look at social movements challenging or questioning the dominant power structure norms about race, gender, and economic inequality; However, he argues that when one form of control is challenged, another may emerge in its place.

Another crucial aspect of Foucault's theory is power and surveillance. Inspired by Jeremy Bentham's prison design, the panopticon is a circular structure where prisoners are constantly visible to a central watchtower. The key idea is that the prisoners do not know when they are being watched, so they regulate their own behaviour.

Foucault used this as a metaphor for modern society, where institutions like schools, workplaces, and social media operate through constant observation and self-discipline. Surveillance creates a form of internalized power where individuals conform to norms not because of direct oppression but because they believe they are being monitored. One application of Foucault's theory can be seen in media representation and cultural narratives. For instance, television dramas, films, and news reports often reinforce societal norms by portraying certain groups as powerful while marginalizing others. In Korean dramas, for example, power is often represented through class hierarchies, gender roles, and institutional authority.



## Chapter 3

## Understanding Binary Opposition and Power Structure In Korean Drama

*Scandal* is a Korean mystery series narrating from the viewpoint of a character named Baek Seola playing as writer who takes revenge for her father's death. She encounters a rich lady who turns out to be her step mother who actually killed her father. When the story progresses, another issue arises. A character named Mun Jeong-in and Mun Juryeon fell in love with same man which stain the relationship between mother and daughter and they ending up committing so many things that they shouldn't have done, overall, it's a tension between women characters through all the episodes. If we take a look at the women characters portrayed here, we can find binary opposition.

Here is the example of portraying good vs. evil. Baek Seola is portrayed as a kind girl who is very polite as well as a dedicated girl who works hard towards her dreams, is innocent and pure in a relationship with her lover. Mun Jeong-in is portrayed as seductive, evil, and greedy, misusing her higher status, often called a gold digger in this series. One of the most striking aspects of the drama is the way wealth is associated with moral corruption. Many of the rich characters engage in deceitful practices, covering up scandals, bribing officials, and using their power to silence those who challenge them.

On the other side of this binary opposition, *Scandal* portrays the lives of the poor as a daily battle against an unjust system. Working-class characters live in small apartments, struggle with debt, and face discrimination when trying to improve their

lives. Unlike the wealthy, they do not have the luxury of using money to solve their problems, and they are often at the mercy of those in power.

Despite their hardships, the poor characters in *Scandal* embody resilience and justice. They fight against the injustices imposed by the rich, seeking to expose the truth and demand accountability. Their struggle is not just personal but symbolic of the larger battle against corruption and inequality. The protagonist, often from a humble background, represents the voice of the oppressed, challenging the elite and uncovering their hidden crimes.

Through Baek seola portraying the struggles of average family their innocence is mocked by the rich sometimes society doesn't believe the truth because rich influence society with money. Baek Seola's facing biggest problem is that when she tries to say Mun Jeong-in killed her father no one believes her, also Mun Jeong-in mocked her by saying no one would believe her because she influenced the law and legal system high officials with her money.

Masculinity and femininity are also portrayed through these characters. Baek Seola and Aunt Choi Mi-Sun often show their feminine side, living based on traditional societal expectations. She is so devoted to her husband, daughter, and Baek Seola that she quotes in one episode, "All you guys ask for me is when the food is ready". This shows she fulfils her duties as a wife and mom while she doesn't take care of herself and only cares about others around her.

Masculinity is seen through the character named Lee Sun Ae, mother of the director who is in charge of shooting the drama written by Baek Seola named Poker Face. Lee Sun Ae plays a big role in helping Baek Seola to complete her revenge she

was married once, but when the husband abandoned her and killed her child, devastated and determined, she decided to take revenge. She became successful after 30 years and built her own company. After being abandoned by her husband she made it clear that she doesn't need a man in her life, and she is only focusing on her career and her family, showing the masculine side as women.

Baek Seola is a perfect example of an innocent character. When Mun Jeong-in died from the top of the building, everyone suspected she killed her, and even the officers made this death a murder, but after one week they got the evidence to prove her innocence as Mun Jeong-in's death was concluded as an accidental death. Through Mun Jeong-in corrupted authority and life portrayed.

The K-drama *Vincenzo* (2021) is well-known for its daring blend of crime, law, and dark comedy, but one of its most fascinating qualities is its strong portrayal of women. Unlike many conventional Korean dramas, where female characters are generally limited to romantic or supportive roles, *Vincenzo* depicts strong, independent, and multidimensional women who can hold their own in a male-dominated environment. The drama, through characters such as Hong Cha-young, Choi Myung-Hee, and Jang Yeon-Jin emphasizes women's influence in a variety of fields, including law, crime, and corporate manipulation.

*Vincenzo* is centered on the merciless Babel Group, a business that represents uncontrolled corporate power. Babel, led by Jang Han-Seok, uses bribes, coercion, and violence to maintain control over the legal and political systems. The movie effectively depicts how companies manipulate the law to preserve their supremacy, using loopholes and utilizing law firms to conceal their misdeeds.

They use intimidation and assassination to silence opponents. These dynamic mimics real-world corporate corruption, in which the affluent and powerful dodge prosecution while the weak suffer. This drama is known for its diverse representation of power structure in women unlike traditional drama.

Hong cha-young is one of the most dynamic female leads who uses power to manipulate the corrupted legal system. She is not a damsel in distress; rather, she is a fearless fighter who dares to take down the corrupted Babel group along with Vincenzo. She navigates power dynamics skilfully, using her wit and legal expertise to take down her sworn enemies.

On the other end of the spectrum is Choi Myung-Hee, a cold-blooded lawyer and one of the primary antagonists. Unlike many female villains who employ seduction or emotional manipulation, Myung-Hee's power stems from her capacity to be merciless and strategic. She is not afraid to take drastic measures to achieve her goals, making her one of the series most deadly characters. Her presence challenges the notion that women must be pleasant or morally upright in order to be strong; instead, she can be as ambitious, cunning, and dangerous as any male villain.

Another character named Jang-yeon-jin, wife of the chairman of the Babel group, her character symbolizes another kind of power structure, one that functions in the background. She comes out as a trophy wife and meek at first, but as the narrative progresses, it becomes evident that she has more power than that.

## Chapter-4

### Methodology

The graph illustrates seven major oppositions like rich vs poor, good vs evil, traditional vs modernity, revenge vs forgiveness, fate vs free will, love vs duty, fantasy vs reality representing a thematic struggle among them dominant.

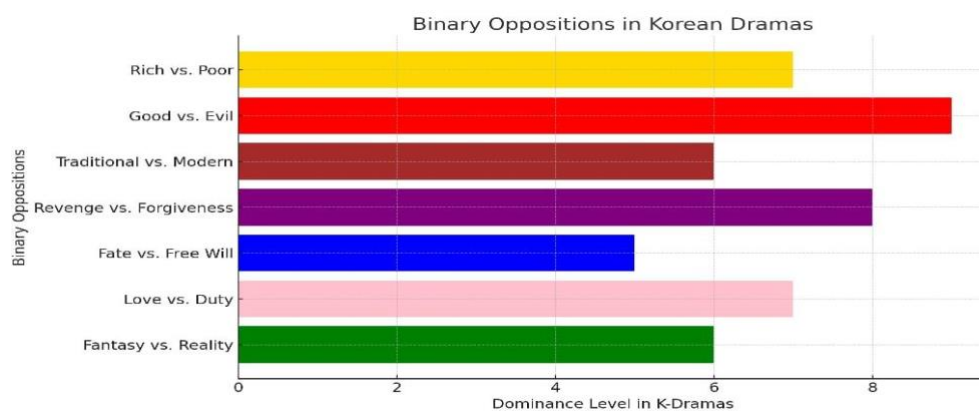


Figure -1 binary opposition in k-drama

Themes are good vs evil, rich vs poor and revenge vs forgiveness reflecting the intense battle between protagonist and antagonist, whether in chaebol dramas, historical drama, revenge or thrillers these opposition heightens the tension and keeps the audience engaged.

Good vs evil can be seen more dominant in K-drama compared to the other binaries. This binary impact society and questions themselves. Rich vs poor portrayed through the romance between a wealthy heir and commoner. This contrast is not about money but also about social hierarchy, privilege and power imbalance. Also, traditional vs modernity highlights generational conflicts especially in k-drama where old believes and customs often restricts personal freedom resonate with viewers by reflecting real-life societal struggles.

Fate vs free will and love vs duty brings an emotional depth that K-drama sets apart. This revolves around whether destiny controls relationships or if the characters can be break free from their fates it evident mostly in historical and fantasy drama where protagonist must choose between love and responsibility.

Figure 1 captures how these binary oppositions shape k-drama narratives the dominance of themes like morality, revenge and wealth disparity highlights the appeal to both emotional and social issues, whether through romance, historical, action, thriller k-drama masterfully use these opposition to create engaging, thought-provoking stories.

The power dynamics of women in K-dramas are depicted in Figure 2 which also highlights how their roles have changed over time. Underdogs Rising to Power, Queens & Royals, Police & Detectives, Lawyers & Prosecutors, and CEOs & Businesswomen are the five primary archetypes into which it divides female characters.

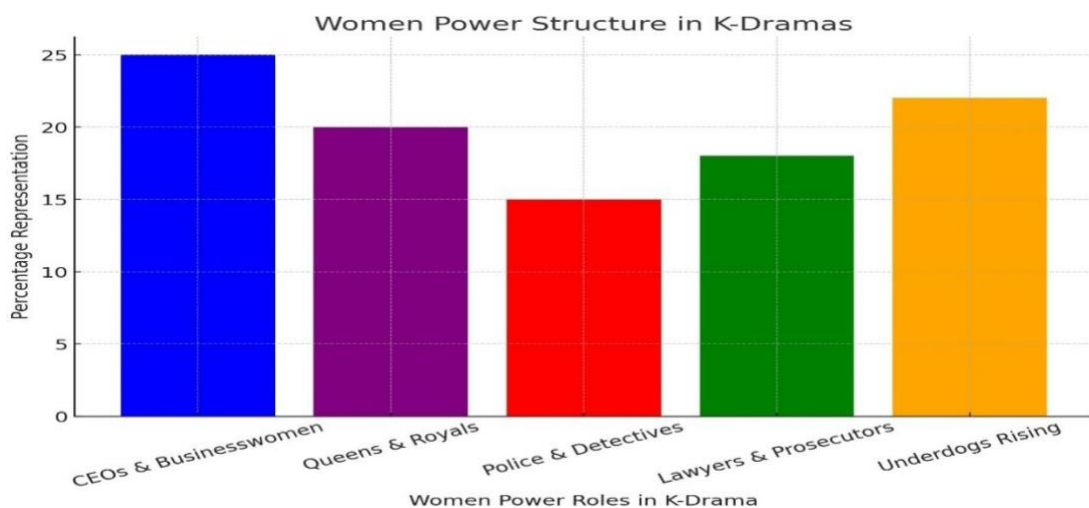


Figure -2 women power structure in k-drama

Strong businesswomen have the largest representation, which is indicative of the growing number of independent and career-driven female protagonists. Historical

and political dramas continue to frequently feature queens and royals, highlighting their significance in conventional storytelling. This graph illustrates the dramatic change in K-dramas, where female characters are now powerful individuals influencing their lives rather than merely being romantic interests.

## Chapter-5

### Conclusion

Strong thematic contrasts, especially through the use of binary oppositions, emotional depth, and nuanced narrative are all hallmarks of Korean dramas, or K-dramas. The plot and character development are significantly shaped by these oppositions, which include rich against poor, good versus evil, tradition versus modernity, and power versus resistance. However, K-dramas also create a distinct power structure, frequently depicting a strict hierarchy in which relationships, disputes, and settlements are determined by social standing.

By examining these two elements—binary oppositions and power dynamics—we may better understand how K-dramas engage viewers, question conventions, and reflect societal reality. Many K-dramas are built around binary oppositions, which produce gripping conflicts that advance the plot.

Rich vs. poor is one of the most prevalent contrasts, which is commonly observed in chaebol (conglomerate family) dramas where a wealthy heir develops feelings for a common or struggling person. As the protagonists negotiate these contrasts, this contrast allows for character development while highlighting concerns of privilege, injustice, and social mobility.

To conclude, a basic binary opposition that appears in a variety of genres, from contemporary courtroom dramas to historical sagas, is power vs. resistance. This resistance, whether it be a helpless commoner opposing a despotic monarch or a whistleblower exposing corporate malfeasance, heightens the tension in the play and emphasizes themes of justice, resiliency, and social transformation.



Chaebol chairmen, kings, and presidents are at the pinnacle of the power hierarchy and have the most sway and authority. These individuals are frequently depicted as either cruel, battling personal issues, or both. Their heirs, crown princes, or senior officials are beneath them and have to deal with expectations from their families, power disputes, and inheritance problems.

Elite politicians, CEOs, and royal advisers make up the middle echelons of the hierarchy. They have a lot of power, yet they frequently operate in the background to influence others further up. They are essential in starting disputes, plotting to gain greater power, or advancing the protagonist's path.

Ordinary people, workers, and soldiers, who represent society as a whole, are at the bottom of the power hierarchy and frequently endure the oppression of those in positions of authority. In the end, the success of K-dramas lies in their ability to blend strong character dynamics, thought-provoking themes, and emotional storytelling.

In conclusion Claude -Levi Strauss binary opposition theory provides a powerful framework for analyzing the culture, language and narratives, essential for understanding how societies organize their beliefs and values. Not just for dramatic effect but also complex social and emotional themes. K-drama's not only for entertainment, but also making them rich text for exploring Foucauldian dynamic.

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