

Volumes I (2) 2023

ISSN: 0972-0766



**JOURNAL OF  
THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF MUMBAI**  
(A UGC - CARE Listed Journal)

**International Conference  
on  
Emerging Trends & Challenges  
In English Language and Literature**

Department of English  
**Navarasam Arts and Science College for Women**  
(An Institution affiliated to Bharathiar University)  
Arachalur, Erode - 638 101.  
Tamil Nadu.

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Published by  
**The Asiatic Society Of Mumbai**  
Town Hall, Mumbai - 400 001.  
Maharashtra State (INDIA)  
2023

## THE HUED GAZES OF KPOP: FROM STAGE TO PAGE

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### **Abstract**

The world domination of the South Korean pop industry has inevitable effects in the cultural materialism of the various art forms. Graphic literature is one such form of kpop representation. The paper aims to would map the infrastructural, structural and super structural elements that constitute the denotative and connotative layers of the webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim. In the due course of study, the literary and technical elements of the webcomic will also be analyzed to have an enhanced understanding of its appeal and marketability that lead on to cultural materialism.

**Key terms:** Cultural materialism, kpop, visual culture, graphic literature, Manhwa, infrastructure, digital humanities

## THE HUED GAZES OF KPOP: FROM STAGE TO PAGE

Culture is often defined as the way of life, the beliefs, values and customs of a specific group of people at a specific time. This dynamic realm has its rippled effect on every micro aspect of the society that gets manifested in art, music and literature of a society. The material and abstract attributes of the society are the founding stones of a culture. It is to be underlined that, the historical and political frames of reference have their hold on the evolution of culture. Evans defines culture as, "...the complex whole of collective human beliefs with a structured stage of civilization that can be specific at a nation or a time period". Aligned with it, in 2022, kpop, one of the prominent representatives of the South Korean culture, has gained popularity at the global level.

Korean pop (kpop) has rampantly turned into a global phenomenon due to the catalysts, BTS and the pandemic, leading South Korea, a musically-inclined country, under the spotlight of the western pop world after two decades of kpop. The South Korean language and music have become the highly distributed cultural commodities of the post-lockdown world. The artistic achievements of the country in terms of the global standards have become multitudinal in the past decade, making it a golden era for the country. While the music, dance and the film industries are bagging prestigious global awards across the borders, the Korean literature and the TV dramas are being translated into numerous languages for the international audience. Such flourishing prospects have contributed to the rising wave of the South Korean culture – the Hallyu wave.

The Hallyu Wave is a prominent coinage which refers to the soaring popularity of the South Korean culture through the pioneer k-art forms like films, TV dramas and music. The government's conscious export of its culture has exponentially increased its economic

growth. Music and South Korea go way back to the traditional trot music that turned the trend of the early twentieth century. Known for its upbeat tempo, vocal inflections and repetitive rhythm, trot music is still pretty popular with the older generation. These two beats elemental music was heavily influenced by the western pop music in the early 1990s. This created a new genre of music, pop music with the touch of Korean rhythm and dance, the kpop. The world of kpop is an intricately crafted production industry catering to the visual appeal of the target audience that creates an emotional connect with them wrought through industrious professional training of the artists who are called the 'kpop idols'.

Psy's *Gangnam Sty* became the first ever YouTube video to cross 1 billion views and was ranked second on the Billboard Hot 100 songs for seven consecutive weeks in 2012. This viral hit, one of the inaugural portals that lured in many fans into the kpop realm, led to the mushrooming of fandom subcultures in the neighboring Asian countries. In 2021, the relevance and dominance of Korean culture in the post-pandemic digital world became evident when the viral k-drama *Squid Games* was rated the most-watched Netflix series of all time with more than 1.65 billion hours of viewing in the first four weeks after its release in September, 2021. Furthermore, the widely popular boy band, BTS bagged numerous awards at the Billboard Music Awards, American Music Awards and a lot more, breaking world records of being the first Asian phenomenon to do so:

In the past, the Korean Wave was just a regional phenomenon in some geographically and culturally adjacent Asian countries, but now, it is a global phenomenon happening with no particular pattern and in countries with no similar culture background like the United States, Kazakhstan and Indonesia. At first glance, what we see now appears to be

the peak of Korean content. But considering various circumstances, there are big chances for it to grow bigger.

The popularity of kpop also had its undulations in the field of literature, especially graphic literature which attained a global reach. Manhwa is a genre of Korean comics that became popular during the Japanese occupation of Korea. As newspapers were subjected to staunch censorship, political and social commentaries were expressed to the public via the comics. With the advent of technology, Manhwa took a digital form when Junkoo Kim established a platform called “Webtoon” in 2004 which provided an infinite scrolling mechanism to the readers. Therefore, South Korean witnessed a sudden boom of webcomics shifting towards less contentious themes and topics. A number of globally popular South Korean dramas have been adapted from Manhwa and webcomics like “*Full House*,” “*True Beauty*,” “*So I Married an Anti-fan*” and the others.

The objective of the paper is to trace the manifestation of cultural materialism in the webcomic, “*So I Married an Anti-fan*.” In such an attempt, the paper would map the infrastructural, structural and super structural elements that constitute the denotative and connotative layers of the chosen graphic narrative. In the due course of study, the literary and technical elements of the webcomic will also be analyzed to have an enhanced understanding of its appeal and marketability that lead on to cultural materialism.

*So I Married an Anti-fan* is a South Korean webcomic which was published in 2021 by the illustrator Jaerim based on the original story by Kim Eun Jung. The plot revolves around the relationship between a kpop superstar Hoo Joon and a journalist, Lee Geun Young, who becomes his anti-fan due to chance encounters. The duo is forced to live together for a reality show which eventually leads to their relationship. The subplots

deal with the intricacies of the kpop industry and the realities behind the stardom. This cultural product's visual and literary narratives are highly relevant for the institution of cultural materialism.

The literary narrative of *So I Married an Anti-fan* opens with the perspective of Lee Geun Young as a journalist in her office. As a junior in her team, she is loaded with duties and responsibilities. The breakup with her boyfriend drives her to become a successful career woman. The perspective of Hoo Joon unfolds parallelly with his solo concert surrounded by hundreds of fans which establishes his popularity as a kpop star to the readers. Despite his busy schedule, he decides to show up for his old friend, JJ's club opening party. Geun Young is assigned to report the star-studded party. In their first encounter, she accidentally meets Hoo Joon and is mistaken as his fan. She witnesses the secret meeting of Hoo Joon and an actress, Inhyeong. As she was seen with a camera, she was immediately labeled stalking paparazzi.

Hoo Joon confronts her angrily and bashes out on Geun Young for invading his privacy. Angered by the false accusation and insults, she throws her shoe on him and storms out. This becomes the headline and eventually, she is labeled as the anti-fan of Hoo Joon. She undergoes various perturbations from his fans and is spoken ill of on social media platforms. An opportunistic TV producer proposes a reality show program where the kpop superstar, Hoo Joon lives with his anti-fan, Geun Young, which will surely be a hit among the audience. Both of them accept the proposal to save themselves out of their dire situation.

The reality show brings them together as Geun Young is asked to follow Hoo Joon through his schedules. They get to know each other's unfamiliar stories and get used to



each other's presence. The show becomes a quick hit as it showcased the gentlemanly side of Hoo Joo even towards his anti-fan. Geun Young slowly gets acquainted to him and even gets to know about his past life and his friends. She starts defending him unconsciously and this reflects the objective of the reality show - to convert an anti-fan into a fan. After the shooting ends, they both start missing each other. Hoo Joon realizes that he cannot live upto the epectations of his fans and give up on his love. He proposes marriage to Geun Young. They decide to live happily even if the public is against their marriage. However, to their surprise, the fans and the public favor their decision. The narrative ends in their simple wedding with family and friends.

*So I Married an Anti-fan* is one of the many cultural products which is being analyzed by cultural anthropologists to trace the roots of this universal spotlight on South Korea. Chakraborty posits that, "...culture is constituted by social, political and spiritual processes of life which are invariably influenced by material determinants." Cultural Materialism was developed by the American anthropologist, Malwin Harris through his book *The Rise of Anthropological Theories* (1968). He propagates that cultural materialism explores the values, beliefs and worldviews that dominate the society. He also adds that these values connect to the societal framework, its trends and problems. Cultural materialism thus gives a critical understanding of the values, beliefs and world views of a particular period through a close study of the cultural products.

Cultural materialists, from am etic or the outsiders' view of culture, insist that any societal framework has three distinct levels: infrastructure, structure and superstructure. They highlight on the power and significance of the infrastructure as it forms the basis of all levels. Infrastructure includes the practices through which the basic needs of a

demographic group are met using the constructs that serve with the sole purpose of promoting production and reproduction. The graphic narrative, *So I Married an Anti-fan* deals with the cultural materialist framework of kpop. Its infrastructure encompasses two demographic groups of the kpop realm that attribute to the production and reproduction purposes. The first is the artist demographic which includes the kpop idols and the idol-aspirants, who form the material of the kpop infrastructure. In *So I Married an Anti-fan*, Hoo Joon and his friends, JJ and Inhyeong are the representatives of this demographic. They dedicate years of exclusive practice in the material kpop kingdom to fulfill their dream of becoming global stars. When their entertainment company is unable to afford to debut all the three friends, JJ and Inhyeong, heartbroken and frustrated, invite Hoo Joon to leave the merciless company for a better one. However, Hoo Joon chooses to stay and debut all by himself at the expense of his friends' loyalty. Hoo Joon's discretion reflects the materialization of the kpop idol demographic, where the artists are treated as objects and prized solely on their market value in the industry.

While the artist demographic contributes towards the material for the production, the audience demographic acts as the consumers, enhancing the reproductive aspects of the kpop infrastructure. According to Marx, the economic reproduction refers to the extended recreation of the economic conditions. With reference to the webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan*, the consumer demographic consists of the fans, producers, journalists, entertainment companies, managers, stylists and makeup artists who depend on the artist's value for their economic conditions.

The multifaceted promotions where the artist's value is sustained and taken forward are reflected in various instances throughout the webcomic. At the outset, Hoo Joon is



introduced as a kpop star with the panels exhibiting the grand stage of his solo concert with hundreds of fans passionately holding their light sticks to show their support. Later, the TV show producer proposes a reality show where the kpop idol, Hoo Joon, lives together with his official anti-fan, Geun Young, to capitalize the existing situation. Hoo Joon's agency forces him to accept the proposal. At this juncture, the plot is propelled by incorporating a reproductive strategy as the only solution to sustain the economic status of the artist (protagonist) and his agency.

The other reproductive prospects in the graphic narrative are centered on the fans of the kpop idol, Hoo Joon. The fan meetings, product endorsements, weekly music bank performance and the world tour undertaken by Hoo Joon vouch for the fact that the artist's value is reproduced due to the influence of the consumer demographic. Such extended recreations of the material facilitates in the promotion of its market value in the kpop infrastructure.

According to cultural materialists, the second level of a societal framework is the structure which refers to a society's economic and political hierarchical organizations. The structural power of the kpop industry which is showcased in the webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim is such that it has a hold on the economic structure of South Korea with a massive turnover of 10.28 billion US dollars by the Travel & Tourism sector in 2021. The kpop industry fuels the soft power of South Korea; thus altering the structure in economic terms. According to Joseph S.Nye, soft power is "... the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion." He opines that soft power is pervasive in terms of a country's digital infrastructure, global reach of its culture, its appealing economic model, its diplomatic engagement in international affairs and the

quality of its educational and political institutions. As opined by Anderson,

In the production of art, social institutions affect, amongst other things, who becomes an artist, how they become an artist, how they are then able to practice their art, and how they can ensure that their art is produced, performed and made available to the public. Furthermore, the judgements and evaluations of works and schools of art are not simply individual and ‘purely aesthetic’ decisions, but socially enabled and socially constructed events.

The webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan* deals with a dynamic digital infrastructure which influences the economic structure of Hoo Joon’s agency. At their first encounter, GeunYoung is offended by Hoo Joon and in a fit of fury; she throws her shoe at him in the presence of the public and the press at JJ’s club opening party. This incident marks Geun Young as Hoo Joon’s official anti-fan. Eventually, she is condemned and harassed by his fans on social media platforms. This negative attention of the public garnered by Geun Young that tows Hoo Joon affects the digital sales and stocks of his agency. In order to quench the flames of animosity, his agency prods him to partake in the reality show with Geun Young – a manifestation of the power exerted by the infrastructure over the structure. Likewise, it is to be underscored that the decision of Geun Young and Hoo Joon to get married after their participation in the reality show harnesses their fans’ approval and increases his agency’s stock values.

The third level of the societal framework is the superstructure, which includes the ideologies and values that run through the society, shaped by the structural and infrastructural strands. The webcomic *So I Married and Anti-fan* records how the soft

power exerted by South Korea via the Hallyu wave has its repercussion in the superstructure of the world. Hoo Joon is perceived to be an ill-mannered and unempathetic person by Geun Young as she meets him for the first time. Nevertheless, the unraveling of the plot proves her wrong. She understands perspective of Hoo Joon in terms of being a celebrity. The graphic narrative also traces how the public gaze gradually shifts from the non-acceptance of an artist marrying a commoner to the acceptance of the same. This sensitive and tabooed topic in the kpop industry is well-woven in a subtle and convincing plot. The author's choice of involving an anti-fan with a kpop star, which even ends in their marriage, is indeed a symbol of revolution as it alters the superstructure of the kpop society. A deep probe into *So I Married an Anti-fan* makes it evident that, cultural materialism indeed explores the values, beliefs and world views that dominate a society. The world domination of the kpop industry in the recent times is thus justified by unfolding the infrastructural, structural and superstructural levels of the kpop realm through a close analysis of the chosen cultural product. This visual narrative is employed as a tool to justify the global appeal and marketability of the kpop subculture which lead to cultural materialism.

Graphic literature deals with "...the ability to create meaning with and from texts that operate in combination of print, visual, audio and spatial forms." Such graphic narratives juxtapose a visual narrative and a textual narrative which form an artistic expression in panel sequences. Comics range from the traditional Japanese manga, comic strips and graphic novels to the avant-garde webcomics that span across a plethora of genres, subjects and art styles. The webcomics is a fast-developing art form that acts as an

effective transmitter of the kpop culture. The impact of the Hallyu wave has tremendously increased the prominence of Korean webcomics which are easily accessible and globalized through translations. Visual and technical devices like panels, gutters, speech bubbles, captions, color palette, characterization, sound effects and motion lines are some of the features that make webcomics more desirable among its audience, especially among the kpop fans.

The technical elements of Jaerin's webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan* are immensely intricate and sophisticatedly detailed for a work of graphic literature. As for the characterisation in the manhwa, the protagonist Hoo Joon and his nemesis Lee Geun Young are perfectly round characters and the plot could be considered as a bildungsroman as it deals with the psychological and moral development of the main characters. The narrative is dynamic and shows the points of view of various characters, but primarily Geun Young's. Colour plays a vital role in graphic literature and it is evident in *So I Married an Anti-fan*. The illustrator uses a luxurious palette of hues to depict the rich, grand and glamorous world of the kpop super star, Hoo Joon. The colour of his hair is shown in bright red and the flashy costumes emit grandeur and charisma of a global star which represents the cultural material of the kpop infrastructure. The illustrator uses a bright palette to depict a vibrant and optimistic character like Geun Young. This contrasting depiction of colours symbolise the mood of the plot. In chapter 4, a grey palette exposes the sad and lonely home of Hoo Joon and a bright palette juxtaposes the home of Geun Young filled with warmth, as shown in figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3.



**SFX: BIRDS CHIRPING**

**Figure 1.1 – Geun Young’s house** © *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim via webtoon.com



**Figure 2.3 – Hoo Joon’s apartment** © *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim via webtoon.com



**Figure 3.2 – Hoo Joon’s house** © *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim via webtoon.com

A unique technical characteristic of *So I Married an Anti-fan* is the employment of the speech bubbles which are customized in line with the emotions. The dialogues and the thoughts of the characters portrayed in the bubbles transcend all linguistic barriers to reach the international audience. Neutral dialogues are depicted in plain speech bubbles whereas an angry dialogue is shown in distorted and crooked bubbles in the panel. In chapter 6, Geun Young and her colleague get yelled at by their boss for breaking the company's camera at JJ's club opening, as shown in figures 2.1 and 2.2. The speeches of the different characters within a single frame are differentiated using color toned bubbles. In chapter 14, Hoo Joon engages in a telephone conversation with the CEO of his company regarding the consecutive accidents with Geun Young, as shown in figure 2.3. The thoughts of the characters and their mind voices are portrayed differently from speech bubbles, either with little bubbles or with striped bubbles. In chapter 4, Geun Young throws her shoe at Hoo Joon to show her frustration and thinks to herself victoriously, as shown in figure 2.4. In Chapter 18, Hoo Joon's thoughts are depicted with little bubbles accompanying the major one, as shown in figure 2.5.



Figure 21 – Geun Young and her colleague giving excuses for breaking the camera © *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim via webtoon.com



Figure 22- Geun Young's boss getting angry at her employees © *So I Married an Anti-fan* by Jaerim via webtoon.com





Figure 23- Hoo Joon's telephone call with his CEO © So I Married an Anti-fan by Jaerim via webtoon.com



Figure 24- Geun Young's remark after hitting Hoo Joon with her shoe © So I Married an Anti-fan by Jaerim via webtoon.com



Figure 25- Hoo Joon's thought bubble indicating his tiredness © So I Married an Anti-fan by Jaerim via webtoon.com



Figure 31 – Geun Young's anger portrayed in a hyper-realistic style © So I Married an Anti-fan by Jaerim via webtoon.com



Figure 32- Geun Young's confusion portrayed in an understated style © So I Married an Anti-fan by Jaerim via webtoon.com

The illustrator sketches the characters in a hyper-realistic manner or in an understated style with graphic details projecting their emotions, befitting the characters' serious or funny moods respectively, as shown in figures 3.1 and 3.2. The illustrator also excels in producing even the micro levels of the background sounds through effective SFX effects such as calligraphic monosyllables or onomatopoeic terms. Few such SFX effects found throughout the webcomic include *footsteps, turn, gasp, ring, tip toe, thud and so on*. Motion Lines are employed to highlight the direction and movement of the characters and objects in the panel. Besides, Gutter-less panels are used to depict a fast moving sequence of actions as in chapter 45, where Hoo Joon performs on stage. It is to be noted that black panels are used to throw light on the flashback scenes that indicate change in time, as in chapter 5, when Hoo Joon's past life with JJ and Inhyeong are portrayed.

The literary analysis results in an inference that, in a country like South Korea, the cultural production forms have a prominent existence and sustenance. The close reading of the webcomic, *So I Married an Anti-fan*, inclusive of all the technical and literary elements, brings out the manifestation of the infrastructural, structural and superstructural elements of cultural materialism. The paper stands testimony to the understanding that, the cultural product *So I Married an Anti-fan*, serves as a fitting tool to analyze and validate the world domination of the kpop industry through the lens of cultural materialism. Cultural materialism thus holds immense potential to promote the soft power of a society to the extent of altering its core cultural values – the infrastructure's dominance over the structure and superstructure.

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