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REPRESENTING FEMALE INFERIORITY IN KOREAN DRAMA: A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF *SQUID GAME* 2

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the representation of female inferiority in Squid Game Season 2 Episode Six Legs by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The research integrates Barthes' theory of denotation, connotation, and myth with Hall's theory of representation and feminist media studies to explain how gender ideology is constructed through audiovisual narratives. Using a qualitative research design, the study analyzes selected scenes by interpreting visual and verbal signs embedded in dialogue, character interactions, gestures, and cinematic elements. The findings reveal that female inferiority is represented through symbolic constructions that portray women as physically vulnerable, emotionally dependent, and less competent than men in decision-making and survival contexts. At the mythical level, these representations naturalize patriarchal ideology by reinforcing masculine authority and positioning women as secondary social actors. Despite the presence of female resistance, patriarchal values remain embedded within the narrative structure. The study contributes to communication and media studies by demonstrating how globally distributed streaming dramas reproduce gender ideology through subtle symbolic meanings. It also provides practical insights for media creators to promote more balanced and inclusive gender representations in contemporary digital entertainment.

Keywords: *Roland Barthes; female inferiority; gender representation; Korean drama; Squid Game.*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the global media landscape, shifting audiences' viewing habits from conventional television broadcasting to streaming-based platforms. This transformation has accelerated the expansion of Over-the-Top (OTT) services, allowing media content to be distributed beyond geographical boundaries while creating new patterns of cultural consumption. As one of the world's leading streaming platforms, Netflix has played a significant role in facilitating the international circulation of Korean television dramas, enabling local cultural products to reach diverse global audiences and strengthening the transnational influence of the Korean Wave (Hallyu). The platformization of media production and distribution has therefore reshaped not only the television industry but also the ways audiences consume, interpret, and negotiate cultural meanings in the digital era (Kim, 2022; Nieborg & Poell, 2021).

The globalization of Korean dramas through streaming platforms has transformed Hallyu from a regional cultural phenomenon into an internationally recognized cultural industry. Unlike conventional television broadcasting, streaming services provide unrestricted access to serialized narratives that attract audiences across different countries and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, Korean dramas have become important cultural texts that construct and disseminate various social values, identities, and ideologies, including those related to gender relations. As cultural products consumed by millions of viewers worldwide, these dramas no longer function merely as entertainment but also as symbolic spaces where meanings are produced, negotiated, and reproduced within contemporary society (Hall, 1997; McQuail, 2010; Yoon & Lee, 2025).

Among the Korean dramas that have gained unprecedented international recognition, *Squid Game* has emerged as one of the most influential cultural products distributed through Netflix. Since its initial release, the series has attracted global attention not only because of its commercial success but also because of its complex portrayal of social inequality, capitalism, violence, and moral dilemmas. The global circulation of *Squid Game* demonstrates how streaming platforms have transformed local television productions into transnational cultural texts that stimulate academic discussions across communication, media, and cultural studies. Rather than functioning solely as entertainment, the series reflects broader social realities and ideological values embedded within contemporary society, making it an important object for critical media analysis (Kim, 2022; Yoon & Lee, 2025).

Existing studies have predominantly examined *Squid Game* and other Korean dramas from perspectives such as platformization, transnational television, genre transformation, and socio-cultural criticism. While these studies have successfully explained the relationship between streaming platforms and the globalization of Korean popular culture, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the ways gender meanings are constructed through visual narratives, particularly regarding the representation of women within the series. Consequently, *Squid Game* offers a significant opportunity to explore how media texts communicate gender ideology through visual signs, character interactions, and narrative structures, especially in the context of globally distributed streaming content (Jeon, 2024; Kim, 2022; Yoon & Lee, 2025).

Media representations play a crucial role in shaping public understanding of gender by constructing meanings that influence how women and men are perceived within society. According to Hall (1997), representation is not merely a process of reflecting reality but a cultural practice through which meanings are produced and circulated. Within television dramas, visual narratives, dialogues, character development, and symbolic interactions function as representational systems that communicate social values and normalize particular gender ideologies. Consequently, media texts become important sites where audiences

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encounter and negotiate dominant discourses concerning femininity, masculinity, power, and social hierarchy.

From the perspective of feminist media studies, gender representations in popular media frequently reproduce unequal power relations by positioning women within stereotypical and subordinate roles. Female characters are often portrayed as emotionally dependent, physically vulnerable, or lacking authority in comparison with male characters, thereby reinforcing patriarchal ideologies that normalize women's inferiority. Although contemporary Korean dramas increasingly feature independent female protagonists, recent studies suggest that traditional gender norms continue to shape narrative structures and character portrayals in subtle yet influential ways. Such representations demonstrate that gender inequality is not only communicated through explicit discrimination but also through symbolic meanings embedded in visual images, dialogues, and narrative conventions that audiences may unconsciously accept as natural (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994; Ward & Grower, 2020; Boman, 2022).

Within this broader context of gender representation, *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* provides a particularly significant case for examining how female inferiority is constructed through audiovisual storytelling. The episode presents a series of interactions in which female characters occupy unequal positions within interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and decision-making processes. These inequalities are communicated not only through dialogue but also through facial expressions, camera composition, body language, costume, and narrative sequencing, all of which function as meaningful signs that shape audiences' interpretations of gender roles. Rather than portraying inequality solely through explicit acts of discrimination, the episode embeds gendered power relations within everyday interactions, making the representation of female inferiority appear subtle, ordinary, and culturally acceptable.

Such symbolic construction demonstrates that audiovisual narratives communicate meanings beyond their literal content. From Barthes' semiotic perspective, visual and verbal signs operate simultaneously at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth, allowing ideological messages to become naturalized through repeated cultural representations (Barthes, 1977). In the context of Korean streaming dramas, these symbolic meanings are particularly important because globally distributed media texts contribute to the circulation of cultural values across different societies. Recent studies have shown that gender representations in Korean dramas continue to negotiate tensions between contemporary female identities and persistent patriarchal norms, indicating that traditional gender ideologies remain embedded within modern streaming narratives despite their global orientation (Liao & Ling, 2025; Choi et al., 2024). Therefore, Episode *Six Legs* offers an appropriate analytical context for investigating how myths of female inferiority are communicated through visual signs and narrative structures within one of the most internationally consumed Korean television series.

Previous studies have extensively applied Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to examine gender representation across various media, including films, television series, and commercial advertisements. These studies have explored issues such as sexism, gender stereotypes, feminist representation, and the construction of women's identities (Maulianza & Galib, 2018; Wijaya & Firmanto, 2021; Azahra et al., 2021; Nahda et al., 2024; Pawestri, 2025). However, limited attention has been given to how female inferiority is constructed through the interplay of denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings within globally distributed Korean streaming dramas. Specifically, studies focusing on *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*

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remain scarce, despite its rich visual and narrative elements that communicate gendered power relations.

This study contributes to feminist media studies by integrating Roland Barthes' semiotic framework with contemporary discussions on Korean streaming dramas. Rather than focusing solely on gender stereotypes or sexism, this research specifically examines how myths of female inferiority are produced and naturalized through visual signs, dialogue, and narrative structures in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. By situating the analysis within the context of Netflix's global streaming platform, this study also provides a contemporary perspective on gender representation in transnational media.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to analyze the representation of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The analysis focuses on the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in visual and verbal signs to reveal how gender ideology is constructed and represented within one of the most globally consumed Korean dramas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Representation

Representation is a fundamental concept in media and cultural studies that explains how meanings are produced and communicated through language, images, and symbols. Rather than merely reflecting reality, media actively construct social meanings by selecting, organizing, and presenting particular versions of reality to audiences. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a process of meaning-making in which signs, language, and cultural codes shape people's understanding of social phenomena. Consequently, media texts should not be viewed as neutral reflections of society but as cultural products that participate in constructing ideologies, identities, and power relations.

Within audiovisual media, representation is realized through multiple narrative elements, including characterization, dialogue, cinematography, costume, setting, and visual composition. These elements work collectively to communicate ideological meanings that audiences interpret within particular cultural contexts. As globally distributed cultural products, Korean dramas not only entertain audiences but also reproduce social values concerning class, gender, and identity. Recent studies indicate that streaming platforms have expanded the global influence of Korean dramas, enabling local cultural narratives to circulate internationally while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging existing social norms (Kim, 2022; Yoon & Lee, 2025; Nieborg & Poell, 2021).

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Roland Barthes developed semiotics as an analytical framework for understanding how signs produce cultural meanings beyond their literal appearance. According to Barthes (1977), meaning operates at three interconnected levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, while connotation reflects the cultural and emotional associations attached to that sign. At the deepest level, myths function as ideological systems that naturalize particular cultural beliefs, making them appear normal and unquestionable.

The concept of myth is particularly relevant for analyzing audiovisual media because films and television dramas communicate ideology through recurring visual symbols, character interactions, narrative structures, and dialogues. Rather than presenting explicit ideological messages, media texts often normalize social values through symbolic representations that audiences unconsciously accept. Consequently, Barthes' semiotic model has become one of the most widely used approaches for examining gender representation, power relations, and cultural ideology in contemporary media texts. Recent studies have successfully employed

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Barthes' framework to analyze women's representation, gender discrimination, and patriarchal culture in films and television series, demonstrating its continued relevance in media studies.

Feminist Media Studies and Female Inferiority

Feminist media studies examine how media construct, reproduce, and negotiate gender relations within society. Gill (2007) argues that media representations are closely connected to broader systems of gender inequality because they shape public perceptions regarding femininity, masculinity, and social roles. Similarly, van Zoonen (1994) emphasizes that media representations frequently reproduce patriarchal ideologies by positioning women within unequal power structures. Such representations often portray women as emotionally dependent, physically vulnerable, or socially subordinate, thereby reinforcing gender hierarchies through repeated cultural narratives.

Although contemporary media increasingly feature strong and independent female characters, recent scholarship suggests that patriarchal values continue to operate through more subtle symbolic forms. Studies on Korean dramas indicate that female characters frequently negotiate between modern identities and traditional gender expectations, reflecting persistent tensions between gender equality and patriarchal cultural norms (Ward & Grower, 2020; Boman, 2022; Liao & Ling, 2025). Therefore, feminist media studies provide an important theoretical perspective for understanding how media texts reproduce myths of female inferiority through visual and narrative representation.

Female Representation in Korean Streaming Dramas

The expansion of global streaming platforms has transformed Korean dramas into influential transnational cultural products. Netflix has enabled Korean television series to reach wider audiences, increasing their cultural impact while simultaneously intensifying scholarly discussions regarding gender representation within digital media. Recent studies demonstrate that Korean streaming dramas frequently portray women through complex and sometimes contradictory identities, combining narratives of empowerment with representations that continue to reflect patriarchal values (Kim, 2022; Choi et al., 2024; Kim & Lee, 2026).

Existing research has examined gender representation in Korean dramas from various perspectives, including sexism, feminism, and female identity. However, most studies emphasize broad gender issues rather than investigating how myths of female inferiority are constructed through interconnected visual signs, dialogue, and narrative structures. This limitation indicates the need for a more comprehensive semiotic analysis capable of revealing how ideological meanings become naturalized within globally distributed streaming content.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates Hall's representation theory, Barthes' semiotic theory, and feminist media studies to examine the construction of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. Hall's theory explains how media construct social meanings through representation, while Barthes' semiotic framework uncovers meanings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Feminist media studies provide the critical perspective for interpreting how these meanings reproduce gender ideology and patriarchal values. Accordingly, this study analyzes visual images, dialogue, character interactions, gestures, costumes, camera techniques, and narrative sequences to identify the symbolic construction of female inferiority within the selected episode.

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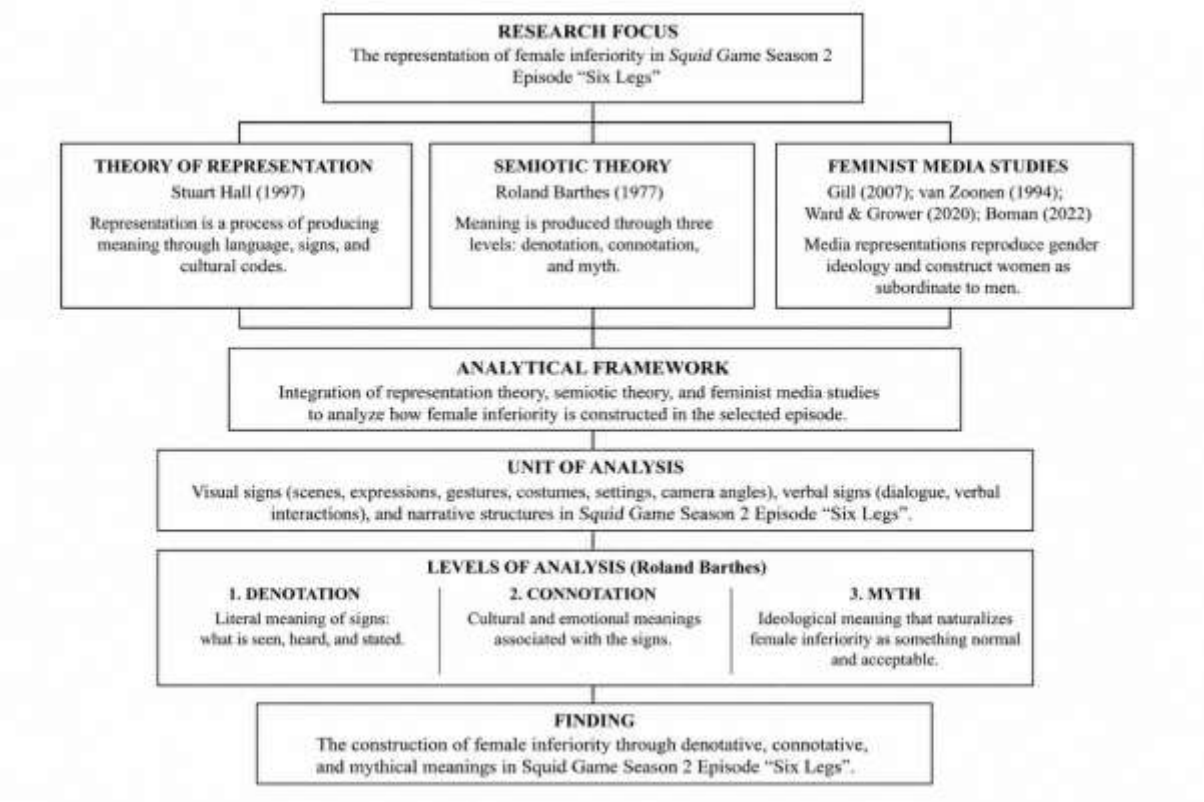


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: Processed by the author

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework employed in this study. The analysis integrates Hall's Theory of Representation, Barthes' Semiotic Theory, and Feminist Media Studies as the primary theoretical foundations for examining the representation of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. The analytical process begins with identifying visual and verbal signs within the selected episode, which are subsequently interpreted through three levels of Barthes' semiotic analysis—denotation, connotation, and myth. This framework enables the study to reveal how gender ideology and myths of female inferiority are constructed and naturalized through the narrative and visual elements of a globally distributed Korean streaming drama.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to examine the representation of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth interpretation of meanings embedded in visual and verbal signs within media texts. Rather than measuring frequencies or testing causal relationships, this study focuses on understanding how gender ideology is constructed and communicated through symbolic representations.

The object of analysis was *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*, produced by Netflix. This episode was purposively selected because it contains various scenes depicting interactions between male and female characters that reflect unequal power relations, gender stereotypes, and symbolic representations of female inferiority. The unit of analysis consisted of visual and verbal signs appearing throughout the episode, including dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, costumes, camera angles, mise-en-scène, character interactions, and narrative sequences.

Data were collected through non-participant observation and document analysis. The episode was viewed repeatedly to identify scenes relevant to the research focus. Important

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scenes were documented through screenshots and detailed field notes. Each scene was then transcribed and organized according to its visual and verbal elements to facilitate systematic interpretation.

Data analysis followed Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which consists of three analytical levels: denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1977). The first stage identified the literal meanings of visual and verbal signs presented in each selected scene. The second stage interpreted the connotative meanings by examining the cultural and emotional associations attached to those signs. Finally, the third stage analyzed the myths or ideological meanings embedded within the representations to reveal how female inferiority is normalized and reproduced through the narrative structure of the series. The interpretation of findings was further supported by Hall's theory of representation and feminist media studies to explain how media representations construct and reinforce gender ideology (Hall, 1997; Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994).

To enhance the credibility of the findings, this study applied theory triangulation by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives, namely representation theory, semiotics, and feminist media studies. Analytical consistency was maintained by comparing the interpretation of each scene across the three levels of Barthes' semiotic model while relating the findings to previous studies on gender representation in films and streaming television series. This procedure ensured that the interpretation remained systematic, theoretically grounded, and aligned with the objectives of the study.

Tabel 1. Analytical Framework

Analytical Stage	Focus of Analysis	Expected Output
Denotation	Literal meaning of visual and verbal signs	Description of scenes and characters
Connotation	Cultural and symbolic meanings	Interpretation of gender representation
Myth	Ideological meaning	Construction of myths of female inferiority

Source: Adapted from Barthes (1977), Hall (1997), and developed by the authors (2026).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the semiotic analysis of selected scenes from *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. The findings are organized according to Roland Barthes' three levels of meaning—denotation, connotation, and myth—to explain how female inferiority is represented through visual and verbal signs. Four scenes were purposively selected because they most explicitly depict unequal gender relations and symbolic constructions of female inferiority.

Scene 1: Questioning Female Capability During Pregnancy

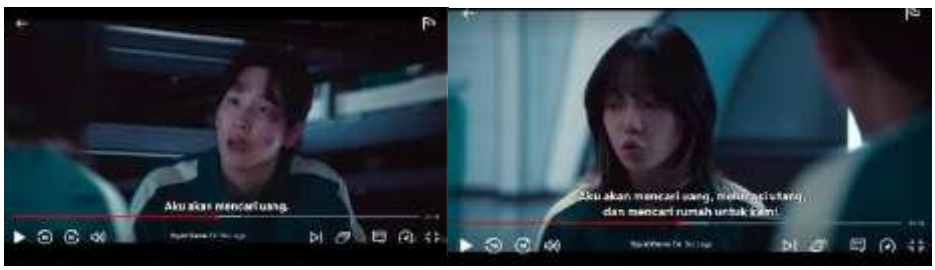


Figure 2. Scene 1
Source: Processed by the author

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Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 1

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Dialogue	**Lee Myung Gi:** "How can you raise a baby without money?" **Kim Jun Hee:** "I'll earn the money myself… This baby has no father, so the mother has to do it." **Lee Myung Gi:** "You came here to earn money? How can you survive here in your condition?"
Denotation	A pregnant woman insists on participating in the game to secure her future, while a male character questions her ability to survive because of her pregnancy.
Connotation	Pregnancy is associated with physical weakness and dependency. The male character's questions imply that women, particularly pregnant women, are naturally less capable of surviving under extreme conditions.
Myth	The scene reproduces the patriarchal myth that women are inherently vulnerable and require male protection. Motherhood is framed as incompatible with resilience and leadership, reinforcing the cultural belief that women are less competent than men in situations demanding strength and rational decision-making.

Source: Processed by the author

This scene illustrates how gender ideology is communicated through ordinary dialogue rather than overt discrimination. Although Kim Jun Hee demonstrates confidence and agency by rejecting Lee Myung Gi's assistance, his repeated questioning positions her as incapable because of her gender and pregnancy. Following Barthes' framework, the literal conversation (denotation) develops into a connotative meaning that associates femininity with weakness. At the mythical level, the interaction naturalizes patriarchal assumptions that women's reproductive roles diminish their competence. This finding aligns with Hall's (1997) argument that media representations construct social meanings rather than merely reflecting reality. It also supports feminist media studies, which argue that media often normalize unequal gender relations through subtle symbolic representations (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994; Ward & Grower, 2020).

Scene 2: Pregnancy as a Symbol of Female Weakness



Figure 3. Scene 2
Source: Processed by the author

Table 3. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 2

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Dialogue	**Lee Myung Gi:** *"No one will want you on their team except me. You're pregnant."* **Kim Jun Hee:** *"Don't pretend to care. I can survive on my own."*

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Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Denotation	Lee Myung Gi suggests that Kim Jun Hee will not be accepted by other teams because she is pregnant. Kim Jun Hee rejects his sympathy and insists that she is capable of surviving independently.
Connotation	Pregnancy is represented as a physical limitation that reduces a woman's value within a competitive environment. Acceptance into the group is determined not by individual capability but by assumptions about women's physical condition. Kim Jun Hee's response reflects an effort to resist these assumptions and defend her autonomy.
Myth	The scene reinforces the patriarchal myth that women, particularly pregnant women, are burdens rather than contributors in situations requiring strength, endurance, and strategic decision-making. Female identity becomes associated with dependency and vulnerability, while masculinity is positioned as the standard of competence and leadership.

Source**:** Adapted from the analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* by the authors (2026).

Scene 2 demonstrates that gender inequality is communicated through symbolic evaluations of women's competence rather than through direct exclusion. Lee Myung Gi's statement implies that pregnancy automatically reduces Kim Jun Hee's usefulness within the group, reflecting a cultural assumption that women are physically incapable of contributing equally in high-risk situations. Although Kim Jun Hee explicitly rejects this perception and asserts her independence, the interaction continues to position her as someone whose worth must be measured against male expectations. This finding supports Hall's (1997) argument that representation constructs social reality by repeatedly associating particular identities with specific meanings.

From Barthes' semiotic perspective, the denotative meaning concerns a discussion about team selection during a dangerous game. At the connotative level, however, pregnancy becomes a symbolic marker of weakness and dependency rather than resilience. At the mythical level, the scene reproduces patriarchal ideology by naturalizing the belief that women who perform reproductive roles are less capable of participating in public or competitive spaces. This interpretation is consistent with feminist media studies, which argue that media often normalize gender inequality through subtle symbolic narratives instead of explicit discrimination (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994). Similar patterns have also been identified in studies of Korean dramas, where female empowerment frequently coexists with traditional gender expectations that continue to privilege masculine authority (Boman, 2022; Kim & Lee, 2026; Liao & Ling, 2025).

Scene 3: Excluding Older Women from the Group



Figure 4. Scene 3
Source: Processed by the author

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Table 4. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 3

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Scene	A group of male players refuses to accept Player 149 (an elderly woman) into their team and insists that Player 007 should leave his mother behind if he wishes to join them.
Denotation	Male players reject an elderly female participant because they believe she will reduce the team's chances of survival.
Connotation	The elderly woman is portrayed as physically incapable and strategically useless. Her identity as both a woman and an older adult becomes the basis for exclusion rather than her individual qualities.
Myth	The scene reinforces the patriarchal belief that women lose social value as they age and are less worthy of inclusion in competitive or decision-making spaces. Masculinity is constructed as synonymous with strength and survival, while femininity and old age are associated with weakness and dependency.

Source**:** Adapted from the authors' analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* (2026).

Scene 3 demonstrates that female inferiority is represented not only through gender but also through age. Player 149 is marginalized because she is perceived as incapable of contributing to the group's survival. This representation reflects Hall's concept that media construct social meanings by repeatedly associating particular identities with specific social values (Hall, 1997). Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the rejection functions as a myth that naturalizes the assumption that elderly women are burdens rather than valuable social actors. This finding is consistent with feminist media studies, which argue that media often intersect gender stereotypes with other forms of social inequality, reinforcing patriarchal norms that privilege youth, masculinity, and physical strength (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994).

Scene 4: Female Resistance within Patriarchal Structures



Figure 5. Scene 4
Source: Processed by the author

Table 5. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 4

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Scene	Player 044 (Seon Nyeo) responds aggressively when her position is questioned by other participants during the preparation for the six-legged pentathlon.
Denotation	A female player reacts assertively after experiencing rejection and distrust from other contestants.
Connotation	Her aggressive behavior symbolizes resistance against repeated marginalization. Instead of being accepted as a competent participant, she

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Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
	must continually defend her legitimacy within a male-dominated environment.
Myth	Women who resist patriarchal expectations are frequently portrayed as irrational, emotional, or socially disruptive. Assertiveness in female characters becomes interpreted as deviant rather than as a legitimate expression of agency.

Source**:** Adapted from the authors' analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* (2026).

Unlike the previous scenes, Scene 4 introduces resistance rather than passive acceptance of gender inequality. Nevertheless, the narrative frames this resistance as unusual and confrontational. According to Barthes, myths work by making culturally specific values appear natural. In this scene, the myth shifts from female weakness to the notion that women who challenge patriarchal authority are excessively emotional or difficult to accept. Similar patterns have been identified in Korean streaming dramas, where female empowerment is frequently accompanied by narrative sanctions that reinforce traditional gender expectations (Boman, 2022; Choi et al., 2024; Kim & Lee, 2026). Consequently, the representation does not fully dismantle patriarchal ideology but instead negotiates it through controlled forms of female agency.

Scene 5: Male Authority over Female Participation



Figure 6. Scene 5
Source: Processed by the author

Table 6. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 5

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Scene	Thanos invites Se Mi to join his team, but Nam Gyu openly questions the decision because she is a woman.
Denotation	A male player objects to the inclusion of Se Mi in the group solely because she is female.
Connotation	Team membership is portrayed as dependent on masculine approval. Female competence is questioned before any actual performance is observed, suggesting that gender itself becomes a criterion for exclusion.
Myth	The scene reproduces the patriarchal ideology that leadership, strategic thinking, and physical competence belong primarily to men, while women must continually prove their worth before receiving equal recognition.

Source**:** Adapted from the authors' analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* (2026).

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Scene 5 provides the clearest representation of female inferiority within the episode. Se Mi is evaluated not on her abilities but on assumptions attached to her gender. Hall (1997) argues that representation shapes social understanding by repeatedly connecting certain identities with specific meanings. Here, femininity is linked to incompetence, whereas masculinity is positioned as the norm for authority and capability. Through Barthes' three levels of meaning, the interaction progresses from a simple disagreement over team membership (denotation), to the symbolic devaluation of women's abilities (connotation), and ultimately to the myth that male dominance is both natural and necessary (Barthes, 1977). These findings are consistent with feminist media studies, which demonstrate that patriarchal ideology often operates through subtle representational practices rather than overt discrimination (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994). They also resonate with recent studies of Korean streaming dramas that show how contemporary narratives continue to negotiate women's agency within enduring patriarchal frameworks (Liao & Ling, 2025; Kim & Lee, 2026; Choi et al., 2024).

Scene 6: Female Authority and Social Stigma



Figure 7. Scene 6
Source: Processed by the author

Table 7. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 6

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Scene	Player 044 (Seon Nyeo), a female shaman, expresses confidence and attempts to influence other contestants. Instead of being respected, she is mocked and dismissed by several male players because of her gender and unconventional identity.
Denotation	A female contestant attempts to exercise authority by advising other players, but her statements are ignored and ridiculed.
Connotation	Female authority is portrayed as irrational and lacking credibility. The rejection is directed not only at the character's beliefs but also at her position as a woman attempting to influence others.
Myth	The scene reinforces the myth that authority and rational leadership are masculine attributes, whereas women who claim authority are perceived as emotional, irrational, or socially disruptive.

Source**:** Adapted from the authors' analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* (2026).

Scene 6 illustrates that women's authority is not easily accepted within a patriarchal social structure. Although Player 044 actively attempts to guide other contestants, her opinions receive less legitimacy than those expressed by male characters. Through Barthes' semiotic framework, the denotative level depicts a disagreement among contestants, while the connotative meaning associates female leadership with irrationality and instability. At the mythical level, the narrative reproduces the long-standing cultural belief that authority and

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decision-making naturally belong to men. This finding supports Hall's (1997) argument that representation constructs social meanings through repeated symbolic practices and is consistent with feminist media studies, which explain that women occupying positions of authority are often represented as less trustworthy or excessively emotional (Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994; Boman, 2022).

Scene 7: Questioning Women's Competence in Group Survival



Figure 8. Scene 7
Source: Processed by the author

Table 8. Semiotic Analysis of Scene 7

Scene Description	Semiotic Analysis
Scene	Thanos invites Se Mi to join his team, but Nam Gyu questions the decision by expressing doubt about including a female participant in a male-dominated group.
Denotation	A male contestant openly doubts whether a woman deserves a place in the team despite no evidence that she lacks ability.
Connotation	Female competence is evaluated through gender stereotypes rather than actual performance. Women are positioned as potential liabilities whose participation requires additional justification.
Myth	The scene naturalizes the patriarchal belief that men are inherently more competent in leadership, strategy, and physical endurance, while women must continually prove that they deserve equal recognition.

Source**:** Adapted from the authors' analysis of *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* (2026).

Scene 7 represents the clearest manifestation of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs*. Se Mi's capability is questioned before she has the opportunity to demonstrate her skills, indicating that gender stereotypes precede individual evaluation. According to Hall (1997), media representations organize social meanings by repeatedly associating particular identities with specific values. In this case, masculinity is linked to competence and authority, whereas femininity is associated with uncertainty and weakness. Barthes' three levels of meaning reveal how a seemingly ordinary disagreement over team composition evolves into a broader ideological message that legitimizes male dominance. These findings support previous studies on gender representation in Korean streaming dramas, which argue that contemporary narratives continue to negotiate women's agency within enduring patriarchal norms (Liao & Ling, 2025; Kim & Lee, 2026; Choi et al., 2024). Consequently, the episode reinforces the myth that women remain secondary participants whose legitimacy depends upon male acceptance.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the representation of female inferiority in *Squid Game* Season 2 Episode *Six Legs* through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The findings demonstrate that female inferiority is constructed through interconnected denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings embedded in visual images, dialogue, character interactions, and narrative structures. At the denotative level, female characters are frequently portrayed as being questioned, underestimated, or excluded from strategic decision-making. At the connotative level, these representations associate femininity with physical weakness, emotional vulnerability, and dependence on male authority. At the mythical level, the series reproduces patriarchal ideology by naturalizing the belief that leadership, competence, and survival are masculine attributes, while women are positioned as secondary actors whose legitimacy depends on male acceptance.

Although several female characters demonstrate courage, resilience, and resistance against gender stereotypes, these forms of agency continue to be negotiated within patriarchal narrative structures that privilege masculine authority. Consequently, *Squid Game* not only functions as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects and reproduces gender ideology through symbolic representation. The application of Barthes' semiotic framework reveals that seemingly ordinary dialogues and visual signs carry broader ideological meanings that shape public understanding of women's social roles within contemporary popular culture.

Beyond its contribution to semiotic analysis, this study reinforces the relevance of representation theory and feminist media studies in understanding how streaming media participate in the construction of gender ideology.

As Korean dramas continue to reach global audiences through digital platforms, their symbolic representations have the capacity to influence public perceptions of gender roles across different cultural contexts. The findings suggest that patriarchal values are not always communicated through explicit discrimination but are often embedded within ordinary conversations, visual compositions, and narrative structures that appear natural to audiences. This demonstrates that media texts remain important sites where social meanings and gender relations are continuously produced, negotiated, and reproduced.

This study also highlights the importance of developing more gender-sensitive media narratives within the global streaming industry. Content creators, producers, and scriptwriters should recognize that audiovisual storytelling not only entertains audiences but also contributes to shaping social attitudes toward gender equality. Future research is encouraged to extend this analysis by comparing multiple Korean dramas or other streaming platforms to identify broader patterns of gender representation. Combining semiotic analysis with audience reception or digital ethnography may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of how viewers interpret and negotiate the myths of female inferiority within contemporary popular culture.

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