

The Expected Gender Roles on the Main Characters and Their Responses in *Queen of Tears*

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ABSTRACT

Queen of Tears, 2024's top k-drama, explores a unique couple dynamic: a conglomerate heiress marries a village man. This article examines the expected gender roles imposed on Baek Hyun Woo and Hong Hae In, and their responses. The findings indicate that modern society still expects Baek Hyun Woo to be the breadwinner and the head of the family, while Hong Hae In is expected to be a homemaker and submissive. Baek Hyun Woo shows conformity to the expectations as he internalizes his roles. However, Hong Hae In shows ambiguity, performing nonconformity yet also conforming to gender roles in situations where it benefits her. The study concludes that traditional gender roles expectation persists in modern Korean society. Individuals are able to respond through nonconformity and conformity, driven by internalized values and beneficial considerations.

Keywords: expectations of gender roles, Korean gender ideology, traditional gender roles

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons why Korean dramas have become more popular. Korean dramas have a long history which contributed to the Korean wave, a phenomenon that increases the international spread of South Korean cultural products. Korean drama has been around since 1950, but it started to become popular, starting from East Asian countries, in the 1990 (Ju, 2018). Korean drama has various genres from comedy, melodrama, thriller, and various others. However, the romance comedy genre is dominating the production of Korean drama during 2015-2023 (Sulianta, 2024). There is also a connection between the credibility of the actor and actress that contributed to audiences' satisfaction in watching a k-drama (Sukendi, 2023). These factors, Korean wave, variety of genres, and actors' and actresses' credibility, have contributed to the growing popularity of Korean dramas globally.

Queen of Tears, starring Kim Soo Hyun and Kim Ji Won, is the most watched k-drama in 2024. The drama tells a story of the relationship between Hong Hae In, a conglomerate heiress, and Baek Hyun Woo, an ordinary corporate employee. After walking their married life and living with Hae In's family, Hyun Woo felt the pressure of living in a conglomerate family where he often received degradation and having his wife and in-laws as his boss. It can be seen from the drama that the main character's type of relationship is not very typical in Korean culture as Korea still operates under traditional gender roles where man is superior than women.

This article investigates the specific social expectations of Korean gender roles that the main characters face, as well as, the way they respond to those expectations. It is an important topic to delve into since Korean culture is heavily affected by traditional gender roles. Not to mention, the issues regarding pressure of gender roles are also real-life issues faced by Korean society that manifested in gender inequalities for women. This article also addresses a significant gap as existing studies about *Queen of Tears* mainly focus on female representation and intercultural communication.

In order to analyze the specific social expectations and the responses, we will be using a conceptual framework of gender roles. Gender role is what people "do" when they attribute a circumscribed meaning to male and female (Goktan, 2021). For those identified as male at birth, society often expected a set of characteristics of masculinity. Conversely, for individuals identified as females at birth, society expects femininity characteristics. Traditionally, it often establishes hierarchical structures where one gender, male, holds more power status and expectations.

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In Korean society, the traditional concept of gender roles still operates within the society. This happened due to how Koreans adopt Chinese Confucian beliefs that promote patriarchal structures in the family. Santos & Harrell (2017) mentioned that “Chinese classic patriarchal structures contain two major axes of both prestige and power in domestic relations: a generational axis and a gender axis. In terms of prestige, on the generational axis, elders had prestige over juniors, and on the gender axis, males had prestige over females” (p. 11).

A woman's role is to be able to submit to the husband, be the mother of his children, and manage the household. The idea of women to submit to her husband is believed to be the ones that uphold the family's harmony as mentioned by Kim (2024), “and women are thus required to subsume their personal interests for the sake of maintaining familial harmony and upholding the family's social standing.” A woman's role is also to be a mother who raises the children. They are expected to be the primary caregivers for children, the elderly, and other family members. *Analects for Women* by Song Ruozhao mentioned, “But the authority/responsibility to instruct them (children) rests solely with the mother.” Besides being inferior by submission, women are often in charge of house duties. This idea is mentioned by Lee & Hsiang (2023), “A woman, confined to the realm of *nei* (inside), is essentially a functional vessel for household management.”

The notion of an ideal Korean woman juxtaposes the gender roles expected from Korean men. While Korean women are demanded to be passive and obedient, Korean men are expected to play a more active role by providing and leading the family. Zheng mentioned, “a man should work outside of the house, gain resources for the family to live on, and make a difference in the society” (2014. p. 5). Moreover, the role of man is also to be the head of the family, meaning that he is expected to have a superior position in the family. This is mentioned by Song Ruozhao, “the husband is the master of the household. The husband is to be firm, the wife soft” (Bary, T. D., & Bloom, I., 1999).

In today's modern society, changing social and cultural factors have shifted traditional gender roles ideas to more egalitarian values. However, the expectations of a woman to do the household duties and childcare remains strong. This is supported by Yoon (2023), who conducted a survey upon dual earners families in Korea. Based on her study, she writes that a relatively high proportion of respondents agree with the traditional gender specific roles of a male breadwinner and a female homemaker. Thus, using gender roles conceptual framework will provide a thorough analysis of the gender roles expectations and the responses of *Queen of Tears*' main character.

ANALYSIS

Baek Hyun Woo and Hong Hae In face the expectations to conform to the traditional gender roles and show different responses towards the expectations. This can be seen in the following analysis.

The Expected Gender Roles and The Response of Baek Hyun Woo

The expectation of being the breadwinner is mainly not something that is directly voiced to Baek Hyun Woo, but rather something that has been shaped since Baek Hyun Woo was young. The internalization of the role as a breadwinner is due to how Baek Hyun Woo sees his father. Baek Hyun Woo's father, Baek Du Gwan, works as a village leader and farmer, indicating the characteristics of a hard working man. This can be seen in the following scene where Baek Du Gwan is seen to be working in the field as well as having the title of the village leader.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Adopting Baek Du Gwan's working ethic, it manifests in how Baek Hyun Woo excels in his academic and career journey. This can be seen in this following dialogue where he mentioned about his university major and financial condition to Hong Hae In,

“But I attended Seoul National University. I was a law major. I don't pay monthly rent for the studio I live in. It's an annual residential lease. So I have more than enough saved.”
(Episode 1, 6:09 – 7:28)

In South Korea, SNU is a top university that enables Baek Hyun Woo to have a secure, high-paying job, which is a fundamental aspect of being the breadwinner. A study shows how South Korean students who graduate from a highly selective university earn significantly more than those that are less selective (Jung & Lee, 2016). This shows the importance of education to financial stability in Korea. That is why Baek Hyun Woo excels in his education so that he can get a good job because he has an internalized understanding that the value of a man lies in supporting the family financially.

The reason why Baek Hyun Woo indicates behavior that reflects the role as a breadwinner is not only because he grew up in a family with those gender roles value, but also because of the working environment in South Korea. As South Korea is still a male dominated society, Baek Hyun Woo also adopts the expectation that man should be able to provide. This can be seen from his colleagues' comments about him since he married Hong Hae In.

Employee 1: “Son in law? All he does is fix problems for them. He's got no pride. Gosh. If he had any, he would have married for money. What a disgrace of an attorney.”
(Episode 1, 32:41-33:04)

The comments from his colleagues is an illustration of social pressures when a man is less superior in terms of wealth compared to the wife. The statements of “married for money” and “lack of pride” are more than just personal insults. It reflects the societal judgement on Hyun Woo's perceived failure to hold the traditional male gender roles.

However, responding to the expectations of gender roles, Baek Hyun Woo shows behavior that conforms to the expected roles. Firstly, Baek Hyun Woo shows effort in keeping his job even when he is not the breadwinner in the family. This behavior can be seen in how he keeps a kind manner to his colleagues even when he was insulted with the statement “marrying Hong Hae In for the money.” Moreover, Baek Hyun Woo also shows conformity towards the role of breadwinner by showing doubt before marrying a woman who is financially superior to him. Baek Hyun Woo's response indicates how he operates under the role that a man should be the breadwinner of the family. Thus, even when Baek Hyun Woo is unable to be the breadwinner, he still shows conformity by showing consistent effort which happens because of his internalization of his father.

Besides being the breadwinner, Baek Hyun Woo is also exposed to the expected roles as a head of the family. The role of man as a head of the family means that men should take the role of leadership in the family, such as making decisions, and protecting the family. However, the series reveals that Baek Hyun Woo is not able to be the head of the family yet still shows conforming behavior towards the gender role of head of the family. This can be seen during Baek Hyun Woo's therapy session when he reveals the reason he wants to divorce Hong Hae In in Episode 1.

BHW: “I live with my parents-in-law, my grandfather in-law, and my brother-in-law. We all live under the same roof. We spend all the time together, it's safe to say that I don't have time for myself. We 15 memorial service in a year, they made their male members prepare for the services. So the sons-in-law prepare for the entire service. But their sons never help. My wife is my boss, her boss is his father, and my grandfather in law is his boss. My heart races, and my hands tremble whenever my in-laws call. It's true that I despise my in-laws, but I despise my wife even more. She does not care at all about me or how her family treats me. She only cares about herself. Isn't she selfish? I only married to this family because of her and endured three years of this treatment. But she doesn't care.”
(Episode 1 47:56 – 49:50)

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The monologues above show Baek Hyun Woo's discomforts for being unable to fulfil the role of head of the family. While Hong Hae In was supposed to live with him and serve him, Baek Hyun Woo was the one living with Hong Hae In and served her family by working with them. The unaligned treatments were also supported by Chung (2015) where he said, "In other words, she joined her husband's family, and her domestic duties included serving him and his parents," (p. 105). His discomfort towards his marriage situation shows how Baek Hyun Woo conforms to the expected gender role.

The reason why Baek Hyun Woo shows behavior that is conforming to the expected role as the head of the family is again caused by his internalization of Baek Du Gwan's actions in the family. This internalization is the reason that causes discomfort when Baek Hyun Woo faces situations that make him unable to fulfil his role as a head of the family.

Baek Hyun Woo's discomforts can be seen in his behavior where he asks Hong Beom Jun about his future daughter's name, and protests to Hong Hae In's request. Those responses of discomfort can be seen in the following scene.

BHW: "I see. Will she be Hong Su-bin instead of Baek Su-bin?"

HBJ: "What's wrong? Do you not want her to have her mom's surname? We don't need to follow the patriarchal system. I think it's quite old-fashioned to use the father's surname."
(Episode 1, 21:17 - 21:29)

BHW: "Don't get me any more interviews like that. Otherwise do it by yourself, Okay?"

HHI: "It's a couple interview. I can't do it alone."

BHW: "You can tell them on your own. That I'm a perfect husband, that we're Infatuated with each other, and how happy we are together. Tell the whole story. It's all just made-up anyway."

walks away

(Episode 1, 23:15 - 23:55)

These discomforts show how Baek Hyun Woo shows conformity towards the expectations of gender roles, as being the breadwinner and head of the family, that are shaped through his internalization from his father.

The Expected Gender Roles and The Response of Hong Hae In

In Korean society, Hong Hae In is expected to be a homemaker and be submissive to her husband. However, Hong Hae In character is portrayed as someone who is assertive, ambitious, and workaholic. This shows how her character is not aligned with the traditional gender roles, yet this type of character exists due to modernization. However, the traditional gender roles still dominate in how the Korean society views women. Thus, in facing the social expectations of gender roles, Hong Hae In shows nonconformity to the idea of being a homemaker and submission to husband.

Hong Hae In, who comes from an upper class family or chaebol family is still a subject to the expectations for gender roles as a homemaker. The Chaebol family often highlights the generational family business which results in the expectation of bearing a child put upon Hong Hae In. Thus, Hong Hae In who is a part of the Conglomerate family, is also faced with the expectations of child rearing. This can be seen in Episode 1 in the family meeting scene where Hong Hae In's mother, Kim Seon Hwa expected Hong Hae In and Baek Hyun Woo to have a child.

KSH: "Also, you two should have a child. You can't be the talk of the town forever."
(Episode 1, 20:48 - 20:56)

The suggestion to have children as a solution to that rumor is indicating how society in Korea still thinks that if a woman bears a child it means that they are in maintaining the harmony of the family. The inability to produce an heir and the subsequent gossip surrounding their marriage threatens this harmony and affects the family's reputation. Thus, Hong Hae In's role as a wife is also about upholding the public image, especially as part of the conglomerate family which is a subject of the public's media.

Responding to the expectation of bearing a child, Hong Hae In shows conformity to the expectation. However, rather than a desire to have children, Hong Hae In sees the idea of conceiving a child as beneficial. This can be seen in the following conversation with Baek Hyun Woo.

BHW: “You want to have a kid right now? And then I just go abroad alone?”

HHI: “Why? Isn’t it better that way? You want me to go with you abroad?”

BHW: “Of course not.”

HHI: “Right. You better do what they say and study. Other people will raise our kid anyways. So what’s the problem then? It’s convenient.”

BHW: “Convenient? This is nice to you? Really? You want to have a baby?”

HHI: “If it’s necessary.”

More than being a mother, the series also briefly shows how Hong Hae In is expected to perform house duties such as cooking, which is also a part of being a homemaker. Even when Hong Hae In is a powerful business woman, the Korean media frames her in a kitchen setting which subtly reinforces the social expectation that even women in power are still expected to fulfill traditional roles.



Figure 3

Under the influence of traditional gender roles that operate in Korean society, Hong Hae In is also expected to be submissive to her husband as a woman in Korea. However, the series shows that Hong Hae In does not show traits of being obedient or submissive to the husband. This contradicts what Kim (2024) has mentioned where women are expected to dutifully fulfill their roles as obedient daughters, dutiful wives, and self-sacrificing mothers.

Hong Hae In’s non submissive behavior can be seen in how she refuses her husband’s instructions. In the following dialogue, it can be seen that Hong Hae In directs Baek Hyun Woo without his consent, which shows a non-submissive traits that does not align with the traditional gender roles.

HHI: “Baek Hyun Woo, does it look like I want your opinion? I am telling you to kick them out. You will sue them and win if they try to hold out on us. Isn’t that what the Law Department do?”

BHW: “Yes, ma’am.”

(Episode 1, 16:28 - 16:44)

The reason behind Hong Hae In’s non submissive character is due to the guild exchanging her deceased oldest brother’s position as an heir of the company. This guilt can be seen as a fuel to her ambition in managing the family business and further shaping her non-submissive character. Moreover, As a CEO, it is important for Hong Hae In to be assertive and non-submissive. A study by Men (2021) where she mentioned that, “Assertive communication also showed a small significant positive effect on employees’ organizational citizenship behavior.” Thus, her experiences in navigating complex business environments have most likely solidified her non-submissive character, which extends to her personal life resulting in not showing conformity towards the gender roles of being submissive to her husband.

However, even with her non-submissive character, Hong Hae In is still expected to be submissive to her husband. This can be seen in the following comments of Hong Hae In’s competitor when Hong Hae In attended a business event without her husband.

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Competitor: “You know that Chairman Hermann regards cooperation as the ultimate corporate value. What better sign that a potential business partner has the correct attitude than getting along with their spouse? At least that’s what he believes.”

HHI: “So what?”

Competitor: “Take a look around you. Everyone else is here with their significant other, but I don’t see your husband anywhere. You seem to be alone, right?”

(Episode 2, 1:02:03 - 1:02:31)

Competitor: “You should’ve just married someone normal. When people of the same class get together, there’s never any gossip.”

(Episode 2, 1:03:53 - 1:04: 15)

The competitor mentioned that the attitude of getting along with husband enables her to connect with potential business partners. This highlights how significant the role of a husband is to women in Korean society, as mentioned by Edward Chung, “When married women meet, they usually see each other’s social status in terms of not only her education, occupation, and even wealth, but also those of her husband and children” (2015, p. 110). Moreover, the comments of marrying someone normal are not merely a critique for Hong Hae In’s choice of a partner, but also a manifestation of the social expectation where the wife is expected to be less than the husband.

Responding to the expectations, Hong Hae In shows two responses, conformity and non-conformity. Firstly, in the particular situation when Hong Hae In met her competitor, Baek Hyun Woo’s presence plays an important role for Hong Hae In to reach the potential of a business deal with Chairman Hermann. Thus, even when Hong Hae In does not feel bothered with attending events without Baek Hyun Woo, she still shows conformity towards the traditional expectation in order to operate within a social system.

However, most of the time, Hong Hae In shows non-conformity towards the expectation. This can be seen in the following scene where her mother shows an expectation of a husband that is more superior than Hong Hae In.

Grace: “I can’t help feeling sorry every time something like this is revealed.

KSH: “What are you sorry for?”

Grace: “For the match that could have been between him (Yoon Eun Song, a powerful investor) and Hong Hae In. With a husband like that—”

KSH: “Oh, whatever. She complicated her own life.”

Grace: “Even so, I could have done a much better job with it.”

Episode 2, 1:14:08 - 1:14:18

As a woman is to submit to her husband, Kim Seon Hwa is implying that Hong Hae In is complicating her life if she had to be under the influence of a man who is less superior than her. However, responding to the expectation from the family, she directly shows non-conformity towards the expectation of being the shadow of a superior man. This can be seen in Hong Hae In’s reply to Grace.

HHI: “I think you’re mistaken. I’m always grateful that you didn’t try harder. I’m truly thankful that you excluded me from your list of marriage candidates.”

Thus from the analysis, it is evident in facing the social expectations of being a homemaker and submissive, Hong Hae In shows ambiguity where she performs two types of behavior. Non-conformity most of the times, but also conformity when she is put in situations where conforming to the expected roles brings more benefit. Thus, the analysis concluded that an individual are able to show conformity towards the gender roles expectations only for the sake of social acceptance or other benefits.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study analyzes the gender roles expectations and the responses of the main characters in *Queen of Tears*. The analysis in the dialogues reveals how the main characters are expected according to the traditional gender roles, where male as the breadwinner and the head of the family, and female as a homemaker and a submissive role to the husband. In addition, the study also reveals that Baek Hyun Woo shows full conformity towards gender roles, while Hong Hae In shows ambiguity where she shows both nonconformity and conformity. This suggests that while the expectations of gender roles still exist in the Korean modern society, the responses are not always rigid towards conformity or nonconformity.

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