

Femme Fatale in Korean Drama *The Penthouse*

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ABSTRACT

In South Korea, *makjang* is a genre of Korean drama series that is full of twists and turns. *The Penthouse* is one of the popular *makjang* dramas broadcast in 2020. This thesis explores the portrayal of the femme fatale in the popular Korean drama *The Penthouse*. By examining the characters and narrative used in the series, this study aims to understand how the female antagonists are portrayed in *The Penthouse* and what strategies they use to achieve their goals. *The Penthouse* presents its female antagonists as femme fatales who are portrayed as beautiful, powerful, and ambitious women. They also use their manipulation and seduction as their strategies to achieve their goals. The female antagonists in *The Penthouse* are complex characters who are driven by their ambitions and goals.

Keywords: antagonist, femme fatale, makjang, manipulative

INTRODUCTION

In South Korea, *makjang* is a genre of Korean drama series that is full of twists and turns and plot twists. *Makjang* dramas usually mix a lot of dramatic aspects like infidelity, torture, fraud, and murder. As a result, the audience also felt annoyed and emotional. However, that is the purpose of making this *makjang* drama. *Makjang* dramas usually have many episodes. It could be hundreds or even thousands. The story is more often about the problems experienced in family life (Hwa, 2021). The contents feature diverse elements and occasional surprises, but they might become less engaging because of the presence of unnecessary discussions. The characters in the drama also have morals that exceed the norm and often contain unbelievable plot twists. However, in reality, this type of drama still attracts the audience. In addition, the storyline in *makjang* drama will usually end with an unexpected scene commonly referred to as a plot twist. In South Korea itself, this type of drama has been released a lot.

The Penthouse tells the story of wealthy families living in Hera Palace. It takes place in 2020. Aside from their place of residence, the characters unravel, escape, or take revenge for the death of one of the students. Most of the story is about women characters who strive to achieve their goal of entering high society by becoming the ruler in the 100th-floor penthouse in Gangnam, which is the pinnacle of success in their eyes. Also, those women will do anything to protect themselves. As the characters compete with each other, some lives have to be sacrificed. In the end, some of the female characters die, some others live in regrets.

Antagonists in *The Penthouse*, especially the female ones, are way more abusive and relentless than female antagonists in other Korean dramas. Their intentions involve personal matters and ambition to be the best of all. Although the male characters are ambitious as well, the female characters have stronger force and will to win in life, in all aspects. Those female antagonists are Cheon Seo Jin, Oh Yoon Hee, Ha Eun Byeol, and Joo Seok Kyung.

Although many other characters commit crimes, those four female antagonists are the ones who play their part as the real antagonists. Those 4 characters contain complex and toxic behaviors in the drama.

According to Doane (1991), the femme fatale embodies a duality of allure and danger, serving as a manifestation of male anxieties and desires. Her post the femme fatale serves as a symbol of male apprehension concerning women and their sexuality, as she possesses the capacity to challenge patriarchal norms and wield influence over men (Doane, 1991). Femme fatales are often portrayed as powerful figures who use their charm, intelligence, and sexuality to manipulate men and achieve their goals (Fitriah, 2020). This portrayal highlights the idea that women can possess agency and influence, which is a key aspect of feminist thought. It suggests that women can be active participants in shaping their lives and the world around them, rather than being mere objects of male desire or control. The femme fatale's sexuality is often a significant aspect of her character, and she is often depicted as a sexually liberated woman. This portrayal can be seen as an early representation of women's autonomy over their bodies and sexuality, which is a crucial aspect of feminist discourse. It challenges the idea that women should be sexually modest or subservient to men, emphasizing the importance of female sexual agency (Hahner, 2012)

Analyzing the femme fatales as antagonist characters from *The Penthouse* drama will provide a comprehensive understanding of the various traits of femininity, and complexities of human nature throughout the series. These four characters and their background story motivations contribute to the overall narrative, making them very good subjects to analyze in this thesis. I want to get a better understanding of how female antagonists in *The Penthouse* series succeed in reaching their goals by deceiving their target with feminine characteristics and how they are portrayed in the drama.

ANALYSIS

Cheon Seo Jin as Femme Fatale and Her Strategies

Cheon Seo Jin, a central character in the Korean drama *The Penthouse* epitomizes the archetype of the femme fatale. As a wealthy, ambitious, and ruthless opera singer, she navigates the world of high society with clever manipulation. Seo Jin's persistent pursuit of power and status often involves morally ambiguous decisions, making her a compelling antagonist. Her intricate schemes and willingness to go to extreme lengths to protect her position emphasize her role as a femme fatale, whose allure and danger are shown within this analysis.

Cheon Seo Jin's look often wears smoky eyeshadow and eyeliner to give her a mysterious look. Bold crimson lipstick hues have always been associated with attraction and seduction. It is a color that grabs attention and makes the wearer seem more assured. Bold lipstick hues are a representation of a femme fatale's capacity to draw in and control men. On the other hand, smokey eyeshadow is put on by blending dark tones in the area around the eyes to provide a subtle look. This frequently hides the wearer's actual thoughts and motives. In the context of femme fatale, a type of smoky eyeshadow can represent a woman's ability to hide her true nature and intentions, making her more alluring and dangerous. Smokey eyeshadow gained popularity back in the 1920s during the rise of the femme fatale archetype in cinema, some famous actresses like Lauren Bacall and Veronica Lake brought popularity to this look, which has since become synonymous with mystery. This attention to detail in her makeup reflects the femme fatale's tendency for control and manipulation, using her appearance as a tool to captivate and deceive.

Cheon Seo Jin's hair is usually styled in sleek and wavy styles. Her hair color also is often dark, adding a more mysterious feel to her presence and aura. The perfection of her hair grooming reflects the femme fatale's calculated nature, always presenting herself the perfect as she wants, in an alluring manner to manipulate those around her. Sleek hairstyles have been popular among women for centuries, with examples found in ancient Egyptian and Greek art. In modern times, sleek hairstyles have been worn by iconic femme fatale characters in films, such as Veronica Lake in "The Lady from Shanghai" and Ava Gardner in "The Barefoot Contessa." Wavy hairstyles have been popular among women for their ability to add volume and texture to hair. They have been worn by femme fatale characters in various films, such as Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* and Grace Kelly in *To Catch a Thief*. Wavy hair can be seen as a symbol of femininity, as it's often associated with a more delicate and curvaceous physical appearance. This feminine mystique is a key component of the femme fatale's charm. Sleek, wavy hair can convey a sense of refinement, which is an essential trait for a femme fatale. This hairstyle suggests that the woman is polished, put-together, and cultured. The seductive allure of the soft, flowing movement of wavy hair can be mesmerizing, drawing the viewer's attention to the subject's face and body. This sensual quality adds to the femme fatale's seductive allure.

Applying Doane's theory to Cheon Seo Jin's trait of deception regarding her affair with Joo Dan Tae, several key points can demonstrate these traits. Doane's theory explains how femme fatale women often use their sexual agency as a tool to manipulate and control men. Cheon Seo Jin shows this side through her calculated seduction of Joo Dan Tae, despite knowing full well the consequences of having an affair with her friend's husband. Her manipulation goes beyond a simple physical seduction; she uses her charm strategically to gain power and advantage in the complex social dynamics of their circle.

Cheon Seo Jin is an intelligent and calculated woman who always thinks several steps ahead, this makes her become a master of playing the game of power, using her power, wit, and cunning to control those around her. She is always planning, scheming, and manipulating, always looking for ways to increase her power and gain more in her life. One of Cheon Seo Jin's greatest strengths is her ability to read people and situations. She knows exactly how to play on people's emotions, using their weaknesses and fears against them. She is a master of psychological manipulation, often using guilt trips, emotional blackmail, or playing the victim to get what she wants.

There was this one remarkable canonic event in the movie, where Cheon Seo Jin killed her father and then pretended to be mourning about it. She was even willing to murder her father just to become Chief Director of Cheong-A Group (though she does feel bad about it at first, as seen in her iconic piano scene). In the end, her crimes catch up to her, and is ultimately forced to watch her daughter pay the price of her sins, which is a karmic mirror of what she did to Oh Yoon-hee in the past. By connecting Cheon Seo-jin's actions to the femme fatale archetype, we can see how she uses manipulation, deception, and charm to navigate her complex emotional landscape and achieve her goals. This interpretation adds depth to her character and highlights how trauma, power dynamics, and emotional complexity intersect in human relationships.

Based on Doane's theory about femme fatale, it emphasizes the role of the femme fatale as a figure of deception and betrayal. Cheon Seo Jin's love affair with Joo Dan Tae embodies this deception, as she intentionally engages in a secret relationship that erodes the trust and integrity of her marriage and friendship with Shim Su Ryeon. The secret nature of their affair highlights Cheon Seo Jin's desire to deceive those close to her for personal gain.

Oh Yoon Hee as Femme Fatale and Her Strategies

In Korean drama *The Penthouse*, Oh Yoon Hee develops as a character whose versatility and determination are deeply entwined with her portrayal of the femme fatale archetype. Drawing upon Mary Ann Doane's theory of this archetype, this analysis digs into how Oh Yoon Hee's makeup, hair, shoes, dress, body, and behavior represent both her resilience and her embodiment of the femme fatale persona.

Oh Yoon Hee's makeup serves as a symbol of her versatility, as she deliberately uses it to enhance her appeal. She often selects bold lipstick shades and sultry eye makeup in the middle of the storyline, enhancing her confidence. Her makeup choices reflect her ability to adapt to different circumstances and assert her dominance, even within the misfortune she had to go through. Oh Yoon Hee's wardrobe is a reflection of her versatility. She often styles herself in fashionable and chic clothing that radiates confidence and sophistication ever since she got her place at Hera Palace. Her clothing choices are designed to command attention and assert her power and superiority, even within the most difficult of circumstances. Oh Yoon Hee's fashion sense embodies the femme fatale's ability to overcome obstacles with fashion and elegance.

Oh Yoon Hee pushes Min Seol A from the 47th floor of the Hera Palace in a desperate and violent attempt to secure her daughter Bae Ro Na's place at the prestigious Cheong Ah High School. This scene embodies Oh Yoon Hee's transformation into a femme fatale, a trope often characterized by a woman who uses her charm and cunning to achieve her objectives, frequently through morally ambiguous or outright ruthless means. The critical scene unfolds with suspense. Oh Yoon Hee, feeling immense pressure and desperation due to her daughter's rejection from Cheong Ah High School, confronts Min Seol A. Min Seol A, an orphan and the biological daughter of Shim Su Ryeon (unbeknownst to most characters at this point), becomes an obstacle in Yoon Hee's path. In a fit of rage and fear of losing her chance at securing a better future for her daughter, Yoon Hee pushes Seol A from the balcony of the 54th floor. The act is both impulsive and planned, displaying the lengths to which Yoon Hee will go to secure her daughter's interests.

Applying Doane's theory to Oh Yoon Hee actions throughout the movie, we can analyze various strategies that are commonly associated with femme fatale traits. In episode 1, she pretends to be a kind and caring person, asking for help from the main character, Shim Su-ryeon, and gaining her trust. This allows her to get closer to Su-ryeon and begin manipulating her. Throughout the movie, we do not know that she is the one who killed Min Seol Ah. At first, she loses her memories about this event, so she remains proven not guilty, but after she regains her memories about this event also she refuses to admit that she is wrong. Rather than admit that what she did is wrong, she makes excuses that she did that to save her daughter's future, because of the Min Seol Ah death, her daughter can get into the famous Cheong Ah High School. Oh Yoon Hee shows both resilience and the femme fatale archetype, as she manipulates people around her to achieve her goals. Her affair with Joo Dan Tae demonstrates her willingness to adapt and seize opportunities, even at great personal cost. Furthermore, her involvement in the murder of Min Seol A shows her ruthless determination to overcome obstacles and protect her special interests, such as her daughter Bae Ro Na. At last, her request for Joo Dan Tae to murder Shim Su Ryeon highlights her willingness to take decisive action to ensure her survival and success. Based on Doane's theory, this element of independent spirit shows her strong determination to rise above anyone else no matter how she achieved it, to seek justice for herself and her daughter, Bae Ro Na.

Ha Eun Byeol as Femme Fatale and Her Strategies

Ha Eun Byeol is another main lead in *The Penthouse*. She is portrayed as an ambitious and talented girl who dreams of becoming a successful opera singer. Unlike Oh Yoon Hee, Eun Byeol comes from a wealthy family, who also have a big influential power in the world of classical music, adding to her completely privileged background and supporting her ambitions. Her character is portrayed as a girl who is very passionate about pursuing her dreams, very serious about taking steps to achieve her goals and taking any challenges. Her story in *The Penthouse* portrays the themes of ambition, and sacrifice to achieve her goals in a world full of betrayal.

Ha Eun Byeol embodies the characteristics of the femme fatale archetype, from the theory by Mary Ann Doane. Throughout the series, Ha Eun Byeol's makeup, clothes, body, and behavior reflect her manipulative nature, aligning closely with the traits of the femme fatale. Ha Eun Byeol's makeup is used to enhance her charm and deceive those around her. With subtle yet captivating tones of color, she manipulates her appearance to bring out sympathy and gain favor from others, concealing her true intentions. Pretending to look innocent while hiding her true intentions. Ha Eun Byeol often wears fashionable and chic clothing. She uses her wardrobe to project an image of sophistication and vulnerability, in this manner attracting others into her trap.

Ha Eun Byeol, the character portrayed by Choi Ye-bin, frequently exhibits manipulative and deceitful behavior, especially when she portrays herself as an innocent girl while deceiving those around her. One memorable scene that supports this argument occurs when she shows ignorance and pretends to be innocent about her involvement in Min Seol-A's death. In this scene, Eun Byeol convincingly acts distressed and confused, like she doesn't know anything, and is uninvolved in this case, maintaining her image as a sweet, harmless schoolgirl. She manipulates the emotions of those around her, including her mother, Cheon Seo-jin, and other adults, who are led to believe that she is a victim. Her tears and apparent vulnerability mask her true intentions and actions, allowing her to escape suspicion and continue her deceitful behavior.

Some scenes show that the real Ha Eun Byeol is a fierce and explosive woman, she wants to take control of everything. She often screams in high tones toward others whom she looks down on, willing to do anything to gain victory for her side, and not doubting doing something bad to other people as long as she reaches her goal. This behavior can be connected to the femme fatale theory. A femme fatale, often portrayed in literature and film, is a seductive woman who uses her charm and cunning behavior to achieve her ends, frequently leading others into dangerous situations. Ha Eun Byeol embodies elements of the femme fatale traits by showing her innocent side to manipulate those around her, thereby protecting herself and furthering her agenda.

Her actions align with the core characteristics of a femme fatale. Eun Byeol manipulates the perceptions and emotions of those around her, ensuring she appears blameless while pursuing her hidden motives. She maintains a facade of innocence, effectively deceiving others to shield herself from the consequences of her actions. By exploiting her innocent appearance, Eun Byeol exerts control over the narrative and those involved, similar to how a femme fatale exerts power over her victims through seduction and cunning. Thus, Eun Byeol's character in *The Penthouse* can be seen as a modern adaptation of the femme fatale, using her perceived purity and vulnerability as tools for manipulation and self-preservation.

Applying Doane's theory to Ha Eun Byeol actions throughout the movie, we can analyze various strategies that are commonly associated with femme fatale traits based on

Doane's theory. The first strategy she uses to get what she wants is emotional manipulation. Ha Eun Byeol is a smart girl, with great academic talent and looks perfect in all aspects of her life. But her family background power tends to expect more than what she has achieved. This made her use her intelligence as a tool to manipulate those around her. She is portrayed as a smart strategist who knows very well the output of her actions. This ability to outsmart the opponents and use her intelligence to manipulate others' emotions through her act allows her to maintain the control she has and influence others to get what she wants.

Ha Eun Byeol knows well how to use her innocent image to manipulate the emotions of those around her. Unlike the traditional seductive tactics usually played by femme fatale, Eun Byeol knows well how to use people's emotions and weaknesses to make it become her advantage. Those empathy emotions such as sadness, guilt, fears, and desires, she completely knows how to use these emotions against her enemy. Her skill at manipulating her emotions allows her to maintain her control and get what she wants.

Joo Seok Kyeong as Femme Fatale and Her Strategies

Joo Seok Kyeong is another main female lead in *The Penthouse*. She is portrayed as an arrogant young woman who thinks people are not the same, and she can do whatever she wants to someone she thinks is below her level. This arrogance comes from her privileged and wealthy family and also influences the world of music. Joo Seok Kyeong struggles with pressures to perform as her parents expect and maintain their top-tier levels and reputation within the elite society they have. Joo Seok Kyung's arrogance and her free will add tension and conflict to *The Penthouse* as this interaction with other characters builds up the complexities of social differences, power dynamics, and the relationship between characters.

Within the Korean drama *The Penthouse*, Joo Seok Kyeong is portrayed as a manipulative and dangerous femme fatale. She uses her beauty, charm, and insights to get what she wants, including money, power, and love. Joo Seok Kyeong's facial features are considered natural beauty, from her big sparkling eyes, small nose, and lips. Her smooth skin added to her charm, making her look like a doll. Joo Seok Kyeong's slim and ideal body makes her a symbol of present-day beauty. She always appears in clothes that emphasize her playful side, attracting the attention of everyone who sees her.

Joo Seok Kyeong has a sharp gaze that can enter other people's minds. Her look made others feel awkward and threatened as if she might examine their minds. Joo Seok Kyeong's sharp gaze is often described by her ability to read other people's minds. This ability adds dangerous traits to her strategies to manipulate other people since she can easily know what other people feel through her gazes. This strategy also shows her dominance towards her opposite, controlling other people's behaviors.

She uses her beauty to attract men. Seok Kyeong is exceptionally beautiful and she knows how to use her beauty to her advantage. She often tempts men to get what she needs. She is good at reading individuals and knows how to push the right buttons to get what she wants. For example, she manipulated Min Seol-ah, who once was her tutor and rival, into helping her crush Cheon Seo-jin. She does not hesitate to use violence to achieve her goals. As a master manipulator, Joo Seok-kyung uses her charm and beauty to influence those around her, even her mother, and often ends up getting what she wants in the end. She is not above using guilt trips, emotional blackmail, or even violence to get what she wants.

Seok Kyeong is a dangerous young woman. She does not hesitate to use violence to get what she wants. For example, she nearly burned Min Seol A, who was her rival. In *The Penthouse*, Joo Seok Kyung, portrayed by Han Ji-hyun, embodies the manipulative traits of a femme fatale, especially in her interactions with Min Seol Ah. One striking scene that highlights this occurs when Seok Kyung decides to bully Min Seol Ah, yet plays innocent in front of her parents to gain sympathy and avoid repercussions. This manipulation connects to the femme fatale theory in several ways. Seok Kyung uses her charm and acting skills to manipulate her parents' perceptions. By playing the innocent victim, she avoids blame and garners their sympathy, hence maintaining control over her situation. The essence of the femme fatale is deception. Seok Kyung's ability to convincingly present herself as innocent while concealing her malicious actions epitomizes this characteristic. Her dual nature allows her to continue her bullying unchecked while appearing blameless.

As one of the most dominant figures among the children of Hera Palace, Seok Kyung wields significant social power. Her ability to manipulate her parents' emotions and perceptions showcases her adeptness at exploring and exploiting power dynamics for her advantage, a key characteristic of the femme fatale archetype. The femme fatale often hides her unsafe nature behind an exterior of innocence and vulnerability. Seok Kyung's innocent act in front of her parents represents this, as it contrasts sharply with her cruel behavior towards Seol Ah, highlighting the deception central to the femme fatale. By using her innocent appearance to deceive and manipulate those around her, Joo Seok Kyung embodies the femme fatale archetype. Her actions illustrate how an exterior of innocence can be a powerful trait for manipulation and control, a defining characteristic of the femme fatale.

The four female antagonists, Cheon Seo Jin, Oh Yoon Hee, Ha Eun Byeol, and Joo Seok Kyung are all portrayed as femme fatales through their appearance and behavior. The strategies they use are manipulative and act innocent to achieve their goals. Because of their appearance, behavior, and strategies, they are considered to be antagonist characters.

CONCLUSION

The femme fatale antagonists we analyzed in *The Penthouse* are complex and fascinating characters. At the beginning of the movie, they may appear to be a ruthless and cunning individual who is only out for themselves. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that they are driven by their desire for survival and willing to strive for more.

These characters are often considered evil or manipulative, but they are simply fighting for their lives and their goals, to chase their goals. They are forced to navigate a treacherous world where the rules are constantly changing, and they must use whatever means necessary to get what they want. Their actions may be considered cruel or manipulative, but they are often motivated by a desire to protect themselves. They may use strategies that seem ruthless but these are simply the tools they have at their disposal in a world that is stacked against them. Despite their strategy to achieve their goals is not considered good, these characters are not inherently evil. They are human beings who are fighting for their place in the world and will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. They are not necessarily morally inferior to the protagonists, but rather, they operate within their moral framework that is shaped by their experiences and surroundings. The femme fatale antagonists often become antagonists because of societal expectations and norms. We are taught to sympathize with those who are perceived as victims and to condemn those who are seen as aggressors, which in this movie is portrayed by the characters that I have analyzed. However, this oversimplification does not allow for a nuanced understanding of complex characters like the femme fatale.

In conclusion, the femme fatale antagonists in *The Penthouse* are complex characters who are driven by their ambitions and goals. While their strategy may be morally questionable, they are not inherently evil. Instead, they are human beings who operate within their moral framework and will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. The femme fatale is a perfect symbol for the power of femininity, the ultimate metaphor for the absolute potential and darker side of feminine power. The femme fatale archetype is neither masculine nor self-destructive. Instead, she lives on the thin line between a soothing and nurturing feminine, and the one who devours the children and all men. The femme fatale is the sinister edge of feminine energy, reminding us that what is created also has the power to destroy.

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