



Empowering Women? How the Postfeminist Rhetoric Serves the Interest of the K-Pop Industry

Somya Dimri

Abstract

Most research on post-feminist culture has been conducted in the Western context but the spread of post-feminist ideology is apparent in the cultural texts pervading Asia as well. Though the idea that there is no longer a need for feminism is problematic even in the Western context, it is even more troublesome to adopt such rhetoric in the Asian context where women are treated as second-class citizens. This is witnessed in the case of both developing and developed Asian countries. South Korea is considered a developed nation but it has regularly performed extremely poorly on the World's Economic Forum Gender Gap report. The majority of South Korean men deny the existence of discrimination against women despite the South Korean society being deeply patriarchal in nature. At a time when the popularity of South Korea's cultural products such as Korean dramas and Korean music continues to soar both in India and worldwide, it is imperative to focus on the local processes governing cultural productions in a highly misogynistic society to uncover the disparity between the actual treatment of women and the representation of women by men in cultural texts.

This research focuses on how the post-feminist rhetoric is being utilized by the androcentric Korean popular music (K-pop) industry to serve its interests even as the industry remains anti-feminist in nature. This research takes a feminist cultural studies approach which is situated within the broader area of media studies to show how the workings of the K-pop industry prevents female stars from expressing their feminist sensibilities even as the industry relies on a neoliberal post - feminist sensibility to present itself as a proponent of girl power. The research draws on music videos centering around the girl power (known as girl crush) concept, interviews of K-pop female stars and the backlash against feminism in South Korea to emphasize the dangers of what Andi Zeisler terms as 'market-place feminism'.

Keywords: Korean Culture, Kpop, Feminism, Postfeminism, Marketplace Feminism



Most research with regard to the usage of postfeminist rhetoric in celebrity culture has been conducted in the West. Celebrity studies remain largely Anglo-centric in nature as they revolve around Euro-American case studies¹. The postfeminist sensibility is problematic even in the Western context but it becomes even more insidious when it is applied to Asian culture where gender-based discrimination is rampant, feminism is often stigmatized and women largely continue to be treated as second-class citizens². It is deleterious for women to believe that equality between the sexes has been attained as it will lead them to dismiss the unfairness, they face in their lives due to their gender. At the same time, it will allow businesses to ignore systemic issues faced by women and still act as if they wish to empower women by linking women's empowerment to the consumption of specific products and services³. This is evidenced via the machinations of the Korean popular music industry i.e., the K-pop industry which is located in South Korea. South Korean society is deeply misogynistic in nature and even as the K-pop industry largely neither shows support for feminism nor allows its idols to speak up in favour of feminism, it relies on postfeminist rhetoric for its blatant commodification of sexuality to be considered empowering.

In recent years, South Korea has been bitterly divided over gender issues. This is evidenced by the election of Yoon Suk-Yeol, the current President of South Korea, in 2022. Yoon Suk-Yeol has repeatedly denied the existence of gender-based discrimination against women in South Korea. He has risen to power by pandering to anti-feminists which often consist of young South Korean men who believe that they are being discriminated against with progressive policies that aim to empower women at the expense of men. South Korean men feel "very comfortable in saying that women's demands for greater rights or greater protections are misguided"⁴. The attitude that a majority of South Korean men display towards the feminist movement comes under the concept of 'modern sexism' that was given by Swim et al. as well as under the concept of 'neosexism' given by Tougas et al.⁵ Modern sexism denies "continued discrimination" on the basis of sex and posits that women are demanding "too much from policy makers."⁶ It encompasses resentment over the perceived special treatment afforded to women⁷. Similarly, neosexism denies that women are being discriminated against to date and those who believe in neosexism are "less likely to support affirmative-action policies directed towards women"⁸. Over time, men have gone from having explicitly sexist beliefs to displaying subtler forms of sexism like modern sexism and neosexism. The expression of openly sexist attitudes towards women has become more unacceptable according to societal standards so the



way these attitudes are expressed has changed without a change in the mindset that leads to the development of such attitudes. Neosexism continues to maintain a paternalistic view of women⁹.

Even though prejudiced beliefs regarding women remain entrenched in South Korean society, the majority of men act as if women have attained full equality and are portraying themselves as victims of an unjust society to gain leverage over men. However, the statistics regarding gender inequality in South Korea reveal the extent to which women are discriminated against till date. Gender inequality in South Korea results in the country regularly performing poorly on the World Economic Forum Gender Gap report. In 2018, it ranked 115 out of 149 countries. South Korea also ranked 124 out of 149 countries in the world in terms of economic participation and opportunity for women¹⁰. The country ranked last in the Economist's annual Glass Ceiling Index, based on data till 2017, which revealed that among OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries- South Korea has the largest pay gap at 35 percent¹¹. In its 2023 report, based on data till 2022, South Korea again ranks last¹².

Gender discrimination in South Korea is rooted in deeply engrained patriarchal ideologies which leads to the persistence of rigidly defined gender roles. The disadvantaged position women occupy in South Korean society can be traced back to Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism. The Neo-Confucian philosophy became entrenched in Korean society during the Yi dynasty (1392-1897). Before this time period, women faced less discrimination. They could interact with men in a relatively free manner. Remarriage by women was common and considered socially acceptable. In the Silla dynasty (57 BC-AD 935) it was acknowledged that a female had the right to be the head of a family¹³. However, the status accorded to women in Korea was rapidly exacerbated once Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism became the dominant ideology. The concept of equality between sexes was not present under Confucianism. Women occupied a highly disadvantaged position in society. Under Confucianism, women were confined to the private sphere of the household while men occupied the public sphere. An ideal woman was one who was "passive, quiet, and chaste; she was expected to be an obedient daughter-in-law, devoted wife, and dedicated mother, and this image of the ideal woman is still deeply entrenched in Korean values"¹⁴. Confucianism viewed women as morally and intellectually inferior to men. The identity of a woman was dependent on her relationships with male family members. In modern-day South Korea, women



increasingly occupy the public sphere but are expected to also keep up with their traditional roles and continue to struggle to establish an identity of their own in a society where sexual difference has been firmly constructed¹⁵.

There is no one definition of postfeminism but this research work derives its understanding of postfeminism utilizing the work of researchers Rosalind Gill and Ngaire Donaghue. Like neosexism, postfeminism acknowledges the historical oppression of women while denying the continued discrimination of women. Postfeminism sees feminism “as having done its legitimate work” and no longer “appropriate or necessary”¹⁶. It reframes “the existence of continuing gender inequalities and rejects the possibility that gender-based injustice” still continues to shape the lives of women. Postfeminism aligns with the ideology of neoliberalism as it insists on presenting women as autonomous agents whose “circumstances in life are a result and reflection of the choices made by them” and “for which they alone are responsible and accountable”¹⁷. According to Banet-Wieser, the ‘girl power’ promoted by post-feminism reduced such ‘power’ to consumer power instead of posing a meaningful challenge to the network of gendered power relations. For Gill, post-feminism overlaps with neoliberal feminism and popular feminism which believe in individual change primarily linked to consumption while ignoring concrete and material realities that call for structural change. However, post-feminism differs from other newer forms of feminism because even as it celebrated ‘girl power’ and female success, it was associated with a rejection of feminism. In contrast, neoliberal feminism and popular feminism often comprise people embracing a feminist identity but the substance of such feminism itself is profoundly influenced by postfeminism¹⁸. The postfeminist rhetoric contributes to the backlash towards feminism and is also utilized by corporations as a way of appearing to be proponents of women empowerment and girl power while simultaneously engaging in practices that limit the autonomy of women. This is witnessed in the functioning of the K-pop industry.

The K-pop industry can be traced back to the 1990s when a Korean hip-hop group known as Seo Taiji and Boys became popular. The group is credited with changing the South Korean music industry. The success of the group led to the establishment of the idol system and it is idol music that has become famous globally. The Korean idol system requires young aspirants to pass auditions unless they have been scouted by an agency. The aspirants who qualify sign a contract with an agency and become a trainee. They are expected to master a variety of skills.



Based on the trainee's evaluation, the agency determines when they are ready to debut. Once they debut, they are known as a K-pop idol.

Kim Gooyong in his critique of the functioning of the K-pop industry notes that post-feminism emphasizes 'individual choice, freedom, glamour and success' and how "feminist ideas and projects have been coopted and effective in serving the establishment's economic, ideological, and social interests"¹⁹. Similarly, Kim Yeran observes how the portrayal of women in K-pop may superficially seem to empower them but it only obscures "the neoliberal regime of normalization which defines and dictates the looks and nature of girl power in girl industries"²⁰. The nexus between the interests of the patriarchal society and the corporations leads to control over the lives of female idols. Nevertheless, since the same forces also exercise control over the production and circulation of images of female idols, idols may be presented as choosing for themselves what the powers that be are choosing for them.

K-pop fans are aware that labels exercise control over idols to a certain extent but they still wish to view their idols as authentic beings and this desire has only amplified in recent years with the increasing global popularity of K-pop. According to dictionary.com, authenticity means "representing one's true nature or beliefs"²¹. K-pop labels are cognizant of this desire for authenticity so it is beneficial for them if fans view their idols as having a considerable amount of control in the way they present themselves to the public. A number of female fans also tend to deem girl group videos that they find pleasurable as empowering despite the fact that the industry does not allow the idols to display feminist sentiments and it is the industry that decides what girl power should look like.

The problem is that when women regard certain images as pleasurable, the postfeminist rationale automatically deems it as empowering even though "merely getting enjoyment from something" should not be considered "as intrinsically transgressive and empowering for women and therefore to be championed"²². Such rationale overlooks the way in which the autonomy of women may be limited by the machinations of the K-pop industry and the manner in which the industry may play a role in reinforcing a sexist culture. A study found that K-pop tends to reinforce traditional gender norms in countries which lag behind in terms of gender equality so fans in Asian countries are more impacted by the harmful stereotypes being perpetuated by the K-pop industry than fans in Western countries. The study revealed that K-

pop tended to reinforce " traditional gender norms more strongly in countries already suffering from low gender equality, such as Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan, and Korea"²³.

Such rationale proves to be advantageous for the K-pop industry as it obfuscates the reality that the majority of the people who hold authoritative power over girl group concepts are men. In recent years, given fans' inclination for idols to hold sway in the creative process, the industry is letting more and more idols take part in the production of songs. However, it is male idols far more than female idols who are allowed to be part of the production process. K-pop companies do not usually entrust female idols with the task of writing lyrics for their groups as they cannot allow the carefully curated image of the group to show the slightest of cracks.



Figure 1: The girl group PRISTIN V in a still from their music video *Get It* released in 2018. Their incorporation of sexualized female stylistics and performance of confident sexual agency is an example of the postfeminist rhetoric being utilized by the K-pop industry.

The 'girl crush' concept, which has gained massive popularity in K-pop since 2018, consists of music videos where female idols act in a rebellious and unapologetic manner and are meant to be seen as empowering figures even if they make their rebelliousness known "by incorporating sexualized female stylistics: mini-skirts, high-heeled shoes, perfect hair, and

makeup, highly sensuous dance movements, and overtly sexual lyrics”²⁴. A postfeminist reading of such videos empties the “particular beauty/body management practices” of “any meaning or significance beyond the expression of an entirely personal preference” and embracing feminine practices or ‘girlie-ness’ is deemed revolutionary²⁵. Such a reading diverts the viewers' attention from the power imbalance present within the K-pop industry.



Figure 2: The girl group 2NE1 in a still from their music video *Clap Your Hands* released in 2010. They displayed a fierce image in their music videos.

In 2012, the girl group 2NE1 was interviewed on a variety show. 2NE1 was one of the first girl groups that had a girl crush concept and they were given a fierce image in their music videos. However, behind the scenes, the members were repeatedly told by the then male CEO Yang Hyun-suk of YG Entertainment, one of the most influential K-pop labels, that they were ugly. One of the members, CL, revealed in the interview that YG called them “really ugly” when he saw them with no makeup on and the comment upset CL especially since he ridiculed them in front of the entire staff²⁶. In 2018, Minzy who is a former member of 2NE1 spoke up about how YG's derogatory comments coupled with netizens i.e. active participants in the online community of the internet, critiquing them for being unattractive took a toll on her mental health²⁷.



Dressing up, wearing makeup, and fitting into conventional standards of beauty is not optional for girl group members. The men in charge and the Korean society at large show contempt for women who fail to abide by these standards and this can lead to physical health and psychological health issues. It is imperative to locate the socio-cultural factors that shape beauty practices rather than viewing them solely as personal preferences. 2NE1 disbanded in 2016 and in the same year, YG's new representative girl group, Blackpink debuted. YG spoke of how Blackpink was similar to 2NE1 but the difference was that this time around he made sure that the chosen members were “pretty”²⁸. For YG, the talent and effort displayed by 2NE1 members did not make up for their perceived lack of attractiveness.

Furthermore, post-feminism insists that women “must no longer embody virginity” rather they should put on “the performance of confident sexual agency”²⁹. This is evidenced in 'girl crush' concepts with lyrics such as “Don't hesitate. Right now, get it. However, you want, get it, get it”³⁰, “Give me all you got. Go insane with it, better love hard”³¹, “No need to hesitate, just follow me. Why are you holding back?”³², “Don't be like that, just hold me. Don't say you wanna stop here”³³, “Every time I walk, my hips, they don't lie. Take me to your paradise. 'Cause I don't wanna wait anymore”³⁴. Postfeminism aligns with the neoliberal ideology such that “a continued preoccupation with men's sexual desires now has to be thought of as authentically self-chosen and, what's more, as empowering”³⁵. As mentioned before, female idols, especially the ones in girl groups, are usually not writing the lyrics of the songs that they are meant to perform.



Figure 3: In 2018, Naeun from the girl group ‘Apink’ posted Instagram photos clearly showing her phone case design which states ‘Girls can do anything.’ However, the photos were taken down as Naeun became the target of backlash from netizens.

To understand the extent of the K-pop industry’s hypocrisy in presenting itself as a champion of women's empowerment utilizing post-feminist rhetoric, one has to examine the industry’s response to female idols who display or are perceived as displaying feminist sentiments. In 2018, the girl group Apink's member, Naeun, posted photos of her phone case which stated ‘Girls can do anything’. However, this simple declaration was met with a deluge of hatred sent her way by Korean netizens. The netizens did not appreciate an idol daring to display a feminist stance and consequently, the photos were taken down. Her agency, Plan A Entertainment, was quick to pacify netizens by declaring that Naeun was not speaking up in favor of feminism and that her phone case was merely an endorsement brand's slogan³⁶. The industry is quick to apologize to netizens regarding any display of feminist sentiment by female idols which makes it apparent to the idols that they should steer clear of embracing feminism in any way.

Moreover, regardless of which concept a K-pop female idol performs on stage, she is expected to remain chaste. Even if a woman is hyper-sexualized on stage, she has to appear innocent and charming off stage as she has to adhere to conventional notions of femininity in order to please the Korean public and to meet industry standards. The industry is infamous for



the dating ban it places on all of the idols. If the Korean media captures images of an idol having a love life, it is regarded as a 'scandal'. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a scandal is “an action or event that causes a public feeling of shock and strong moral disapproval”³⁷. Idols daring to go on dates are considered guilty of immoral behaviour. If a dating scandal occurs, it leads the idols to apologize for hurting the sentiments of their fans. The industry encourages the entitled behaviour of fans towards their idols. The idols not only receive backlash from fans but also risk their career coming to a swift end. Labels may drop the idols who have earned the wrath of their fans. While all idols are bashed by those fans who feel betrayed, female artists often receive hate based on the innocent image they are expected to maintain. The industry demands that female idols live up to their pure image in the eyes of the public.

The K-pop industry profits off the superficial images of women empowerment it presents while continuing to place unrealistic and contradictory expectations on female idols and denying them autonomy over their lives. This is characteristic of ‘marketplace feminism’. According to Andi Zeisler, marketplace feminism views feminism as an abstract concept. Businesses reduce feminism to a commodity that they happily sell while showing no concern for the fight for gender equality happening on the ground³⁸. Such feminism links the empowerment of women with the consumption of specific products that only seek to serve the structure of capitalism while businesses do not bother to change their practices and their values to truly empower women³⁹.

South Korean society places utmost emphasis on their appearance. Advancement in social mobility is linked to one's beauty with one's prospects in marriage and employment depending upon their appearance. Female idols have become the nation's standard of beauty for women. Female idols are at the helm of adhering to and encouraging consumption practices related to improving one's appearance. Such consumption is presented as a liberating experience for women in South Korea without an acknowledgement of how adherence to beauty standards is expected from all South Korean women especially female idols. The K-pop industry is largely interested in advocating for ‘marketplace feminism’ and by utilizing the postfeminist rhetoric and denying the inequality between the sexes, it disavows itself of the responsibility to resolve the tension between their professed ideals and actual practices. If gender-based injustice is relegated to an issue of the past, the industry is not required to question the concepts it gives to

female idols or examine their treatment of female idols as female idols could not possibly be leading constrained lives.



Figure 4: The solo artist IU in a still from her music video *BBIBBI* released in 2018. In this self-composed track, IU targets netizens who leave behind malicious comments. She declares her right to maintain certain boundaries which no one should dare to violate while also proclaiming that "we [the idols] don't owe, owe, owe, owe anything."

In my analysis of the K-pop industry, I have focused on the hypocrisy of the industry in presenting itself as an advocate for women's empowerment while actively placing constraints on female idols that lead to them feeling disempowered. However, the women in the industry themselves negotiate with the constraints placed on them and attempt to find ways to express themselves freely with varying degrees of success. What is essential is that female idols should have "control over and within their images and music" and use this control "to push for how the public views them, and by extension, women"⁴⁰. The difference between the "objectifying use" of the girl group concepts from "an empowering representation" is whether "the idols and the persona of their lyrics retain agency"⁴¹. Female idols, both solo artists and those in girl groups, attempt to exercise agency in their own way. Solo artists such as Hyuna and IU and girl groups such as Mamamoo and (G)-idle have challenged the standards of the industry and have called out netizens for violating the boundaries of the lives of female idols⁴².



In recent years, we have seen the postfeminist sensibility expressed in myriad ways around the world - we see its expression via neoliberal feminism and in popular feminism which encompasses within it the ideas of corporate feminism, celebrity feminism and girl power. It seems like an empowering narrative and women desire to witness other women and themselves occupying positions of power. The K-pop industry, like several other industries, profits off of providing the illusion of empowerment for women. However, the authorities – in – charge need to be held accountable for the ways in which they constrain the lives of female idols. The necessity of feminism to bridge gender inequalities needs to be acknowledged despite there being a sense of exhaustion with feminist narratives that emphasize how gender inequality shapes the lives of women and the role of coercion - implicit and explicit - in women's lives. However, as the writer Patricia Lockwood observes, "It is so easy to believe you freely choose the paints, polishes, and waist-trainers of your own time, while looking with tremendous pity to women of the past"⁴³. A balanced approach is needed where we neither view women as passively responding to the forces that they are subjected to nor view them as living unconstrained lives which are free of such forces.

Notes

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