

Special Feature

It All Leads to Education: Korean  
Motherhood, Patriarchy, and Class  
Consciousness in the TV Drama,  
*Eligible Wife (Anaewi Jagyeok)*

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What do you need to be an eligible wife in South Korea? You need to be able to send your children to a prestigious university. What do you need to be an eligible mother? You are off to a good start if you send your children to a prestigious university. What do you need to be an eligible daughter-in-law? You need to send your parents-in-law's grandchildren to a prestigious university.

This is the education-centered role and desire structure of a middle-class family in Gangnam, as portrayed in the TV drama, *Eligible Wife* (*Anaeui jagyeok*).

*Eligible Wife* was the latest work of writer Jeong Seongju, best known for her 2001 drama, *Ajumma*. The 16-episode series ran from February to April of 2012, every Wednesday and Thursday at 9 p.m., on JTBC. Among other general service cable channel programs,<sup>1</sup> whose viewer percentage barely reached 1 percent, *Eligible Wife* became the only program to have a viewer percentage exceeding 4 percent<sup>2</sup>: it gained popularity among women over 30 and was praised as “a masterpiece drama.” Using a reportage-like realistic portrayal, it spotlights two of the most controversial issues for married women: infidelity and children's education. The drama is also set in Daechi-dong,<sup>3</sup> South Korea's private education hotspot.

Jeong Seongju's most controversial previous drama was *Ajumma* which is Korean term for middle-age married women; the term is unflattering and derogatory.<sup>4</sup> *Ajumma* portrayed the growth of a high school-graduate married

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1. Cable TV channels that can broadcast all types of programs, including news broadcasts.
2. The final episode reached an average of 4.49 viewer percentage (AGB Nielson Media Research, households within Seoul Metropolitan Area with cable TV), and the most-viewed minute reached 6.013 percent. A drama production insider mentioned that “4 percent on a general service channel is like 30 percent on a public broadcasting channel” (Lee 2012).
3. Daechi-dong is a place that produces culturally influential “education expert mothers” and provides high-quality private education. It is the place that holds the key to entering good middle schools, high schools, and universities, and revolves around mothers and their children. Furthermore, the area comprises the cornerstone of Gangnam real-estate prices that allow education expert moms to succeed financially as well. Kim Seonyeong (2012) describes it as “a place where the three Korean evils, discrimination based on academic background, classism, and familism, are reproduced”; this entire contradiction is compressed in the frame of the “Daechi-dong mom” (2012).
4. TV drama series that was broadcast from September 18<sup>th</sup> 2000 to February 27<sup>th</sup> 2001 at 9:55 p.m. on Mondays and Tuesdays on MBC. It received Best TV Drama Award in the Paeksang Arts Awards.

woman who escapes patriarchal oppression to start a new empowered life, and it was popular amongst women of that age group. “You’re such a Jang Jingu (name of the main character’s nasty and hypocritical professor husband!)” began to be used as a severe insult, and the main character shouting “I’m divorced!” after winning her divorce suit was a monumental scene that changed “the scarlet letter” that divorce was represented among South Korean women into a path to liberation and victory.

Unlike *Ajumma*, which had clear themes such as good triumphing over evil and the growth of its main character, *Eligible Wife* has a very complex class system and gendered reality. The show’s balanced treatment of the controversial topics of mothers and their infidelity was crucial in garnering praise as “a masterpiece drama.” By portraying infidelity in perspective, the topic, which could easily provoke attacks against women, became an opportunity for introspection, and revealed the raw structure of numerous relationships: male and female, husband and wife, mother and father, and parents-in-law and daughter-in-law. Education and motherhood, as portrayed by Jeong Seongju, are also complex. The themes are more morally clear-cut than her treatment of infidelity, but nevertheless, the drama shows that there is no simple solution in South Korea’s complex educational environment. Even within the “educational struggle,” which is at the forefront of South Korea’s class strife, some children have much less trouble adapting than their more unhappy counterparts. Some are in fact satisfied with the new paradigm of education. It is the same with the mothers. They are confident and intellectual. As they take on the role of educational expert within the family, wives appear less oppressed than before in terms of patriarchy .

On the other hand, while *Eligible Wife* gives an unflinching portrait of the truth of education and motherhood, it does not offer any alternative values or logic to change the status quo. On the contrary, it shows that in various respects, it is not only almost impossible for anybody to be free from the education-centered class-desire structure but also difficult to judge the married woman’s given role as the main actor in education as either good or bad. The key to the series’ realism lies in the fact that no matter how critical its description of South Korea’s educational reality is or how absurd and extreme the situations are it portrays, viewers cannot deny that nobody can escape the imperatives of South Korea’s educational culture.

Park So Jin (2007) interpreted married women’s increased aggressiveness

in the field of education to be related to Korean society's need to catch up with neoliberal changes. She argues that these women, whose behavior can no longer be interpreted as simply a result of a certain desire structure or an indirect overcompensation of their needs, in fact represent a family-level strategic choice made in order to keep up with neoliberal educational policy changes. Married women obtain social citizenship through their role in education, and this is in part because it is widely recognized that this type of citizenship is the best strategy for women to adapt to neoliberal education. Jeong Seongju adds to this by showing that nobody is able to thoroughly criticize or take responsibility for the South Korean class system, which is both reproduced and yet still believed to be reversible through education. In this aspect, Jeong's drama is particularly useful for interpreting the desires and identity of South Korean society.

Academically, TV series are not as widely analyzed as other artistic media, such as movies or art (Yoo 2010). Mini-series not only often have challengingly lengthy scripts but are also usually repetitive and unimaginative in terms of subjects and situations because their priority is to garner high ratings: this is why they are in many cases simply not complex enough to become the subject of analysis. Also, since they are easy to understand and viewer-friendly in the first place, the analysis and guide of an expert is often unnecessary.

On the other hand, TV dramas directly portray the spirit of their viewers and are especially sensitive to public feedback (Lee 2006). They are also extremely influential. During a given drama's airtime, a large number of viewers laugh and cry together, and their values, the way they relate to others, and even their fashion choices are influenced in the process (Choi 2012). This is precisely why Kim Suhyeon's portrayal of homosexuality in *Life is Beautiful*<sup>5</sup> had as much of an enlightening effect on its viewers as it did in sparking opposition: it was influential, and this influence was threatening to some. Viewers not only actively express their opinions but have also begun to make requests regarding the development of the storyline, and this interactivity affects ratings. This is an important reason why completing the series before airing is as of yet seldom used. Internet viewer forums are very dynamic. In the world of TV dramas, the slightest lapse in logic or lack of truth immediately triggers posts and discussions

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5. Korean drama, 63 episodes, broadcast from March 20<sup>th</sup> 2010 to November 7<sup>th</sup> 2010 on SBS, screenplay by Kim Suhyeon and directed by Jeong Eulyeong.

by thousands or even tens of thousands of people.

TV dramas are therefore a good media to analyze when it comes to studying the overall interactions between the drama itself, the writer's tendencies, viewer reaction, and press reaction: from this, we can identify contemporary and realistic desires and values. The dramas of Jeong Seongju are particularly worth analyzing, as her meticulous writing and believable plot development induce earnest viewer and press reaction. Jeong Seongju pertinently portrayed the desires and hypocrisy of contemporary elites, and utilized socially controversial topics (such as internet gambling, sexual harassment, and student suicide) as tools to enhance the sense of reality. Her texts are therefore a good source to analyze contemporary issues, desires and problems. For the analysis, I used 455 posts from the internet viewer forum, press reviews and interview articles of Jeong Seongju for additional reference.

## Plot

*Eligible Wife* portrays the life of Yun Seorae (hereafter Seorae), a woman who is married to Han Sangjin. They have a boy named Gyeol. Han Sangjin is a TV reporter and anchor who was raised in the main educational district of Gangnam and graduated from a prestigious university: his father worked as a high-level government official after passing two major national examinations (*gosi*), and his mother graduated from a prestigious women's university. Seorae, however, who married after graduating art school and working at a broadcasting station, comes from a poor family: her mother is in a nursing home because of her Alzheimer's disease and her sister, who had never been interested in academics, is delivering side dishes to the Daechi-dong after graduating cooking college. Seorae's son, Gyeol, had severe atopic allergy. She spends several years immersed in the treatment of her son. As his atopic allergy begins to get better and his entrance to international middle school becomes an issue, her husband and parents-in-law strongly request that she officially enter "the education scene."

Seorae, who moves to Daechi-dong with the financial help of her husband's family, both interests and bewilders other mothers because of her unorthodox methods of preparing her child for international middle school. However, her son gets the lowest score on an entrance exam for a preparatory

academy to prepare for international middle school; Seorae approaches Mrs. Hong, the head of the academy, through her sister's "housekeeper-network," and her honest plea touches Mrs. Hong's heart. Mrs. Hong highly appreciates the child's non-Daechi-dong upbringing and accepts him into the academy, to Seorae's excitement.

However, Seorae finds herself strongly attracted to Mrs. Hong's dentist husband and the two end up falling in love. Her husband and sister-in-law find out, and Seorae is forced to leave the house and to provide alimony. Her son is kicked out of the preparatory academy, fails to enter international middle school, enters a public middle school instead, and receives strong pressure from his father and grandparents to enter a prestigious high school. Seorae works night shifts at a restaurant in order to pay alimony and provide for her son after the divorce. Her lover, Kim Taeoh (hereafter Taeoh), also divorced, tells her that being a good parent does not necessarily mean being a rich parent, and wants for them to live together and be honest to their children. Meanwhile, Seorae's ex-husband Han Sangjin becomes unemployed after being forced to quit his reporter job due to complaints about his sexual harassment of female employees. Her sister-in-law Han Myeongjin, whose husband's family owns an influential large law firm, finds out that her husband Jo Hyeontae is living with a lover with whom he even had a son. Han Myeongjin, who does not want to get divorced, has to endure the entirely unapologetic ways of her husband. Seorae and Taeoh face problems from the first day they move in together because of ex-husband and ex-wife issues, respectively; however, they recognize that this is to be their new way of life and decide to live together and respect each other's space at the same time.

## Who Has False Class Consciousness?

The most common topic that appeared in the titles of press reviews of *Eligible Wife* was its exposure of "middle class false consciousness."

*Eligible Wife* meticulously portrays the collective hysterics of mothers obsessed with the task of educating their children in order to protect from falling in the social ladder, and sharply exposes false consciousness of the middle class, symbolically represented by Daechi-dong. (Editors 2012)

The soon to end *Eligible Wife* completely exposes middle class false consciousness: Through its portrayal of a middle class family living in Daechi-dong, *Eligible Wife* both reveals Korean society's competition-oriented reality and the false consciousness of the middle class, gaining heated reactions from viewers. (Park 2002)

*Eligible Wife* dissects Korean society with a sharp scalpel: *Eligible Wife* unflinchingly reveals Korean middle class false consciousness and its innermost desires. (K. Lee 2012)

Seorae's husband and his family, as well as his sister's family, are often portrayed as epitomes of false consciousness in media critiques and viewer reviews. However, the charm of Jeong's dramas is that false consciousness is not simplistically portrayed. False consciousness is a Marxist term defined as having a consciousness that misrepresents and distorts reality, due to the interests of the dominating class in a class society (Ko 2000). False consciousness generally refers to a consciousness that is detached from one's economic, sexual, or racial status; it appears that the critics who brought up false consciousness interpreted that the aforementioned characters pretended to be politically correct while actually having entirely discriminative values and desires. However, even if we interpret false consciousness more comprehensively, it is difficult to agree with the idea that *Eligible Wife* exposed the false consciousness of the middle class. Kang Junman (2011) said that "[t]he fiercest class strife in Korea is not the labor movement, but the university entrance war" (372). Whether they be categorized as the middle class, the upper class, or the elite, it is clear that Seorae's husband, his family, his sister's family, and the mothers of the children at the preparatory academy, who have been judged to be the victims of false consciousness, in fact completely understand their class interests and have a corresponding class consciousness. In an education-obsessed society, they clearly understand the education-centered power structure. In particular, Seorae's parents-in-law (a former high-level public officer and his wife) cannot be called wealthy, and completely understand where their social status comes from. "When you don't have any special talents, studying is the only way to go. As I always say, it takes a second to become a loser" (Episode 4), says Seorae's mother-in-law assuredly.

Seorae's husband's claim that he was a theorist in the student movement for democracy or that everybody envied him is bluff rather than false consciousness. The gap between the views that he expresses as a reporter and his

actual inner desires are probably closer to an intellectual's hypocrisy than it is to false consciousness. The way his family kicked out and harassed Seorae after her affair was their interpretation of average social reaction in similar situations, and although it showed their discriminatory prejudices it did not demonstrate false consciousness.

The characters who show class and gender false consciousness are actually Seorae and Taeh, who ironically represent living a truthful life. Seorae describes to her husband how she felt about her marriage as follows:

How could I not know after working at the same place with you for over two years? You were in the reporting department and I was in the arts department, and I knew how badly you acted with female employees. So it felt weird when you said it was me you chose in the end, but I went with it because you had such a good background. You were the essence of the 8<sup>th</sup> educational district,<sup>6</sup> your father was a high-level public official, your mother graduated from a prestigious women's university, and your sister married into the family of Korea's best jurists. That was so appealing to me that I got married to you even though it was just wrong when I looked at what kind of person you were. That was my priority in marriage, out of all things. (Episode 9)

Seorae was so fueled by the desire to climb the social ladder that she married based on her husband's background even though she disliked his character. She probably thought that marriage would automatically bring her the social title she desired. The full realization that she could only be part of that class after successfully educating her child probably came after she moved to Daechi-dong.

It appears that her desire to maintain her social class through education was as strong as her desire to enhance it through marriage. She cares for her child's emotional development, as can be seen in her efforts to go camping with him and identify plants and animals, as well as her initial opposition to the idea of sending him to an international middle school. However, at the same time, she has prepared her child's English to be sufficiently competitive within the international middle school preparatory academy. Unless the mother's English skills are excellent, this is an almost impossible feat to accomplish without

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6. Another name for Gangnam district



considerable investment and effort. Park and Abelmann (2004) argue that command of English is a symbol of class in Korea. It has not only a practical use but also a formidable symbolic significance, and it serves as an important motivation for mothers to become educational managers. Regardless of Seorae's thoughts about international middle school or her English education methods, it is highly probable that she has always had ideas of preparing her son for entering prestigious universities, just like her husband and his family. She just had a different path in mind. It is difficult not to desire a good education for one's child while living in South Korean society in the first place, and she was the kind of person who married based on those standards. The only difference is that she does not accept it. She continuously argues that she is somehow different. Below is her conversation with her sister-in-law's friend who is proven to be the lover of her sister-in-law's husband, Kang Eunju, whom she met for information about international middle school.

Yun Seorae. His studying habits are pretty good. These days it's all about independent studying, you know. I wasn't thinking of actually sending him to that the preparatory academy (*hakwon*), even if he passed the exam. It was just to see his abilities.

Kang Eunju. If that's the case there isn't much I can do for you. I've always been completely dependent on private education. (Episode 2)

Other nearby mothers listening to this conversation have bewildered expressions. This is probably because Seorae's argument is rather inconsistent, coming from a mother who has moved all the way to Daechi-dong, the private education mecca, and had her son take an international middle school preparatory academy entrance exam. Even putting Daechi-dong aside, Seorae's claims of being somehow different by teaching her son all by herself is not altogether convincing. Although she says it is because of her child's atopic allergy, is it advisable for a mother to home-school her child who also attends school on all subjects? Her method may be more problematic than that of parents who did nothing but send their children to school. Seorae's methods require more obsessive effort than private education. Being as difficult as it is for a mother to teach her child while maintaining her calm, succeeding in being a good teacher probably means that there is a desperate motivation for education. The fact that the mother teaches her child herself also does not necessarily

mean that the child will be able to study independently, while using private education does not necessarily deprive a child of such abilities. On the contrary, the mother's personal deficiencies could hurt the child and make him/her even more dependent. Of course, Gyeol is portrayed as polite and understanding. It is, however, unclear whether this is due to the lack of private education or his hardships from atopic allergy.

Putting the actual effectiveness of Seorae's homeschooling aside, it appears that in any case she intends to raise her child competitively, and that this intent existed even before moving to Daechi-dong. She probably also wanted to be recognized by her husband's family for having raised her child successfully. The only difference is that her expression of class desire was not as obvious as others, but rather a little hypocritical?

This analysis is not intended to criticize Seorae. It is simply necessary to point out that the reality of South Korean society's false consciousness regarding education is that almost everybody has the same dreams and goals, in spite of class limitations. Seorae's parents and sister-in-law made it possible for her to aim for international middle school entrance, and it would have been possible had it not been for her affair. However, many families from different social classes who severely lack the assets necessary for educational success also believe that they stand a chance in education, the area with the fiercest class competition in South Korean society. In a study that analyzed the difference in educational fervor among different social classes at elementary school entrance, middle school entrance, and high school entrance in South Korea and Japan, it was shown that although Japan showed clear difference in level of educational ambitions among classes from elementary school, South Korea has an almost identical level of educational ambition among different classes at the elementary level (Nakamura 2005). The way that women in lower social classes believe that they can produce similar results as those in higher classes in the intensely class-sensitive and competitive field that is education, is, I argue, the most symbolic form of class false consciousness.

A year after her divorce, Seorae begins to do some illustrations for a publishing company and publishes a children's book with her illustrations.<sup>7</sup> She even works night shifts as a waitress cleaning dishes at a restaurant, saying it is

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7. She earned 3 million Korean won in total in royalties.

to earn enough to live independently with her son. If she, a former housewife in her 40s without any stable professional job, truly believed that she could earn enough to create a life for her child that her husband or the world would consider fitting just by trying, that would be a clear sign of her naiveté in regard to the hard reality of social class. It is possible for her to think that she should do anything, considering her desperation and her guilt regarding her son. However, the way she believes that she can change her situation by working as a waitress although she has debts—and at the same time spends little time with her lover Taeoh, who is the only real solution to the situation—is hard to understand. One could possibly argue that judging from her unrealistic optimism about the socio-economic status of divorcees and her refusal to accept reality, Seorae is in fact victim to false consciousness. Of course, she retrieves her middle-class status through marriage in the end.

Seorae's lover Taeoh is another character who is unstable within his own social class. A former participant in the student movement, he works as a dentist and his wife runs a successful academy in Daechi-dong. He lives a very unmaterialistic life: for example, although he is a dentist, he does not own a car and often rides a bicycle. He balances his wife's materialistic ways by practicing more virtue-oriented activities such as providing free dental care for the underprivileged. While his wife wears all kinds of expensive fur coats and tries to raise her children as the "noblesse," he usually reacts with silent acceptance rather than directly expressing his values and opinions; his way of retaliation is taking off the brand names from the designer clothes his wife bought him. At the same time, he drives the expensive, eco-unfriendly foreign Jeep that his wife bought him, eats at expensive restaurants, and lives in Daechi-dong Tower Palace, one of most expensive residences in South Korea. He seems to fit the category of "the Gangnam leftist" (the Korean equivalent of Limousine Liberal), but not quite. The Gangnam leftist usually does not feel conflicted over the combination of his/her wealth and progressive political views (Kang 2011), while Taeoh seems repressed and depressed. This is possibly because his wife's financially domineering position has hurt his masculinity, or may be because the fact that his wife is making a living at the cutting edge of private education has hurt his pride as a member of the social elite.

## Obtaining Social Citizenship and Familial Citizenship through Education

What is remarkable about writer Jeong Seongju's description of motherhood in *Eligible Wife* is the fact that she does not portray the educational obsession of Gangnam middle class housewives as the result of misdirected motherhood caused by uncompensated personal deficiencies. Most of the reactions on internet viewer forums were about how similar the education scene in the drama was to reality, and very few ethically judged the mothers as good or bad. This is probably because of the social agreement regarding the futility of criticizing individual actions when it comes to education, as well as the fact that most viewers share similar desires. However, the most important reason why mothers did not become the subject of criticism was that the educational fervor of the father and grandparents was also dealt with in depth.

Kim Kyeonggeun (2005) analyzed that the educational fervor of Korean society is dominated by "solidarity derived from the idea that family members are bound by a common destiny."

Educational choices in South Korean society are mostly based on parents rather than their children....Since the social success of one family member has a considerable impact on the social status of other members, the hopes and needs of parents have an immense influence on important educational choices regarding their children. (208)

In *Eligible Wife*, education was not only the responsibility of the parents but was also related to the grandparents' pride and social status. This is the combination of Korean familism and class consciousness through education. Behind the obsessive concentration of the mother on child education were the desires and intervention of other family members. The moment when Seorae's familial expulsion was finalized by Han Sangjin and his family was when they saw Mrs. Hong's email informing them that Gyeol was expelled from the international middle school preparatory academy. The most unacceptable action for a mother was to hinder her child's educational future, which is why this event caused the strongest emotional fury from the husband's family. This is a scene that clearly demonstrates the idea of "a familial shared destiny" and shows how a married woman's belonging to a family is decided by her functions, abilities, and

devotion as an educator.

An interesting aspect to consider is the fact that traditional family values and role structures, increasingly overlooked due to the importance of child education, are being altered and recreated. The image of the faithful wife trying to make her husband into a professor or suffering from supporting her husband's family from *Ajumma* (2001) cannot be found in *Eligible Wife* (2012). This is an important reason why the fact that education is the sole standard of a married woman's familial belonging cannot be simplified as being female oppressive. Demands for traditional daughter-in-law duties from Seorae's parents-in-law are almost absent in *Eligible Wife*. Most household chores are accomplished by housekeepers or side-dish delivery services. Seorae not only receives little demand regarding household chores but is also considerably dependent on her sister, who runs a side-dish shop, when it comes to cooking. Her parents-in-law, though they may have direct requests regarding education, respect her space in other respects. In fact, it is Seorae's mother-in-law that is more concerned about invasion of privacy when Seorae's family moves to Daechi-dong. Below is the conversation shared by Seorae and her mother-in-law when the former brings rice cakes the day her family moves in:

Mother-in-law. I was thinking about calling to ask if I could visit.

Yun Seorae. I should visit you first. I've brought rice cakes.

Mother-in-law. We should make rules about this. The closer we live, the more we should try to respect each other's privacy.

Yun Seorae. Sorry. I should have called first.

Mother-in-law. It's fine; it's only the first day. But from now on let's call each other first. You know I don't pick up when I'm reading. This evening your father-in-law and I both have plans. Tell your husband to make a visit at night.

Yun Seorae. Okay. We'll bring Gyeol to say hello.

Mother-in-law. Yeah, whatever's comfortable. (Episode 2)

Although the mother-in-law's attitude is to some extent related to her wish to indulge in online gambling without being disturbed, she is in any case sufficiently expressing her respect of each other's privacy and promising to refrain from making any inappropriate requests to her daughter-in-law.

Seorae's husband, because it seems likely that his child will enter international middle school and Seorae is friendly enough with Mrs. Hong to

accompany her to camp, is confident that they have made a good entry into the education scene. He says, “I should tell the folks that they should try not to take too much of your time. I’ll work hard too. Gyeol, let’s just eat *ramyeon*<sup>8</sup> tonight—your mom’s tired” (Episode 5).

This attitude is unusual for someone who was usually extremely selfish and inconsiderate towards his wife. Respect for one’s wife is created through educational success, and traditional daughter-in-law and wife duties can be overlooked for the sake of children’s education.

For Korean women, who increasingly utilize education as an important tool in being part of familial solidarity, child education is becoming a good excuse to escape duties as a daughter-in-law and intervention from parents-in-law. Usually starting from middle school, their child’s private education schedule can excuse them from missing holidays or family events. It is an effective means of escaping the much-hated holiday chores and reducing daughter-in-law duties. Of course, they have to withstand criticism if they fail to yield good results. However, even so, the daughter-in-law’s duties that have already reduced through time do not necessarily become stronger as a result. The idea of supporting one’s husband is diminished because of the looming importance of education. Being “a good wife” has lost its importance compared to being “a wise mother.” Husband and wife conflicts are sometimes even put on hold when the mother takes the children abroad to study English (a family arrangement popularly dubbed Goose Family). This phenomenon is also confirmed in a study of Park Hyekyeong (2008). She explains that a crucial characteristic of the life of a middle-class married woman is that as the importance of the mother’s educational support and management activities for her children increases, everyday chores have been increasingly simplified.

The question of social citizenship also enters the picture. Because social desire for child education is considerable, succeeding in this endeavor makes one a respected member of society. The expertise of these successful mothers is even at times used to fuel “the tutor mom” profession. Tutor moms are paid around 3 to 4 million won (3,000 to 4,000 US dollars) a month to manage a child along with the child’s mother. This is how Seorae’s sister-in-law, the drama’s main education information source, puts it:

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8. A popular fast food in South Korea

Tutoring fees are separately paid. They aren't exactly teachers. To put it simply, you pay them to do what you (Gyeol's mom) have been doing. Schoolwork is done separately, and tutor moms do the general study planning. They're usually used by wealthy professionals or daughter-in-laws of large company owning families. (Episode 10)

Kim Hiju (2012) argues that “the drama, by showing how easily Seorae could be replaced by housekeepers or ‘tutor moms,’ brings up the paradoxical reality of the middle-aged woman, who cannot be respected as an individual.” However, the existence of tutor moms on the contrary proves the importance of the mother's role as a manager in child education. Their high paycheck is proof of the importance of their role, expertise and knowledge. Tutor moms are a straightforward realization of the expertise that is required for managing a child's education. Though it is unclear how popular this profession will become, the limited examples that we have are enough to show that a woman's devotion to child education is rewarded. Seorae's husband, Han Sangjin, describes this crucial expertise as follows:

She's a professional. She sent both of her kids to Seoul National University, started giving tips to friends, and ended up becoming a professional tutor mom. She's really meticulous. She took a kid named Jun from the international middle school preparation academy and got him into that school. She takes care of school lessons, tutors and academies, and even manages the kid's everyday life, so she's just perfect for Gyeol. She does everything Gyeol's mom would normally do. (Episode 10)

Although the traditional housewife duties of women were difficult to directly subject to social evaluation, the modern housewife of the present day has a much more measurable task to undertake. Park Hyekyeong (2009) explains:

Within women's consciousness, a mother needs to be a full-time mother in order to manage her children's educational competition. The enforcement of the education supporting aspect of maternal labor not only rationalizes the housewife status but also increases its value. Women who identify as mothers emphasize their duties and interests concerning their children, and also the fact that the mother should be home full-time for the education and happiness of her children. (23)

Jeong Seongju expresses in her drama that the mother's role as the main educator was not only encouraged and demanded within the family but also by society. The college entrance preparation portrayed in *Eligible Wife* is not the simple and clear process traditionally centered on gaining entry to Seoul National University, Yonsei University and Korea University<sup>9</sup> anymore. The entrance methods are complicated; choices are varied and the preparation is complex. This is an accurate description of the necessity of expert-level abilities and decision on the part of mothers.

Park So Jin (2007) analyzes that behind the entrance of Korean middle-class women in the education scene is the spread of neoliberal values and the consequent change in educational policies and the expansion of the private education market. Because the importance of individuality and creativity is increasingly emphasized and American-style education is seen as a viable alternative, the general trend of entrance examination is being steered towards having the child provide a unique display of his/her abilities and away from the conventional multiple-choice style evaluation. The burden of proof is placed upon students and their parents. Meanwhile, as sending children to study abroad at a young age to American private schools and universities has become possible for certain middle class families, an increasing amount of related programs have been adopted in foreign language high schools and international middle schools. This is where educational expert mothers show their full potential. Since the 2000s, these women who are fully immersed in the education of their children have been dubbed as "road managers" and "road consultants" according to the news articles in *Chosunilbo* on December 6, 2002 and *Joongang Daily* in 2005, respectively. Unlike mothers of earlier generations, who were known for their blind and unsophisticated over-involvement in their children's education, they are considered to be much more professional and evaluations have been more neutral (Park and Abelmann 2004, Park 2007, 2008).

The immense expansion of the private education market led to an increasingly strong correlation between investment and educational hierarchy, and choosing and obtaining the right type of education has become a crucial skill. In *Eligible Wife*, mothers who prepare for international middle school in

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9. Three most prestigious universities in South Korea



Daechi-dong and plan to later send their children to American boarding schools are portrayed as important educational players. Their methods are considerably different from the conventional methods of preparing for prestigious Korean high schools or universities. The education that is practiced is quite unlike the “knowledge-injecting” education method that has been so often criticized as intrinsic to the system of entrance exam-centered education. The children are educated in a debate-oriented and thought-provoking method, and do not appear particularly tired or passive. They do seem over-competitive, but at the same time seem highly motivated to participate in problem solving and debating. Seoraе’s son Gyeol finds studying at the international middle school preparatory academy highly interesting. It is no longer easy to claim that the only meaning of this type of education is entering a prestigious university. Apart from driving their children to academies or finding good teachers, the mothers now have the additional creative (?) and often morally dubious task of finding and implementing information to enhance their children’s paper qualifications. Among the various types of support, *Eligible Wife* focuses on paper qualification enhancement. As university and high school entrance methods diversify, reality increasingly resembles *Eligible Wife*, even for those not preparing for international middle school. Mothers create short films and ghostwrite fantasy novels in order to prepare their children for American private high schools. Mothers even discuss volunteer work plans with a specialist to make their children more appealing. The atmosphere of the scene where they discuss their children’s entrance plans at the academy is like that of an official corporate meeting. In a conference room prepped with individual microphones and modern presentation devices, they run their meeting using professionally graphed information.

The social recognition obtained through this expertise and success makes some mothers into extremely proud and sophisticated individuals. Except for one mother who claims to be beaten by her husband when her child’s grades drop, all of the mothers on *Eligible Wife* have a very sophisticated, confident, and emphatic way of speaking. They rarely say that they are the only ones who know what is right. At the same time, they are quite assured that they are indeed correct.

Even the lover of Seoraе’s sister-in-law’s husband, Kang Eunju, who is assumed to have been a hostess at a bar in the past, speaks in a similar manner. Kang Eunju shows that the method of proving one’s maternal worth through

education can even be stretched to illegitimate lovers. Below are her words when her son is accepted into the international middle school preparatory academy and Seorae's son is not:

But I think it actually might be a good thing that Gyeol didn't get in. I'm not all smiles myself about my kid getting into that academy, after all. We've entered the vicious cycle of endless competition now and it feels like I'm forcing us to go to the dark side. But you can raise Gyeol to be a good-natured, happy child. Considering that you've raised him away from competition on your own, this is a victory in its own right. (Episode 2)

She is objectively recognizing that the path she is taking is dangerous, and she is supporting the need to have different values when raising a child. However, Seorae is offended during the conversation, partially because it is coming from someone who has been accepted into the academy—but also because despite what she says, it is clear that Kang Eunju would never switch situations with Seorae at that point. Telling Seorae to raise her child away from competition would entail raising him as a loser within the competition-oriented society, and this is definitely not the path that Seorae, who has taught Gyeol English and provided him an almost professional level of education on her own, wishes to take. Kang Eunju does not criticize alternative education, but she still firmly believes that her educational methods are cutting edge in South Korean society and are entirely necessary for her children to have an advantage in living life the way they want. Even Seorae is extremely happy to see her son performing well after entering international middle school preparatory academy and is full of confidence from the recognition of others. Had she not had an affair, her son would have probably entered international middle school and later entered an American private high school or a prestigious Korean high school, and it does not appear that Seorae would have been particularly unhappy. In this situation, Seorae would have been able to empathize with mothers who are raising children alternatively or whose children are slightly behind competitively much better than Kang Eunju; regardless of this, it is hard to determine how critical she would have actually been of her own life choices.

## A New Relationship Frame: The *Gab* and the *Eul*

In *Eligible Wife*, Jeong Seongju suggests a relationship frame other than that of class hierarchy that shows a greater variety of types of interactions: the *Gab* and the *Eul* (In Korean, *Gab* and *Eul* signify two anonymous parties on a contract. In everyday language, *Gab* refers to the stronger party while *Eul* refers to the disadvantaged party. To say someone is *Gab* in a situation means that s/he enjoys an advantageous position vis-à-vis the other party, whom we would consequently call the *Eul* in the situation). There were many reactions to the description of the *Gab* and *Eul* in internet forums. Poster Jung says “The ultimate *Gab*? Hopefully they are not all like that. Hyeontae (Seorae’s sister-in-law’s husband) is so unapologetic that it’s scary. It’s a sorry reality where the *Gab* tries to please those who are even stronger *Gabs*” (posted, April 20, 2012). Poster Hwang says “the reason Sangjin can get divorced so easily even though he is a member of the journalist community is probably that he can say that he was benevolent enough to get married with a worthless *Eul* in the first place. It was possible for him to justify his actions by saying that his wife was ungrateful and stupid enough to have an affair and that he’s just a victim of the situation” (posted, April 12, 2012).

Viewers are often seen interpreting and reacting to situations through the framework of “the *Gab* and the *Eul*.” Recently, these terms that were usually used when making contracts have begun to be used to describe general social relationships, and Jeong Seongju is actively using this expression in her drama. This relationship between the *Gab* and the *Eul* effectively portrays the dynamic relationships among Gangnam’s middle class and exposes the fact that it is not only a question of class but also that of education level, profession and gender.

Han Sangjin shouts at Seorae, “I want my son to live as a *Gab*.” And then, who are *Gabs*? People who make the decisions, people who provide you money and job, people who do not have to care what other people think, people from a respectable university, people who do not have to prove themselves, people who can freely express their sexual desires, people who can fearlessly cheat on their spouse, people who are never evaluated for what they do, people who can force their own standards on others, etc. Jeong Seongju uses education level, wealth, gender, and residence location as standards for dividing the *Gab* and the *Eul*.

There is only one true *Gab* in *Eligible Wife*: the father-in-law of Seorae’s sister-in-law, who is the head of large law firm. He has the last say in every

decision that is made and has practically no chance of becoming an *Eul*. Yun Seorae's husband's family constantly tries to please him and depends on his help in a crisis. He is the person that his son's illegitimate lover devotes all of her attentions to, and is the first person Seorae's sister-in-law, Han Myeongjin, goes to when she finds out about her husband's affair. He goes and meets his grandson born from the affair, ignoring the wishes of his daughter-in-law, who only bore him granddaughters. When his father seems to be nonjudgmental about his affair, Jo Hyeontae regains confidence and cynically tells his crying wife to "wait for father's decision."

Of course, being a *Gab* or *Eul* is fluid. One can generally be a *Gab* in society but an *Eul* in a specific relationship. Seorae's sister-in-law, who appears to be living the dream life, is in fact a complete *Eul* when it comes to her relationship with her husband. She is a woman; her social status was obtained through marriage; she only has daughters; and her family has no way of being in a higher position than her husband's family. In a gendered *Gab* and *Eul* relationship, divorce is always bad for the *Eul*. This is especially true because she is a full-time housewife. Her husband is even more confident after his affair; the fact that he has a son outside of marriage is revealed, and she acts apologetically to him, as though she were the one who had been caught cheating. This shows that the enhanced social status that a woman obtains through marriage is fundamentally vulnerable to threats and challenges.

Seorae was always the *Eul* in her marriage. She was from a lower class, was not from elite schools, and even gave birth to a son with an atopic allergy, which gave her very little chance of changing her disadvantaged position. Her only chance was getting her child into international middle school, but this too she misses. She was in such a disadvantaged position that she was immediately expelled from the family when her affair was revealed. Seorae is of such a disparate nature that she is deemed worthy of expulsion as soon as she fails to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother, and her mistakes simply cannot be overlooked.

If Han Myeongjin's father-in-law is the ultimate *Gab*, the ultimate *Eul* would be the housekeepers that take care of the housework. Seorae's younger sister Mirae makes a living delivering side dishes and is close to the housekeepers, from whom she obtains gossip and information. They mostly evaluate the life of the *Gab* by exchanging rumors about them, but for the *Gab*, their existence is basically insignificant. Jeong Seongju portrays them as those who are closest

to the truth of life, who have the best eye for identifying the false consciousness and problems of the Gab's life. They are people with little to lose, and are both unbiased and intuitive. There is a scene where Seorae's mother-in-law, angered at her daughter's request that she get treatment for her internet gambling addiction, screams at her daughter about the money and effort she spent on making her the most eligible bachelorette, to which her daughter responds that it was just fulfillment of parental duty. The housekeeper, who is working outside the room, remarks that "[t]hat's what comes from raising your child with greed" (Episode 14), accurately pointing out the most crucial problem of the current educational fervor.

There are many other female *Euls* that *Eligible Wife* portrays: the weather forecaster that was sexually harassed by Seorae's husband, the makeup artist, and the women who have to put up with Seorae's husband's behavior at the room salon. The only way that they can express their feelings is mostly through their uncomfortable facial expressions. If the housekeepers' bonding gave us a breath of fresh air by showing down-to-earth human relationships, the way the victims of sexual harassment teamed up to become the *Gab* of the situation taught us to show how *Gab* and *Eul* situations could change.

## The Gender Dynamics of Infidelity

The moment when the maternal identity that had been elevated by the mother's active role in education returned to its previous patriarchal gendered status is when the married woman has an extramarital affair. *Eligible Wife* portrays three types of affairs. These are represented by the affair of Seorae, that of her lover Taeoh, and that of Seorae's sister-in-law's husband. The three experience very different reactions and situations.

The main character's extramarital affair incited by far the most reaction from viewers. Many viewers fell in love with her lover Taeoh and requested that their relationship have a happy ending. This is probably because it is the most fantasy-fulfilling aspect of the story. Meanwhile, there were also occasional ethical criticisms condemning infidelity and voices that expressed concern that the development of the drama was romanticizing infidelity.

In this drama, an affair was crucial because it was the only event that could completely change the structure of the situation. It separated Seorae from her

maternity, which gave her a chance to realize the reality of the basis of her class and her eligibility as a wife, a daughter-in-law, and a mother. The main educator of a child is clearly his mother, no matter how faithful and efficient she may or may not be. Within the education war, where there is no room for deviation, expelling the mother is the equivalent, to a certain extent, of surrender in warfare. Whether the cheating mother should be retained for the sake of education or expelled from the family is left in the hands of Seorae's husband and his family. They decide to get rid of her instead of choosing efficiency within the war for education. Patriarchal judgment of a woman's chastity takes precedence over the urgency of education. Mother-in-law says confidently, "[w]hen the wife cheats on her husband, it never works out. In the beginning the husband says he'll forgive her because of the kids and so on, but in the end they always break up" (Episode 8).

There are two other affairs that contrast with Seorae's. The first is that of Taeh and the other is that of Jo Hyeontae, the husband of Seorae's sister-in-law. Even though Taeh has an affair, he is neither kicked out of the house nor harshly criticized. On the contrary, his wife, Mrs. Hong, is afraid that her husband might really want to get divorced, and even after the divorce papers are signed, she attaches a talisman to the wall and hopes for him to return. The husband's infidelity is not threatening enough to significantly endanger the existence of a family. He could have become the underdog if he had strongly wanted custody of the child. However, Taeh as portrayed in the drama does not seem to have any desire for custody. This is probably because his wife is wealthy and enthusiastic in the field of education, and also because he is the one at fault. However, is it natural that someone who found Mrs. Hong's overbearing rearing methods problematic would be so uninterested in gaining custody? This is an aspect that shows the clear difference of what our society expects from maternity and paternity. His divorce is too easy. Because he has limited interest in raising his child, there is little reason for conflict and Mrs. Hong does not have any significant reasons or tools to stop him from leaving. She takes away his economic privileges and demands that he tell the truth to their child. However, these two measures have little impact on Taeh. He is a dentist, and his child is too young to really understand what is going on, even if he tries to explain.

Kim Hiju (2012) says Seorae's replacement was easy, but it appears that Taeh, who lives with a much wealthier Mrs. Hong, is so unimportant within

the family that there is simply no need for replacement. The father's role could be more important in the future. However, it will never be irreplaceable, because the father is not the main actor in education.

Jo Hyeontae's affair is a case where his affair made his position in the family even stronger. He was already "the strongest of the strong," as Han Sangjin puts it, and now he even has a son and nothing to hide, which makes him even stronger. There is not much that Seorae's sister-in-law can do to turn the tables. Getting divorced will only be helping Kang Eunju, Jo's lover, and in an upper class family with a family business to pass on, Kang Eunju's son is much more valuable than Han Myeongjin's two daughters. Because all of the social wealth and power that Han Myeongjin has comes from her husband's family, Myeongjin's choices cannot have much of an impact on her husband in the end. Her parents, who think that their daughter's divorce will mean the official collapse of their family's middle-class social position, tell her that divorce is not an option from the start. They clearly understand the basis of her existence. Jo Hyeontae will never be sincerely loved by his wife anymore, but it seems that she has never done so in the first place, and Jo Hyeontae probably is not looking for that kind of love anyway. Kang Eunju and Han Myeongjin will still be supportive towards Jo Hyeontae, and though his modern concubine-owning situation will be viewed by other men with either derision or envy, it is unlikely that any of them will express negative opinions in front of him.

### **South Korean Society: How it in Fact Loves Han Sangjin**

In *Eligible Wife*, which was said to have dissected the organs of South Korean society in the article of *TV Daily* on April 10, 2012, Jeong Seongju allots the largest portion of indecencies to the character of Han Sangjin, Seorae's husband. He is also the character through which the writer tried to show that good triumphs over evil in the end. His collapse is contrasted with Seorae, who has found an equal and respectful relationship. It is "the good will triumph" type of ending that leaves little room for controversy: the selfish and disrespectful character meets his demise, while the honest and value-oriented main character finds true happiness. This is why the drama's portrayal of Han Sangjin is both very realistic and very unrealistic. His personality and characteristics are realistic, but it is highly improbable that sexual harassment would cause his demise. The

most unrealistic aspect is the disgust he incites from viewers: if he existed in real life, would viewers hate him as much? In real life, he would be the kind of person that would receive recognition, sympathy, and praise from all except his immediate subordinates.

Jeong Seongju has described in the *Wommeneews* on April 10, 2001, the emptiness of the life of male members of the elite. In *Ajumma*, she exposed the illusion of “the professor-husband”; in an interview, she explained that she had initially thought of a reporter-husband, but had changed him to a professor so as not to portray the press negatively. Perhaps because journalism was more difficult to criticize, the role of reporters is not dealt with in depth or openly criticized in *Eligible Wife*, whereas professors were overtly targeted in *Ajumma* (this is probably also because *Eligible Wife* is shorter than *Ajumma*). The main focus is Han Sangjin’s individual characteristics, through which he is shown to be an archetypical male intellectual. Han Sangjin behaves as though the only two values in his life are connections and hierarchy. He shows off incessantly and constantly tries to flatter those who are in higher positions. He tells everyone whom he knows and uses the power of connections. He is keenly interested in who graduated what school and who has what kind of parents or parents-in-law. To his subordinates, he is sufficiently disrespectful. This is probably an easy attitude to adopt for highly educated men who automatically obtain a position of respect and recognition based on their impressive diploma, and need only concern themselves with appealing to those in higher positions.

The first things Han Sangjin clarifies and boasts about when he meets Taeoh’s family at camp are his university, his connections, and the names of his friends. He actively utilizes the connections of the politician that appears on his TV program. This politician is preparing for presidential elections and his main staff is Han Sangjin’s alumnus. The friend sometimes criticizes Han Sangjin’s hypocrisy and pretention, and even fights with him while drinking. However, in the end they continue drinking together and maintain a mutually helpful relationship. This is the power of the always forgiving and accepting nature of alumni connections. Kang Junman (2011) says:

They say you go to university to study, but to benefit from the true purpose of university you have to go to a prestigious school. The better the school the better your connections. The university entrance war is in essence a war for connections. All the autobiographies of socially successful people who



come from good schools have references to close college friends without exception. They're impressive. They all have a socially influential role in their domain of expertise. (372)

In *Eligible Wife*, the power of connections only lasts until Han Sangjin's sexual harassment comes to light. After being accused of sexual harassment, Han Sangjin has to quit his job, and loses a chance to join the presidential staff group. On top of everything, he is dismissed from his brother-in-law's law firm for being an alleged sexual harasser. Jeong Seongju grants the sexual harassment case the power to change the entire context of power and relations. However, sexual harassment cases within an organization are often detrimental to the victim. According to Women Link's 2013 research, the victim receives a penalty in 36% of sexual harassment cases (Kim 2014). This is because the perpetrator not only has more authority to defend himself but also because the sexual culture makes it easy to criticize the female victim. The fact that many congressmen are still active in their political career in spite of their involvement in sexual harassment scandals<sup>10</sup> shows the public's tolerance of the expression of male sexual desire. In a connections-oriented society like South Korea, it appears unlikely that a man as well-educated and professionally successful as Han Sangjin would be expelled from the alumni society for an offense such as sexual harassment.

The culture of Han Sangjin's society is also supportive of his ways. Han Sangjin, distressed after discovering his wife's affair, gets in a fistfight with the camera director. The scene where they make up is interesting. While having drinks he says:

Han Sangjin. Let's drink this and get over with it.

Camera director. Okay then.

Han Sangjin. Look look, this is my special trick. (Episode 6)

He places a glass of *soju* on top of chopsticks that he has put at the top of a

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10. There are various examples, such as the former Secretary General Choi Yeonhee's sexual harassment of a female reporter, the party representative Kang Jaseob's sexually demeaning comment, former President Lee Myungbak's massage girl comment during his candidacy, and Congressman Jeong Mongjoon's sexual harassment of a female reporter, but none were significantly detrimental to the politician's political career.

glass of beer, and when he hits the table a few times with his head, the glass of *soju* falls into the beer and becomes *poktanju* (Korean term for mixed alcohol). Everybody claps. What Han Sangjin has made is referred to as “the loyalty drink,” a drink that became famous because military generals used to make them for Kim Hyeoncheol, the son of President Kim Youngsam (in office from 1992 to 1997). It is unclear what, exactly, he is planning to be loyal to, but it obviously shows that he is expressing extreme respect for the camera director and putting him in a superior hierarchical position. This may be a considerably powerful statement among men, and apparently is accepted as carrying a strong apologetic value. Everybody at the table claps and does a bottoms-up. There is no explanation of why he was angry or what kind of situation he is in. There is no real reconciliation, and there is not even a real apology. This kind of culture—a culture where saying “I’m beneath you” is a good-enough apology and people clap appreciatively—seems to fit perfectly with a person like Han Sangjin. The culture of Han Sangjin’s workplace, which is a peculiar mix of gangster culture, connections-centered culture and education-centered culture, explains how Han Sangjin could progress as far as having his own TV program in spite of his personal deficiencies.

The hardest task for him is when he has to understand the lives of underdogs like Seorae. He is portrayed as someone who interprets everything through the framework of who is stronger and who is weaker, and what benefits who. He does not understand that sometimes pride and public values are more important than personal gains. That was why he was unable to handle the sexual harassment case wisely.

Jeong Seongju, through a meticulous description of Han Sangjin’s hypocrisy, leads viewers to critically scrutinize Han Sangjin’s character. He is the type of man that chose a woman who is an underdog in every aspect so he can do everything he pleases in their marriage. After previously being oblivious to the rearing of his atopic child, he only begins to show interest in his child’s education when Gyeol enters international middle school preparatory academy. After coming home from a drinking session, he shouts out a bar hostess’s name, making Seorae exclaim that “I’m a woman too.” He is even more disrespectful of his wife after their divorce.

However, under normal standards it is unlikely that Han Sangjin would be judged to be a bad father or husband. His punitive attitude towards his wife does not seem exceptional for a man who has discovered his partner’s infidelity.

It is hard for anybody to think on the bright side after seeing a picture of one's spouse hugging and walking into a hotel with somebody else. It is even more difficult for Han Sangjin, who has professional experience of distorting extramarital affairs to make them look more scandalous, to interpret his wife's affair under different standards. He married a woman with a flawed educational and familial background and succeeded in supporting her financially. After divorcing his cheating wife, he concentrates on his son's education without remarrying. Even if we look closer into their relationship, since he was not particularly abusive physically or verbally, apart from the fact that he looked down on his wife's family, and was a fairly good financial provider, there is little objective reason to call him a bad husband. Poster Kim Yujin explains in the viewer forum that in reality, people would sympathize with Han Sangjin and feel bad for him: "[t]he way Han Sangjin was increasingly portrayed like a scumbag towards the end felt contrived. I felt bad for Han Sangjin" (posted, April 27, 2012).

His family members are not particularly demanding, although they are arrogant. Their attitude during and after the divorce can be justified as a socially acceptable punishment of a woman who ruined her son's education and cheated on her husband. Externally, Seorae's sins are sufficient in the eyes of Han Sangjin, his family and the world for her to be treated as abusively as she was.

This duplicity seems to be what Jeong Seongju wished to point out. Seorae and Han Sangjin lead lives that are very different from how society evaluates them. Han Sangjin's family, appearing privileged and respectable on the outside, is in reality full of greed, class consciousness, and the pride of being highly educated, and the only link between family members are their functions and accomplishments. On the other hand, some relationships that appear to be the illegitimate union of two cheating spouses may actually be a relationship based on love, equality and common sense. Society cannot see the difference. The truth of life, in the end, is found in what society cannot see.

## Conclusion

A woman who had been faithful to the educational fever of the times falls in love. She was startlingly happy to realize that she, destined to live as an educational machine, is in fact a woman and a human being. The

consequences: the secrets and carefully ornamented desires of each family that had been hidden beneath the monumental task of child education are revealed. Talk about a living hell...When the catastrophe that is infidelity hits a sturdy communal society, couldn't this sin become a chance for those criticizing the sinner to self-reflect and heal?<sup>11</sup>

This is the official production statement released on the drama's official website. The basic structure of *Eligible Wife* is that within the hellish environment where most are brimming with the desire to maintain or ameliorate their social status through education and women play a crucial role as mothers, infidelity reveals a vision for a new way of life. However, Jeong Seongju's intricate and balanced description shows at the same time that this living hell is too complex to overcome through a simple "good will triumph" ending. Although education is the most significant intermediary, the focus on child education is not simply the mother's fulfillment of vicarious satisfaction or her identity formation. Because this living hell contains the entire society's struggles and desires concerning class, sex, and relationships, everyone involved cannot be unhappy, or happy, at the same time. The consequent problems cannot be solved through the concept of good triumphing over evil. It is impossible to escape from the issue of survival and *Gab-Eul* relations by starting from scratch with a new man like the drama's heroine.

There were many criticisms concerning the drama's solution on viewer forums as well. Some commented that Seorae's meeting a dentist is ultimately just a continuation of the Cinderella structure according to the Poster of Kim Yujin on April 27, 2012. One viewer asks, "Which average viewer could refuse the chance to become a member of the elite?" (If our child could marry into a higher class, if s/he could increase her class status by marrying someone s/he doesn't love but who has a good social position, who would refuse?), as written in the Poster of Yang Byeongyeon on April 23, 2012.

The issue of education, which is closely linked to the issue of class, concerns so many different desires and realities that make it difficult to do anything more than describe it. No matter how we obsess about the topic, there

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11. This statement is posted in the homepage of JTBC, <[http://home.jtbc.joins.com/Plan/PlanMean.aspx?prog\\_id=PR10010069&cmenu\\_id=PM10012296](http://home.jtbc.joins.com/Plan/PlanMean.aspx?prog_id=PR10010069&cmenu_id=PM10012296)>.

is little more we can do in terms of introspection and self-healing than empty agreeing to its reality. This is because all aspects of education include desires that are almost impossible to compromise.

In this aspect, the contrast between the perfectly intricate description of educational reality and the loose and unrealistic portrayal of a women's transformation through infidelity is perhaps the key point of Jeong Seongju's *Eligible Wife*. The mother's identity as an educational actor in the Korean society of the 2010s is something that is too complex and intense to be countered by the freedom and self-respect obtained through an extramarital affair.

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## Abstract

*Eligible Wife* was the latest work of writer Jeong Seongju in 2012. Using a reportage-like realistic portrayal, it explores the clash between two of the most controversial issues for married women: infidelity and children's education. The basic structure of *Eligible Wife* is that within the hellish environment where most are brimming with the desire to maintain or ameliorate their social status through education and women play a crucial role as mothers, infidelity reveals a vision for a new way of life. Jeong Seongju's intricate and balanced description shows at the same time that this living hell is too complex to overcome through a simple "good will triumph" ending. Although education is the most significant intermediary, the focus on child education is not simply the mother's fulfillment of vicarious satisfaction or her identity formation. Because this living hell contains the entire society's struggles and desires concerning class, gender, and relationships, everyone involved cannot be unhappy, or happy, at the same time. Jeong Seongju shows the fact that nobody is able to thoroughly criticize or take responsibility for the Korean class system, which is maintained and is still believed to be reversible through education. In this aspect, Jeong's drama is particularly useful for interpreting the desires and identity of Korean society.

**Keywords:** education, motherhood, gender, class consciousness