The Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity of “Mirroring” in South Korean Cyberfeminist Posts

Sunyoung Yang and Kathy Lee

Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of “mirroring” used by Womad, a cyberfeminist community in South Korea. Mirroring involves the reversal of gender to spotlight misogynist practices that might otherwise go unnoticed. To better understand mirroring, we introduce selected posts from Ilbe, a male-dominant online forum, known for denigrating Korean women and then analyze Womad’s posts on similar topics following approaches in critical discourse analysis and feminist post-structuralism. Our analysis examines two main linguistic strategies of mirroring that Womad uses to disrupt gendered ideologies. First, we focus on the use of intertextuality in Womad’s posts through their adoption of Ilbe’s masculine register to combat misogyny by targeting men. Interdiscursivity is another important strategy Womad users deploy to foreground the inequities entrenched in Korea’s long-standing patriarchy. Ultimately, mirroring offers critiques of gender inequity and misogyny through active engagements with everyday linguistic practices online while opening up new possibilities for gender politics.

Keywords
intertextuality, interdiscursivity, South Korea, gender relations, feminist post-structuralism, critical discourse analysis, online communication
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Content Warning

This article contains excerpts from online posts containing language that some readers may find offensive. The examples are presented in the Findings section.

Introduction

Online gender wars in South Korea (hereafter Korea) have been ablaze since widespread internet penetration in the 1990s (Kwon Kim et al., 2017). Starting in the 2010s, tensions have been reignited by issues such as violence against women, spy camera crimes, and revising conscription laws to include women, among many other sources of contention. A more recent incident that underscored sexist attitudes occurred in early 2021, when the Seoul municipal website under the “Pregnancy and Childbirth Information Center” section published questionable guidelines for expecting mothers. The information suggested women prepare meals and complete other household chores for their husbands and children to avoid inconveniencing their families while away giving birth (Park, 2021). This advice was based on patriarchal ideals of women as caretakers. While the Seoul government apologized, the response only highlighted worsening gender relations. It is against this tense backdrop that we examine the antagonism between women and men by analyzing how one group of Korean cyberfeminists is challenging dominant discourses and bringing online attention to everyday misogyny.
Specifically, this study examines posts from an online radical feminist community called Womad (https://womad.life/). Our analysis uncovers two main linguistic strategies as Womad attempts to disrupt gendered ideologies. First, we focus on the use of intertextuality in Womad’s written posts through their adoption of a particular masculine register to combat misogyny by targeting men in a reversal of gender roles. Additionally, we identify interdiscursivity as an important strategy Womad deploys in their posts to foreground the inequities entrenched in Korea’s long-standing patriarchy. To demonstrate how intertextuality and interdiscursivity are manifested in Womad’s postings, we also present online posts from Ilbe (https://www.ilbe.com/), a male-dominant, ultra-conservative website known for denigrating women, to provide common examples of online masculine register and misogynistic discourses. While Womad and Ilbe contain diverse topics, we focus on posts discussing marriage-related issues since marriage in Korea requires men and women to directly engage with each other and is strongly tied to patriarchal practices such as childbirth and serving in-laws. Additionally, marriage has played an important role in creating gendered spaces, a public sphere for men and private one for women, which has contributed to sustaining gender roles and inequity in Korea throughout history and the modern era (Cho, 2002; Kim and Kim, 2007; Lee and Yoo, 2017).

Since the 1990s, online venues in Korea have offered a new public arena in which people of different political persuasions actively engage in debates on previously under-discussed topics such as democracy and popular politics (Kang, 2016), feminism (Kwon Kim et al., 2017), and LGBTQIA+ (Kwon Kim and Cho, 2011) movements. Simultaneously, these spaces have provided opportunities in which users socialize and participate in more trivial activities for leisure (Yang, 2018). One of the most popular anonymous online user fora and largely male dominant, DCinside (https://www.dcinside.com/), has been known as the center of unregulated
fun since 1999. Ilbe, popular among males in their 20s and 30s, notoriously emerged from the “anything goes” space of DCinside in 2010 by discriminating against minorities, upholding political conservatism based on regionalism, and promoting misogyny that highlights the selfish, gold-digging nature of Korean women, also known as “kimchi women” (kimch’inyŏ) or “kimchi bitches” (kimch’inyŏn). While some may say that Ilbe’s influence is confined to the online world, it is evident that their slurs describing women have penetrated and thrived in offline public discourse. For example, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea (2020) has designated terms such as “kimchi woman” as hate speech in its educational materials for schools.

Similar to Ilbe, Megalian, the precursor to Womad, also originated from DCinside in 2015, as a reaction to online misogyny (Yoon, 2015). Following the storyline of Egalia’s Daughters: A Satire of the Sexes by Gerd Brantenberg in which women occupy dominant positions in society, Megalian users reversed gender roles to objectify, sexualize, and disparage men (Jeong and Lee, 2018; Kim, 2021). Megalian named this reversal of misogyny “mirroring” (mirŏring). Cyberfeminist parody of online misogyny through mirroring created a national sensation while reviving feminist activism (Kim, 2020; Lee, 2019; Park, 2018). Megalian eventually met its demise in 2016 when users splintered on the issue of whether they should align themselves with gay men even though some are considered just as misogynist as Ilbe users. Consequently, Megalian’s end spawned other sites including Womad. Womad proclaims to only accept biological females as members, yet anyone is free to access and subscribe to the website. However, Womad attempts to keep its space for women by blocking users whose posts are reported by others as suspicious or supportive of men. This community, whose users are mainly in their 20s and 30s, gained notoriety for its exclusionary and separatist policy indiscriminately essentializing all Korean men, including minorities such as male-to-female transgender people.
and the disabled, which led to conflicting debates among feminist scholars, as well as different feminist groups, on the radical feminism that Womad claims to advocate. Those scholars who criticize Womad’s exclusionary stance point out the ways in which Womad stereotypes men and women based on sex and upholds a gendered patriarchal system (BM Kim, 2018; Lee, 2019). They also denounce Womad for failing to help dismantle misogyny but rather encouraging it while ignoring the past achievements of feminism. Others who support Womad emphasize the marginalization of Korean women, even within different activist groups such as labor movements and LGBTQIA+ groups, which are thought to be more sensitive to the disenfranchised status of women (Yun, 2019). Jeong (2018) also contends that intersectional feminism, which emphasizes solidarity with other minority groups including LGBTQIA+, could erase women’s experiences and spaces while radical feminists could potentially become TERF and reinforce the logic of misogyny. Furthermore, Jeong (2018) argues that the exclusion of biological men that Womad’s radical feminism endorses is different from reproducing hatred but based on women’s needs for their own space. These critics assert that labeling radical feminists as TERF works to silence women’s voices (Jeong, 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Yun, 2019).

Overall, mirroring posts have garnered positive and negative attention, upset male Internet users, and prompted feminist activism by addressing social issues such as spy cameras and abortion (Kim et al., 2018). At the same time, these posts have stirred up controversy in terms of whether they are considered feminist actions or hatred towards all men (Jang, 2016; Kim and Lee, 2017; Yun, 2019). In this paper, we lay out the complications of Womad’s mirroring against long-standing, male-dominant cultures and gender inequity in Korea by focusing on intertextuality and interdiscursivity found in online posts. To this end, we briefly introduce Ilbe’s popular posts on marriage-related topics to show the register and misogynistic
language of its users. Then we analyze Womad’s posts on similar topics following approaches in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist post-structuralism. This method allows for the interpretation of the nuances of Womad’s mirroring instead of reducing Womad’s posts to imitations of male speech that ultimately reinforce the hegemony of androcentric cultures as some Korean scholarship argues (Park, 2016). Our findings reveal the ways in which mirroring posts offer critiques of gender inequity and misogyny. Specifically, through intertextuality and interdiscursivity, Ilbe and Womad users both reproduce and contest broader traditional gendered discourses.

**Background on Mirroring**

According to previous studies, mirroring is a tactic that reverses the power dynamics in gender discriminatory words, tropes, or stories to reflect misogynistic realities (Kim, 2020; Kim, 2021; Lee, 2019). Among the scholarship examining mirroring, Lee (2019: 58) provides a useful typology of mirroring that is based on semiotic inversions: attributional, moral, and directional. At the lexical level, mirroring reverses a derogatory term directed at females such as “flower snake” (*kkot paem*) meaning a gold digger into a newly coined term, “dick snake” (*chot paem*). New mirrored phrases originating from the negative aspects of misogynistic terms form attributional inversions that re-ascribe meaning by resisting dominant gender ideologies (Lee, 2019). Overlapping with attributional inversions, moral inversions foreground the lofty moral obligations of women compared to men, but mirroring inverts these obligations. For example, the term “mom-worm” (*mam-ch’ung*), an insult directed toward loud, demanding mothers, is mirrored by “dad-worm” (*aebi-ch’ung*) to highlight absentee or abusive fathers.
These mirrored words were popularized on Megalian and are widely found on Womad. Mirroring also involves tropes such as the reversal of the long-standing ideal of female virginity in unmarried women. In this trope, which was parodied in a viral post from Megalian, male virginity is preferred by women for their future husbands. This kind of mirroring can be rewritten word by word with reversed gender roles, which is referred to by Lee (2019) as directional inversion. Mirroring at different layers points out the persistent power structures that have systemically discriminated against women as the other. When Womad users mirror specific words or gender expectations, they refer to broader contexts of public discourse based on prevailing gender ideologies. Specifically, they reference Ilbe’s misogynist speech that reflects their attitudes toward or ways of engaging with women as the other on a deeper level. Ilbe’s speech style, in this sense, is closely related to their gender subjectivities. When Womad users appropriate Ilbe’s speech style, they reflect on their gender subjectivities as women while questioning inequity and contempt of women. As seen through their viral spread and comment sections, mirroring posts were considered refreshing and humorous for many females online since they had experienced misogyny both online and offline (Kim, 2020; Lee, 2019; Park, 2018). Through mirroring as well as other practices, Womad users fashioned their own identities, expressed collectivized humor, and formed a “counterpublic” challenging misogyny according to Koo (2020). Fraser’s (1993) and Warner’s (2005) notion of publics and counterpublics are often used to study subordinated groups to examine how their acute awareness of their marginalized status serves to create alternative publics and forms of inclusivity. Understanding Womad as a counterpublic is useful for conceptualizing how mirroring operates. First, Warner (2005: 16) defines publics as “essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts...” As a counterpublic, Womad’s
formation is due to the creation, circulation, and recirculation of discourses and counterdiscourses, namely mirroring. These intertextual processes characterize networked publics and counterpublics that have expanded their boundaries and impact thanks to the power of producing and distributing content in the digital era (Jackson et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2014).

**Theoretical Background**

*Intertextuality and Interdiscursivity*

Exploring the posts of Ilbe and Womad requires an understanding of the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. As stated earlier, Womad’s origins can be traced to DCinside. One of the most popular posts on the forum mirrored a post on DCinside that discussed the perceived importance of the virginity of one’s future wife by reversing the gender to create a new post, touting the virginity of one’s future husband. By parodying the previous text, it is apparent that written as well as spoken words do not occur in a vacuum but are reiterations of the words that came before them, a concept called intertextuality. Intertextuality, originating with Bakhtin (1986) and more widely introduced by Kristeva (1986), highlights the interconnectedness of speech both diachronically and synchronically with each utterance influenced by previous ones and subsequently affecting future text. In other words, speech carries traces of previous text while also anticipating subsequent texts, a process that characterizes linguistic interaction (Bakhtin, 1986). It is also worth reiterating that individuals gain meaning not solely from a single text, but from the intertextual links associated with that text (Hodges, 2015). Without intertextual traces connecting previous texts, it would be difficult for us to fully comprehend written and spoken words.
In terms of analysis, intertextuality can be recognized in various ways such as the marking of boundaries with quotation marks to indicate reported speech. The overt inclusion of quotations is also known as manifest intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992). Other linguistic strategies indicating intertextuality include presupposition and hedging, which can be used to indicate the voice of others or oneself, among other purposes. Intertextuality can also be readily seen in the choice of vocabulary of a given text; lexical choices are overt reminders of previous utterances that can serve as links to future texts. In this paper, we refer to intertextuality when discussing surface forms of text.

A related concept to intertextuality is interdiscursivity. Some researchers interchangeably use both terms; however, to avoid confusion, we adopt Fairclough’s (1992) conceptualization of interdiscursivity or “constitutive intertextuality,” which involves the mixing of different discourses (e.g., neoliberal discourse, feminist discourse) and genres (e.g., narratives, interviews). Similar to intertextuality, interdiscursivity reflects the notion that language is inevitably linked to circulating discursive practices in the past, present, and future, resulting in the heterogeneity or hybridity of a given text. For example, in studies of written text and gender, scholars report on multiple discourses operating, especially in mass media. Caldas-Coulthard (1996) notes the coexistence of traditional gendered and liberal discourses in women’s magazines that present conflicting views of sexuality. In newspapers, Baxter (2018) uncovers the gendered representations of U.K. female leaders that position them in contradictory and stereotyped ways despite a newspaper’s purported political stance. Regarding men, Gong (2016) reports on the discursive constructions of masculinities in a Chinese online football fandom community, where users shift their identities both toward and away from hegemonic masculinities. In a similar vein to the above research, this article examines the complexity of
discourses at play as a vehicle for uncovering how language works to maintain and transform social relations between genders.

Feminist Post-structuralism and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Particularly well suited to explore intertextuality and interdiscursivity in online texts from a men’s and a women’s discussion forum are the theoretical orientations found in feminist post-structuralism and CDA. Feminist post-structuralism highlights the multiple and contested meanings associated with a particular social phenomenon by foregrounding complexity and ambiguity with a specific focus on language (Weedon, 1997). For instance, despite Ilbe’s reputation for misogyny and Womad’s posts, the potential ambiguities and contradictions can provide a plurality of interpretations instead of fixed, reductionist interpretations of gender (Baxter, 2018). Moreover, feminist post-structuralism holds that “language is always discursively produced. Thus, speakers produce fluctuating meanings in relation to how powerfully they are positioned within a range of competing discourses” (Baxter, 2003: 10, emphasis in original). Consequently, feminist post-structuralism moves beyond essentializing men as dominant and women as oppressed but rather prompts researchers to examine the complexities and intersections of gender and power, thus offering richer interpretive analysis of texts.

We complement this feminist post-structuralist approach with CDA to uncover entrenched assumptions about gender and how the social actors of Ilbe and Womad represent, reproduce, and contest dominant discourses. With a transformative objective, CDA is useful for exposing and challenging systemic gender inequities. As Choularaki and Fairclough (1999) note, CDA is concerned with how language is used to construct asymmetries in power while using a close and detailed textual discourse analysis. In the previous section, we discussed some of the linguistic features of intertextuality that researchers study. For this paper, we specifically
examine lexical items since both Ilbe and Womad are well known for coining pejorative neologisms related to gender. The types of vocabulary in Ilbe and Women are both intertextual links and are used to evoke various discourses, especially in words used to construct men and women and talk about marriage.

**Methodology**

This study examined Ilbe and Womad posts from January 2017 to December 2018 that were gathered as part of a larger ethnographic and discourse-centered project. This time period was of particular importance because Womad was created after Megalian was shuttered, and Womad’s online and offline feminist activism attracted considerable public attention. We collected posts from Ilbe’s hall of fame BBS called “The Daily Best,” which requires at least 33 likes and less than 33 dislikes. Using Ilbe’s search tool, we looked for titles that used the term, marriage (kyŏlhon), resulting in a total of 960 posts. After initial surveys to eliminate irrelevant posts, we narrowed our results to those with at least 300 comments and 300 likes since our initial goal was to analyze at least 100 posts. Filtering the results to those with a considerable number of comments and likes served to confirm the popularity of the opinions, resulting in 116 posts.

Unlike Ilbe, Womad does not offer clear criteria for posts to become part of their four hall of fame BBSs other than the posts must have at least 15 likes. Moreover, there is no ability to search individual BBSs, but instead Womad consolidates the entire website for searches. Therefore, we collected posts for Womad by searching the entire website and also used three other search terms: pihon (remaining single), manghon (life ruined by marriage), and t’alhon (escaping marriage) since they are popularly used on Womad in lieu of marriage. Our search using these terms yielded a total of 2,640 posts. Additionally, the average number of views on
Womad was considerably smaller than that of Ilbe. For example, the views for posts under the search term “marriage” ranged from 1,125 to 6,034 on Womad, while on Ilbe ranged from 6,444 to 45,581 for January 2017. Since our original focus is on Womad, we wanted a corpus of at least 300 posts, which is why we decided to apply only the “like” criterion with a smaller minimum. Therefore, we narrowed our results to those with at least 150 likes, which resulted in 369 posts.

Both authors, who are bilingual in Korean and English, individually coded the posts; then the posts were compared and re-coded. The first author who has been leading a long-term study on online communities and intimately familiar with Womad and Ilbe users was able to resolve many questions from the second author especially related to Internet slang and other Womad-related terms that would likely be unknown to the average Korean. In the few cases of disagreement, we also relied on research assistants who are actively participating in and researching Womad and Ilbe to offer further insight. It is also worth mentioning that we fully acknowledge our subjectivities and self-reflection that are motivated by critical and emancipatory interests, which in turn shapes our interpretations. Below we present translated excerpts of selected posts.

Findings
In this section, we first provide an analysis of the main intertextual elements that were uncovered after several sessions of iteratively coding the data, comparing codes, and then finalizing codes. Comparing posts on marriage from Ilbe and Womad yielded two interrelated examples of intertextuality, that is, masculine register and lexis, which illustrate the textual aspects of mirroring. Collectively, these components used by Womad call attention to misogynistic
treatment by adopting the speech norms of Ilbe and rejecting traditional norms of femininity. In the second section, we move to the macro level by examining discourses found in mirroring. Our data focus on marriage-related posts that deal with a complex assemblage of gender ideologies, old and new.

*Intertextuality in Mirroring*

**Masculine Register**

As a clear example of intertextuality, Womad’s posts imitate the speech style or register of Ilbe users in various ways. Many of Ilbe’s posts are associated with the speech style of President Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008), who committed suicide amidst political attacks from his conservative opponents, who are largely supported by Ilbe. As many Internet trends in Korea have originated on DCinside, this speech style mimicking the late President Roh started on a BBS called the “Roh Moo-Hyun Gallery” and became popular as DCinside users migrated to Ilbe. Ilbe users have openly derided President Roh by mimicking his Gyeongsang dialect in their posts regardless of the topic by including common expressions of Roh’s such as *ya, kibun cho’na,* (“that’s great”). The Gyeongsang dialect is distinguishable from other peninsular dialects due to its vowel length and tones; however, for the written mode, Ilbe users use the sentence interrogative ender *-no* and the speech marker *-igiya*, or *-igi* as a shortened form, to end interrogative and declarative sentences in the Gyeongsang dialect. While speakers from Gyeongsang province would differentiate the interrogative enders *-no* and *-na*, those who learned *-no* as part of the Ilbe register have indiscriminately overgeneralized *-no* for all instances. Womad follows Ilbe’s direction with a superficial use of the informal Gyeongsang dialect enders *-no, -igiya*, and *-igi*. For example, in this Womad excerpt, “The wedding ceremony itself is full
of misogyny [Kyŏlhonsik to yŏhyŏm dŏngŏri ta igi]”, the -igi ender is underlined in the Korean transliteration. However, President Roh is not a target of ridicule for Womad as he has been on Ilbe. Instead, overgeneralizing these particular sentence enders mirrors the masculine Internet register of Ilbe to index Womad’s transgressive identity; Womad users appropriate and take advantage of Ilbe’s widely recognizable speech style to project an authoritative online voice that runs counter to normative feminine speech practices.

Another salient example of intertextuality between Womad and Ilbe is the use of swearing, which is prevalent on anonymous BBSs. Womad’s profanity-laden posts mirror Ilbe’s hostile language. Below in excerpt 1 is a common example of how swear words and vulgar language (indicated in italics) are used to disparage men on Womad.

Excerpt 1

This bastard (saekki) talked to my friend less and less because he was such a “dick snake” (chot paem or gold digger) who is all talk not spending any money and told my friend that they should postpone marriage since their financial situation was not very good, which was only true for him, fuck (chot).³

While Ilbe’s use of expletives might not necessarily surprise Koreans who regularly use Internet BBSs, women’s swearing targeting men on a public forum is arguably scandalous due to the social constraints imposed on women. Moreover, cursing is typically equated with power and masculinity (De Klerk, 1997). It should be mentioned that Korean women swearing is nothing new. Internet BBSs have offered spaces where Korean women feel exhilaration by cursing and being free of the responsibility to always be polite (Yang, 2018). However, women’s cursing directly at men is exceptionally flagrant since men are probably not used to hearing such language from women (BM Kim, 2018). The mirroring of swearing and Ilbe’s speech style are indications of Womad’s deliberate encroachment on men’s territory. Womad’s abrasive language
serves to recalibrate the imbalance in social power that has favored Korean men. The shock of this masculine register from Womad drew widespread online and offline attention to this linguistic inequity, especially in Womad’s coining of new words, which is discussed in the next section.

Lexis

Now we examine how mirroring reverses the power dynamics in gender discriminatory words. Womad’s staunchly anti-marriage stance is reflected in their use of terms based on marriage (kyŏlhon) or the hon root. For example, Womad advocates the hardline stance of “no marriage” (pihon), which contrasts with the commonly used term unmarried (mihon) found on government documents to indicate one’s marital status. Although pihon did not originate on Womad, its growing popularity is also reflected in 2018 survey data indicating that only 48.1% of Koreans feel that marriage is necessary compared to 64.7% in 2010 (Statistics Korea, 2019). Moreover, while both pihon and mihon indicate unmarried, mihon is formed from the root “not yet” and carries the implication that one plans to marry or should marry. Another related term that is also collocated with pihon and used not only on Womad is pich’ulsan or “no childbirth.” This term corresponds with the plummeting marriage and birth rates in Korea. Among OECD countries, Korea ranked the lowest with a fertility rate of 0.92 in 2019 compared to the OECD average of 1.61 (OECD, 2021a).

A new term that rejects the institution of marriage and having children is manghon or “(life) ruined by marriage”, which suggests that a woman’s life is ruined due to marriage burdening women with homemaking, childcare, and wifely duties including serving one’s in-laws. As the sole solution to manghon, Womad encourages “escaping marriage” (t’alhon), a
replacement for the word “divorce” (ihon). The emphasis on escape is apparent as Womad users also support leaving Korea (t’al chosŏn) for another country because of deep-rooted misogyny and limited freedom for women in Korea.

Womad’s lexical creativity in mirroring is also seen in noun phrases that refer to Korean men. One of the most commonly used terms to deride Korean men is hannam. Its literal meaning is a blend of Korean (hanguk) and man (namja), which does not appear overtly offensive. However, hannam essentializes all Korean men as misogynist, unintelligent, and unattractive much the same way “kimchi woman” is used to refer to a selfish Korean woman, but as a sweeping generalization. For Womad, hannam is used to show contempt for all Korean men, even one’s father, and the word itself has gained such notoriety that its usage has been censored in mass media (Hong, 2019; Kim, 2021).

Womad also uses numerous ways to refer to Korean men through mirroring. Men are called “kimchi dick” (kimch’ijot) resulting from semantic inversion or a simple reversal of gender from the commonly used “kimchi woman/bitch.” In addition to nouns, verb phrases are also reversed to highlight misogyny. For example, ch’wijip, a degrading neologism, blending the Korean words for getting a job (ch’wijik) and marriage for women (sijip), implying that women forgo working to marry because their husbands will support them. The mirrored term ch’wijang is used to indicate men who marry to take advantage of their wives. In these ways, Womad users mirror Ilbe’s most commonly used slurs toward women and reverse the gender to insult Korean men.

There is another type of lexical expression that does not directly reverse existing misogynist lexical items but instead appropriates derogatory terms for women such as Wom(ad) bitch (wŏm nyŏn) to be a source of self-identification. Also, these newly coined words add the
English word “god” (kat) to misogynistic words and blend, compound, or shorten the form to create terms such as katch’i (a blend of “god” and shortening of kimchi woman) and poji-sin (compounding “cunt” and “god”), which project positive connotations that can be literally translated to “god-like kimchi woman” and “god-like cunt”, respectively. Outside of Womad, kimchi woman and poji are still used as slurs against women while katch’i and poji-sin can be considered mirroring since they reverse the power dynamics of misogyny by positioning women as superior to men.

Overall, these intertextual links and examples of mirroring demonstrate Womad’s attempts to disarm insults leveled at Korean women. Moreover, these neologisms based on the co-opting of sexist epithets could also fall under the category of linguistic reclamation or linguistic appropriation, an act where those targeted reclaim and redefine the expletives on their own terms (Smitherman, 1997). Womad’s reclamation has found success at least among the in-group, that is, Womad users who feel empowerment and promote solidarity by regularly using these terms as many Womad posts indicate. One representative example titled “For Megal(ian) to mirror Ilbe’s speech styles in its early days…” argues that mirroring Ilbe’s masculine register was a “game-changer” since women should not be confined to only speaking politely but should be able to say anything including vulgarities. To reiterate, the mirroring of Ilbe’s register intertextually retaliates against the harsh criticism of Korean women while also demonstrating Womad’s noncompliance with inscribed gender expectations.

**Interdiscursivity in Mirroring: Traditional Gendered Discourses**

In terms of marriage, Ilbe demonstrates an ambivalence toward marriage, while Womad maintains a strict adherence to pihon. Users on Ilbe overwhelmingly support marriage with a
“sensible woman” (kaenyŏm nyŏ), someone who is a frugal, dedicated wife and mother, the antithesis of a kimchi woman. As such, warnings against marriage with kimchi women are prevalent on Ilbe. Both the sensible and kimchi women are frequently dichotomized in a genre of posts on Ilbe called the “marriage story” (kyŏlhon ssŏl) that describes the lives of unhappily married men. On the other hand, Womad’s posts are motivated by promoting pihon and illustrating how unfair marriage is for women.

In our corpus of marriage posts, Ilbe users markedly deploy traditional gendered discourses when describing their roles as husbands. According to these men, they are the sole income earners, and their spouses are full-time housewives. Under this arrangement, Ilbe users expect their wives to prepare meals, be in charge of childrearing and housekeeping, and respect their husbands. Ilbe’s marriage stories reflect a traditional discourse of men working in public domains and women in domestic spaces with each party’s roles clearly defined. However, many marriage stories present women who do not fulfill their duties, giving rise to the discourse of kimchi women by virtue of being bad wives and mothers.

Excerpt 2 is from a marriage story that ends in divorce where the author warns other Ilbe users who may be planning to marry. The original post describes his reasons for divorce since his wife abandoned her responsibilities of childcare and exhibited other unacceptable behaviors such as frequent drinking with her friends and staying out overnight.

Excerpt 2

Title: I am planning to get divorced, Ilbe guys planning to get married should read this (Scroll warning, long post)

[parts omitted]

For three months, marriage life was really great. I ignored the marriage stories on Ilbe thinking “my wife’s not like that, you poor guys,” I lived happily with this bullshit for 3 months.
Her mother and father were poor so they couldn’t help out [with dowry for the marriage]. My family provided everything. We had lived in my parents’ 200 square meter house since my parents went down to the countryside to farm

[parts omitted]

But the problem was she didn’t clean or prepare breakfast three months after our marriage. I worked fucking hard after our daughter was born, but the house was a total mess when I came home. We did not fuck at all after our daughter was born since neither of us wanted to

[parts omitted]

It was fucking shitty [that she did not even prepare a decent breakfast for me], so I ate breakfast sandwiches near my company for a while. Then, all of a sudden, she prepared a splendid breakfast for me. I was satisfied and happily went to work, but she fucking asked me to give her money to go out with her friends, fucking cunt

[parts omitted]

I did not ask this cunt to do much but made sure she did one thing. I programmed her to take our daughter to daycare and bring her back home no matter what.

But one day the daycare called me since she did not come to pick our daughter up. I had to go pick her up since that fucking crazy cunt did not answer her phone.

According to this author, despite his wife’s presumably comfortable life thanks to her hardworking husband and his parents, the wife was irresponsible as a mother and wife and dared to ask for more. This unappreciative and delinquent attitude characterizes kimchi women who are perceived to lead frivolous lives without showing gratitude for their husbands’ efforts, especially in the form of home-cooked meals. Complaining about meals at home or the lack thereof is prevalent on Ilbe. Based on traditional ideals, marriage is presented as a transaction where spouses are expected to provide goods and services, and wives should also be grateful to their husbands for earning income for the family. Therefore, when wives do not uphold their obligations, they are branded as kimchi women, and husbands experience victimization, leading to these “warnings” to single Ilbe users.
Most posts depict Korean women as being eager to marry based on Ilbe users’ belief that marriage offers them comfortable lives without financial worries as reflected in the term *ch ’wijip* mentioned earlier. This kimchi woman discourse overlooks the systemic inequities that contribute to fewer employment opportunities, more irregular jobs, and low wages for women compared to men in Korea, which in 2020 had the worst gender pay gap among OECD countries (OECD, 2021b). Nonetheless, Ilbe recommends that men should carefully avoid these types of women who consider marriage their life-long meal tickets. Despite the risk of marrying a kimchi woman, most Ilbe users do not forgo marriage because they believe they can still meet ideal wives. However, these so-called sensible women are often not Korean. The following excerpt 3 is written by a Korean man who married a Japanese woman, known as a “sushi woman” (*sūsin’yō*) who is extolled as an ideal wife and mother. The author’s original post describes his desirable and fair married life with photos⁶ allegedly confirming his successful marriage. In excerpt 3, how his wife handled pregnancy is described below.

Excerpt 3

Title: [Sushi nation] Good things that I found after marrying a sushi woman

[parts omitted]

She insisted she didn’t want to get a C-section, so she was in labor for 9 hours. She came back home 4 days after giving birth and made me breakfast even though I told her not to. She started doing house chores 3 days after she came home while apologizing for not being able to take care of house chores.

She did house chores, bought groceries, filed paperwork at the district office, and many other things while taking care of our baby but always tells me with a smile that I must have had a hard day working when I come home.

[parts omitted]

There’s really nothing I have to do besides go to work.
How come these fucking maggot-like kimchi bitches are all physically weaker than my grandma? These bitches are out of their minds.

This author praises his wife’s fortitude during pregnancy, considering many Ilbe users criticize Korean mothers for staying in expensive postpartum care centers following childbirth. Additionally, her dedication to the household is highlighted even after recently delivering a baby. This post, along with many others, implies that when men are the sole breadwinner, they should not need to assist around the house. To further disparage Korean women, Korean wives are also subjected to comparisons with other women. For example, “fucking maggot-like kimchi bitches” weaker than his grandmother are too inept to uphold basic responsibilities as the author claims. Moreover, Ilbe users deride kimchi women as physically inferior to women of other countries such as Israel where women and men are both required to serve in the military unlike Korea, a major source of contention between Korean men and women (Martin and Jeong, 2021). Instead, Japanese women are projected as physically strong and decent wives but objectified for men’s desires as Korean women have been. These gendered labels based on representative national foods, sushi and kimchi, are typical ways in which Ilbe users dehumanize women since food and cooking are stereotypically and historically associated with women (DeVault, 1991; see also Hines, 1999 for women as dessert metaphors). These metaphors also work to sexualize women as Ilbe users identify women as “consumable and disposable” (mŏk pŏ yong, a blend of mŏkko pŏri nŭn yong) versus “marriage material” (kyŏlhon yong).

The polar opposite of Ilbe’s stance on marriage and women is Womad. As the terms pihon, manghon, and t’alhon demonstrate, Womad firmly believes marriage should be avoided at all costs, which is succinctly described in excerpt 4.
Excerpt 4

Title: Why do people ruin their lives with marriage even if it doesn’t get them upward mobility??

Fucking serving in-laws + giving birth that damages women’s health + contributing to a dual-income household + house chores + childrearing + slavery for large family holidays + filial piety to parents-in-law on the husband’s behalf

A full package of slavery that comes with free sex as well. If you can’t get upward mobility from that slavery, what’s the point? Who does business that foolishly? Lol

No marriage, no childbirth is the best, but if you really have to get married, checking and calculating your benefits thoroughly is the right way to do it.

This post presents marriage as equivalent to slavery. These onerous obligations for women are based on traditions of supporting the patrilineage into which women were brought to serve the husbands’ families (Lee, 2007). These practices continue while creating ever-worsening conflicts among family members and contribute to record-low fertility rates. As reported by Yoon (2017), one of the main factors preventing second births among couples in Korea is the lack of help with the household from husbands. In contexts where gender equity is remarkably low despite a high GDP such as Korea, which ranks 102 among 156 in “The Global Gender Gap Index 2021” from the World Economic Forum (2021), support from husbands positively influences an increase in fertility (Yoon, 2017). Womad users seem to be keenly aware of husbands’ limited contributions to the family, omitting any mention of the husband when describing married life in excerpt 4. Consequently, strong patriarchal traditions and Korean men are targets of Womad’s condemnation. While Womad users unequivocally oppose marriage and childbirth, they are aware of fellow women who still want to marry. Similar to this author, Womad posts urge these women to carefully weigh the pros and cons, so they can benefit somehow from the inequity of marriage. Excerpt 4 and others criticize gendered expectations in marriage that capitalize on women’s unpaid labor. While Ilbe’s marriage-related posts depict married women as free-riding
housewives, married women in excerpt 4 and other posts usually work full-time while still being pressured to fulfill traditional gender roles. Both groups perceive themselves as victims of unjust circumstances, producing a discourse of unfairness. Ilbe users believe women are not complying with their roles as wives despite leeching off their husbands’ financial support. Contrarily, Womad views men as enslaving their wives, not contributing fairly to household management, and hindering their wives’ careers. These conflicting views represent Ilbe’s desire to maintain its grip on a system that has supported previous generations of Korean men, while Womad is determined to liberate women from the shackles of marriage and motherhood by disparaging men.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

In our analysis of Womad’s mirroring, we have examined how Womad’s posts create intertextual and interdiscursive links to Ilbe’s online attacks on women, as well as to mainstream misogynist discourses circulating more broadly. Womad’s mirroring addresses and subverts these discourses. First, through intertextuality, Womad appropriates and mirrors Ilbe’s masculine register including their superficial Gyeongsang dialect, expletives, and neologisms to flout feminine speech norms. This transgressive practice emboldens their commitment to exposing misogyny. In this way, Womad as an online community functions as an outlet for women’s voices, which have often been ignored, altered, and silenced.

Mirroring is also seen through Womad’s interdiscursive practices. When comparing Ilbe and Womad’s marriage posts, traditional gendered discourses were uncovered. Ilbe users’ strict adherence to a gender-based division of labor can be seen as an effort to reaffirm traditional femininity. With neoliberal restructuring in Korea beginning after the Asian financial crisis in
1997, Korean men no longer enjoy the same privileges that previous generations of men were privy to such as lifelong employment in the post-crisis era (J. Kim, 2018). These major social and economic changes have prompted Korean men to blame Korean women for their struggles, thereby reasserting their masculinity, especially when confronted with kimchi women (J. Kim, 2018; Kim and Choi, 2007). The kimchi woman discourse figures prominently in failed marriage stories, and subsequently, Ilbe users feel a sense of victimhood as they believe they have been exploited by these women.

On the other hand, Womad contends that married women are the victims of *manghon* as they are required to cook, clean, and care for children and in-laws while also working full-time. By calling into question the normative femininities imposed on Korean women, Womad users outright reject marriage and childbirth. By interdiscursively addressing patriarchal practices and misogyny, Womad mirrors Ilbe’s grievances with women by recontextualizing traditional gendered discourses and essentializing Korean men as kimchi dicks. Rather than negotiating or trying to reform existing social systems, Womad users exercise extreme measures to disrupt traditional gender ideologies in ways that impact both men and women. For men, mirroring brings about unpleasant and shocking realizations since men are subjected to objectification and ridicule by women who are supposed to be docile and subordinate to men. For women, mirroring enables women to realize the harshness of misogyny and gender inequity in Korea, which they have largely internalized, endured, and dealt with individually while pushing themselves to meet the gender expectations set by traditional gender ideologies and more recent sensible woman discourses. Furthermore, mirroring provides options so that they do not need to suffer needlessly from misogyny and gender inequity. These women can retaliate against misogynist speech and forego institutions of gender discrimination and exploitation through *pihon*. Even if they exercise
self-determination, women will still likely encounter gender inequities from pervasive misogyny, sexual harassment, limited work opportunities, rigid gender ideologies forcing women to become primary caretakers, and lack of self-determination over their reproductive rights (Kim et al., 2018; Yun, 2019). However, mirroring and online spaces like Womad allow women to see they are not alone and the gender issues they have endured are not personal, but political and collective.

Through mirroring and being part of a counterpublic, Womad users have experienced a certain degree of emancipation as their voices finally started being heard when they gave up on communicating with men and patriarchal Korean society in politically correct and polite ways and responded with a misogynist male speech style with gender roles reversed (Hi, 2018). Ilbe users’ hostility toward mirroring, Womad, and feminism at large as revealed in their posts, coupled with increasing media coverage on gender issues and Womad, are a testament to the impact of mirroring (Kim et al., 2018). Womad users, other feminists, and women have also used social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as well as their own websites to draw attention to important gender issues from misogyny in South Korea to spy cam and online sex crimes (Kim et al., 2018). Most notably, Womad rallied many to aid in the 2016 takedown of Soranet, a website in which Korean men circulated videos of nonconsensual sex with women and organized the gang raping of intoxicated women. While some may decry Womad’s unorthodox practices and extremist views toward men, it is clear that Womad has helped to raise the consciousness of young women to speak out against hegemonic discourses that marginalize women.

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References


Have the History of Light and Shade]. Seoul: Wood Pencil Books.
Lee W (2019) Responding to misogyny, reciprocating hate speech: South Korea’s online feminism movement: Megalia. MA Thesis, Harvard University, US.
These pejorative terms are similar to the “Kong girl” of Hong Kong (cf. Kang and Chen, 2017) and the “office lady” of Japan (cf. Ogasawara, 1998) that stereotype certain groups of women based on their spending and desire for marriage. Another commonly used term toenjang nyŏ (lit. soybean paste woman) preceded kimchi woman and targets Korean women according to their cosmopolitan consumption patterns such as Starbucks coffee or travel abroad. However, kimchi woman encompasses “characteristics of Korean women as a species” (kimch’i nyŏ chong t’ŭk) from financially exploiting men to demanding gender equity that is deemed undeserved from the perspectives of men who think they sacrifice more than women due to mandatory military service and being the sole breadwinner.

It is difficult to find the original post because it has been reposted excessively. However, one version of the post can be found here [link removed to respect privacy].

Chot literally means penis but is used by men and women as an expletive equivalent to “shit” or “fuck.” As a term that signifies the male gender, chot is used in many mirroring terms to reverse terms traditionally referring to women such as kŏllae chot “male slut,” a mirroring of slut (kŏllae).

The popularity of t’al chosŏn is not limited to Womad but the general public, especially youths. This term became popular with the newly coined term hel chosŏn (“hell + Chosun,” lit. meaning hellish Korea that harks back to the highly stratified Chosun dynasty). These terms convey the economic challenges of gaining upward mobility in contemporary Korea.

This post can be found at [link removed to respect privacy].

Ilbe and Womad often include images to illustrate their posts. Due to space constraints, we do not include images.