

Representation of Feminism in Korean Historical Drama: A Semiotic Analysis of ‘*Under the Queen’s Umbrella*’

Ainida Nur Fadhila

Faculty of Letters, Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Abstract

This article analyzes the representation of feminism in the Korean historical drama *Under the Queen's Umbrella* using John Fiske's semiotic analysis approach. The study aims to understand how the drama portrays feminist struggles through symbols, narratives, and visual elements. Through this approach, the article examines the social, technical, and ideological codes that construct the narrative of resistance against patriarchy, as depicted by the character Queen Hwaryeong. The findings indicate that *Under the Queen's Umbrella* effectively represents female empowerment in challenging patriarchal systems through solidarity among female characters, cinematographic techniques that highlight character strength, and dialogues that reinforce gender equality. This article suggests the need for further research in analyzing the representation of feminism in other Korean dramas and highlights the importance of creating female characters with substantial roles in social and political narratives.

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Corresponding Author

ainida.nur.2102216@students.um.ac.id

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Introduction

Series or dramas are television shows presented in sequential episodes over daily or weekly periods (Safira, 2022), typically lasting 60-75 minutes per episode with an indefinite number of episodes, depending on the storyline. Dramas possess the power to reach social spheres, influencing public perspectives through the messages they convey. This is because dramas or series reflect social realities (Ridwan & Adj, 2019). As dramatized representations of reality, they grow and evolve within society, carrying ideas, messages, and ideologies that are then disseminated to a broader audience.

Besides serving as a medium for conveying messages, dramas provide visualization through symbols and dialogue, closely related to societal realities. These symbols often aim to shift societal mindsets. Wrapped in an epic storyline combined with real-life elements and the author's imagination, films and dramas become accepted across different eras. This aligns with John Fiske's view that media, including dramas, represent reality and social facts, reflecting society's constructs. The symbols created by directors in conveying meaning within a film serve as a way to understand how meanings are built within society.

Korean dramas, especially in the historical genre, often reflect dominant social, cultural, and political values of their respective eras. One prominent theme is the position of women in South Korean society, which has traditionally been dominated by patriarchy—a social system where men hold dominant power over women in various aspects, including politics, economy, and family structures. Historically, this system has strongly positioned women as mere supporters, complements, or even objects in historical narratives.

Over the past decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the representation of women in Korean media. Modern productions increasingly highlight stories of empowered women who challenge unjust systems. One drama that reflects this change is *Under the Queen's Umbrella*, released in 2022, written by Park Ba Ra and directed by Kim Hyun Sik. The drama follows Queen Hwaryeong (played by Kim Hye Soo) as she navigates political intrigues during the Joseon Dynasty, fighting to protect her family. As both a mother and a leader, Queen Hwaryeong is portrayed as intelligent, compassionate, yet resolute and brave in confronting the patriarchal system for the sake of her children.

This drama offers a new perspective on the role of women in history, often marginalized in historical records. Yoon & Park (2021) state, "Women in Korean historical dramas are often positioned as objects of patriarchal culture, but increasingly, works reconstruct their roles as active and independent subjects." This statement aligns with Queen Hwaryeong's portrayal, who not only fights for her family but also challenges traditional norms that disadvantage women.

Through her struggles, Queen Hwaryeong serves not just as a fictional character but as a symbol of strong, empowered women strategically facing challenges. Lee (2020) notes that "historical dramas provide a space for reevaluating history, particularly through the lens of often-overlooked female perspectives." This suggests that popular media like dramas can incorporate feminist values, fostering a more inclusive understanding of history and culture. *Under the Queen's Umbrella* thus becomes a compelling subject of study, particularly through semiotic analysis, to explore how feminist symbols are constructed and communicated to audiences.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze how *Under the Queen's Umbrella* represents feminism through John Fiske's semiotic approach, which examines the relationship between social, technical, and ideological codes within cultural texts. This study seeks to uncover how visual symbols—such as costumes, gestures, and character expressions—as well as technical elements like cinematography and dialogue, create a narrative opposing the patriarchal system. Furthermore, it will explore the underlying meanings within the drama's resistance to traditional gender norms, focusing on how Queen Hwaryeong is depicted as an agent of change in a male-dominated world. Through this analysis, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how *Under the Queen's Umbrella* functions not just as entertainment but as a medium that voices gender equality and women's struggles within patriarchal cultures.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using semiotic analysis. A qualitative approach is chosen because the research aims to understand the meanings embedded in visual symbols, narratives, and technical elements in *Under the Queen's Umbrella*. As explained by Moleong (2018), "Qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth and holistically, focusing on process and meaning." Therefore, this study does not merely describe symbols but also interprets the feminist meanings reflected in the drama.

This research applies John Fiske's semiotic analysis theory, which identifies three levels of analysis in cultural texts: social codes, technical codes, and ideological codes.

- Social Codes analyze the relationships between characters in the drama, such as Queen Hwaryeong's interactions with male authority figures and her children. The focus is on how social and gender hierarchies are portrayed and how feminist struggles manifest through female characters.
- Technical Codes encompass production elements like camera angles, lighting, costumes, and set design. Fiske (1990) states, "Technical codes create meaning by structuring how visual and audio elements are produced and perceived by audiences." In this context, technical symbols emphasizing Queen Hwaryeong's strength—such as royal attire and close-up shots in emotional moments—will be analyzed to understand their feminist significance.
- Ideological Codes examine the ideological messages conveyed by the drama. Fiske asserts that ideological codes function to "connect texts with broader social and cultural structures." This research investigates how *Under the Queen's Umbrella* projects feminism as resistance to patriarchy and traditional norms that restrict women.

The primary data source for this research is *Under the Queen's Umbrella*, a 16-episode drama set during the Joseon Dynasty, where patriarchal structures dominated social and political life. The drama was chosen for its strong portrayal of female representation through its protagonist, Queen Hwaryeong. The study focuses on scenes highlighting Queen Hwaryeong's struggles in maintaining family stability and challenging patriarchal norms that limit women's roles. Key scenes include her interactions with male authority figures, dialogues expressing resistance to gender injustice, and conflicts demonstrating her strategies for protecting her children. Additionally, visual elements such as costumes, gestures, and facial expressions are analyzed to understand how feminist symbols are projected through the drama's aesthetics.

This study employs two main data collection techniques. First, Visual Text Observation, where the researcher watches and analyzes key scenes in *Under the Queen's Umbrella* to identify feminist symbols such as costumes, gestures, facial expressions, and spatial usage that reinforce the narrative of resistance against patriarchy. Second, Narrative and Dialogue Documentation, where relevant dialogues are recorded, especially those illustrating how female characters, particularly Queen Hwaryeong, challenge traditional gender norms and assert their positions in a patriarchal structure. These techniques aim to uncover the meanings embedded in the visual and narrative elements shaping the drama's feminist messages.

Data analysis follows systematic steps. First, Data Categorization, where data obtained from visual text observation, dialogues, and secondary documentation are categorized based on Fiske's three levels of semiotic analysis: social codes, technical codes, and ideological codes. At this stage, the researcher identifies visual elements, dialogues, and social contexts constructing the feminist message in *Under the Queen's Umbrella*. Second,

Interpretation of Symbols and Narratives, where the researcher interprets identified symbols and narratives, linking them to feminism and resistance to patriarchy. The study examines how symbols—such as costumes and body language—and narratives expressed in dialogues contribute to constructing female representation in the drama. Lastly, Conclusion of Meanings, where the researcher summarizes the meanings embedded in the feminist representation, emphasizing how the drama's narratives and symbols communicate resistance to patriarchal norms and reinforce gender equality.

Result and Discussion

Feminism Representation Through Social Codes

Under the Queen's Umbrella explicitly portrays feminist struggles through character relationships, particularly Queen Hwaryeong's confrontations with the patriarchal system in the royal court. One notable scene occurs in Episode 4, around minute 23:00, when Queen Hwaryeong confronts the King, who rules with absolute authority over the royal family. In this conversation, Queen Hwaryeong firmly states, "My children are not mere pawns in a political game; they have the right to determine their own futures." This statement is not only a defense of her children's rights but also an act of defiance against patriarchal norms that deny women and children full autonomy over their lives.

The interactions between Queen Hwaryeong and other female characters in the palace, such as Concubine Hwang and other mothers, also demonstrate female solidarity in navigating male-dominated power structures. In Episode 6, minute 15:30, Queen Hwaryeong seeks Concubine Hwang's assistance in strategizing to protect their children from political manipulation. This interaction illustrates mutual support among women, even when they are positioned as rivals. Such solidarity aligns with feminist ideology, which emphasizes collective liberation rather than individual success. As bell hooks (2000) states, "Feminism is not about individual women rising above; it is about collective liberation for all women."

Feminism Representation Through Technical Codes

Technical codes in *Under the Queen's Umbrella* reinforce feminist narratives through visual elements and cinematography. One prominent example is the use of low-angle shots in Episode 3, around minute 18:00, where Queen Hwaryeong is depicted standing tall against the all-male Ministerial Council. This low-angle framing enhances her authoritative presence, visually asserting her equal or superior status despite being a woman in a patriarchal system.

Additionally, Queen Hwaryeong's costume choices also play a crucial role in symbolizing her feminist resistance. In Episode 2, minute 12:30, she wears a deep red hanbok with striking gold accents. This contrasts with the softer colors worn by concubines, emphasizing her role not just as a mother but as a powerful leader. Red, a symbol of strength, conveys Queen Hwaryeong's defiant stance against patriarchy. As Barthes (1967) explains in his study of visual semiotics, "Clothing can serve as a cultural code that communicates identity, authority, and resistance." This is evident in how Queen Hwaryeong's attire visually asserts her defiance against patriarchal oppression.

Background music also plays a vital role in reinforcing feminist themes. In Episode 5, minute 33:00, an intense yet melodic score accompanies Queen Hwaryeong as she comforts her son, who is distressed by patriarchal expectations. The music enhances the emotional depth of the scene, portraying her as both a compassionate mother and a resilient fighter against societal constraints. Through these technical elements, the drama effectively builds a compelling feminist narrative.

Feminism Representation Through Ideological Codes

At the ideological level, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* presents feminism as resistance against the patriarchal system governing the kingdom's social and political structures. In Episode 8, around minute 45:00, Queen Hwaryeong challenges a minister who attempts to discredit her son for not meeting traditional expectations of an heir due to not being the eldest. In this scene, Queen Hwaryeong firmly states, "Laws created to preserve male power will not determine the worth of my children." This statement embodies feminist ideology that opposes legal and societal norms restricting women and children based on gender and birth order. It also represents a rejection of gender discrimination and an assertion that individuals should be valued based on merit and character rather than hierarchical gender norms.

In Episode 9, minute 27:00, Queen Hwaryeong openly defies the Ministerial Council and high-ranking officials attempting to suppress policies that favor her children. During the confrontation, she asserts that political decisions should not only benefit men but must also consider the rights of women and children. This reflects feminist ideology advocating for gender equality in public and political spheres. As Connell (2005) explains, "Patriarchy creates hierarchies that harm everyone, not just women." The drama illustrates how patriarchal structures negatively impact both men and women, reinforcing that feminism's struggle for gender equality should be a collective effort for a more just society.

Discussion

Through the three levels of John Fiske's semiotic analysis, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* successfully represents feminism in a nuanced and profound manner. At the social code level, the drama depicts Queen Hwaryeong as a central female figure dismantling entrenched patriarchal norms. Her interactions with male figures, especially the King and court officials, highlight tensions between male-dominated power structures and women's rights to autonomy and decision-making. In key scenes, Queen Hwaryeong does not hesitate to challenge unjust rulings, asserting that women, particularly mothers, should have the authority to determine their families' futures. This extends beyond personal advocacy—it is a broader resistance against gender injustice that places women in subordinate social and political positions.

At the technical code level, the drama utilizes visual and cinematic elements to reinforce its feminist messages. The use of low-angle shots in crucial moments visually positions Queen Hwaryeong as a formidable and authoritative figure, countering traditional depictions of women as passive or submissive. The costume design further supports this

narrative, with Queen Hwaryeong's bold red hanbok symbolizing her defiance against patriarchal norms. Music scores accompanying emotionally charged scenes deepen the portrayal of her as a compassionate yet resolute leader. These technical elements work together to construct a compelling feminist narrative that challenges gender-based power hierarchies.

At the ideological code level, the drama sends a clear message about the need for gender equality and resistance against patriarchal systems that have long dictated social and political structures. Several scenes depict Queen Hwaryeong opposing discriminatory laws that diminish women's and children's rights, reinforcing feminist ideals advocating for equal opportunities regardless of gender. As Kim (2019) states, "Historical dramas allow us to revisit the past through the lens of contemporary values, providing critical insights into gender and power dynamics." By incorporating feminist perspectives into historical storytelling, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* not only entertains but also encourages deeper reflection on ongoing gender struggles.

This drama effectively communicates feminist messages using a combination of symbolism, narrative depth, and technical storytelling elements. It highlights the significance of female solidarity, gender equality, and resistance to oppression. By doing so, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* serves as more than just entertainment—it becomes a medium for reflecting on and critiquing gender dynamics, offering a more inclusive and just perspective on women's roles in society.

Conclusion

Under the Queen's Umbrella successfully represents feminist struggles through various semiotic elements that construct a narrative of resistance against patriarchy. Through social codes, the drama portrays Queen Hwaryeong as an active figure in challenging patriarchal structures, emphasizing the importance of female solidarity in resisting systems that hinder women's progress. Technical codes, such as cinematography, costume design, and music, reinforce this narrative by visually and emotionally enhancing Queen Hwaryeong's strength and resilience. Ideological codes embedded in the dialogue and character actions reject gender discrimination and emphasize the necessity of equality in both public and political spaces.

Overall, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* provides a powerful depiction of how women can become agents of change in patriarchal societies while advocating for gender equality across various aspects of life. The drama not only highlights historical struggles but also resonates with contemporary gender issues, making it a valuable subject for feminist analysis.

This research suggests several directions for future studies. First, further research could explore feminist representations in other Korean historical dramas to provide a broader understanding of gender themes in historical and cultural contexts. Second, filmmakers and screenwriters should continue creating female characters with substantial narrative roles—not just as supporting figures but as key agents of change within patriarchal societies. Additionally, the use of visual elements, such as costume and camera angles, in depicting

feminist resistance should be further explored to enhance the impact of visual storytelling in dramas. Finally, dramas like *Under the Queen's Umbrella* can serve as effective media literacy tools to increase critical awareness among audiences regarding gender equality issues.

Thus, *Under the Queen's Umbrella* demonstrates the potential of historical dramas to function as both entertainment and a medium for social reflection. By embedding feminist narratives and gender equality themes within its storyline, the drama contributes to a growing discourse on women's roles in history and society, reinforcing the importance of feminist representation in mainstream media.

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