

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN THE K-DRAMA THE JUDGE FROM HELL: A SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS USING IBN HAMAD'S APPROACH

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Abstract

Gender representation in media, particularly within K-Dramas, reflects shifting social dynamics and the evolving construction of female identity. The Judge from Hell (2024) portrays Kang Bit-na as a female judge endowed with supernatural authority, challenging dominant patriarchal narratives commonly found in Korean mainstream media. This study aims to examine how female representation and power relations are constructed through symbols, narrative structure, and visual elements in the series. Employing a qualitative method grounded in social semiotics and Ibnu Hamad's discourse analysis model, this research analyzes five high-intensity episodes in which Kang Bit-na plays a central authoritative role. The findings indicate that The Judge from Hell presents a transformative representation of women—from passive figures to authoritative agents who command both legal and supernatural domains. Through the categories of Field of Discourse, Tenor of Discourse, and Mode of Discourse, the series depicts women as holders of moral and structural power, while male characters occupy negotiated or subordinate positions. Visual analysis reinforces this construction through camera framing, color symbolism, body language, and legal performativity. In conclusion, the drama constructs a counter-narrative to patriarchal norms and broadens the meaning of female authority in contemporary Korean cultural contexts.

Keywords: Agency; Gender; Power; Representation; Social Semiotics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Korean dramas, or K-dramas, are an important medium for conveying cultural values, social norms, and identity construction, including gender (Rianty et al., 2024). In the context of media globalization, the representation of women in K-dramas often reflects and reshapes public perceptions of women's roles and positions within social structures (Rofidah, 2021; Setiawati et al., 2024). One recent example that has captured attention is the K-drama The Judge from Hell (2024), in which the main character, Kang Bit-na, played by Park Shin-hye, appears as a female judge with supernatural powers. This character challenges the dominant patriarchal narrative in Korean television, which often depicts women in subordinate or passive positions. Historically, women in media, whether in soap operas, dramas, films, or advertisements, have often been represented stereotypically: as weak, emotional, dependent on men, and confined to the domestic sphere. However, in recent years, this representation has shifted (Kurniawan, 2020; Oktavia et al., 2022). Female characters have emerged in media who appear dominant, rational, and even in complete control of power. One notable example of this new representation appears in the K-drama The Judge from Hell (2024). The Judge from Hell tells the story of a female judge named Kang Bit-na who is possessed by a supernatural entity named Yustitia. This character not only carries out judicial duties in the human world

but also tries sinful souls in the afterlife. Her mission is to sentence ten murderers who show no remorse. Bit-na is portrayed as a firm, rational figure with absolute authority in a justice system that even transcends human law. With a blend of legal and supernatural elements, this drama presents a unique narrative, while also opening up a deep reading space for issues of female representation and power. The uniqueness of *The Judge from Hell* lies in how Kang Bit-na is represented as the center of power, who not only enforces the law but also interprets it based on morality, empathy, and transcendental justice. This clearly contrasts with the representation of women in many previous media narratives, which are generally depicted as subordinate to male power structures (Haryati, 2019). In this drama, men are in a position where they must negotiate with or even submit to female authority. This study examines gender representation through a social semiotic approach combined with Ibn Hamad's discourse analysis model, which consists of Discourse Field, Discourse Engagement, and Discourse Vehicle. This approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the structure and meaning of gender discourse in audiovisual texts (Ekawati et al., 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021). The novelty of this study lies in the application of Ibn Hamad's approach, which is still relatively rare in K-Drama studies, a critical analysis of the representation of women in supernatural and legal power spaces, and an attempt to integrate Western and local theories within a social semiotic framework. Amid the growing feminist movement and awareness of gender bias in the media, *The Judge from Hell* can be an example of how media can create counter-narratives to masculine dominance in the public sphere. By examining how women are represented not only as victims, but as just and principled decision-makers, this study makes an important contribution to media and gender studies. This research uses a social semiotic approach, specifically through the discourse analysis framework developed by Ibn Hamad, namely the Discourse Field, Discourse Engagement, and Discourse Vehicle. This approach allows researchers to see how gender issues are constructed, who is involved in the discourse, and how messages of power and identity are conveyed symbolically and visually.

2. METHOD

This research employs an interpretive qualitative paradigm with a hermeneutic-critical focus. The method employed is qualitative text analysis based on social semiotics and Ibn Hamad's media discourse analysis. This method combines symbolic and narrative approaches to interpret the structure of meaning in visual texts. The primary data comes from the series *The Judge from Hell* (Netflix, 2024). The episodes analyzed are the five episodes with the highest intensity in presenting Kang Bit-na as the center of legal and supernatural power. The main issues analyzed are the representation of women in power, resistance to patriarchy, and women's agency within fictional legal structures. Data were collected through selecting episodes with high visual and narrative intensity, transcription of key dialogues, visual documentation (screenshots of visual symbols, camera framing, character appearance), and initial coding based on Ibn Hamad's three discourse categories. The coding sheet includes Discourse Field (Narrative theme; legal topic; supernatural intervention), Discourse Engagement (Main characters, power relations, powerful actions), Discourse Tools (Dominant colors, visual symbols (judge, hell, gavel),

musical tone, body language, and camera framing). The data were analyzed using qualitative interpretative techniques, by reading the relationship between visual symbols and the social structures they represent. This process was assisted by mapping the cultural context and local discourse using a theoretical framework. The qualitative interpretative techniques in this study allowed researchers not only to understand the narrative superficially, but also to interpret the hidden meanings behind the visuals, symbols, and discourse relations.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. General Description of Data Collection Results

Data were collected through in-depth observation of five main episodes of the drama The Judge from Hell, which intensely features the character of Kang Bit-na as a supernatural judge. Data collection was conducted using an interpretive qualitative paradigm, emphasizing understanding the meaning and symbolic structure presented narratively and visually in audiovisual texts. Researchers transcribed dialogues, noted visual details (gestures, costumes, symbols, colors, camera composition), and copied key scene clips as a basis for analysis. Data validation was carried out by triangulation between visual texts, verbal texts, and the socio-cultural context of the representation. Data that had been coded using a coding sheet were arranged based on the categories of Field, Involvement, and Discourse Means according to Ibn Hamad's model.

3.2. Presentation of Analysis Results

3.2.1 Field of Discourse

In Ibn Hamad's theory, the Field of Discourse refers to the main issue or subject matter underlying the text. In this drama, that issue is justice, conveyed not only through the formal legal system but also through the moral and supernatural dimensions conveyed by the female character, Kang Bit-na. This discourse implies resistance to the patriarchal legal system, which is deemed to have failed to uphold true justice.



Figure 1

Source: The Judge from Hell

As a concrete example, the scene featuring the dialogue "People who commit sins are unrepentant and unforgiven" reflects an approach to justice based on absolute morality. This demonstrates that forgiveness in the system presented by Bit-na/Yustitia relies on genuine remorse, not technical legal defense.



Figure 2

Source: The Judge from Hell

Similarly, the dialogue "The murderers will be marked on the forehead and receive severe punishment," reinforces the narrative that the alternative justice system not only punishes but also provides symbolic marks as a form of social and spiritual consequences.

In this way, the drama builds a discourse field that highlights the value of ethical justice carried out by women, outside the conventional masculine legal system.

The dominant theme found is the pursuit of justice from the perspective of women who possess moral and supernatural authority. Kang Bit-na is involved in several episodes in resolving legal cases that have failed to be resolved by the human system.

The issue of the patriarchal legal system that protects perpetrators of violence or harassment, as well as the inequality in power relations between men and women, becomes the main context.

In a key scene, Bit-na symbolically delivers a verdict that cannot be challenged by the conventional legal system.

3.2.2 Discourse Involvement

In the analysis of discourse engagement, the focus is directed at how power relations between characters are formed, particularly between the main female character, Kang Bit-na, and other male characters such as the defendant, prosecutor, or co-workers.

This drama demonstrates the representation of women as dominant actors in the legal process, not only symbolically but also in concrete actions.



Figure 3

Source: The Judge from Hell

One crucial scene shows Kang Bit-na bluntly asking the defendant, "Is this a joke to you?" In this instance, Bit-na not only takes control of the courtroom but also reverses the power struggles of men, who are typically portrayed as the dominant force in the legal system.



Figure 4

Source: The Judge from Hell

A subsequent scene shows Bit-na standing upright in front of the male defendant, who sits in a defensive position. The angle of the shot visually and symbolically emphasizes Bit-na's superior position of power. This demonstrates the dynamics of social relations in which women are the interrogators, not the interrogated. In another scene, the entire courtroom stands as Bit-na enters the room and takes her seat. This is a symbolic representation of the discourse that asserts that women hold the highest power in legal institutions. Men in this scene are structurally and symbolically subordinate.



Figure 5

Source: The Judge from Hell

Through these three scenes, it can be concluded that the involvement of discourse in *The Judge from Hell* displays a shift in gender relations within the context of power. Women are not only involved in the legal system but also become the primary controllers of the narrative, structure, and decisions within it (Sukwanto et al., 2022). The character of Kang Bit-na is presented as having full authority, while the male characters are shown as negotiators or even defensive against Bit-na's decisions. The power relations behind this shift are women as the arbiters of justice, while men are the recipients of decisions (Wahyuni, 2022).

3.2.3 Discourse Suggestions

In the drama "The Judge from Hell," the discourse is presented through cinematic elements such as visuals, symbols, color, camera framing, and expressions and dialogue. The two analyzed scenes reinforce the representation of women as holders of absolute power through consistent and authoritative visual power.



Figure 6

Source: *The Judge from Hell*

In this scene, Bit-na sits in the judge's chair with a solemn expression as she pronounces the verdict on defendant Jeong Taegyu. The camera uses a symmetrical and slightly low-angle perspective, emphasizing absolute authority. The crimson chair behind Bit-na serves not only as a prop but also as a symbol of the majesty and supernatural power attributed to the female figure. The color red also indicates a final, uncompromising decision (Pratiwi 2023; Syahrani, 2023).



Figure 7

Source: *The Judge from Hell*

This scene features another female judge wearing a black robe with red trim. In this scene, the female judge's visual position is always taller and more upright than the seated male defendant. The female judges' body language is fully in control, showing neither fear nor submission. The bold design of the robe, the neat hairstyle, and the body position reinforce the message that women's power is not symbolic, but structural and substantial.



Figure 8

Source: The Judge from Hell

The dialogue in these scenes is also significant: when Bit-na says, "Defendant Jeong Taegyu will be sentenced to death," she does so without hesitation, without excessive emotion, and in a matter-of-fact tone. This represents a performativity of female power that does not conform to emotional feminine stereotypes, but rather emphasizes logic and legal principles. Through the use of clothing, color, camera angles, and body gestures, the drama's discursive devices construct the image of women as subjects of legal power not only verbally but also visually and symbolically. These devices reinforce women's position as key actors in the discourse of justice.

Judge Bit-na's visuals are often framed with low-angle shots, reinforcing her authoritative position. Her elegant black dress with red details symbolizes power and courage. Other symbols, the dominant colors of black, red, and gold, frequently appear in the supernatural courtroom, depicting a sacred, solemn, and controlling atmosphere. The background music tends to be minor and dramatic whenever Bit-na delivers a verdict. The findings indicate that *The Judge from Hell* shifts the meaning of women's roles in institutions of power. Kang Bit-na is not only presented as a strong woman but also as a symbol of resistance to the patriarchal legal system. Within the framework of social semiotics, the signs and symbols attached to Bit-na, such as her gavel, clothing, expressions, and voice, form new social meanings about women's authority.

Within the framework of Butler's theory of gender performativity, Bit-na's actions as a supernatural law enforcer are a form of repeated action that breaks down the dominant norms of passive femininity. Bit-na demonstrates a new construction of "women in power" who do not have to submit to aesthetics or social obedience. From Laura Mulvey's perspective, Bit-na's position is not placed for the visual interests of men (male gaze), but rather appears as a subject of power. The camera does not exploit her body; instead, it frames her as a decision-maker. This indicates a release from the roles of women who

are generally trapped in patriarchal visual logic. Ibn Hamad's approach is very effective in mapping the hidden structure of meaning in the text, because it is able to systematically trace the layers of issues (field), actors (involvement), and means of delivery (medium).

4. CLOSING

The Discourse Field in *The Judge from Hell* presents gender issues as a matter of structural injustice in the legal system, and provides an alternative narrative through strong female characters. The involvement of Discourse in this drama shows a transformed power relationship: women become the center of authority, while men are in a position of support or negotiation. The means of Discourse through visuals, symbols, and dialogue represent women in a way that is not trapped in patriarchal aesthetics, but as holders of rational and transcendent power.

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