

Women's Agency in Korean Consumer Society in the Korean Drama *Little Women*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines why the three sisters in *Little Women* Korean Drama strive to fulfill the demands of Korean consumerism and how they navigate the structure of Korean consumer society. Drawing upon Baudrillard's consumer society theory and Giddens' agency and structure theory, the study analyzes the reasons of the main characters—Oh In Joo, Oh In Kyung, and Oh In Hye—fulfilling the demands of Korean consumerism, driven by financial struggles, social marginalization, and lack of social power. It also explores the ways they navigate the structure of Korean consumer society by exercising their agency through their actions. The findings reveal that the power of agency produced by social pressure, represented by consumer society, shapes individuals in different ways. The study concludes that agency fosters resilience, determination, passion, allowing people to challenge social limitations and create the life they aspire to.

Keywords: consumer society, determination, structure, struggle, women's agency

INTRODUCTION

Little Women is a Korean television drama that combines suspense, thriller, and family drama. Unlike typical K-dramas that focus only on romance or lighthearted stories, this drama brings intense emotional conflicts, mystery, and social critique into one compelling narrative. With a strong female-centered story, it explores how three sisters confront complex challenges involving money, power, and morality. The combination of emotional depth and thrilling plot twists makes *Little Women* not only entertaining but also meaningful to analyze.

The Korean drama *Little Women* is compelling to me for two main reasons. First, unlike other adaptations, this version reimagines the classic *Little Women* story in a modern Korean setting, incorporating themes of financial struggles, social class, and corruption, which make it more relevant to today's audience. By setting the story in modern Korea, the drama gives a new and interesting take that makes it different from the original novel or Western versions, especially in how it shows wealth, power, and social status. Second, contrary to the coming-of-age, heartwarming story of the original version, *Little Women* Korean drama adds suspense, crime, and conspiracy, making it more intense and unpredictable. This drama stands out from other Korean dramas because it skillfully blends suspense, thriller, and family drama while maintaining strong emotional depth. The show not only explores sisterhood and personal ambition but also criticizes the influence of money and power in society. Therefore, its mix of modern storytelling, social issues, and thriller aspect makes *Little Women* Korean drama more intriguing than other versions or different dramas to analyze.

The series *Little Women* tells the story of three sisters—In Joo, In Kyung, and In Hye—who come from a poor family in modern Seoul, South Korea, and dream of escaping poverty while living in a consumer-driven society that prioritizes material wealth and social status. In Joo, the eldest, works as a bookkeeper for a powerful company, managing financial

records while struggling with the pressure to achieve financial stability in a society where wealth measures success. In Kyung, the middle sister, is a determined reporter who fights to uncover the truth but faces marginalization at work, as her modest status prevents her from gaining recognition and major assignments. In Hye, the youngest, is a talented high school artist who dreams of studying abroad but is held back by her family's lack of money and the societal belief that success depends on financial privilege.

Set in a consumer-driven society where wealth and status control opportunities, the series portrays the sisters navigating difficult choices as they work to change their futures. The conflicts they face reflect the broader problems of consumerism and access to power. Their journey highlights their strength and determination to balance social expectations with their personal goals. By the end of the series, the sisters overcome poverty and achieve success, not only by securing financial stability but also by challenging and, at times, adapting to the demands of the consumer society in which they live. This consumer-driven mindset is especially evident in South Korea, where luxury spending is deeply tied to social status and identity.

South Korea serves as a prime example of a highly consumer-driven society. According to Baudrillard, consumer society is a social system where consumption is not just about fulfilling needs or acquiring goods, but it is a deeply structured cultural activity that organizes and communicates meanings within society. According to CNBC, South Koreans are the world's biggest spenders on luxury goods. Total spending on personal luxury brands grew around 24% to \$16.8 billion per year, amounting to \$325 per capita. Korean millennials buy luxury goods to express exclusivity (Burnasheva & GuSuh & Moron, 2019). 50.2% of Korean millennials purchase luxury goods online at least once per year (Wong & Park, 2022).

Baudrillard's concept of consumption, as elaborated in his work *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, sees consumption as a system of signs. In a consumer society, objects function as "signs" within a "code." A handbag, for example, does not only function to carry things but also symbolizes someone's social standing. Luxury items symbolize wealth and success, which the Korean consumer society often associates with personal worth. In this system, consumption creates social classes and differentiation. People pursue those signs to fit in the code, which allows them to get better treatment and access in a society that values consumption. However, Baudrillard also criticizes the idea that consumption liberates individuals or fulfills genuine needs. He argues that the greedy cycle traps individuals in pursuing sign-value, veiling true fulfillment. In the drama, it is portrayed that Won Sang Ah's family projects an image of fulfillment through their luxurious lifestyle while hiding big corruption and a broken family inside.

To explore how the sisters navigate this system, I use Anthony Giddens' theory of agency and structure. Giddens explains the dynamic relationship between agency (individual actions) and structure (social systems). Structure consists of rules and resources that shape and constrain individual actions. Giddens also explores the concept of the duality of structure, which highlights that structures both enable and constrain actions. Structures are not fixed; they are created, maintained, and changed through human actions. This theory will help this study examine how the Korean consumer society, characterized by materialism and social hierarchies, constrains the sisters and provides the context for them to exercise their agency.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently, make choices, and influence their environment. Key characteristics of agency are knowledgeability, reflexivity, and power. People have an understanding of their actions and the social context they live in, constantly reflect on their actions, and adapt them based on their goals and circumstances.

This study is significant as it shows how the three sisters in *Little Women* fulfill the demands of Korean consumerism to attain wealth and social status by exercising their agency. A

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handful of studies have analyzed this literary work through semiotics, cultural hegemony, Marxist feminism, and social class differences. In contrast, this study takes a sociological approach by employing Baudrillard's consumer society theory and Giddens' concept of agency.

This research highlights the power of agency produced by social pressure, represented by consumer society, can shape individuals in different ways. Some people may give in to it, while others, like the sisters, use it as motivation to fight for a better life. The demands of society become the causes that push individuals to pursue their desires, ultimately turning that pursuit into an expression of agency. This study emphasizes that all people possess agency within them, but it is up to each person whether or not they activate and exercise it, strive for change, or remain stagnant. It is an agency that people manage to take control of their own lives, transform their circumstances, and achieve the success they seek. In this way, agency fosters resilience, determination, passion, and grit, allowing people to challenge social limitations and create the life they aspire to.

ANALYSIS

I will discuss why the three sisters in the *Little Women* Korean drama strive to fulfill the demands of Korean consumerism. Using Baudrillard's consumer society theory, I would like to explore the demands of Korean consumerism toward the sisters, which led them to strive to fulfill those demands. In the second part, I will explore how they navigate the structure of Korean consumerism by exercising their agency. To analyze that, I will use Anthony Giddens' concept of agency to elaborate on the ways the sisters navigate the structures.

The Reasons Behind the Sisters' Strive to Fulfill the Demands of Korean Consumerism

Korean consumer society demands wealth, status, and power. In the drama, the sisters are surrounded by people from higher economic classes and those who hold power. However, they were born poor, which limits their opportunities and places them at a disadvantage in a society where money determines social status. In a highly consumer-driven society like South Korea, financial success dictates individuals' social standing, personal recognition, and access to opportunities. As Baudrillard argues, consumption functions not merely as the satisfaction of needs but as a system of classification and social differentiation, in which sign-objects are ordered as status value in a hierarchy (1998, p. 61). People do not consume for use but to position themselves within a social structure driven by symbolic value. The pressure to succeed financially is immense, and a person who lacks wealth often faces marginalization and is underestimated in power.

Financial Struggles

Growing up in poverty shapes their desire to escape financial hardship. In episode one, the dialogue between Oh In Joo and Oh In Kyung reflects their frustration with their difficult circumstances:

Oh In Joo: "That was when I knew for sure... that we were living a very different life from the people we see on TV."

Oh In Kyung: "We had to brush our teeth with salt because we didn't have any toothpaste."

This highlights the sisters' realization of poverty. According to Giddens (1984), this shows their reflexivity—their awareness of hardship and their capacity to adapt and act accordingly. Even when their condition improves slightly, they continue to experience financial instability in their cramped rooftop room (옥탑방), shaping their determination to escape poverty.

Their ongoing struggles with money are not just about lacking material goods but also about how poverty shapes their sense of self and their choices. The sisters' memories of deprivation, like brushing teeth with salt, become a constant reminder of their social position. This ongoing awareness, as Giddens (1984, p. 20) notes, is a key part of reflexivity, where individuals monitor their circumstances and act to improve their situation.

Social Marginalization

Social marginalization also motivates the sisters to fulfill society's demands. In Joo, with no prestigious education or elite background, is marginalized in her workplace. In Kyung is fired for pursuing truth, and In Hye feels judged at a rich friend's party for wearing a school uniform. This aligns with Baudrillard's concept of social differentiation—where clothing, language, and appearance reflect and reproduce class distinctions (1998, p. 49).

Each sister is treated as less because they don't fit the symbols of elite society. The sisters' experiences show how social marginalization operates through visible markers like dress and speech, and through invisible barriers like exclusion from opportunities. Baudrillard (1998, p.61) argues that these symbols of status—such as branded clothing or elite schools—are used to separate groups and maintain social hierarchies. The sisters' lack of these markers means they are continually reminded of their outsider status, reinforcing their motivation to seek acceptance and recognition.

Lack of Social Power

Power determines who gets heard and who gets ignored. In Joo seeks influence by aligning with the rich. In Kyung, despite having evidence, cannot expose corruption because she lacks the authority to be believed. In Hye accepts an offer to erase her identity in return for recognition. Baudrillard explains that consumer society produces both satisfactions and dissatisfactions (1998, p. 55), meaning the system needs inequality to maintain itself. The sisters' efforts show that power is not just desirable; it is necessary to survive.

Their lack of power is evident in how their voices are dismissed and their actions are constrained by those with more authority. Even when they have the truth or talent, their lack of social power means they are often ignored or undervalued. Baudrillard (1998, p.55) suggests that this is not accidental, but a feature of consumer society, where inequality is maintained to keep the system running. The sisters' pursuit of power is thus a response to the necessity of being recognized and protected in a world that favors the powerful.

Navigating the Structure of Korean Consumer Society by Exercising Agency

Each sister exercises their agency to navigate the structure of Korean consumer society, not just to fulfill the demand but ultimately to independently achieve what they desire. As explored above, their experiences of poverty, marginalization, and lack of power initially limit their choices and push them to fulfill the demands of consumer society. However, through these hardships, the sisters begin to develop a sense of agency. Giddens' theory of structuration suggests that they are not simply shaped by this society but also actively shape it through their actions, recognizing that "the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize (1984, p.25). Their agency is revealed through conscious actions like how they pursue economic independence, build elite connections to access resources and opportunities, and challenge corruption and injustice. These acts reflect

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their refusal to remain passive within a system that favors the privileged, showing instead their determination to shape their own futures.

Pursuing Economic Independence

Rather than relying on others, the sisters act to earn money independently. In Joo accepts a risky job under a wealthy family but negotiates for her own safety. In Kyung works at her grand-aunt's office while suspended and uses this role to gather information. In Hye sells her art through Hyo Rin's identity to earn money and support herself. These acts reflect their agency to choose and adapt based on their knowledge of their environment, aligning with Giddens' concepts of knowledgeability and reflexivity (1984, p. 20).

By taking initiative and making strategic choices, the sisters demonstrate their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Giddens (1984, p.11) describes this as knowledgeability, where individuals use their understanding of the social world to navigate challenges. The sisters' actions show that even in difficult situations, they can exercise agency and find ways to improve their lives, rather than passively accepting their fate.

Building Elite Connections

The sisters realize that building relationships with powerful people gives them access to resources and information. In Joo negotiates with Choi Do Il. In Kyung collaborates with Ha Jong Ho and her grand-aunt. In Hye becomes close to Hyo Rin to gain opportunities. These strategic relationships help them enter spaces otherwise closed to them, showing that they can use social structure not just as a limit but also as a resource.

By forming alliances with those who have influence, the sisters are able to access opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. This reflects a strategic use of social structure, where connections can be leveraged to overcome barriers. Giddens (1984) emphasizes that structures can both constrain and enable action, and the sisters' ability to build elite connections demonstrates their understanding of how to use these structures to their advantage.

Challenging Corruption and Injustice

Eventually, the sisters don't only adapt but resist. In Joo testifies about the slush fund despite her own risks. In Kyung continues her investigation even after losing her job. In Hye, though young, uses her position inside the elite family to help her sisters reveal the truth. These actions reflect Giddens' idea of agency as power, which is the ability to bring about change or resist pressure (1984, p. 14). Though their means differ, they all use their agency to fight injustice, showing that even in an unequal society, individuals can act meaningfully.

Their resistance reflects how the sisters are not only trying to adapt but also to transform the system that has oppressed them. This supports Giddens' idea that even though structure can constrain, it is also created and changed by human action. In Joo, who initially desires wealth to feel safe, ends up risking everything to reveal the truth. In Kyung chooses justice over job security. In Hye, though still a teenager, uses her access to elite spaces to stand up for herself and her family. These moments are not accidental; they are conscious decisions that show the sisters exercising agency.

Baudrillard's concept also helps understand the symbolic power behind the sisters' actions. In consumer society, success is often measured by what people own. When In Joo wears luxury heels or moves into an expensive apartment, she is not just living comfortably, but she is

communicating power. However, the drama reveals that these signs can also be false. People like Won Sang Ah live in luxury but are deeply broken and corrupt. This shows that signs can be manipulated and used to hide the truth, reinforcing Baudrillard's view that consumer society is a system of signs without real substance.

The drama suggests that even when individuals like the sisters participate in the consumer system, they do not lose themselves. Instead, they learn how to navigate and use the system for their own goals. Their agency is not about completely rejecting consumer society, but about understanding it and using that knowledge to make better choices. This aligns with Giddens' concept of reflexivity, which is individuals reflecting on and responding to their social world. The sisters reflect, adapt, and act. Their agency is a form of resistance that shows resilience, creativity, and determination in the face of structural barriers.

By the end of the series, each sister has achieved some form of success. Not just financially, but emotionally and morally. They are no longer passive victims of consumer society but active agents shaping their own futures. Their journey represents how people in real life can exercise agency even in a society that seems to value only money and status. Through strategic decisions, social navigation, and moral courage, the sisters of *Little Women* demonstrate that agency is not just possible, but it is powerful.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of *Little Women* reveals that the sisters strive for wealth, status, and power in response to financial struggles, social marginalization, and a lack of power, with the Korean consumer society significantly shaping their agency. However, they actively exercise this agency by pursuing economic independence, building elite connections, and challenging corruption and injustice. Ultimately, this demonstrates that agency, while influenced by social structures, empowers individuals to overcome limitations and strive for a better future, fostering resilience and determination in the process.

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