

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Background of The Study

The Korean drama *When Life Gives You Tangerines* a South Korean series, is a sweeping, decades-spanning love story about two ordinary people whose devotion to each other helps them endure the hardships and joys of life, released globally on Netflix on March 7, 2025 (Netflix, 2025). Consisting of 16 episodes divided into four volumes representing the four seasons, which is Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The series follows the intertwined lives of Oh Ae-sun and Yang Gwan-sik across different stages of life, from their youth on Jeju Island during the 1950s to their later years as parents and grandparents (Ostby, 2025). Each volume marks a distinct phase in the family's life. *Spring* introduces the protagonists' youth and explores themes of poverty, aspiration, first love, and the social limitations experienced by women in post-war Korea. *Summer* shifts to adulthood, portraying the realities of marriage, parenthood, economic hardship, and the challenges of building a family amid changing social conditions. *Autumn* expands the narrative to the next generation, focusing on the couple's children as they navigate adulthood, educational opportunities, and family expectations, with particular emphasis on their eldest daughter, Yang Geum-myeong. Finally, *Winter* centers on aging, reconciliation, and intergenerational relationships while reflecting on the sacrifices made throughout the family's life. Through this multigenerational structure, the drama illustrates how family roles, gender expectations, and cultural values evolve across different generations while remaining deeply rooted in Korean society (Ostby, 2025).

The issues represented in the drama are closely connected to broader social realities in South Korea, where family relationships continue to be shaped by cultural values emphasizing filial piety, collective responsibility, and gendered expectations within the household. Although South Korea has experienced significant social and economic transformation, women often remain associated with caregiving roles and emotional responsibility within the family. As a result, expectations related to sacrifice, emotional labor, and maintaining family harmony continue to influence women's everyday experiences. At the same time, the global distribution of the drama through Netflix enabled audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with these themes. Consequently, discussions surrounding family obligation and gendered responsibility extended beyond Korean society and resonated with viewers who recognized similar experiences within their own cultural and familial contexts.

Through its emotionally grounded narrative, the drama highlights how individuals navigate familial roles shaped by cultural values and gender norms. One of the central characters, Yang Geum-myeong, occupies the position of the eldest daughter whose role within the family is closely associated with responsibility, emotional endurance, and sacrifice. Her experiences reflect pressures commonly attached to the eldest daughter role, including caregiving duties, emotional labor, and the balancing of personal desires with family expectations. Rather than presenting these responsibilities as purely individual struggles, the drama situates them within broader social and cultural structures surrounding gender and family obligation.

The eldest daughter at the center of the narrative reflects the historical experiences of women within Korean society. Rather than portraying Geum-myeong's struggles as

merely personal or familial, the drama illustrates how gendered family responsibilities are socially and culturally constructed across generations. Through the lives of women from different generations, *When Life Gives You Tangerines* explores the persistence of caregiving, sacrifice, and emotional responsibility as expectations disproportionately placed upon women, making the eldest daughter an effective lens through which these issues can be examined.

Historically, however, the social position of women in Korea has undergone significant transformation. During the Koryŏ and early Chosŏn dynasties, approximately from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries, Korean society practiced a bilateral descent system that enabled women to enjoy relatively high social status, inheritance rights, and greater participation within family life (Kim, 2018). This situation changed substantially following the institutionalization of Neo-Confucianism during the late Chosŏn dynasty. As Neo-Confucian principles became deeply embedded within Korean political, legal, and familial institutions, society gradually shifted toward a patrilineal family system emphasizing male lineage, filial hierarchy, and clearly differentiated gender roles (Deuchler, 2020; Gao, 2024). Women were increasingly confined to domestic spaces, expected to embody obedience, chastity, modesty, and self-sacrifice, while their access to education, property ownership, and public participation became considerably restricted (Cawley, 2023; Buja, 2021; Manek, 2023). Consequently, women's social value became closely associated with their ability to care for family members, maintain household harmony, and support the continuation of the patriarchal family order.

These historical transformations also reshaped the position of daughters within Korean families. As patrilineal lineage and primogeniture became dominant, daughters

gradually lost inheritance rights and were excluded from family succession, while eldest sons assumed symbolic authority as heirs responsible for continuing the family line (Deuchler, 2020). Despite occupying a lower structural position within the family hierarchy, eldest daughters were frequently expected to undertake substantial domestic labor, care for younger siblings, and provide emotional support for parents and other family members. Their contributions remained largely invisible because they emphasized service and sacrifice rather than authority or recognition. This historical background helps explain why the eldest daughter occupies a distinctive position within Korean family culture and why her experiences become central to the narrative of *When Life Gives You Tangerines*.

Contemporary Korean society has experienced profound social and economic modernization, particularly since the late twentieth century. Women's educational attainment and labor force participation have increased considerably, accompanied by legal reforms promoting greater gender equality (Midha et al., 2018). Nevertheless, modernization has not entirely displaced traditional gender norms. Women continue to experience unequal divisions of domestic labor, persistent expectations surrounding marriage and motherhood, and cultural assumptions that family responsibilities should take precedence over personal aspirations (Lim et al., 2020). At the same time, movements such as *Escape the Corset* demonstrate growing resistance among Korean women toward restrictive beauty standards and patriarchal gender expectations, illustrating the continuing negotiation between traditional values and contemporary ideals (Robinson, 2025).

Similar transformations can be observed in the role of the eldest daughter within contemporary Korean families. Although daughters are increasingly recognized as important emotional supporters and caregivers, expectations surrounding family responsibility have not disappeared. Rather, these expectations have evolved. Recent studies indicate that eldest daughters continue to shoulder significant emotional responsibility, particularly in caring for aging parents and maintaining family relationships, even as traditional preferences for sons gradually decline (Lim-Soh et al., 2024; Choi & Nam, 2024). Modernization has therefore transformed the nature of eldest-daughter responsibility from unquestioned obligation toward more negotiated and emotionally driven forms of caregiving without eliminating the expectation itself.

Nevertheless, the expectations imposed upon eldest daughters remain distinct from those placed upon eldest sons. Within Confucian family traditions, eldest sons have historically been associated with family lineage, inheritance, ancestral rites, and symbolic authority. Their filial obligations are generally fulfilled through socially recognized positions within the family hierarchy. In contrast, eldest daughters are more commonly expected to provide emotional caregiving, domestic support, and the preservation of family harmony while receiving comparatively limited authority or recognition. Consequently, eldest daughters often negotiate more emotionally demanding responsibilities than eldest sons, balancing personal aspirations with expectations to preserve family stability and provide continuous emotional support (Chung, 2016). This unequal distribution of responsibility demonstrates that eldest-daughter obligation is not merely determined by birth order but also by gender.

The historical origins of these gendered family expectations are closely associated with Neo-Confucianism rather than New Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism refers to the philosophical tradition that developed during the Song dynasty and became institutionalized throughout Korea during the Joseon dynasty, where it profoundly influenced legal institutions, family organization, inheritance systems, and gender relations (Cheng, 2021; Liu, 2017). Through its emphasis on filial piety, hierarchical family order, and patrilineal descent, Neo-Confucianism established patriarchal norms that defined women's roles primarily in relation to family obligation and domestic responsibility. By contrast, New Confucianism emerged during the twentieth century as a modern intellectual movement seeking to reinterpret classical Confucian values within contemporary society rather than establishing the historical family structures themselves (Guo, 2023; Rošker, 2020). Because this study examines the historical and cultural foundations of eldest-daughter responsibility within Korean family life, Neo-Confucianism provides the more appropriate conceptual framework.

Building upon these historical developments, the formation of eldest-daughter responsibility cannot be separated from the influence of Neo-Confucian patriarchy in Korean society. Neo-Confucian philosophy institutionalized hierarchical family structures that emphasize filial piety, obedience, and gender-based divisions of responsibility. Within this system, women are commonly positioned as caregivers and emotional stabilizers within the household (Deuchler, 2021). Consequently, femininity becomes closely associated with sacrifice, emotional endurance, and responsibility for family welfare (Cho & LoCascio, 2018). These patriarchal values continue to shape gendered

expectations within Korean families by encouraging women to prioritize collective family interests over individual aspirations.

From the perspective of Social Role Theory, these expectations are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Eagly (1987) argues that social roles emerge through cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and socialization processes that prescribe appropriate behaviors for women and men. Within patriarchal societies influenced by Neo-Confucian values, women are consistently associated with nurturing, caregiving, and emotional responsibility, while men are more frequently linked to authority, leadership, and family succession. As a result, eldest daughters experience intensified expectations because they occupy both the position of women and firstborn children within hierarchical family structures. Gender Role Theory therefore provides an important framework for understanding how *When Life Gives You Tangerines* represents eldest-daughter responsibility and how audiences may interpret these representations through their own cultural and familial experiences.

The representation of eldest daughters in Korean dramas therefore becomes culturally significant because media texts actively participate in constructing social meanings regarding gender and family roles. According to Hall (1997), representation is not a passive reflection of reality, but a process through which meaning is socially constructed through language, narrative, and images. Media representations shape how audiences understand identity, responsibility, and social expectations. Feminist media scholars further argue that media often normalizes women's emotional labor and self-sacrifice as desirable feminine qualities (Gill, 2007). Thus, the portrayal of Yang Geum-myeong in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* can be understood as part of broader

ideological constructions surrounding femininity, family obligation, and gendered responsibility in Korean society.

Nevertheless, meaning does not solely reside within the media text itself. Reception theory within Cultural Studies emphasizes that audiences actively interpret and negotiate media meanings according to their social experiences and cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1980). Through the encoding/decoding model, Hall explains that audiences may adopt dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional readings toward representations embedded within media texts. Therefore, audiences are not passive consumers but active meaning-makers who may accept, reinterpret, or resist ideological messages represented in the drama.

This process of meaning negotiation becomes increasingly visible in contemporary digital culture. The development of participatory media platforms such as X enables audiences to publicly articulate emotional responses, personal experiences, criticism, and social interpretations related to media texts (Jenkins, 2006). Online discussions surrounding Korean dramas frequently extend beyond entertainment commentary into broader discussions about gender, family relationships, emotional trauma, and social expectations. Digital comments therefore function as discursive spaces where audiences collectively negotiate cultural meanings and connect fictional representations with lived experiences.

In discussions related to *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, many audiences explicitly identify themselves as eldest daughters and relate the drama to their own experiences within family structures. Expressions such as “as an eldest daughter” or discussions about emotional exhaustion, family pressure, and invisible responsibility

demonstrate how audience reception intersects with personal identity and social reality. This indicates that audience responses toward the drama are shaped not only by narrative engagement, but also by broader cultural understandings regarding gender and familial obligation.

Previous studies have explored women's representation, audience reception, and eldest daughter experiences from various perspectives. Oceanie et al. (2025) examined the representation of female identity and emotional healing in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*, while Riana and Kholil (2024) investigated Korean drama fans' perceptions of Korean culture through social media. Meanwhile, Purnamasari (2020) applied Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Theory to analyze audience reception of the film *Aladdin*, and Ciarico (2024) explored the lived experiences of parentified eldest daughters through qualitative interviews. Although these studies provide valuable insights into gender representation, audience interpretation, and eldest daughter experiences, they have not specifically examined how audiences decode the representation of the Korean eldest daughter (*k-jangnyeo*) in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* using Stuart Hall's Reception Theory. This study addresses that gap by focusing on audience decoding of eldest daughter responsibility within the context of Korean patriarchal family values.

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining how audiences construct, negotiate, or contest the representation of eldest-daughter responsibility in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* through comments posted on X. By integrating reception theory as the main theory, supported by representation theory, social role theory, neo-confucian values, this research aims to analyze how audiences decode gendered familial expectations represented in the drama. Ultimately, this study

contributes to broader discussions regarding media representation, gender ideology, and participatory digital culture by highlighting how meanings surrounding eldest-daughter responsibility are collectively constructed and negotiated within contemporary online discourse.

1.2 Research Question

How do audiences on X decode the representation of eldest daughter expectations in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* through dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional positions?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study is to analyse how audiences construct, negotiate, or contest the representation of eldest daughter expectations in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* within digital discourse on X.

1.4 Limitations of The Study

This study is limited to English-language public comments posted on X discussing the representation of eldest-daughter responsibility in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* (2025). The data was limited to comments collected within one year after the drama's release, from 07/03/2025 to 07/03/2026. The study focuses on audience interpretations expressed through emotional responses, personal experiences, agreement, negotiation, or resistance toward the representation of the eldest daughter character. This

research does not examine production processes, audience demographics, or full textual analysis of the drama.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how global audiences interpret the representation of the Korean eldest daughter (*k-jangnyeo*) in *When Life Gives You Tangerines*. By employing Stuart Hall's Reception Theory (Encoding/Decoding), supported by Representation Theory, Social Role Theory, and Neo-Confucian values, this study provides insights into how audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret and negotiate meanings of responsibility, sacrifice, filial obligation, and gender expectations through their reception of Geum-myeong's character. Furthermore, this research contributes to media, cultural, and gender studies by expanding scholarly discussions on the cross-cultural reception of Korean dramas and demonstrating how the culturally specific concept of *k-jangnyeo* is interpreted, negotiated, and recontextualized by global audiences through discussions on X (formerly Twitter) in contemporary digital spaces.

1.6 State of the Art

Current scholarship on Korean dramas has predominantly explored women's representation, gender identity, and emotional resilience. Research by Oceanie et al. (2025) demonstrates how *When Life Gives You Tangerines* constructs female identity and emotional healing through the experiences of its female characters, reflecting broader discussions on women's empowerment in Korean media. At the same time, audience

reception studies have widely employed Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to examine how audiences negotiate meanings in media texts. Purnamasari (2020), for example, showed that audiences actively interpret representations of women's freedom based on their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. These studies confirm the relevance of Hall's theoretical framework in understanding media representation and audience interpretation.

Beyond media studies, research on eldest daughters has mainly been situated within psychology and sociology. Nandana and Bismirty (2025) revealed that eldest daughters often experience parentification, emotional labour, and caregiving responsibilities shaped by patriarchal family structures. Meanwhile, studies on social media, such as Saraswati and Nurbaity (2021), have established X (formerly Twitter) as an important space where audiences participate in discussions, negotiate meanings, and express their identities through online interactions. Together, these studies demonstrate the growing interest in gender, family roles, audience interpretation, and digital participation.

Despite these developments, little attention has been given to the intersection of these four areas. Existing studies on *When Life Gives You Tangerines* have not specifically examined the representation of eldest-daughter responsibility, audience reception research has rarely focused on birth-order expectations and family obligations in Korean dramas, studies on eldest daughters remain centred on lived experiences rather than media representation, and research using X has primarily explored participatory culture instead of audience decoding. Accordingly, this study positions itself at the intersection of Korean drama representation, eldest-daughter responsibility, audience

reception, and social media discourse by examining how audiences on X decode the representation of eldest-daughter responsibility in *When Life Gives You Tangerines* through Stuart Hall's Reception Theory as the main theory, supported by Representation Theory, Social Role Theory, and Neo-Confucianism Values. This integration constitutes the novelty of the present research and extends the application of Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model to an underexplored issue in global media studies.

