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## Self Hood and Self Realization in Contemporary Korean Dramas

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**Loyola Marymount University**  
**University Honors**  
**Program**

# **Self Hood and Self Realization in Contemporary Korean Dramas**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Kevin Chang**

**May 8th, 2021**

## ABSTRACT

### SELF HOOD AND SELF REALIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY KOREAN DRAMAS

By Kevin Chang

Korean dramas are an important worldwide cultural phenomenon; however, there has been a lack of direct critical analysis on contemporary Korean dramas. Significantly, popular media is a potent tool to understand a country's societal values. Given Korea's intellectual contact with the West, it is possible to interpret K-dramas through the lens of self-realization. *It's Okay to Not be Okay* teaches us that trauma must be faced to overcome it through the stories of Moon Gang-tae, Sang-tae, and Ko Moon-young. In *Extracurricular*, Jisoo and Gyuri represent how the current youth environment of South Korea stifles self-expression and self-realization. *Itaewon Class*, unlike many other K-dramas, shows how the multicultural environment of Itaewon aids in the development of marginalized people in South Korea. The three dramas are also concerned with themes of mental health, which is a largely stigmatized subject in South Korea. As Korean dramas grow in prominence, it is more important than ever to analyze them critically.

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## **Chapter 6: Self-Realization in Korean Dramas**

## Chapter 1: Understanding Self-Realization in South Korea

### *Introduction – Korea's past and present in Korean Dramas*

The Korean Wave, or *Hallyu*, is the rise in global popularity of South Korean entertainment outside of Korea. South Korea's development into a full-fledged economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been accompanied by the international growth of distinctly Korean cultural products like BTS and Korean dramas. Yet, despite South Korea's relative success today, South Korea underwent significant social and political upheaval in the past 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following the Korean war, South Korea was a relatively impoverished country – in the mid 1950's about half the population was living in absolute poverty (Henderson, 2013). Furthermore, South Korea was chronically under the rule of authoritarian dictatorships that brutally suppressed popular democratic movements like in the Gwangju Uprising in 1980. But with massive economic growth during the “Miracle on the Han River” and the democratization of South Korea in the 1980's, Korea has emerged as a highly developed country boasting high internet speeds and world-renown technological industries.

Given the massive upheavals in Korean society, it is pertinent to study popular media to understand Korean society. As Gurevitch et al. describes, “mass media plays a strategic role in reinforcing dominant social norms and values that legitimize the social system” (Gurevitch, 1982). For example, in *Dae Jang Geum* (Jewel in the Palace), a famous K-drama about the first female royal physician of the Joseon Dynasty describes the “16th-century royal court of Korea, and family values, which are derived from Confucianism and represent the real sentiments of East Asian lives” (Parc, 2013). Korean society has long been dictated by adherence to Confucian ethics, which generally stresses the harmony of core familial relationships and certain virtues to

follow. But in light of Korea's recent modernization and increased contact with the West, the introduction of different humanistic, individualistic elements such as the idea of self-hood and self-realization have become prevalent. Self-realization, for example, is the "fulfillment of oneself of the possibilities of one's character or personality" and has its roots in Western psychology and philosophy. While there have been many studies about the relative popularity of Korean dramas as part of *Hallyu* phenomenon, there are few studies that directly analyze these dramas (especially modern K-dramas) *as is* and as effective tools for understanding self-realization and its potential application to Korean society. This project addresses a lack of academic discourse in the analysis of East Asian, specifically Korean, popular media. Three Contemporary Korean dramas (released in 2020), *Extracurricular*, *Itaewon Class*, and *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* have character-driven storylines concerned with the development and growth of their protagonists. Given their relative popularity and accessibility on Netflix, they are prime candidates to understand modern Korean society and analyze in the lens of self-realization. Through reading closely these three dramas, this paper argues that while Western ideas of self-realization provides young people in South Korea with novel perspectives to redefine themselves, clashes between these ideas and the deep-rooted Confucian notion of self remains strong. *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* and *Itaewon Class* synthesize Western ideas of self-realization and self-hood to provide novel messages that contrast with societal norms in South Korea surrounding mental health and multicultural expression respectively. *Extracurricular* criticizes the enormous mental burden placed on adolescents in Korean society by showing that self-realization is impossible.

*Review of Literature – Dae Jang Geum*

While most existing literature surrounding Korean dramas is limited to their role in *Hallyu* and as transnational constructs, they are still useful for a broad understanding of Korean dramas. Parc argues that cultural similarities, nationalism, attractive actors, and cultural hybridization are not sufficient alone to explain the *Hallyu*. Instead, other market-related factors such as skill of producers, domestic demand, internationally supportive distributors (social and video sharing platforms – e.g. Netflix), and domestic regulations and competition (Parc, 2013) drive popularity of Korean Dramas. Local TV stations, such as Hunan Satellite TV are also deeply involved in the trans-nationalization of K-dramas like *Dae Jang Geum*. The perception that there is an overwhelming globalizing force destroying local culture is flawed due to the roles of these local distributors (Mee, 2005).

*Dae Jang Geum*, a prominent, internationally popular K-drama, has a relatively large body of academic articles dedicated to it. The main protagonist, Jang-geum, is a “beautiful, virtuous, and intelligent woman blessed with a positive attitude and iron will” and has a “kind of pure love, lacking any obvious sexual tone, between the heroine and the male lead” (Kim, 2019). Throughout the series, Jang-geum uses cooking and medical skills to sustain the happiness and health of the palace inhabitants. Ultimately her perseverance pays off and for her efforts she becomes head court physician and is romantically involved with the male lead Min Jeong-ho. In this sense, the drama “mixes traditional Confucian values with modern values such as perseverance and hard work as well as career pursuit self-reliance” thereby increasing its mainstream appeal across Asia (Kim. 2019). Kim argues that invoking such Confucian mores explains why the drama was so popular across Japan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China, especially with urban audiences. Jeong et al. also notes that the *Hallyu* received a significant



amount of financial support from the South Korean government as an important aspect of nation building and increasing South Korean soft power internationally (Jeong et al., 2017). In this sense, K-dramas may be a way for the South Korean government to propagate Korean culture and values to far flung corners of the world.

### *Theory and Methodology*

1. Outlining the major aspects of traditional Confucian ethics and the adoption Western Ideas such as self-realization and self-hood.
2. Synopsis of *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *Itaewon Class*, *Extracurricular*. Textual analysis of important scenes, themes, and characters and their relationship to self-realization.
3. Synthesize all three dramas to create a distinct message about Korean society as portrayed in Contemporary Korean Dramas.

### *Significance of the Study – A New Perspective on Korean Dramas*

This Thesis Projects addresses a lack of academic discourse in the analysis of East Asian, specifically Korean, popular media. There have been many studies about the relative popularity of Korean dramas, as part of *Hallyu* phenomenon, but there are few studies that directly analyze these dramas *as is* and as effective tools for understanding self-hood and its potential application to Korean society. This is a problem because the tools to describe K-dramas are limited, even as the dramas themselves become increasingly popular in scope. In particular, the dramas analyzed in this project are on the popular streaming service Netflix, which is available in over 190 countries and thus widely available to many international audiences (although TV libraries do vary per country).

### *Structure of the Thesis*

This Thesis project first provided historical context to South Korea, traditional Confucian social values in Korea, and the role of Korean dramas in describing Korean society. The three dramas *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *Extracurricular*, and *Itaewon Class* will be analyzed with respect to self-realization and Korean society. After analyzing previous literature about *Dae Jang Geum*, the theory and methodology as well as the significance of the study are described.

The intellectual emergence of Self-Realization in the heavily Confucian Joseon Dynasty will be described. Then, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* will be examined to understand how confronting trauma can help one overcome it in the context of self-realization. Using textual analysis, we find that characters in *Extracurricular* are emotionally stunted by their parental and academic environment. Self-realization for marginalized people in South Korea can be seen in *Itaewon Class*. Finally, a concluding statement about self-realization in South Korean dramas will be made in the last chapter.

## **Chapter 2: Self-Realization's Intellectual Emergence in Korea**

### *Confucian Ethics, Joseon Korea, and Western intellectualism*

Much of Korean society is based on Confucian ethics, which is at its core an ethic of virtues. These virtues are strongly tied to living a worthwhile life (“the good life”) and one’s obligations to both family and society. According to Ames, “It is part of the Confucian vision of a life befitting human beings that it is a life of relationships marked by mutual care and respect, that one achieves fullest personhood that way.” (Ames, 2011). The ideal of Confucianism is the *junzi*, an exemplary person who is filial, respectful of tradition and conduct (*li*), and has the correct discernment to make the correct decisions. The ideas of Neo-Confucianism were

particularly dominant during the Joseon dynasty, the last dynasty of Korea that reigned from 1392-1897 CE. Much of what is considered traditional Korean culture is based off this period – for example *Dae Jang Geum* is set during Joseon. In the capital of Joseon, Seoul, the five Confucian virtues (*Ren, Li, Yi, Zhi, Xin*) were emblazoned throughout five key buildings to reinforce this Confucian ideology (HaeSung, 2016). In particular, the five Confucian relationships “burgeoned in significance during the neo-Confucian era not just as a code of ethics or mode of moral education, but as the locus of the existential project of embodying the human original nature” (Hwang, 2019).

However, like the Joseon dynasty, the dominance of Neo-Confucian thought was not to last. Starting in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, Western ideologies began to spread in Korea, namely under the banner of Christianity. Importantly, the “Catholics and Donghak introduced to Korea the revolutionary concept that religion is a separate sphere of human society, existing alongside rather than under the state” (Baker, 2006), in contrast to state-sponsored Confucianism. When the Catholic *yangban* Yun Jicheng refused to observe orthodox Confucian rituals during his mother’s funeral, he was summarily executed in 1791. Religions like Catholicism that did not recognize the primacy of state authority were persecuted, but through Western political and military pressure prominent missionary schools in Korea were established and Western ideals took hold in Korea (In 2005, around 1/3 of South Koreans were Christian – Baker, 2006).

While some Korean intellectuals abided by *seohak* – following Western philosophy and ideas directly, western intellectualism most often took the form of *Silhak* – practical learning. At this point in Korean history, Korea’s economic growth had been stunted, the ruling *Yangban* class had unprecedented sociopolitical control over the country, and foreign powers like Russian and Japan were seeking to control the Korean peninsula. The adoption and learning of Western

scientific and philosophical ideas, including Christianity, was seen as a method to promote modernization and progressive reform to improve Korea (Lee, 2002). While the Protestant Church saw initial resistance to direct religious conversion, education quickly became their primary way to establish Christianity in Korea. One Dr. Allen, after saving Prince Yongik Min from a medical ailment, was able to open Kwanghye-won medical hospital and school in 1885. At schools such as Union Christian College and Ewha Woman's University, educators also taught "western...humanistic science, natural science, and other practical subjects" (Lee, 2002). And since Christian missionary schools became hotbeds of pro-independence activity later on in Korea history, Western ideas became more integrated in Korean intellectual life and society.

### *Self-Realization*

Self-realization is a primarily western ideal dictated by the "fulfillment of oneself of the possibilities of one's character or personality". In John Dewey's "Self-realization as the moral ideal" (1893) he writes that:

"To find the self in the highest and fullest activity possible at the time, and to perform the act in the consciousness of its complete identification with self (which means, I take it, with complete interest) is morality, and is realization."

In as much as philosophy is concerned with "living the good life" – *eudaimonia*, self-realization can be thought of as the final goal of life. While this concept does not outline a specific endpoint for realization, it may also be viewed as becoming the best, authentic version of yourself. For example, one might pursue vocational training, feel dissatisfied with life, get married, or seek a divorce because such actions are in line with our true selves. "In a word, many people today feel

that it is their right to live personally meaningful lives...to pursue personal quests for development and fulfillment” (Cavarero, 2014).

Many psychological theories and frameworks incorporate the idea of self-realization. While Sigmund Freud’s theories were often based on faulty evidence, his theories still have a significant influence on our understanding of individual development. For him, overcoming traumatic, repressed, and often childhood memories were crucial to realize one’s potential. Furthermore, Jung said, “...to become an individual being, to the extent that, by individuality, we understand our most intimate, ultimate and incomparable uniqueness, means to become our own self” (Rusu, 2019). Under Jung’s process, this would occur in multiple stages, starting with adapting to an external environment and then maintaining broad social relationships. In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization are at the top of the pyramid to become a fully actualized human being. To achieve self-realization, one must first seek growth, obtain a sense of love and affection from others, and gain the respect of others. Of course, the process may not be easy and require “courage, effort, risk-taking, and sometimes suffering, frustration and isolation” to grow (Rusu, 2019).

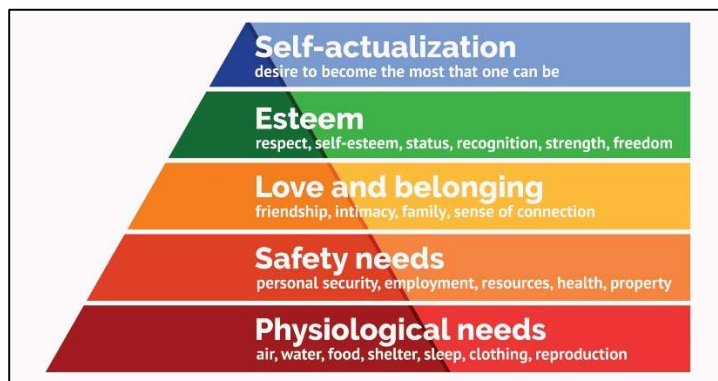


Figure 1: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

In this thesis, the three dramas will be analyzed through the lens of self-realization. This thesis project will also connect these findings with larger issues and problems surrounding Korean society.

### **Chapter 3: *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* and Overcoming Trauma**

#### *Mental Health in South Korea*

In South Korea, mental health is unfortunately largely stigmatized. Between 2000 and 2011 South Korea was the country with the highest suicide rate in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Han, 2012). In general, South Korea does have mental health services, but these resources are underfunded and underutilized. Furthermore, “The life-time prevalence rate for mental disorders in Korea is reported at 27.6 %, which means three out of 10 adults experience mental disorders more than once throughout their lifetime” (Roh, 2016). Despite the prevalence of mental health issues in South Korea, comprehensive, centralized studies are hard to find due to prevailing stigmas against mental health in South Korea’s healthcare system.

In this context, *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, written by Jo Yong and Park Shin-woo, provides a refreshing perspective on attitudes towards mental health in South Korea. In this K-drama, a caregiver at a psychiatric hospital (called OK psychiatric hospital) named Moon Gang-tae takes care of his older autistic brother Moon Sang-tae. By chance, Gang-tae meets a famous children’s book author named Ko Moon-young, who has antisocial personality disorder. All of them eventually move back to their hometown and must work to heal their emotional wounds to fully face and move on from their past. In an interview with the writer Jo Yong in Cosmopolitan, Yong says that the story is based on her former romantic experiences with a man who had a

personality disorder. For Yong, the drama was her method of both apologizing to the man and emotionally dealing with her experiences. Yong says that one of the goals of the show was "...to tell you somehow, 'You haven't done anything wrong. So please be happy wherever you are'" (Lopez, 2020). In psychological perspectives of self-realization, it is essential that we fully understand ourselves and improve our current selves by dealing with past trauma. In this way, self-actualization is possible.

### *Children's Stories and Facing the Past*

One major theme outlined starting from the first episode is that to "To overcome trauma, we must face it". In Moon-young's novel *The Boy Who Fed on Nightmares*, a boy asks a witch to remove all the bad memories from his mind so he can sleep soundly at night. The witch complies, yet even years later the boy finds that he is still wholeheartedly unhappy. The witch retorts that "hurtful, painful memories, memories of deep regrets, memories of hurting others and being hurt, memories of being abandoned...only those which such memories in their heart can become stronger and emotionally flexible... and only those who can obtain happiness. So don't forget any of it. Remember it all and overcome it."



Figure 2: The witch laments the foolishness of the boy as he regrets his inability to become happy.

The path to self-realization in this K-drama cannot be separated from facing the past. Children's stories, like Aesop's fables, become a vehicle for watchers to understand life lessons and understand the themes of the show. In general, "Fables originally functioned not only as entertaining anecdotes but also as *ainoi*, quick stories designed to teach a pointed lesson by indirect means" (Rothwell, 1995). The actual concept artist of these children's stories, named Jamsan, writes that "After going through a career slump, I found joy in drawing zombies and fairy tales with dark twists. However, the fact that I tell stories through images and symbols remains the same" (Kwak, 2020).

Early in the series, the patients at OK psychiatric hospital provide examples of confronting trauma to overcome it. A patient named Kwon Ki-do is admitted to the hospital because of his nudist, exhibitionist tendencies. However, with the help of Ko Moon-young he escapes from the hospital to his father's political rally, where he strips on stage and opens up about his father's abusive behavior and the lack of attention he received when he was young. Another patient named Yoo Sun-hae still believes that her dead daughter is alive and clings to an expensive jacket that her child bought her. When she mistakes Ko Moon-young for her daughter, however, Moon-young reprimands her for indulging in her fantasies. Yoo Sun-hae faints as a result. However, in the cases of both Kwon Ki-do and Yoo Sun-hae, directly confronting their past emotional traumas was a crucial step for them to improve mentally and ultimately be discharged from OK psychiatric hospital. This is demonstrated again when Gang-tae reassures a patient named Yoo Sun-hae during a confrontation with her neglectful father that "(I can) stay by



your side and keep you safe while you say everything you wanted to say to him”. Unaddressed trauma can leave a gaping hole in people lives that must be filled by direct confrontation.

*The Brothers Moon Gang-tae and Moon Sang-tae*

Overcoming trauma by facing it is reinforced primarily through the central struggle of the main characters Moon Gang-tae, Sang-tae, and Ko Moon Young. Sang-tae is Gang-tae’s older autistic brother and is traumatized by witnessing his mother’s murder, with his only recollection of the event being “butterflies” threatening to kill him. While Gang-tae plays the role of a kind caregiver to Sang-tae, he holds deeply hidden resentment towards Gang-tae for receiving more attention and love from their mother when they were younger. And while Sang-tae is autistic, he is more than intelligent enough to notice all the times that Gang-tae briefly lets down his mask to display his disgust towards his older brother. When Sang-tae is asked if he has ever hated his brother, he hesitates and does not answer. Overall, this creates an exceedingly toxic dynamic between Gang and Sang-tae. Both are overly codependent on each other and limit each other’s potential growth. Gang-tae hides behind a veneer of kindness, always having to bottle up his feelings. He views his relationship with his brother as a duty, a burden he must carry. Jo Jae-soo, a friend of the two brother remarks that “He (Gang-tae) never really open up to everyone... I’ve stayed close to him by having no idea what’s going on in his mind or how he really feels”. Sang-tae is worried about Gang-tae abandoning him, as Sang-tae does not have any other close friends or family. In the words on Sang-tae “Moon Gang-tae belongs to Moon Sang-tae!”

However, the delicate equilibrium of their relationship cracks when Gang-tae becomes enamored with Ko Moon-young. Sang tae realizes that Gang-tae has lied to him about spending a day out with Moon-young, and in his fear of Gang-tae abandoning him, recalls Gang-tae once saying “I (Gang-tae) just want my brother to die... You said that”. The scene ends with Sang-tae

having been sedated due to his frenetic state and Gang-tae on the ground, crying. Eventually, the two apologize to each other in a surface level manner that both leaves both the brothers unsatisfied. The real resolution comes when Gang-tae and Sang-tae get into a heated argument for once, where Gang-tae says, “Do you think that I stay quiet because I enjoy getting hurt? I’m not going to hold it in anymore. I’m done doing that!” The two then actually physically brawl (though not particularly violently) for the first time in the series. Gang-tae drops his nice façade and lets his true feelings be known.



Figure 3: The brothers Moon Gang-tae and Sang-tae fight each other

The process of rapprochement is painful but necessary. Gang-tae had to accept the possibility that he might be anything but a kind caretaker to Sang-tae and communicate his true feelings to ultimately reconcile with his brother. After the fight, Gang-tae says “I had a dream fighting my brother...I feel like a normal person now”. He is normal in the sense that he must no longer bottle in his emotions. In this cathartic confrontation, Gang-tae has shown true self development and growth. Later the night of the fight, Sang-tae notices Gang-tae sleep talking

about Ko Moon-young, saying that “...I really love her”. Sang-tae is confused, because “This is the first time I’ve seen him happy”. Since Gang-tae has dropped his facade and acted upon his emotions he has “graduated from being a child”. Sang-tae, on his part, realizes how much Ko Moon-young means to Gang tae and gradually accepts her as part of their family and as someone he can trust.

For Sang-tae himself, his own development and self-realization lies in overcoming the trauma of witnessing his mother being murdered. While not explicitly mentioned in the show, Sang-tae mostly likely has PTSD as “Posttraumatic stress disorder is described in the DSM-5 as a syndrome arising from witnessing, directly experiencing, or being otherwise exposed to serious physical or sexual violence, threats to bodily integrity, or death of family members” and that Sang-tae has symptoms of PTSD including “...re-experiencing of traumatic thoughts or images through memories, dreams, or intrusive thoughts...negative cognitive and mood states related to the trauma” (Hoover, 2015). Furthermore, Sang-tae’s PTSD may be especially heightened since “...existing bullying literature that children with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) are sensitive to peer victimization and suffer deleterious effects much as has been found in typically developing children” (Hoover, 2015).

In this respect, the director of OK psychiatric hospital, Oh Ji-wang, plays a key role. Dr. Oh remarks that butterflies are also Latin for the word *psyche* and have historically symbolized healing and being cured. In this perspective, Dr. Oh wants Sang-tae to turn his trauma into his cure. Dr. Oh instructs Sang-tae to paint a mural on the hospital wall of a beautiful landscape containing butterflies. For years, Sang-tae left this unresolved trauma as an open wound. His method of coping was to “run away” as he and Gang-tae regularly moved from place to place because of his reoccurring nightmares. While Gang-tae would comfort Sang-tae, he did not want

to fully confront his past either. The only way to move past this traumatic memory is to turn it into a positive from a negative. After all, the trauma is deeply rooted in Gang-tae's mind; it is a part of him.

In a conversation with Kan Pil-ong, a patient who has PTSD from his time in the military, the two reminisce about the past:

Kan Pil-ong: "Don't let the past trap you."

Sang-tae: "Why? I can just go out the door."

Kan Pil-ong: "No you can't, you won't be able to see the door."

This conversation reflects how finding closure to one's past is essential to one's well-being. Immediately after this conversation, the Kan Pil-ong hears a construction drill and then faints due to his wartime PTSD. Later, Sang-tae gives the Pil-ong the storybook "*The Boy who Fed on Nightmares*". Unlike the boy in the story, Sang-tae implicitly realizes that he himself must face his past and confront his "memories of being hurt..." Eventually, he fully describes the night his mother died to Dr. Oh and his brother Gang-tae, providing a crucial clue that the "butterfly" was in reality a pin on the killer's outfit.

### *Ko Moon-young and a Child without Arms or Legs*

Ko Moon-young's story is not fully explained until the end of the drama, yet we get a glimpse of her childhood in Ko's fairy tale called "*The Hand, the Monkfish*". In this story, a beautiful baby is born and is pampered by her overbearing mother, who provides and does everything for the child. However, when the child grows up, it lacks arms and legs – since it never had to use these limbs these parts never developed. The child is essentially just a torso and

head. The mother, infuriated with the child, calls her as useless as a monkfish and casts it out into the sea. The story can be interpreted as a critique of “helicopter” parenting styles. By doing everything for the child and controlling every aspect of the child’s life, the child can never grow and remains forever immature. Yet, the mother cannot recognize the consequences of her actions and merely sees the child as an extension of herself. When the child betrays her unrealistic expectations, the mother can do nothing but rage and project her failures and blame onto the child.



Figure 4: The Child without arms or legs

The story symbolizes Ko Moon-young and her mother’s (Do Hui-jae) relationship. Hui-jae saw her daughter merely as an extension of herself, and sought to control every aspect of her daughter’s life. She forbade her daughter from playing with the other neighborhood children, encouraged Moon-young’s worst anti-social tendencies, and taught her daughter that she must strive to be as cruel and selfish as herself. Hui-jae was emotionally abusive because she would “...persistently criticize, shame, rebuke, threaten, ridicule, humiliate, put down, induce fear and

anxiety... was seldom satisfied with a child's behavior and performance” (Iwaniec, 1997). That kind of abusive parenting “...damages a child's self-esteem, degrades a sense of achievement, diminishes a sense of belonging, and curtails healthy, vigorous, and happy development (Iwaniec, 1994). Like the child in *The Hand, the Monkfish*, Moon-young was never able to develop certain fundamental parts of herself. Do Hui-jae made sure Moon-young would not receive warmth and love, and as a result Moon-young grew up to also be heartless and cruel. Ko Moon-young must overcome the trauma of her abusive mother and realize that she is not the same as her.

A pivotal plot point occurs when Ko Moon-young realizes that the killer of Gang and Sang-tae's mother is her own mother, Do Hui-jae (she would often wear the butterfly pin). Immediately, Moon-young feels guiltily towards the two brothers and avoids contact with them. Yet, Gang-tae repeatedly reassures her that “...you're not like your mom. No matter what happens, I won't leave you. To me, you're just Ko Moon-young, the girl I liked ever since I was a boy”. Eventually, once Do Hui-jae is finally captured and brought to jail for her crimes, Ko Moon-young visits her in her prison cell. Ko-Moon rebukes her mother's teachings by saying that “...you know nothing about warmth...I've learned how warm and nice it feels” – primarily through her interactions and romance with Gang-tae. When her mother says that such words are meaningless and that Ko-Moon will never escape from her grasp, Ko-Moon once again evokes the idea of the butterfly and says that she'll just have to “...cover it up with something better”. By the end of the drama, Ko Moon-young has developed far beyond a simple child missing her limbs.

The stories of Moon Gang-tae, Moon Sang-tae, and Ko Moon-young reveal a complicated message of overcoming trauma. One must face their traumatic history to overcome

it and grow as a person. While trauma can never truly be removed from a person, it can still be “overwritten” by new memories. As fairy tales in *It’s Okay to Not Be Okay* often reflect major themes in the drama, the last story Ko-Moon writes, *Finding the Real Face*, symbolizes the emotional resolution and self-realization that the three main characters have achieved. Unlike the other stories Ko Moon-young writes, this one has a happy ending. The characters shed their false personas and drive away happily into the sunset.

## **Chapter 4: The Burden of Adolescence in *Extracurricular***

### *South Korea’s Mental Health Crisis in the Youth*

In addition to the mental health issues mentioned in the previous chapter, mental health is a particularly pressing issue for the youth in South Korea. South Korean students typically score incredibly well on international tests, and regularly score the highest on average in science and math in the International Assessment of Educational Progress (Sorensen, 1994). Yet, in South Korea suicide is the leading cause of death of people ranging from their teens to their twenties, a rate higher than traffic accidents and cancer combined (Choi, Bae, 2020). Reasons for this disturbing trend are often thought to be due to “pressure on academics and success, and anxiety about their careers and the future” (Choi, Bae, 2020). In addition, in a “collectivist culture like South Korea, interpersonal relations are more emphasized and emphasis is placed on relationships with others than on oneself. In this culture, it is important to get affection and positive feelings from others, and the experience of being rejected or isolated by others is perceived as very troubling” (Choi, Bae, 2020).

It is in this South Korean school environment, that *Extracurricular*, written by Jin Han-sae and directed by Kim Jin-min, takes place in. In an interview with the writer Jin Han-sae, he

says the inspiration for the show came from his own experiences witnessing crime in high school and his reflections on fundamentally why crime is bad. He also adds that “Naturally, people become indifferent to past events and the voices of teenagers are too easily muted. Many grown-ups say that issues of adolescents have been experienced by everyone and simply assume that the problems can be overcome if they patiently wait the passage of time. However, to the kids, it’s their undeniable reality that could feel like an endless cold winter” (Choi, 2020). The main character, Oh Jisoo is a model student – quiet and studious with top grades in his class. However, beneath the surface, he also secretly runs a prostitution ring which even some of his classmates like Seo Minhee are part of. However, Bae Gyuri, a daughter of a wealthy family, eventually joins Jisoo’s prostitution ring as a business partner. As the series progresses, the main characters’ lives take a definite turn for the worse as situations become far out of their control. Effectively, *Extracurricular* shows that under the current conditions in South Korea, young people cannot explore who they are or engage in self-realization – authentic expression is snuffed out under societal and academic obligations.

#### *Jisoo’s Deconstruction of Academic Success*

More than anyone, Jisoo represents a critique of the ideal Korean model student in this show. When Jisoo is talking to his teacher mentor Dr. Choi, Choi questions if Jisoo has any hobbies besides studying for school and college entrance exams (known as the CSAT – Korean College Scholastic Aptitude Test). Choi even mentions that it might be good for Jisoo to break a few rules in high school for his own well-being. Ironic, given the fact that Jisoo is running a prostitution business to fund his private school tuition and college savings. To advance himself, he exploits others.



In the first episode, as Jisoo is managing his prostitution ring, he is listening to his homeroom teacher, Dr. Cho, lecture on the poem *The Self Portrait* by the poet Seo Jung-ju. Seo Jung Yu was an intellectual during the later Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula and was known for his lyric and resistance poetry. Dr. Cho emphasizes that strangeness of the line in the poem “The wind raised me”, because “Parents raise kids. They pay for things and support you, right?”. Ominously, Cho continues by saying “The love from your family. The warmth of parents. All of these are completely lacking”, overlaid by images of Jisoo’s hired muscle, “Uncle”, beating a client who mistreated one of the prostitutes. And as the camera zooms into Jisoo, he highlights in a marker one particular line of the poem “But I regret nothing”. In an analysis by Kim, motifs in the poem like red coloring in the line “a few drops of blood were always mixed” are “...a symbol of the dark world and urges the desire of destruction” (Kim, 1999). In *Extracurricular*, the narrow pursuit of orthodox, academic success is irrevocably tied to violence and exploitation. The South Korean school system has failed to educate Jisoo on how to be a good person, instead only imparting onto him a crass and selfish ethos.

Even though Jisoo is running an illegal underground business, he himself is never clear about his own motivations. When pressed by characters like Gyuri on why he is engaging in illegal activities, the most he usually divulges is a dissatisfactory and bland answer about saving up money for college. In a series of hallucinations, imaginary conversations with other characters in the drama, Jisoo’s motivations are shown more clearly. With his runaway, con-artist dad, Jisoo agrees that he is “the lowest of the low”. When talking with Mr. Choi, Jisoo is asked what his goals are. While Jisoo says he wants to live a normal life like Mr. Choi, the camera cuts to a hermit crab (a symbol often associated with Jisoo) pushing a beetle out of a plate. He rejects a life with the two female leads (Minhee and Gyuri) and asks if “...this will go in his evaluation”

and turns in a scantron to Mr. Choi. His test result is a picture of Gyuri, who at the time was kidnapped by a rival criminal gang. From these snapshots of Jisoo's true self, it becomes clear that Jisoo has never really considered what a happy life would look like for himself. Jisoo's depiction as a hermit crab pushing out the beetle represents his inability to form genuine and emotional bonds with other people. In the hallucination, Dr. Choi even remarks how he and Gyuri "are basically the same at this point", a reference to how both are selfish individuals who use other people as means to an end. Jisoo can only narrowly reflect on how he will be ultimately graded on his result. For him, the path to typical academic success necessarily means that other people will be harmed.

After all, "In Korea, the rules of the "Educational Competition" game are distorted. There is no clear concept, definition, or standards of "Authentic Achievement". This situation has resulted in hazy rules in academic competition...They (students) are graded in relation to their classmates and then placed into one of nine brackets. The higher the bracket, the better the university they can gain early admission to. If students cheat their way up the rankings, the relative grading system means other children are inevitably bumped down to lower brackets. (Lee, 2005). Jisoo represents the worst of the Korean education system, as he too, exploits and cheats others for his own academic gain. Throughout the drama, he is never worried or stressed about the moral consequences of his actions, only the legal consequences of them. In that sense, Jisoo truly "...regrets nothing" because he would hurt others without hesitation if he knew he would not be punished. In 2018, a cheating scandal happened at Sookmyung Girl's High School located in Gangnam, Seoul in which a senior school official helped his two daughters cheat on exams. Despite the pouring of outrage of the school community, the "The family has continued to maintain their innocence. When asked about the clean exam paper (no work was shown for a

math problem), the twins' claimed to have done all the calculations in their head, while the note on the phone was simply filled with possible answers – that they got them all correct was just a lucky guess" (Kwon, 2018). Perhaps Jisoo might find a kindred spirit in this family due to their utter disregard to honesty and integrity.

Another hallucination occurs towards the end of the drama, as Jisoo envisions himself burying Minhee, who is a potential loose end for Jisoo. Dr. Choi is also present, looking at Jisoo's "report card".

Dr. Choi: "Can you get into college like this? Two dead, several injured, and one with PTSD."

Jisoo: "What level (on the CSAT) am I then?"

Dr. Choi: "Does that really matter at this point?"

Jisoo: Of course.



Figure 5: Jisoo digging his own grave as Dr. Choi looks at Jisoo's report card.

Jisoo looks at the corpse he is burying, which turns out to be himself. Even after all the pain and hardship Jisoo made other people suffer for his sake, he still cannot realize the weight and moral impact of what he has done. Dr. Choi is morally a standout figure in this drama, and in his role as student counselor seems to be one of the few people in the drama who genuinely care for the mental wellbeing of students like Jisoo. Yet, his guidance falls on deaf ears as Jisoo follows a destructive and bloody path all for the goal of “achieving good marks” since “...many universities favor using the Korean CSAT score as the most reliable and predictable measurement for student selection” (Lee, 2005). Perhaps if Jisoo’s situation was different - if he wasn’t “...just unlucky” – things could be different. However, at the end of the drama remains stuck. He has not progressed to any higher, better version of himself. As students continually progress through the South Korean education system, they too might find themselves like Jisoo – a cruel exploiter only concerned with a narrow conception of success.

#### *Gyuri and Being Trapped by Expectations*

Gyuri also demonstrates that the environment provided to South Korean youth is largely inadequate for self-realization. Gyuri appears to be a smart, pretty, and popular student leader on the surface. However, on the inside lies a deeply disturbed individual who is burdened with astronomical expectations from her family. When we first receive her point of view, she is eating with her parents and discussing her various academic achievements and her future career as the heir of her parent’s wealthy company. However, for a brief moment, Gyuri envisions stabbing both her parents with the table silverware, revealing her deep-seated resentment and hatred for both of them.



Figure 6: Gyuri imagines killing both of her parents at the dinner table.

Gyuri's parents have little regard for Gyuri's actual wants or needs, wanting her to fit in with their image of the perfect heiress. She is treated as a vehicle for the parent's legacy rather than as a daughter. As an heiress, Gyuri is also forced to attend many social gatherings with various business partners and socialites. Even when her parents witness Gyuri being the unwanted recipient of an older male's attention and unsolicited touching, they believe this to be a necessary part of adjustment into high society. Over time, it is revealed Gyuri attempted suicide in the past. Studies "...indicated that parental abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect significantly predicted suicidal ideation among high school students... in South Korea" and "...found that clinically depressed female youth who have poor communication with their parents during adolescence were likely to have suicidal thoughts" (Lee, 2010). Yet, her parents are dismissive of the weight of this event, with the mother merely calling it a "...phase in her life". The mother therefore reflects the current disregard for mental health and the stigma surrounding it in South Korea. Like the writer mentions, the mother thinks of attempted suicide as a symptom of youth

and not a serious issue that requires healing and self-reflection to overcome. It is no wonder that Gyuri “...absolutely cannot live there,” in the house where she feels like a prisoner.

In another episode, Gyuri pulls the fire alarm to distract from a school-wide inspection (which would reveal money from prostitution in Jisoo’s backpack). She initially tells the school superintendent that she pulled the fire alarm to relieve stress from parental pressure. But once the superintendent leaves, and only Dr. Choi is present, he asks her why she really pulled the fire alarm. Gyuri replies with a genuine tear in her eye that “If I didn’t go do that, no one would look at me”. In a rare scene in *Extracurricular*, Gyuri displays emotional vulnerability. Rare because Gyuri always presents a mask of confidence around herself so that no one can see her for who she truly is. Her parents view her as a tool to fulfill their own egos and her school peers think she is a strong-willed, outgoing leader. Therefore, Gyuri becomes “business partners” with Jisoo to act genuinely as herself. She does not need to act polite to anyone, only freely live out her own selfish desires for once in her life.

Gyuri eventually blackmails her parents with evidence of various white-collar business crimes. Before she does so, Gyuri sits at her father’s desk and turns face up a family photo of herself and her parents. Once her mother sees Gyuri at her father’s desk, she immediately places the photo back to its original facedown position – demonstrating that their dysfunctional family unit consists of nothing more than transactional, superficial interactions. Gyuri uses her parents’ money to buy tickets to Australia, where she and Jisoo will go to escape their sins and the collapse of their prostitution business. For them, it is a fresh start, a new beginning from their violent environment and depressing circumstances. However, such an ending is unachievable for the two main characters. Jisoo pushes Minhee off a flight of stairs and kills her when she threatens to report Jisoo to the police. Minhee’s boyfriend finds out about this, and stabs Jisoo in

the chest. The drama ends with Gyuri attempting to perform CPR on Jisoo and somehow save him.

Both Jisoo and Gyuri were unable to develop themselves or grow as people. Under Maslow's hierarchy of needs the two could not obtain their safety needs and most definitely not their love and belonging needs. Jisoo remains a craven and heartless satire of the South Korean education system while genuine emotional connection and self-realization remains out of reach for Gyuri.

## **Chapter 5: Multicultural Possibilities for Self-Realization in *Itaewon***

### ***Class***

#### *Multicultural Itaewon*

Itaewon is a district in Seoul, South Korea that is known for international and multicultural atmosphere. In the past, Itaewon was known as a red-light district with businesses like bars and brothels catered towards US soldiers in South Korea. However, after many of these businesses closed following a crackdown on military behavior, a variety of new trendy restaurants and upscale bars with an international clientele appeared. While this process has displaced many low-income residents in Itaewon, cultural entrepreneurs have also “led the revitalization of old neighborhood by reimagining its negative image into culturally vibrant space” (Kim, 2016). In the minds of many South Koreans, Itaewon has a “...perception of foreignness and open atmosphere” (Kim, 2016).

Some academic articles refer to Itaewon as a false, superficial multicultural neighborhood, with Yoo saying that “...Korean-style version multiculturalism appears to be just

a “fancy slogan”, enforcing a “Koreanized version of western conservative multiculturalism, which deliberately adopted the term “diversity” in order to mask an assimilation ideology within” (Yoo, 2012). However, the K-drama *Itaewon Class*, directed by Kim Sung-yoon and written by Kwang Jin (the drama is based off a Korean webcomic written by Kwang) seems to take the possibilities of a multicultural Korea seriously. *Itaewon Class* is about an ex-convict named Park Saeroyi, who seeks to open a successful trendy bar-restaurant named Danbam in Itaewon. However, he also wants revenge against the Jangga group, a rival restaurant company, since they caused his father’s death. Unlike many other Korean dramas, *Itaewon class* has characters that represent traditionally marginalized groups in Korean society, such as LGBTQ people, ex-criminals, and people of mixed-Korean descent. Itaewon can be “contrasted with the ethnic nationalism expressed within the larger country of South Korea, Itaewon is a relatively permeable space, and certainly more welcoming to the concept of difference...amidst various intersecting forces like the Cold War, American hegemony, modernization, Americanization, nationalism, and multiculturalism... the urban district called Itaewon, as synecdochic of Korean society and culture, spatially communicates the ever-changing rhetoric of Korean identity building” (Lee, 2015).

In this cultural and physical context, self-realization of the characters in Itaewon class is contrasted to dominant conservative, Confucian Korean culture. If Confucian morals are based on self-restraint, responsibility, and duty, then the environment of Itaewon provides a new kind of freedom for the characters to express themselves and reach their full potential.

### *Danbam vs Jangga*

In the drama, Danbam (and later on, Itaewon class (IC) – the name of Park Saeroyi’s food business) are depicted in starkly different imagery. The Jangga Group headquarters is built



according to traditional Korean architecture, with “the windows of the rooms...at least two-folded. The outermost window, known as a *deot-mun*, is an opening and shutting type. The inner window is a sliding window known as a *young-chang* or a *changhoji-chang*” (Kim, 2006). Additionally, as seen by Figure 7, the Jangga chairman’s office reflects a strict, hierarchical, and oppressive ethos found in many Confucian ideologies. Danbam, on the other hand, is heavily influenced by a Western restaurant aesthetic (Figure 8). In this sense, the “...western influences on Itaewon create the liberating mood that releases the weight of conservative quality of South Korean traditional culture” (Lee, 2015). The main characters of the story can truly grow and develop in the environment of Danbam and Itaewon.



Figure 7: Jang Daehee’s, chairman of Jangga Group, main office (Hanja Text: Jangga).



Figure 8: The interior of Danbam pub has a trendy, westernized aesthetic.

*Ma Hyeon-yi and Choi Sung-kwon: Subverting Societal Expectations*

The character Ma Hyeon-yi is Danbam's chief cook and is also a transgender woman. Her initial reason for joining Danbam was to save up enough money for sex reassignment surgery. In general, the LGBTQ community has been largely marginalized and ignored, and only very recently have many in South Korea become aware of issues like discrimination towards LGBTQ people (while same-sex activity is legal, same sex marriages are not recognized in South Korea). However, "...with the liberating vibes of Itaewon as a step stone, LGBTQs appropriated hedonism that was still deeply rooted in the dichotomous idea on sex. They resisted the heterosexuality embedded within hedonism by queering the masculinity of the space. They formed their alley, colloquially called Homo Hill, in Itaewon where openly gay bars began to gather" (Lee, 2015). In South Korea, Itaewon is a relatively safe space for the LGBTQ community.

Hyeon-yi initially is a relatively incompetent cook. Additionally, since Hyeon-yi is transgender, Danbam's manager Yi Seo advises Saeroyi to fire her because many customers may be prejudiced against transgender people. However, Saeroyi rebukes Yi Seo by saying "Just like you all, Hyeon-yi is one of my people. To me, that's important. You may find Hyun-yi uncomfortable, and though it would be great for you to understand, I won't force it. If Hyun-yi being transgender will disrupt your work, speak now" and keeps her as head cook. Later in the series, Danbam is a contestant on the TV competition "The Best Pub". Unfortunately, Jangga Group reveal to the press that Hyeon-yi is transgender in order to sabotage them. Yet, Hyeon-yi eventually proudly reveals that she is a transgender woman, and at the competition to win. At the

end of Hyeon-yi's character arc, she has openly embraced her transgender identity and is comfortable with who she is thanks to the help and support of her friends at Itaewon class.

Choi Sung-kwon, similar to Danbam's owner Park Saeroi, is also an ex-convict. Like in many other countries, being an ex-convict in South Korea carries a heavy societal stigma and negatively impacts one's job and life prospects. In a South Korean survey conducted by the Life and Changes Society, 88.4 percent of respondents said they would not want an ex-convict as a neighbor in 2006 - For homosexuals, the percentage was 87.3 (Yoon, 2008). In the past, when both Sung-kwon and Saeroi were in prison together, Sung-kwon would be offended with Saeroi's aspirations, saying "You don't think you have a chance because you're a poor, undereducated ex-con?". He believed that Saeroi was naïve idiot for chasing his dreams of opening a pub; after all, as ex-felons they would have no opportunities, no dreams outside of the prison grounds. Yet, when Sung-kwon saw Saeroi opening Danbam, he was amazed and joined to work with the pub in order to live out his own dreams of living a proper life.

Later in the series IC becomes a highly successful company and Sung-kwon has a high-level executive position on the board of IC. When Sung-kwon reports a group of former gang accomplices who have kidnapped Saeroi to the police, the gang members say the police won't believe the testimony of an ex-con. To which Sung-known replies, "Don't you dare determine my worth", showing off his business card. Here, Sung-kwon has achieved his dream. Against all odds he has made something of himself even as an ex-con.

### *Park Saeroi's Goal in Life*

Park Saeroi, the main protagonist of the show, primarily affects other characters through his iron-clad beliefs and convictions. He values protecting and caring for his newly found family

in IC above all, even at the cost of business revenue. And as shown by Ma Hyeon-yi and Choi Sung-kwon, Saeroyi believes in investing in people, in watching them grow into their fully realized version of themselves. Yet, Saeroyi's main internal conflict arises when dealing with the bitterness and burden of revenge over losing his dad to Jangga. For Saeroyi, his father was a bedrock of emotional support – even when Saeroyi was expelled from High School his father reassured him by saying "...as long as we're alive there would be no issue." Saeroyi's thirst for revenge, his goal to defeat Jangga Co and its chairman Jang Dae-hee would often conflict with his desire to protect his friends.

Yet, in a hallucination-like conversation with his deceased father, Saeroyi admits that pursuing revenge meant that he "could never live a day comfortably". In his final goodbye to his father, Saeroyi realizes that protecting the people who have supported him and helped him when he was struggling are more important than any notion of revenge.

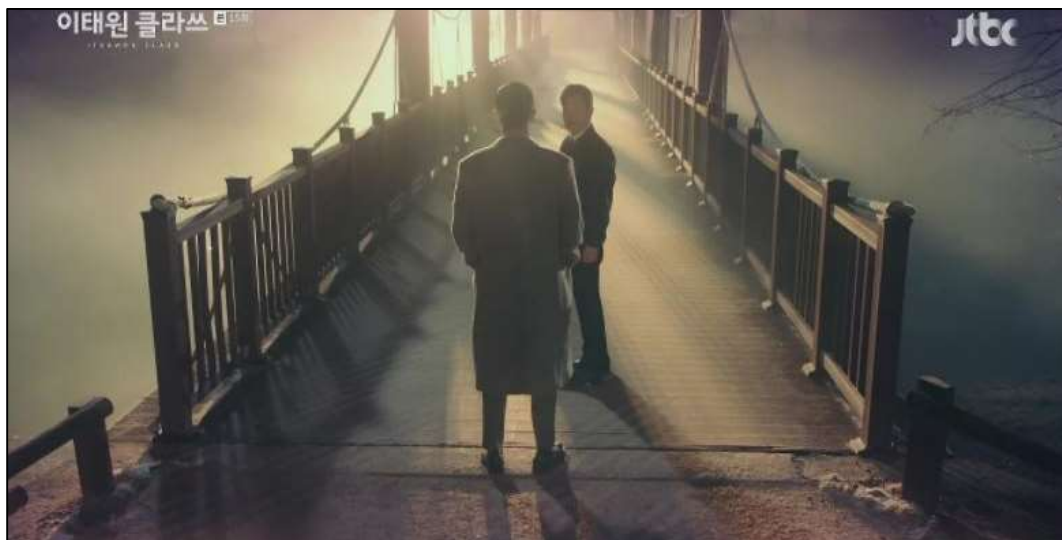


Figure 9: Saeroyi's hallucination-like conversation with his father.

In the final episode of *Itaewon Class*, Jangga chairman Jang Dae-hee has the location of Saero-yi's loved ones. To find their location, Saero-yi must kneel to Dae-hee; he must recognize the personal superiority of the chairman and swallow his pride. Yet, even though he frequently refuses to kneel throughout the series, in this moment he says "There are impossible things, things beyond death.... But for me, in this moment, I could easily kneel a million times." While Jang Dae-hee gloats over him kneeling, Saero-yi realizes that he "...spent over a decade of my life following in the footsteps of such a disgusting old grouch..." For Park Saero-yi, he has realized that revenge is not his only purpose in life. He has friends and family that are far more important than an obsession over a wicked old man. Like Ma Hyeon-yi and Choi Sung-kwon, Saero-yi has become a more developed, fuller version of himself.

## Chapter 6: Self-Realization in Korean Dramas

Self-realization is a potent tool for understanding the narrative arc of different characters in contemporary Korean dramas. Due to Korea's modernization and historical intellectual engagement with the West, ideas like self-realization can be found in Contemporary Korean Dramas. Throughout *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, *Extracurricular*, and *Itaewon Class*, characters grow and develop (or lack thereof) in meaningful ways.

*It's Okay to Not Be Okay* invoked the idea that trauma must be faced in order to overcome it. Ko-Moon Young, Moon Gang-tae, and Moon Sang-tae all had to explore their pasts and face deeply uncomfortable and traumatizing memories to "obtain their final happiness". In *Extracurricular*, the main characters' development stagnated. The expectations and burdens of Korean society meant that Jisoo would never graduate from his superficial definition of success. *Itaewon Class* portrayed marginalized communities in South Korea, unlike many other Korea

dramas. Through the context of Itaewon, the growth and development of peoples shunned from mainstream South Korean society is possible.

As South Korea's prominence in worldwide entertainment continues to be more than a passing trend, Korean dramas will find receptive audiences all around the globe. Understanding them by analyzing their content critically will be important for the future of TV and media studies. Along with K-drama classics like *Dae Jang Geum*, the dramas analyzed in this essay reflect social issues and changes in contemporary Korean society. As Korean dramas covering a wider range of topics and issues are made, self-realization will remain an essential theme.

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