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WOMEN'S AGENCY AND RELATIONAL SUPPORT IN RESISTING PATRIARCHY: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF *WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU TANGERINES*

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Abstract

Patriarchal resistance in popular media is often interpreted primarily as an individual struggle by female characters, leaving the role of interpersonal support within family relationships insufficiently examined. This study analyzes how resistance to patriarchy is represented through Oh Ae-Sun's actions across her life course and how Yang Gwan-Sik's support contributes to negotiating patriarchal expectations within the family in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. The study employed a descriptive qualitative design using deductive qualitative content analysis of all 16 episodes. The data consisted of scenes, dialogue, actions, nonverbal expressions, and family interactions, which were analyzed through three structures adapted from Sylvia Walby's theory: household production, culture institutions, and sexuality. The findings show that Ae-Sun's individual resistance is most explicit in her persistence in maintaining her literary identity, challenging gendered exclusion from leadership, and supporting educational opportunities for her daughter. Her capacity to resist domestic and reproductive expectations is more constrained when patriarchal authority is exercised through the extended family. In these situations, Gwan-Sik's relational support limits the enforcement of unequal domestic obligations and reproductive demands. The study concludes that private-sphere resistance is represented as a gradual and relational process involving women's agency, supportive masculinity, negotiation of family authority, and intergenerational changes in gender values.

Keywords: *Caring Masculinities; Gender Sociology; Korean Drama; Patriarchal Resistance; Relational Support*

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A. Introduction

Patriarchy is not limited to individual attitudes or interpersonal discrimination. It operates through interconnected social structures and practices that organize power, labor, authority, sexuality, and cultural representation in ways that systematically privilege men and subordinate women. Walby (1990) identifies six principal structures of patriarchy: household production, paid employment, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. These structures may operate differently across historical and social contexts, but they frequently intersect within family life, where gendered expectations concerning domestic labor, education, marriage, reproduction, and decision-making are reproduced through everyday practices.

In South Korea, gender relations have historically been shaped by Confucian family ethics, patrilineal traditions, industrialization, educational expansion, and changing state policies (Koh, 2008; Park & Cho, 1995). Traditional gender ideals positioned women primarily as wives, mothers, and caregivers, while men were associated with education, employment, inheritance, and familial authority. These arrangements have changed significantly as women's educational participation, economic involvement, and public visibility have expanded (Kim, 2023; Koo, 2019; Lee, 2018; Lee & Sambanis, 2025). Nevertheless, historical gender norms continue to influence women's experiences within households, workplaces, and cultural institutions (Jang & Kwon, 2022). Patriarchy in the Korean context should therefore not be understood as a static cultural inheritance, but as a changing system in which traditional expectations coexist and compete with demands for gender equality.

Popular media provides an important arena in which these tensions are represented and negotiated. Television dramas do not simply reflect existing social conditions; they also construct narratives about acceptable gender roles, family relationships, female agency, and masculine authority (Baldacchino & Park, 2021; Yang, 2008). Contemporary Korean dramas have increasingly presented women as active subjects who challenge conventional expectations and negotiate greater autonomy in education, employment, intimate relationships, and family decision-making. At the same time, these dramas may continue to reproduce gender stereotypes and domestic hierarchies, producing complex and sometimes contradictory representations of social change (Boman, 2022; Daalmans et al., 2017; Gammon, 2023; Safira, 2024).

Previous studies of gender representation in Korean dramas have examined female masculinity, gender stereotypes, cultural bias, domestic subordination, and symbolic resistance. Hasanah and Ratnaningtyas (2022), for example, analyzed the representation of female masculinity in *My Name*, while Safira (2024) examined how Korean popular culture challenges global stereotypes of Korean women. Boman (2022) demonstrated that feminist themes have become increasingly visible in contemporary Korean television dramas, reflecting broader transformations in South Korea's sociocultural landscape. These studies confirm that Korean dramas have become significant cultural texts for examining changing representations of femininity, masculinity, and gender relations.

Studies specifically addressing *When Life Gives You Tangerines* have also identified representations of patriarchal norms and gender resistance. Zakaria and Kalihta (2025) used Roland Barthes's semiotic framework to examine the construction of gender bias in the drama and found that patriarchal values were represented through gendered roles and unequal social expectations. Syahrani (2025) similarly analyzed visual, verbal, and narrative signs of patriarchy and showed that the drama challenges male domestic authority, gender labeling, and the construction of women as subordinate family members. These studies provide useful accounts of the drama's symbols, dialogues, and representations of gender inequality.

However, existing studies have predominantly approached the drama through semiotic or representational analysis. Consequently, they have paid less attention to how different forms of patriarchy operate as interconnected structures within family relations and how resistance develops across the protagonist's life course. They also tend to treat resistance primarily as the individual actions of female characters, without adequately distinguishing between women's agency, support provided by male family members, and the resulting transformation of domestic relationships. This distinction is important because resistance within the private sphere may not always occur through direct confrontation. It may also emerge through everyday negotiation, refusal, supportive partnerships, and changes in the intergenerational transmission of gender norms.

To address this gap, the present study applies Sylvia Walby's structural theory of patriarchy to analyze *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. Although Walby's framework comprises six structures, this study focuses on household production, cultural institutions, and sexuality because these dimensions are most consistently represented in the selected scenes concerning Ae-Sun's family relationships, education, literary aspirations, domestic responsibilities, and reproductive expectations. This analytical focus does not imply that the other structures are absent from the drama; rather, it establishes a manageable scope based on the specific data examined in the study.

This study analyzes how resistance to patriarchy is represented through Oh Ae-Sun's actions across different stages of her life and how Yang Gwan-Sik's support contributes to the negotiation of patriarchal expectations within the family. The analysis distinguishes between Ae-Sun's individual resistance and the relational support that enables or strengthens her agency. By examining household production, culture institutions, and sexuality as interrelated dimensions of private patriarchy, the study seeks to explain how the drama represents changes in domestic gender relations and the transmission of gender values across generations.

B. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design using deductive qualitative content analysis to examine representations of patriarchal resistance in the Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. The primary data comprised all 16 episodes of the series, released in 2025, while academic literature on gender sociology, patriarchy, Korean media, and Sylvia Walby's theory served as secondary sources for theoretical interpretation. The series was selected because its longitudinal narrative follows Oh Ae-Sun from childhood to old age and depicts changes in domestic gender relations across generations. The units of analysis consisted of scenes, dialogue, actions, nonverbal expressions, and family interactions that represented gendered restrictions or responses to those restrictions. Qualitative content analysis was used because it enables systematic and theory-guided interpretation of textual and audiovisual material through clearly defined analytical categories (Mayring, 2014).

The analytical categories were derived deductively from Walby's structural theory of patriarchy. Although Walby identifies six patriarchal structures, this study

focused on household production, culture institutions, and sexuality because these dimensions were most directly related to the domestic conflicts represented in the selected scenes (Walby, 1990). Household production referred to unequal domestic labor and women's subordination within the family; culture referred to gendered norms restricting education, leadership, ambition, and literary expression; and sexuality referred to familial control over women's bodies, reproductive decisions, and expectations regarding male heirs. The analysis also distinguished among Ae-Sun's individual resistance, Gwan-Sik's relational support, and intergenerational changes in gender values. This distinction was necessary because resistance in the drama was not represented solely through Ae-Sun's actions but also through supportive interventions that weakened patriarchal control within the family.

Data were collected through repeated nonparticipant observation of all 16 episodes. Relevant scenes were identified purposively when they contained an explicit patriarchal expectation associated with one of the three analytical categories and an observable response in the form of negotiation, refusal, persistence, or relational intervention. Each relevant scene was documented in a coding matrix containing the episode number, time stamp, dialogue or action, characters involved, narrative context, patriarchal structure, and form of resistance or relational support. The coded scenes were then compared within and across categories and interpreted using Walby's framework while retaining their chronological and narrative contexts. The tables in the findings section present representative evidence selected from the coding matrix to illustrate the principal analytical patterns rather than the complete dataset. To maintain analytical credibility, interpretations were limited to what the drama represented and were not treated as direct evidence of gender relations in South Korean society.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Results

When Life Gives You Tangerines is a 2025 Korean limited series that follows Oh Ae-Sun and Yang Gwan-Sik from their youth on Jeju Island through several decades of family life. The narrative begins in 1960s Jeju and traces their relationship amid economic difficulties, familial opposition, personal loss, and changing social expectations. Ae-Sun is portrayed as ambitious and resistant to the limitations imposed on her, whereas Gwan-Sik is consistently represented as a steadfast partner who supports her throughout their lives.

The analysis identified two interconnected patterns. The first concerns Ae-Sun's resistance to patriarchal restrictions on education, literary expression, leadership, domestic position, and reproduction. The second concerns Gwan-Sik's relational support when patriarchal expectations are enforced by the extended family and the surrounding community. These patterns operate across the three selected structures of patriarchy—household production, culture institutions, and sexuality—and illustrate how individual resistance and interpersonal support jointly reshape gender relations within the immediate family.

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1) Oh Ae-Sun's Resistance to Patriarchal Structures

Ae-Sun's individual resistance is represented most clearly in relation to cultural restrictions on education, literary expression, and female leadership. During her youth, her father questions the value of girls' education and dismisses poetry because it does not generate an immediate economic return. These restrictions position women's intellectual and creative aspirations as less valuable than their expected contribution to household survival. Nevertheless, Ae-Sun does not fully internalize these expectations. Her continued identification as a poet and her eventual publication of a poetry collection represent a sustained refusal to abandon the creative identity that was devalued during her childhood.

A similar pattern appears in the representation of leadership. As a child, Ae-Sun is prevented from becoming class president because leadership is defined as an exclusively masculine capacity. In later life, however, she becomes Ddong-ri's first female leader. The contrast between these two moments represents resistance as a gradual life-course process rather than a single act of open confrontation. Her later achievement does not eliminate the discrimination she experienced, but it reverses the gendered boundary that had previously excluded her from leadership.

Ae-Sun's resistance also acquires an intergenerational dimension. Although her own access to education was restricted, she does not reproduce the same limitation in her relationship with her daughter. Instead, she supports Yang Geum-Myeong's higher education and career development. The narrative therefore portrays resistance not only as Ae-Sun's effort to retain her own aspirations but also as her refusal to transmit restrictive gender expectations to the next generation.

Table 1. Representative Evidence of Oh Ae-Sun's Resistance

Analytical category	Episode/time	Patriarchal restriction	Representation of Ae-Sun's resistance
Culture: literary expression	Episode 1, 08:47	Ae-Sun's father asks, "Why are you writing poetry? Does it give you *pauhi* or abalones?" Her creative aspiration is evaluated solely according to its immediate economic utility.	Ae-Sun retains her identity as a poet throughout her life and later publishes a poetry collection titled *A Toast to Everything You Have Experienced* in Episode 16, 1:06:14.
Culture: education	Episode 1, 12:08	Her father asks, "Why should girls go to school? It only adds stress," expressing the belief that formal education is unnecessary for girls.	Although her own educational opportunities are restricted, Ae-Sun later supports Geum-Myeong's higher education and career development in Episodes 6, 7, and 16.
Culture: leadership	Episode 1, 20:40	Ae-Sun is told that a girl cannot become class	In later life, she becomes Ddong-ri's first female

		president because only boys supposedly possess leadership qualities.	leader, reversing the gendered exclusion represented during her childhood.
Sexuality and reproduction	Episode 4, 02:02	Gwan-Sik's grandmother states that Ae-Sun should bear at least two sons, reducing her reproductive role to the continuation of the patrilineal family line.	Ae-Sun does not affirm the demand; however, the practical challenge to this expectation is primarily represented through Gwan-Sik's intervention.

Source: Representative scenes selected from the authors' coding matrix of all 16 episodes of When Life Gives You Tangerines (2025)

The evidence indicates that Ae-Sun's individual resistance is most explicit within the cultural structure, particularly in relation to literary expression, education, and leadership. Her resistance is represented through persistence rather than continuous direct confrontation. She preserves aspirations that were denied or devalued during her youth and later creates different educational opportunities for her daughter.

By contrast, Ae-Sun's capacity to resist is more constrained when patriarchal authority is exercised through the extended family, particularly in relation to household obligations and reproductive expectations. In these areas, her resistance cannot be interpreted as an entirely individual achievement. It develops through the interaction between her nonacceptance of patriarchal demands and Gwan-Sik's willingness to confront the family members who enforce them.

2) Yang Gwan-Sik's Relational Support in Negotiating Patriarchy

Gwan-Sik's relational support is most evident when patriarchal expectations are imposed through the authority of his extended family. Within the structure of household production, Ae-Sun is expected to serve her husband's family and ancestors as part of her role as a daughter-in-law. This expectation reduces her position within marriage to domestic service and subjects her to the authority of her mother-in-law. Gwan-Sik directly challenges this arrangement by emphasizing that Ae-Sun entered the household as his partner rather than as a servant for his extended family.

His intervention alters the immediate domestic power relationship. Rather than remaining neutral, Gwan-Sik limits his mother's authority over Ae-Sun and prioritizes the marital relationship over the conventional expectations attached to the daughter-in-law's role. The scene therefore represents relational support as an action that creates practical protection for Ae-Sun within a structure in which she possesses less authority than the senior members of her husband's family.

A similar form of support appears in relation to reproductive expectations. When Gwan-Sik's grandmother demands that Ae-Sun produce at least two sons, Gwan-Sik rejects the attempt to define her primarily through her capacity to continue the male lineage. The scene does not demonstrate that Ae-Sun possesses unrestricted reproductive

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autonomy. Instead, it shows that the extended family's claim over her reproductive role is challenged from within the family by a male member whose position gives him greater authority to oppose the demand.

Gwan-Sik also supports Ae-Sun's public identity. When she becomes Ddong-ri's first female leader, he rejects the idea that a husband loses dignity when his wife occupies a position of authority. His expression of pride represents a form of masculinity that does not depend on maintaining superiority over his wife. Across these scenes, Gwan-Sik's support does not create Ae-Sun's aspirations or replace her agency. Rather, it weakens the social and familial constraints that limit her ability to pursue those aspirations.

Table 2. Representative Evidence of Yang Gwan-Sik's Relational Support

Analytical category	Episode/ time	Patriarchal expectation	Representation of Gwan-Sik's support
Household production	Episode 4, 29:37–31:16	Gwan-Sik's mother expects Ae-Sun to serve her husband's family and ancestors, describing the daughter-in-law's position in terms associated with servitude.	Gwan-Sik intervenes: "Ae-Sun came to live with me, not to become your daughter-in-law. I will not let Ae-Sun live with you anymore."
Sexuality and reproduction	Episode 4, 02:02	Gwan-Sik's grandmother states that Ae-Sun should bear at least two sons, reflecting the prioritization of male heirs and the continuation of the patrilineal family line.	Gwan-Sik rejects the demand and prevents Ae-Sun from being treated primarily as a reproductive instrument for the extended family.
Culture and leadership	Later-life leadership scene	Ae-Sun's appointment as Ddong-ri's first female leader is associated with the stigma that a husband may lose status when his wife holds authority.	Gwan-Sik rejects this stigma and states, "Why should I lose pride? I am proud that Ae-Sun is the leader."
Culture and self-expression	Across the life-course narrative	Ae-Sun's educational and literary aspirations are repeatedly devalued by her family and social environment.	Gwan-Sik's continued acceptance of Ae-Sun's identity and aspirations provides relational space for her literary expression and later public recognition.

Source: Representative scenes selected from the authors' coding matrix of all 16 episodes of When Life Gives You Tangerines *(2025).*

The findings show that resistance to patriarchy is represented through an interaction between Ae-Sun's individual persistence and Gwan-Sik's relational support. Ae-Sun maintains her literary, educational, and leadership aspirations, whereas Gwan-Sik intervenes when domestic and reproductive expectations are enforced by the extended

family. His support does not substitute for Ae-Sun's agency; instead, it expands the space in which her agency can be exercised.

The resulting changes are also represented across generations. Ae-Sun and Gwan-Sik establish an immediate-family environment in which their daughter receives educational and occupational opportunities that had been restricted in Ae-Sun's youth. The findings therefore answer the two research objectives: the drama represents Ae-Sun's resistance as a life-course process of persistence and nonacceptance, while Gwan-Sik's support functions as a relational mechanism that helps negotiate patriarchal authority within the family.

2. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that resistance to patriarchy in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* is represented not as a single act of rebellion but as a gradual process involving individual persistence, interpersonal negotiation, and changes in family relationships. Ae-Sun's resistance is most explicit when she preserves her literary aspirations, challenges gendered exclusions from education and leadership, and refuses to reproduce the same restrictions in her daughter's life. By contrast, her ability to resist domestic and reproductive expectations is more constrained because these expectations are enforced through the hierarchical authority of the extended family. Gwan-Sik's intervention consequently becomes important, not because it creates Ae-Sun's agency, but because it limits the capacity of other family members to suppress that agency. These findings support the distinction established in the results between Ae-Sun's individual resistance and Gwan-Sik's relational support.

Ae-Sun's experiences illustrate that gender inequality operates simultaneously at individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Risman (2004) conceptualizes gender as a social structure embedded not only in personal identities but also in social interaction and institutional arrangements. Ae-Sun's exclusion from education and leadership is therefore not represented merely as the consequence of individual prejudice. It is sustained through family authority, cultural assumptions about female capability, and expectations that women's activities should provide immediate domestic or economic utility. Her father's rejection of poetry and girls' education reflects a broader system in which women's aspirations are evaluated according to their usefulness to established gender roles. This interpretation is consistent with Walby's understanding of patriarchy as a configuration of interconnected structures rather than a collection of isolated discriminatory actions.

The cultural dimension of Ae-Sun's resistance is particularly important because the drama represents agency across the life course. Her eventual recognition as a poet and community leader does not suggest that earlier restrictions were easily overcome. Instead, the temporal contrast between childhood exclusion and later achievement shows how gendered boundaries may be persistently contested without disappearing immediately. Kandiyoti (1988) argues that women develop strategies within historically specific patriarchal constraints rather than acting outside those constraints entirely. Ae-Sun's

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persistence can be read in this sense: she neither completely escapes the patriarchal environment nor simply submits to it, but maintains aspirations and makes decisions within the limited opportunities available to her.

This interpretation extends several Indonesian studies of gender representation in Korean screen narratives. Asyariri and Latifah (2021) found that *True Beauty* reconstructs conventional masculinity and femininity by presenting characters who cross established gender-role boundaries. Similarly, Herlina et al. (2022) show that *Because This Is My First Life* represents women's attempts to challenge marginalization within patriarchal relationships. Ae-Sun's trajectory is comparable to these findings in its rejection of fixed gender roles, but it differs in its longitudinal emphasis. Her resistance is not primarily constructed through an immediate reversal of masculine and feminine characteristics; it develops through continued commitment to education, writing, leadership, and more egalitarian parenting across several decades.

The findings nevertheless do not support an entirely celebratory interpretation of female agency. Ae-Sun's resistance is considerably weaker when patriarchal authority is exercised through household hierarchy and reproductive expectations. Research on Korean screen narratives has repeatedly shown that domestic roles remain central mechanisms through which women are subordinated. Febriyanti's analysis (2022) of *Kim Ji-young, Born 1982*, for example, identifies the domestic position of wives and mothers as a site where restricted freedom and unequal caregiving responsibilities are normalized. Riyadi and Fauziah (2022) similarly found that family, employment, and public interactions reproduce patriarchal disadvantages throughout a woman's life. These studies caution against interpreting personal achievement as evidence that the underlying patriarchal structure has been fully dismantled.

The findings concerning household production reinforce this limitation. Gwan-Sik's rejection of the expectation that Ae-Sun should serve his extended family changes her immediate domestic circumstances, but it does not demonstrate the disappearance of private patriarchy. The mother-in-law and grandmother retain the cultural assumptions that legitimate women's service and reproductive obligations. Aini and Hariyanti's (2022) analysis of *Samjin Company English Class* similarly shows that marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and unequal workloads operate as interconnected expressions of patriarchy rather than as separate problems. In *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, resistance modifies the immediate relationship, but the norms against which the characters struggle remain visible in the wider familial environment.

Gwan-Sik's actions can be interpreted through the concept of caring masculinities. Elliott (2016) defines caring masculinities as configurations of masculine identity that reject domination and embrace care, interdependence, emotional engagement, and relationality. Gwan-Sik's support for Ae-Sun's literary identity, his refusal to subordinate her to his extended family, and his pride in her leadership depart from a model of masculinity based on male superiority. His actions do not feminize the character or remove him from masculinity; rather, they represent an alternative masculine practice organized around partnership and non-domination. This interpretation is also compatible

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with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that masculinity is relational, historically situated, and expressed through practices rather than constituted as a fixed personality type.

However, Gwan-Sik's support should not be romanticized as sufficient evidence of gender equality. Nayak (2023) cautions that caring masculinities cannot be separated from the wider material and structural relations through which care, authority, and inequality are organized. In the drama, Gwan-Sik can protect Ae-Sun partly because his position as a male family member grants him greater authority to confront his mother and grandmother. His intervention challenges patriarchal outcomes, but it also reveals that Ae-Sun's protection remains partly dependent on a supportive man's access to familial power. Relational support therefore expands her agency while simultaneously exposing the structural constraints that prevent her from exercising the same authority independently.

This critical qualification distinguishes relational support from male rescue. The findings do not suggest that Gwan-Sik liberates a passive Ae-Sun. Ae-Sun's identity, aspirations, and refusal to internalize restrictive cultural expectations precede and exceed his interventions. His contribution is most significant in situations where the extended family's hierarchy limits her capacity to act directly. Relational support should therefore be understood as a mechanism that protects and enlarges an already existing form of agency. It is neither a substitute for women's resistance nor proof that patriarchal relations have been eliminated.

The drama's representation of intergenerational change further develops this argument. Ae-Sun's support for Geum-Myeong's education indicates that resistance can alter the gender values transmitted within a family. This change is more limited than a transformation of South Korean society as a whole, but it is sociologically meaningful because families are important sites for reproducing or modifying gender expectations. Risman's structural approach suggests that changes at the interactional level may disrupt established patterns even when broader institutional inequalities remain. In the drama, Ae-Sun and Gwan-Sik do not abolish patriarchy, but their parenting produces a different range of opportunities for their daughter than those available to Ae-Sun in childhood.

At the same time, media representation should not be equated with empirical social change. Korean films and dramas may criticize patriarchal structures while also retaining conventional narrative assumptions. Studies published in Indonesian journals show both tendencies. While Asyariri and Latifah (2021) identify gender reconstruction in *True Beauty*, Aini and Hariyanti (2022), Riyadi and Fauziah (2022), and Febriyanti (2022) demonstrate that Korean screen texts continue to represent the persistence of domestic subordination, unequal labor, and gendered cultural expectations. The present findings therefore indicate a negotiated and internally contradictory representation: *When Life Gives You Tangerines* imagines more egalitarian family relations, but it does so against a narrative background in which male authority and extended-family hierarchy remain structurally influential.

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D. Conclusion

This study concludes that *When Life Gives You Tangerines* represents resistance to patriarchy as a gradual life-course process shaped by the interaction between women's agency and interpersonal support. Through Walby's framework, Ae-Sun's resistance is most explicit within the cultural structure, particularly in her persistence in maintaining her literary identity, challenging gendered exclusion from leadership, and refusing to reproduce educational restrictions in her daughter's life. Her capacity to resist is more constrained within household production and sexuality, where patriarchal expectations are enforced through the authority of the extended family. In these contexts, Gwan-Sik's relational support limits the enforcement of unequal domestic obligations and reproductive demands. His interventions do not replace Ae-Sun's agency but expand the social and familial space in which she can exercise it.

The study therefore shows that private-sphere resistance cannot be reduced either to an isolated female achievement or to male protection. It emerges through the interaction of individual persistence, supportive masculinity, negotiation of family authority, and intergenerational changes in gender values. By distinguishing Ae-Sun's resistance from Gwan-Sik's relational support, this article extends existing studies that primarily interpret gender resistance in Korean dramas through symbolic or semiotic representations. Nevertheless, the findings are limited to one fictional narrative and should not be generalized as evidence of gender relations in South Korean society. Comparative studies of other Korean dramas, historical periods, and family configurations are needed to determine whether similar patterns of relational resistance and intergenerational change appear across contemporary media narratives.

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