



# REPRESENTATION OF THE GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR IN KOREAN WEB SERIES “LITTLE WOMEN”

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**Abstract:** The research paper analyses how the Korean web series "Little Women" represents the difference between the rich and the poor. The paper's main thesis explains how hegemonic institutions, such as certain organizations, family, and media, or in other terms the leisure class, generate social divisions and how their ideologies propagate spurious notions of what it means to live a luxurious lifestyle, covering up the treacherous situations. The paper starts off with a quick overview of the web series before moving on to its primary points. The concept of cultural hegemony by Gramsci and the theory of leisure class by Veblen are being used to explicate the central argument.

**Index Terms - Korean Society, The rich and the poor, Social inequality, Social class, Television series.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Little Women" is a South Korean television series with twelve episodes, directed by Kim Hee Won. It was produced by Studio Dragon and was released on September 3, 2022. The series is a loose adaptation of Louis May Alcott's novel of the same name Little Women. The television series though an adaptation has brought in a satisfactory and engaging turn to the story. The plot mainly revolves around the three sisters Oh In-ju, Oh In-Kyung and Oh In-hye. The three sisters belonging to a poor family gets involved in a case that pits them against the richest and most influential family in South Korea. The sisters were raised in abject poverty and remained so. The three sisters are involved with the family through three scenarios but later everything connects and brings them together against the rich family and their organization. The television series portrays the gap between the rich and the poor in a realistic manner, just as it exists in society in numerous forms. It also demonstrates the hegemonic control that the wealthy exercise over the poor and how, at times, the poor are easily swayed by the rich lifestyle.

The oldest sister Oh In-ju believes that money is the most important thing that can protect herself and her family. She fantasies about living a normal life like others. She becomes entangled in a case against the wealthiest family in South Korea after receiving a 70 billion won from her friend who is purportedly dead. Oh In-Kyung is the middle sister who works as a reporter for the OBN news station. She is ascertain to do the right things and money doesn't rule her life. She digs in to a mysterious case regarding a savings bank that involves the same family and an organization that is run by them. She further realizes how the media is in support of the organization and the wealthy and covers up or is hesitant to reveal the dark truths regarding the family. Oh In-hye is the youngest sister is a student at an arts high school. She befriends Park Jae-sang's daughter and the family uses her as a tool to give a bright future to their daughter. She is easily blinded by the lifestyle of the family and falls for the promises they give her. Later in the series instances arises which leads to the revelation of the fourth sister who died because the family couldn't afford medical treatment. Towards the end the three sisters joins hands and exposes the real picture of the family and the organization that runs under them.

The series discusses themes such as class, power, desperation, greed etc. The series shows how harshly the poor are treated. The three sisters are manipulated, used and threatened by the rich. This alludes to how the people of the lower levels of the social hierarchy are used as mere tools and puppets by the rich and the powerful. These points are being explicated in the paper using Theory of the Leisure Class by Thorstein Veblen and the concept of Cultural Hegemony put forward by Antonio Gramsci.

Veblen's "The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions" is a discourse on economics and social studies that critiques consumerism and extravagant consumption as social behaviors resulting from social stratification and the division of labour, two feudal-era social institutions that have persisted into the modern era.

As a result of Veblen's research, we have the concept of "Veblen good," a good which is coveted as its price increases and consumers tends to view it as a status symbol.

Hegemony is the term used to describe how one group rules over another group whose ways of life are considered inferior and how that group's political, economic, social, and cultural institutions do so. In short, cultural hegemony, or our unconscious way of

accepting things, is caused by enculturation, interactions with social agencies, and subjection to cultural behaviors and imagery—all of which match the paragons and standards of the ruling class.

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of “cultural hegemony” as a result of Karl Marx's claim that the majority belief in a society contemplates the paragons and objectives of the ruling class. According to Gramsci, the way that the consent to the rule of the dominant group is gained through the spread of objectives, reliance, preconditions, and values propagated by social agencies such as schools, churches, courts, and the media, among the rest in the society. Via these agencies, people are socialized into the conditions and propagandas of the dominant group. The group in command of these institutions exerts influence over the rest of society. Cultural hegemony is clearly manifested when the ‘others’ in the society begins to believe that the economic and social conditions of the society to be natural rather than the upshot of people with personal interests.

The series has a fragmented narrative which through alternative segments brings in a clear visual presence of the gap between the rich and the poor. Color is an important element in the web series which adds to the recurring motifs such the red shoes, blue orchids. Bright colors are being used throughout the series as well as in the introduction clip, which tells volumes about how the wealthy exercise power, widen the wealth gap, and entangle the poor in it. The series illustrates the division between the rich and the poor through the employment of certain symbols and signs.

The clothing that the characters in the story wear reveals a lot about their socioeconomic status. As there are noticeable distinctions shown between the wealthy and the poor in terms of the color of their clothes, color becomes a significant factor in this situation. The gap between the rich and the poor is in fact being demonstrated by this color difference. The Oh sisters are frequently seen wearing clothes in subdued colors. In-hye, the youngest sister, is typically depicted in uniform in the first few episodes. But later as she moves in with Park Jae-sang's family she is seen in different attires. Won Sang-ah dresses In-ju up in a black expensive attire as she wants In-ju to be with her as her shadow. After In-ju starts working for Won Sang-ah her clothing style seems to become different which is more solid and expensive looking.

In his research, Veblen claims that clothing is a reflection of material culture. Instead of shielding people from the elements in a consumer society, clothing helps to recognize the user as a person who belongs to a specific social class. Wearing clothing also demonstrates independence from economically productive occupations like farming and industry, which both require protective gears. Also, the symptomatic meaning of clothing suggests that the wearer is a member of the leisure class who is capable to afford new clothing when trends shift.

In-ju purchases herself expensive clothes to look presentable like the rich. In-ju is seen only wearing simple studded earring throughout the series except for when she visits Singapore for the International Orchid Auction competition, where she is gifted expensive earrings and bracelet by Choi Do-il and he says that people would expect her wear them because she has the status of a rich person there. In-Ju explains how winter coats are status symbol. She says how summer clothes don't really show how poor you are, but winter clothes are expensive.

There is an instance in the second episode where Jin Hwa-young is described as the team leader who wore the same clothes to work everyday and after that she is someone else who dresses impressively while she went for studying English and Software Development. She wore the same clothes to work so that she would look underprivileged to others. Compared to the co-workers at the office it is clearly visible how In-ju's clothing is less vibrant. Brightly colored clothing is frequently worn by other employees except for In-ju who is treated as an outcast at the office. This itself generates the impression that less colorful clothing is less expensive or even cheap. If a material object is accepted into the canon of respectable waste by the leisure class and is deemed either beautiful or deserving of ownership for oneself, it is then said to be a product of ostentatious consumerism. Thus, obtaining such a thing for the lower classes turns into a practice in economic imitating the leisure class. An object made of precious metal and gemstones is a popular possession than one made of less expensive materials. This is because a high price can pass for beauty and appeal to the consumer's social prestige.

In-ju in the second episode recalls how Jin Hwa-young asks her not to carry replica bags to work as it makes her look poor and obsessed with money. Accessories that are included as a part of the garment are also significant components that illustrate the gap. The characters' footwear choices, particularly their heels, reveal a lot about their financial standing. The fur coat owned by Won Sang-ah which she used to dress Jin Hwa-young after murdering her also is an expensive attire that is made of expensive material and are affordable only to the higher classes. Won Sang-ah passes on her expensive used clothes and shoes to Jin Hwa-young. The black heel with jewels which is described to be owned by only three people in Korea is gifted to Jin-Hwa-young and later passed on to In-ju. Veblen items are high-end, designer products with a distinct brand character. They rarely appear in stores since they are so highly sought-after. Customers see them as being more valuable because of their higher pricing. The heels alone changes the vision of In-ju's social status. Despite of her wearing in expensive clothes, the particular heel brings in an image that she belongs to the wealthy class.

Food is a significant component that highlights the disparity between the rich and the poor. The story opens with In Hye's mother boiling eggs for her and her friends in place of a cake for her birthday because her family could not afford it. In-ju can be seen eating boiled eggs for meals when she is by herself. When Jin Hwa or Choi Do-il are with In-ju, she is seen eating costly cuisine like steak at upscale places and she is intrigued by how it tastes. This demonstrates how she cannot buy such meals on her own. In-ju and her sister In-kyung can be seen consuming an expensive ice cream, but they subsequently admit that they only bought one and received a second one for free. Later, when In-ju receives the two billion won following Jin Hwa's passing away, she buys the same pricey ice cream in bulks.

The residences of Hyo-rin and In-hye clearly show a distinction. In addition, Hyo-rin's house has a mansion-like appearance with adequate lighting, larger number of rooms, separate kitchen, workstation, dining area, etc., all of which are frequently emphasized by accessories in vibrant colors. In-hye, on the other hand, resides in a roof-top unit of an apartment with blocked windows and a table that serves as an ant highway. The three sisters share the only two rooms in the apartment. They share a kitchen and dining area. When compared to Hyo-rin's home, the lighting and color scheme used in the residence are rather muted. Hyo-rin's basement floor is noticeably larger than In-hye's entire house. A mansion with well-designed interiors is also the home of the great aunt of the Oh-sister. The apartment that In-ju wants to purchase from her great aunt is also very roomy. Great aunt calls the apartment a place where one can start from scratch even after losing everything. When compared to the Oh-sisters' home, Ha Jong-ho's house has more room and light. The houses of Jin-Hwa and the Oh sisters are smaller, more cramped, and crumbling, with easily breakable doors. The disparity between the rich and the poor is plainly shown by these houses.

Paintings and arts is yet another significant element in the series. In-hye's paintings reveal a lot about the difference that exists between the wealthy and the poor. In-hye states that she succeeds in painting a realistic portrayal of Hyo-rin because she puts herself in the shoes of Hyo-rin, who travelled to many countries and visited museums to view great works of art. But In-hye paints as herself in ominous scenes that frequently reflect her deepest anxieties. It portrayed the feelings she had been carrying around with her throughout her life. These paintings also alluded to their fourth sister, who passed away from a lack of medical attention. Moreover, In hye describes her desire to depict the lineage of a renowned noble family and further states how Hyo-rin and her parents looks noble to her.

The orchids are a recurring motif in the web series. The blue orchid, sometimes known as the ghost orchid, was introduced to Korea by soldiers returning from the Vietnam War. The orchid is reputed to induce hallucinations. This reflects the nature of the wealthy and those in power who creates hallucinations and manipulates others to obtain what they want. The soldiers initially carried the orchids to South Korea because of its hallucinogenic properties, which relieved their agony and made it easier for them to travel home once their duty was completed and they had been abandoned. Won Sang-ah's father founded the Jeongran society to aid others from less fortunate backgrounds and provide for their children's education and made the blue orchid the symbol of the Jeongran society. Later Park Jae-sang and Wang-sa takes over the organization and begins to use it as a tool for making money and murdering people.

Another important orchid that is being discussed is the Princess orchid which is also known as the "Princess of Thieves" which depicts Oh In-ju or the poor in general. In the third episode, In-Kyung describes how she was treated as a thief even though she didn't steal anything. She was called so for just being poor. The orchid hence represents the poor in the series. The journals that were written regarding the princess orchids said that "in order to make it bloom, it needs a few days of cold mornings." This shows how the poor have to endure the difficulties under the dominant to reach a better place. Jin Hwa states that once it blooms it will outshine all others in beauty which could mean how these people reach places through struggles and this makes them deserving.

When assessing the wealth gap, money is both a crucial and the most relevant factor. In-ju talks about how the money that was laundered caused her to kill herself and the people she cares about. The series does a good job of capturing the stress and panic that money can induce in a person. Won Sang-ah and Park Jae-sang are distraught when Jin Hwa steals and launders their money. In-ju experiences stress and problems as a result of the same money at the same time. Despite her desire to live a wealthy lifestyle, she is uncertain of how to use her wealth and is anxious about it. In-ju purchases all the cosmetics and skincare items she has ever wanted. She uses the money to purchase a lot of ice cream. She gives In-hye cash so she can buy snacks for herself and her friends, something she was unable to do before. She believed that the only way to give her sisters a different existence was by having more money.

Pecuniary emulation, or trying to outperform a wealthy person's socioeconomic standing, is the phrase used to characterize such efforts. According to Veblen, what drives the evolution of lifestyle in a society is the struggle for material success that individuals engage in order to achieve a higher status. Plebian imitate high-status members of their socioeconomic class by buying overpriced brands that are believed to be of higher quality and, therefore, of a higher social class in order to acquire, maintain, and earn more social status within their social class. People acquire 'Veblen goods' in an effort to raise their social status, despite the availability of goods and services that are perceived as being lax and hence of a lower social class. In a clientele society, the businessman was a new member of the leisure class. He was a primitive who, by managing supply and demand for the same things among the social groups and their strata at varied rates, exploited his strength and competitive talents to increase profits. In-joo wants to purchase an apartment, get a new position, learn English, and obtain her accounting certification. All these would let her live a life like the wealthy with a better social status in the society.

The way In-ju is handled at work is yet another crucial aspect that highlights the inequality. According to Jin Hwa, people only identify with others who share their circumstances and that disdain is an emotion of the rich for the impoverished. Because of her unusual economic background, she is viewed as an outcast at her workplace. When she is spotted going to upscale places with Jin-Hwa or Choi Do-il, she is frequently criticized.

In addition to highlighting the disparity, the web series shows how hegemonic institutions like the family, media and organizations create social separation and how those in authority may influence and force the underprivileged to work for them. The youngest sister In-hye is used by Park Jae Sang's family to facilitate a good future for their daughter. In-hye is manipulated through promises to send her for higher studies abroad along with Hyo-rin. She is made to believe that she is given this opportunity through the scholarship given by the Park Jae sang foundation. Jae sang and Won Sang-ah are seen extremely frustrated when their employees failed to do detailed check on In-hye's family background to make sure she has no one to speak for. The Jeongran society or the International Orchid society that was started by Won Sang-ah's father takes in people and children from poor family with the promise to take them to higher places from rock bottom. But when the organization comes under Park Jae-sang and Won Sang-ah began to use it for taking people suitable enough for their needs and job. These people were made to work for the organization in different areas such as media, schools, for managing their accounts and wealth etc. These people are eventually persuaded to die by the very organizers when they feel their role has come to an end or when they retorts against them. This ensures that their secrets remains intact.

Gramsci in "The Study of Philosophy", explained concept of 'common sense', which is the predominant notion about society and the position of an individual in it. An example of 'common sense' is the notion of "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps," which means one may succeed reasonably with hard work i.e., for the belief of succeeding through hard work and dedication, capitalism and social systems must be legitimate. So, financially successful individuals have done things in fair and decent manner and individuals with financial hardship deserves poverty. This type of 'common sense' imprints that social and economic mobility is the responsibility an individual alone. This cloaks the cultural and class imbalances inherent in the capital system.

This dominant "common sense" is clearly depicted in most of the conversations that takes place between the characters. The rich people risk their capital while the poor must risk their lives to get what they want. In-joo says to In-kyung how people die when they do not have money and that people die when they are poor. They would have had a very different life if they had enough money. Many instances are present in the series which shows how the poor finds it difficult to live without money and often have to sacrifice many things for livelihood, such as how In-ju finds it difficult to pay for treatment when In-hye falls sick and when Park Jae-sang's employees catch her with the 2 million won. She agrees to get beaten 10 times so that she could get the money. Park Jae-sang uses this instance to promote his social status by paying for In-hye's treatment under the name of his foundation. In a conversation between Choi Do-il and In ju, Choi Do-il mentions about the main ethics agreed upon by Jin-hwa and Choi Do-il was that nothing in this



world is more sacred than money. Wong-sa in the 8th episode in a conversation mention that it was In ju's fault that she was born poor and that she dared to try so hard and come up. This is the explanation received by In-ju when Won Sang-ah threatens to kill her.

Media is yet another powerful institution that works for the hegemonic or the dominant. The head of OBN news and their reporter Mari belongs to the Jeongran organization and works for maintaining the status of the family intact in the society. They purposefully redirects In-kyung to covering news that would make her give up. They give no support and are completely hesitant to In-Kyung when she conducts a research about the Bobe bank issue which involves Park Jae Sang. The HTN media on the other hand helps In-Kyung to bring out the true story despite the risks behind it. This shows how the institutions exerts power and domination over certain fields to cover up their wrong doings.

The online series depicts the various worlds that civilization is creating for the privileged and the destitute through lifestyle choices and crimes. Housing, clothing, food, and many other factors also play a role in determining the difference between the rich and the poor, in addition to capital. The rich and the poor now belong to separate social classes as a result of these discrepancies. This essay primarily focuses on the socioeconomic classes that the gap has produced in the Korean society as it is shown in the web series. The series accurately depicts social separation through its narrative style, setting, plot, and props.

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