

# Representation of Alpha Woman in Korean Series

## (Roland Barthes Semiotics Analysis on Pachinko Season 1 Series)

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### ABSTRACT

Korean dramas are not merely artistic works without meaning or purpose. They serve as a medium to depict social realities through storytelling and visual art. One of Korean dramas that reflects the social realities of Korea is Pachinko, set in the 1930s when patriarchal culture and the low status of women were still prevalent. The purpose of this study is to explore how the representation of alpha woman is depicted in Pachinko. The study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method to interpret the signs within the drama through three levels of analysis: denotation, connotation, and myth. The researcher selected three episodes from the eight-episode series (episodes 3, 4, and 5) for a detailed analysis of scenes referencing alpha woman characteristics. The findings of this research reveal various ways in which Pachinko portrays alpha woman. The study highlights the courage, independence, and resilience of woman characters. This research recommends that future Korean dramas continue to feature alpha women characters to inspire gender equality. Additionally, future studies could explore similar representations in different cultural contexts to provide comparative analyses, enriching the understanding of gender representation across cultures.

Keywords: Korea Drama, Pachinko, Alpha Woman.

### INTRODUCTION

Pachinko is a South Korean series that has successfully captured significant attention from the international community, even earning the title of Best Foreign Language Series at the 28<sup>th</sup> Critics Choice Awards. Set between the 1930s and 1980s, Pachinko follows the story of a woman named Sunja, who lived during Korea's

Japanese colonial period. The drama begins by highlighting Sunja's poor family background, despite their ownership of a boarding house. As she grew up, her father passed away from an illness that was untreatable at the time. Sunja and her mother took over the boarding house business left behind by her father. Every day, Sunja would go to the market to buy groceries, which her mother and their two

employees would later cook for the guests. One day, she encountered Hansu, a realtor who had been living in Japan for many years. Their frequent meetings sparked a deep attraction between the two, ultimately leading to Sunja becoming pregnant with Hansu's child. However, Hansu, who was already married to a woman of Japanese descent, chose to offer Sunja a luxurious house and other facilities as his way of taking responsibility, instead of marrying her – contrary to Sunja's wish to become his wife, leading to their separation.

Sunja, pregnant out of wedlock, faced severe criticism from her community, who labeled her a disgraceful woman. At the time, no one, not even her mother or the two employees she regarded as siblings, knew the identity of her child's father. The situation took a turn when a compassionate priest named Baek Isak appeared and offered to marry Sunja. His only condition was for Sunja to accompany him to Osaka, Japan, so they could start a new life together.

The success of Pachinko as a Korean series demonstrates South Korea's ability to consistently excel in producing high-quality works and competing with Western countries that have long dominated the popular culture industry. The development and global spread of Korean popular culture, known as Hallyu or the Korean wave, began in the 1990s, coinciding with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Korea and China (Prasanti & Dewi, 2020). From that point, Korean cultural products such as music, dramas/series, fashion and more, were embraced and enjoyed by audiences worldwide, solidifying Korea's position in the global cultural landscape.

Hallyu itself is derived from the Korean words *han* (한) and *ryu* (류), which mean "Korean wave". According to Bokrae (2015), Chinese people interpret Hallyu as *hanliu* "寒流", meaning the current or wave of Korean culture, and as *hanliu* "韓流" which contrasts with the concept of a warm current.

Additionally, they use the term *hanmi* "韓迷" to refer to the craze for Korean culture in China, particularly among teenagers who are deeply captivated by it. However, Bokrae (2015) notes that this interpretation also reflects the presence of anti-Hallyu sentiment, which arises from the belief that Korean culture overshadows local culture in China. This perspective emerges as Hallyu is predominantly seen as a popular phenomenon among young people, who are drawn to elements such as K-pop, K-dramas, fashion, food, and movies.

The rise of Hallyu has shifted the course of Western cultural dominance by putting Asia at the forefront of its own cultural expressions, which were once primarily influenced by the West. Among the many products of Hallyu, Korea dramas have emerged as one of the most popular, both within Korea and globally. According to Hafifah & Urfan (2024), Korea dramas are widely loved by people of all ages, from teenagers to adults, as they portray various aspects of human life and are easily accessible, offering a rich and immersive experience for viewers. In another sense, Korea dramas are described as an artistic form of culture, typically in the format of mini-series, produced in Korea and using Korea as the primary language (Prasanti & Dewi, 2020). Prasanti & Dewi (2020) also noted that globalization, particularly in the fields of science and technology has paved the way for the international distribution of Korean films and dramas, boosting their presence on the global stage.

The growth of Korean dramas is not only due to their easy availability on national television or through streaming platforms, but also due to the evolving storylines they present. One notable change can be seen in the portrayal of female characters, particularly those who are depicted as poor, weak, and naive. These characters are typically depicted as submissive and dependent on rich men who become their romantic partners. This type of narrative

positions men as superior, suggesting they have control over the lives of women of their partners. However, these storylines cannot be dismissed as just entertainment; they are a reflection of the prevailing ideology in the local culture. As Toni (2017) argues, the ideologies people hold ultimately shape how they think, interpret issues, and respond to challenges. In societies where patriarchal values dominate, these gender dynamics are reinforced, which is why such portrayals persist in Korean dramas. The continued representation of these power imbalances in the media highlights how deeply ingrained these ideologies are in human interactions, both in real life and in fictional narratives. Then, the portrayal of female characters in Korean dramas has evolved. They are no longer depicted as weak, dependent, or unable to chart their own course in life. Instead, they are shown as strong, independent, and in control of their destiny, even if they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. These characters are often referred to as alpha woman. According to Winoto & Rachmawati (2017, as cited in Hafifah & Urfan, 2024), an alpha woman emerges through a dynamic process of life experiences. She is not only resilient and capable of leading, but also serves as a positive role model for other women. The term "alpha" indicates someone with influence over others in setting and achieving goals and is often seen as a leader because of these qualities (Sumra, 2019). While not all women with alpha characteristics become formal leaders within a group, they still possess a unique charisma (Hafifah & Urfan, 2024). The portrayal of alpha woman characters in contemporary Korea dramas highlights significant social changes, reflecting a shift in how society views women and gender equality.

As one of the Asian countries that adheres to a patriarchal culture, Korea traditionally places women in a subordinate position in various aspects of life. This cultural norm stems from the division of

gender roles, which has been reinforced through Confucianism since the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) (Herlina, 2018). There are five things that are taught: (1) the relationship between the ruler and the people; (2) the relationship between father and son; (3) the relationship between the older and the younger; (4) the relationship between husband and wife; and (5) the relationship between two friends of equal status (Tudor, 2012). In these relationships, the first party mentioned holds a higher position than the second and is expected to be responsible and wise in their dealings with the subordinate party. Among these five relationships, the last one is the only one that emphasizes equality.

The Confucianism understanding that has been deeply ingrained in Korean society significantly influences the way people think and behave, particularly in their views on gender equality (Herlina, 2018). According to Farnisari & Sudrajat (2013) discussions about gender are sensitive and ongoing, especially when it comes to the experiences of women. They explain that the belief that gender is natural, rather than a social construct, is at the root of the problem. Gender is not innate but a societal construct that assigns roles to men and women, ultimately leading to gender injustice through marginalization, discrimination, stereotyping, subordination, violence, and an unequal distribution of labor. Korean dramas reflect societal realities through their storylines, characters, and scenes, conveying ideologies that shape audience interpretations (Herlina, 2018).

By portraying women characters who are independent, strong and able to determine their own paths in life, Korean dramas make an effort to challenge and reshape the deeply rooted views and ideologies in Korea society. This portrayal not only reflects a shift in societal perspectives but also captivates audiences, encouraging them to keep watching (Herlina, 2018). Moreover, movies and dramas serve as a

mirror of life, often shaped by social constructions created by their makers (Daniel, 2010 as cited in Farnisari & Sudrajat, 2013). Films are also powerful mediums for expressing ideas, using signs, symbols, and other elements to communicate messages (Robby et al., 2021). The visual representation in movies makes it easier for audiences to understand and connect with the characters depicted (Dirgantari, 2020).

The portrayal of alpha women characters reflects a shift in social values, where women are no longer underestimated or seen merely as supporters of men. Instead, they are shown as individuals capable of making decisions for their own lives. This change also highlights the role of the media as a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and driving social change. The presence of alpha woman characters is not only significant for women in Korea but also for women globally, as it raises awareness about the importance of women empowerment.

Representation is defined as a process of creating meaning, consisting of two interconnected components: concepts in the mind and language (Agustina, 2020). It is also described as the act of recording thoughts, messages, or knowledge physically through signs, such as sounds, images and other forms (Danesi, in Cristy et al., 2023). In agreement with this view, Rosfiantika et al. (2017) defines representation as the depiction of abstract meanings in real-life events, linked to signs and their associated meanings. The process of meaning formation involves negotiation and mutual understanding based on each individual's subjective experience. As Rosfiantika et al. (2017) point out, the representation process is dynamic because it adapts to the desires and intellectual capabilities of those who use the signs, making it a form of social construction. The

function of representation is therefore tied to the various ways in which social reality is presented in text or scripts (Ridwan et al., 2022).

The signs used in representations must undergo a selection process to determine whether they align with the ideology of a particular group. This is because representation has gained a significant role in cultural studies, where the relationship between meaning, language, and culture becomes a central focus (Riyadi & Fauziah, 2022). The signs displayed in these representations are then analyzed by researchers using semiotic analysis, which examines the signs embedded in a message or text. In this study, the focus is on conversations between characters in *Pachinko*.

Semiotic analysis, in its most basic form, is a method used to analyze and uncover the meanings in the signs found within a text or message (Cristy et al., 2023). One of the most widely used approaches to semiotic analysis is Roland Barthes' framework, which divides analysis into three levels: denotation, connotation and myth. Denotation refers to the most straightforward, literal meaning of an image, the primary meaning without any hidden or implied elements (Nofia & Bustma, 2022; Seba & Prihandini, 2021). In contrast, connotation refers to the second level of meaning, where the signs within the denotation become part of a chain of interconnected signifiers (Wibisono & Sari, 2021). Finally, myth refers to messages or ideas that are widely accepted as true but cannot be empirically proven (Ismatullah, 2013).

Several previous studies have examined the portrayal of alpha woman characters in Korean dramas. One such study

is by Hafifah & Urfan in 2024, *Representasi Karakter Alpha Female Dalam Drama Korea Queenmaker*. This research explores how the alpha woman characters in Queenmaker are depicted as woman who can lead, motivate, stay strong, and remain resolute in difficult situations to achieve common goals. The drama portrays woman as capable, tough leaders with the confidence to influence others.

Another study by Cristy, Danadharta and Ayodya in 2024, *representasi Karakter Alpha Female Pada Drama Korea (Analisis Semiotika Pada Film The World of The Married)*. It describes her as a woman who can think logically, make decisions even when angry, and exhibit high self-confidence. She is calm, assertive, and conceals her vulnerabilities, never showing weakness. Additionally, there is research by Lia Oktavia, Sholihah Titin Sumanti and Fakhrur Rozi in 2022, "Women's representation in the Korea Drama "It's Okay, That's Love" (Semiotics Analysis Study)" While it does not focus directly on the alpha character, it discusses how women are represented in the drama as intelligent, strong and resilient, though their roles in the domestic sphere are still prominently depicted. Furthermore, Eka Herlina's 2018 study, *Representasi Ideologi Gender di Korea Selatan dalam Drama Korea "Because This Is My First Life"*, takes a different approach. Unlike the studies mentioned before, it addresses the patriarchal ideology within the drama. Herlina (2018) argues that the scenes in the drama reflect real societal conditions in Korea, where women are still perceived as inferior to men and face discrimination, particularly in the workplace. The study also suggests that some women may accept the values of patriarchal culture, despite the modern context of Korean society. The first three studies demonstrate that contemporary

Korean dramas no longer limit woman roles as weak, submissive, or dependent characters. Instead, they portray woman as independent, strong, responsible individuals who can make decision for her own lives. In contrast, Herlinas's study delves into how patriarchal culture continues to shape societal views on woman. Building on this, the present study seeks to examine how the alpha woman character is represented in Pachinko Season 1.

## METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative research method, which is a type of qualitative research focused on phenomena, both natural and man-made that can be observed in activities, characteristics, changes and relationships between different phenomena (Rusandi & Rusli, 2021). Rusandi & Rusli (2021) argue that descriptive qualitative research is used to interpret or explain situations or relationships, with the goal of providing a detailed description of events and clarifying the phenomena that occur within them.

The analysis in this study utilizes Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis framework to explore how the representation of alpha woman characters in Pachinko season 1 is depicted in denotative, connotative and mythical terms. The data collection method used in this study is documentation, where the researcher selects and extracts still images from scenes that are considered representative of the alpha woman characters. These images are then analyzed to uncover the underlying meanings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this discussion, from the 8 episodes of Pachinko Season 1, the researcher has chosen to analyze three specific episodes. These are Episode 3, where Sunja announces her pregnancy to Hansu; Episode 4, when Sunja decides to follow her husband, Isak to Japan; and Episode 5, where Sunja helps her sister's husband in law repay his debt. These episodes have been selected because they prominently showcase Sunja's portrayal as an alpha woman.

**Scene 1: 00:13:15 – 00:17:41**



Figure 2. A still image from episode 3  
(Source: Screenshot by Afrina, from a personal viewing of the drama via Telegram, December, 10 2024)

In Episode 3, Sunja expresses her disapproval of Hansu's remark that marriage is merely a form of arrangement. This confrontation begins when Sunja informs Hansu about her pregnancy and asks him about meeting her mother to discuss their marriage plans. Hansu, caught off guard and irritated, reveals that he is already married and has three daughters from his marriage. Sunja is left speechless upon learning this. Instead of agreeing to marry Sunja, Hansu offers her and Sunja's mother a secure and comfortable life, which Sunja rejects outright. Hansu, in turn, accuses Sunja of plotting to trap him into marriage, saying "Was this your plan all along to force me into marrying you because no one else would?" He goes further by insinuating that their child might be born

with defects due to the hereditary disease carried by Sunja's father. This accusation enrages Sunja, who firmly defends her father by saying, "Don't insult my father". The argument escalates until Sunja storms off in tears, leaving Hansu alone in the forest, despite his shouts for her to return.

Denotatively, what happens between Hansu and Sunja could be seen as a typical encounter and argument between a couple. However, when we look deeper and explore the meaning behind the incident (connotation), we see that Sunja chooses to end her relationship with Hansu, even though she has to give up the luxurious and secure life that Hansu promised her. Making decisions during unplanned pregnancy is complex. As Dalmijn et al. (2024) stated, making decisions about an unplanned pregnancy is complex, involving curiosity, feelings, self-belief, influence from others, and social norms. Dalmijn et al. (2024) also added that rational decision-making alone is not sufficient in this process. During that time, Korea was a conservative society regarding pregnancies outside of marriage. Women who had children before marriage or without marriage were considered guilty, defenseless, looked down upon, and stigmatized by traditional Korean society (Ryall, 2024; Hannani, 2021).

This perspective also becomes a consideration for Sunja in making her decision. Living in the midst of a strong patriarchal culture, where culture plays a central role in human life (Akbar, 2017), combined with being a woman who is pregnant outside of marriage, becomes an enormous burden for Sunja in choosing her own path. She must face an uncertain future and the stigma attached to her. On the other hand, her decision reflects courage and determination not to conform to the norms

that perpetuate women's dependence on men. It even shows resistance to social norms that limit women. In this case, she acts not only as someone who is brave, but also as a symbol of resistance against cultural expectations that place women in subordinate positions. This decision indirectly represents a shift in the social paradigm, gradually opening up space for women to define the meaning of their own roles in a conservative society. The myth in this scene refers to how money or a luxurious life is often seen as the solution to various problems. Therefore, we can see how, in such circumstances, Sunja continues to display her character as an alpha woman, brave in making decisions. Despite the significant consequences, she remains firm in her commitment to marry. As a woman living in a conservative society at that time, Sunja's decision was not only a challenge to social norms but also demonstrated her bravery in taking control of her life as a human being, especially as a woman, even when facing stigma and significant economic difficulties.

Referring back to when Sunja is accused by Hansu of planning the pregnancy to trap him, the researcher views this as Hansu's way of protecting himself from the demand to marry Sunja, who is carrying his child, which is then considered psychological manipulation. According to Braiker (2004, as cited in Fitriani et al., 2023), psychological manipulation is a tactic used to influence an individual or group's perception, judgment, and behavior in a dishonest manner—through deceit or coercion—to serve the manipulator's personal interests.

Such manipulation is commonly found in toxic relationships, which are often characterized by destructive dynamics such as emotional manipulation, excessive control, verbal abuse, and demeaning behavior (Chi &

Dariyo, 2025). In this scene, Sunja's response is one of silence and disbelief; she simply shakes her head in disagreement. Before walking away from Hansu, she firmly states, "Don't insult my father." Through this statement, Sunja demonstrates courage in defending her father's dignity, even though he had long passed away. This response reflects her refusal to allow anyone—regardless of their social status—to degrade her family.

In Barthes' semiotic analysis, Sunja's statement, intended to defend her father, can be seen as a sign of resistance against the social myth that places women in passive roles. She is able to defend herself and uphold the values of her family's dignity.

#### Scene 2: 00:27:30 – 00:31:53



Figure 2: A still image from episode 4

(Source Screenshot by Afrina from a personal viewing of the drama via Telegram, December, 10 2024)

In episode 4, while Sunja was shopping at the market, a Japanese market guard directed her to follow him to a room. There, Hansu was working. This initiated a conversation between the two. Hansu, using his dominant demeanor, tried to persuade Sunja to remain in Korea and criticized her decision to marry Isak, referring to him as "just a sickly man who will only burden her". In response, Sunja glared at Hansu and firmly replied, "Why are you calling him that? He's my husband now. He's doing things you can't do". The conversation became increasingly heated, ultimately ending with Sunja leaving in anger.

Denotatively, the scene is a conversation between Hansu and Sunja at Hansu's workplace. Connotatively, however, several elements can be interpreted. First is the moment when Sunja defends her decision to marry Isak, a pastor with a chronic illness who lacks wealth and status, and to follow him Osaka, Japan. This scene illustrates Sunja's defense of Isak but also emphasizes her values – she esteems men based on their behavior and commitment rather than their social status or wealth. In the broader social context of the era, Sunja's statement carries significant weight in challenging the patriarchal culture that often dictated women submit to men of higher social and economic standing. This moment also dispels the myth that wealth or money is a universal solution to life's challenges. By rejecting Hansu's offer and choosing to live with the poor but devoted Isak, Sunja demonstrates extraordinary courage in defying societal norms. At that time, Korea society was deeply conservative, particularly regarding issues such as marriage and pregnancies outside of wedlock. Women like Sunja, who became pregnant before marriage, were often heavily stigmatized. Hansu's offer could have been an easy way for Sunja to address her predicament, but instead, she chose the more challenging path to uphold her dignity and take control of her own life. This confidence and high self-esteem exemplify her alpha woman character, portraying her as independent, assertive, strong and capable of making her own decisions without external influence, especially from men (Kurniadi et al., 2024).

Next is the scene where Sunja firmly declares that the child she is carrying belongs solely to her, rejecting Hansu's assertion, that the child is also his. Sunja's piercing gaze in this moment reflects her courage and confidence in facing Hansu, a man with

considerable power and influence in his community. Her unwavering stare signifies her position as a woman unafraid to confront pressure, even when that pressure comes from someone who once held a significant role in her life. This conflict represents Sunja's struggle to defend her dignity, despite Hansu's persistent offers of an easier, more luxurious life. In doing so, she challenges the myth that women can only survive by relying on men. Furthermore, Sunja demonstrates autonomy and ownership over her own body, asserting her independence in a way that is often denied to women in patriarchal cultures. In such societies, women's freedom and autonomy are frequently stripped away, controlled or subject to external interference (Salwa, 2022). Hansu might have believed that Sunja would submit to him, given his threats and the enticing offers he presented, especially since he is the father of her child. However, what Hansu possesses and offers means nothing in Sunja's eyes. To her, Hansu is merely a man who has failed to take responsibility. This is made evident when Sunja walks away after their argument, unwavering in her decision to move to Osaka. In Barthes' semiotic analysis, this scene also debunks the myth that a child born out of wedlock is a disgrace and a burden to the mother. Through her words, Sunja asserts that she is fully prepared and capable of raising her child without needing assistance or validation from Hansu.

The final scene to analyze is when Hansu insults Isak by calling him a foolish, sickly man, and Sunja stands up for her husband. The way Sunja defends Isak mirrors how she previously defended her father when Hansu had insulted him, labeling him as disabled and claiming that this condition might be passed on to Sunja's unborn child. Sunja's resolute stance in these moments underscores her character as someone who

refuses to stay silent when her loved ones are demeaned, no matter how wealthy or influential the person delivering the insult might be. In patriarchal cultures, men are often portrayed as "heroes" who protect women from threats and danger. This representation not only reinforces the subordinate position of women but also fosters a sense of self-satisfaction among men regarding their social roles, as their heroism and patriotism are continuously praised and idealized (Kgatla, 2020). However, in this scene, Sunja subverts this traditional role: she emerges as the hero for her husband, defending his honor and dignity. However, in this scene, Sunja reverses that role. She becomes that hero for her husband, defending his honor and dignity. Through this act, she reaffirms her commitment to her relationship with Isak, solidifying her role as an alpha woman.

#### Scene 3: 00:36:15-00 – 00:38:40



Figure 3: A still image from episode 5 (Source Screenshot by Afrina from a personal viewing of the drama via Telegram, December, 10 2024)

The depiction of Sunja as an alpha woman in episode 5 can be observed through several scenes and dialogues. The first scene is when Sunja insists on paying off her brother-in-law's debt. The scene begins with two debt collectors arriving to demand payment and threatening to seize their home. At that time, Yoseb (Sunja's brother-in-law) was at work, leaving only Sunja and

Kyunghee, Yoseb's wife, at home. Sunja's decision to go directly to the debt collector's office to settle the debt caused Kyunghee to feel hesitant, fearful and worried. Kyunghee remarked that they should not pay the debt, as it was considered improper. While Kyunghee's words, in a denotative sense, reflect her doubt and anxiety, a deeper cultural and societal context reveals more complex layers. In patriarchal Korean society at the time, such actions could be seen as a violation of social norms. This is because, through the lens of patriarchy, there are constant limitations imposed on women, particularly in matters of child-rearing, domestic responsibilities, and economic affairs (Park, 2001, as cited in Novianty, 2024; Halizah & Faralita, 2023). In Sunja's case, the issue becomes even more pronounced, as it involves dealing directly with a loan shark. Within the patriarchal framework, such matters are viewed as the responsibility of Yoseb, the male head of the household; therefore, Sunja's involvement would have been seen as inappropriate. Walby (1989, as cited in Riyadi & Fauziah, 2022) identifies two types of patriarchy: private patriarchy, where women are confined to domestic roles while men make decisions, policies and have authority over women; and public patriarchy which regards power as a male-dominated domain. In this scene, the form of patriarchy presented aligns more with private patriarchy, where women are relegated to household responsibilities. Sunja's decision to insist on going to the debt collector's office directly defies the prevailing social norms of her time. However, her boldness in making this decision highlights her alpha characteristics. By taking on a role traditionally reserved for men and disregarding societal stigma and norms, Sunja demonstrates independence and courage. Her actions underscore her

unwillingness to rely completely on others and her readiness to make tough decisions in difficult situations. Through this scene, Sunja not only challenges the traditional boundaries imposed on women but also sets an example of resilience and determination. Her ability to navigate and confront the expectations of a patriarchal society further emphasizes her role as an alpha woman, capable of breaking conventions and standing firmly for what she believes is right.

The next scene showcasing Sunja's alpha woman role occurs when Kyunghee hesitates to accompany Sunja to settle the debt or return home and leave the matter entirely to Yoseb. Realizing Kyunghee's doubt, Sunja eventually says, "Let's be scared together. Maybe strength can come from that," while clasping Kyunghee's hands tightly. In this scene, Sunja indirectly acknowledges that she shares the same fears as Kyunghee. However, her sense of moral responsibility to repay the debt outweighs her fear, illustrating her great confidence. Moreover, Sunja's warm gesture of holding Kyunghee's hands tightly conveys full reassurance that everything will be alright if they face it together. Sunja's actions are an example of nonverbal communication to convey her emotions. As Auza (2019, as cited in Ramadhan et al., 2023) states, nonverbal communication is a way humans communicate without words, using body language, gestures, and facial expressions instead. Auza further emphasizes the importance of nonverbal communication in human interaction, as it helps to express emotions.

Nonverbal communication, whether intentional or unintentional, is always present in any act of communication (Ma'ruf et al., 2020). Sunja's nonverbal gesture eventually instills confidence and courage in Kyunghee, enabling both of them to go to the

debt collector's office. Maslow (1939, as cited in Sumra, 2019) mentions that women with alpha characteristics tend to exhibit high self-confidence and prefer to be treated as humans rather than merely as women. He also notes that alpha women value independence to pay off the debt also reflects her unique leadership style. As a woman under social and economic pressure, she still manages to motivate Kyunghee to join her. Her statement, "Let's be scared together," becomes a rallying cry that underscores the idea that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to act despite it. Through this, Sunja not only demonstrates her own bravery but also leads and inspires Kyunghee to face a difficult situation alongside her.

This action embodies one of the primary qualities of an alpha woman: the ability to influence and inspire others. Sunja's courage in making decisions and stepping into roles traditionally considered taboo for women reflects resistance against patriarchal norms that confined women to the domestic sphere. Her actions challenge the notion that women should be passive and powerless. Furthermore, this act serves as resistance to the social constructs that restrict women from taking on roles beyond what is traditionally expected. In Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, Sunja's actions may be denotatively understood as simply paying off a debt to the collectors. However, connotatively, her actions demonstrate her courage in assuming responsibilities typically reserved for men and defying the myth of women as weak and powerless. Once again, Sunja proves that women possess equal competence. They can act rationally and take responsibility even under challenging circumstances. Ultimately, Sunja's bravery not only saves her family from the debt collectors' threats but also exemplifies how

women can take on roles in the non-domestic sphere, particularly in economic matters.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the portrayal of the alpha woman character in the Korean drama Pachinko Season 1 is demonstrated through traits such as bravery in decision-making, a sense of responsibility, confidence, and a willingness to take risks. Among the eight episodes aired, the research focuses on three episodes—episodes 3, 4, and 5—selecting scenes that best represent these alpha woman characteristics. The presence of the alpha woman character in Korean dramas reflects a shift in societal stigma toward women, who were once viewed as weak and dependent on men but are now depicted as independent and capable of making their own life decisions without relying on others. The theme of self-ownership and autonomy over one's own body is emphasized in this drama, addressing the loss of such autonomy often experienced by women in patriarchal societies, particularly during the era depicted in the story. Pachinko not only portrays the narrative of a resilient woman but also encourages its viewers to reflect on long-held social and gender values that have been considered societal norms. By introducing a character like Sunja, the drama provides space for more progressive narratives and fosters empowerment for women. Through this study, it is hoped that a deeper understanding can be achieved regarding how media, particularly Korean dramas, contribute to shaping representations of women and altering societal stigmas against them. Additionally, this research aims to serve as a reference for future studies on gender issues and the representation of women in popular culture, whether in Korean dramas or more broadly.

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