

A Critical Study of Identity Politics Based on the Category 'Biological Woman' in the Digital Era: How Young Korean Women Became Transgender Exclusive Radical Feminists*

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This paper aims to offer a critical analysis of the identity politics of recent Korean radical feminism that is based on the category "biological woman." For these purposes, it will provide a critical analysis of the Korean urban imaginary and show why Korean radical feminists had to choose such transgender-exclusive identity politics based on biological sex in the digital era. In addition to neoliberal competition, fear of disintegration caused by image exploitation led them to transgender exclusive radical feminism. They desire to become subjects in the biological dichotomy by excluding objects from their spaces. Finally, this paper argues that Korean feminists must turn to a politics of recognition in accordance with the status model. This deconstructive approach to the politics of recognition gives us the possibility of guaranteeing the equal parity of women without the trap of exclusion or reification.

Keywords: *identity politics, biological woman, Korean radical feminism, status model, TERF*

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Introduction

The struggles for the recognition of group identity in the seventies and eighties were charged with emancipatory promise. From campaigns for national sovereignty to movements of multiculturalism and feminism, calls for the recognition of group identities have driven many of the world's social movements. Iris Marion Young calls these movements "politics of difference" and Nancy Fraser "recognition politics," as one of their prime objectives was to acknowledge an undervalued group identity.

Charles Taylor (1992, p. 25) argued that "nonrecognition or misrecognition (...) can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being." Axel Honneth (1992, p.189) also pointed out that disrespect or misrecognition prevents people from having a "positive understanding of self."

Nevertheless, the dangers of identity politics became apparent. Fraser (2008, p. 129) explained that questions of identity have generated ethnic cleansing campaigns with an extreme extent of genocide, as well as movements against them. She pointed out that the struggles for recognition often serve not to promote respectful interaction but to drastically simplify and reify group identities. Iris Marion Young (1990, p. 148) also pointed out that even members of an oppressed group often show signs of disgust and undervaluation toward members their own group as long as they assume "the position of the subject within the dominant culture."

At the end of the 20th century, feminists of the third wave had clearly recognized that the substance of identities like human, woman, and subject is a kind of fantasy. They have suggested that no essence exists behind gender identity and that the gender that we know is the stylization of the body created through performative repetition (Butler 1990). Others have pointed out that humans have transformed into cyborgs that are a hybrid of organisms and machines or focused on the "transposition" of the subject (Haraway 1996; Braidotti 2006). Their focus was the discourse of how to "undo" a fixed group identity.

However, it seems that everything changed with the advancement of digital technology. Beginning around 2011, when social networking services began to connect with large-scale mobile environments, the so called fourth wave of feminism appeared in the West, fueled by online environments (Chamberlain 2017, p. 3). Online feminism, which spreads via connecting actions such as hashtags over social media, has developed through anti-

sexual objectification movements or anti-sexual violence movements such as #MeToo. Unlike the third wave of feminism, the fourth wave emphasizes the identity of the female body in the sexual dichotomy and, worrisomely, there is a tendency toward the exclusion of transgender people and refugees (Real 2020; Cochrane 2013).

The same goes for Korean society. Ever since smartphones became popularized, with the release of the iPhone in 2007 and the introduction of the global mobile messaging service KakaoTalk in March 2010, the number of social media users has increased dramatically.¹ The “fourth wave of feminism,” “the feminism reboot,” or “the young-young feminists” mainly between the ages of 15 and 39 (in 2015) in Korea was made possible due to the onset of the digital era (Sohn 2017, p. 84).

While it is true that until the eighties modern Korean feminism had been fairly cis-woman-centric and based on female identity, they did not officially exclude “biological men,” refugees, or transgender people because of their biological sex. Rather, with the introduction of postmodernism in the eighties and nineties, Korea’s young feminists were discussing psychoanalytic feminism, queer feminism, and post-colonial feminism. However, the radical stance of today’s young-young feminists has a tendency to emphasize the identity of the “female body” as based on the category of the “biological woman,” taking an attitude of excluding “biological” men refugees, and transgender people. How, then, did transgender-exclusive radical feminists (TERFs) who openly attack transgender people (especially MtF) appear in the Korean context? And how different is their stance from that found in the West?

In the next two sections I will explain the background and characteristics of the radical stance of recent Korean feminists that is oriented toward an identity politics based on biological sex. Then, I will provide a critical analysis of why they had to choose such essentialist and exclusive identity politics as a strategy in the digital era. After exploring the limitations of their identity politics, I finally propose a politics of recognition in accordance with the status model, introducing the critical theory of Fraser. This model enables a vision of feminist politics of recognition that overcome the dangers of exclusion and reification.

¹ Ministry of Science, ICT and Future Planning, “2016 Internet usage survey”, 2017.01.31, <https://www.korea.kr/news/pressReleaseView.do?newsId=156181299>. According to the 2016 Internet Usage Survey conducted by the Ministry of Science, ICT, and Future Planning involving 61,238 people (25,000 households) aged 3 or older, the internet usage rate by age was 100% for both teens and those in their 20s, 99.8% for people in their 30s, and 99.4% of people in their 40s. Therefore, most Koreans aged 10 to 40 use the Internet.

The Emergence of Korean Radical Feminism based on the “biological woman”

Even in the early 2000s, cyberspace was expected to be a space of freedom (Harvey 2000, Castell 1996, Kim 2009).² However, contrary to expectations, Korean cyberspace turned out to be a place where misogyny prevails; since 1997, the high-speed internet has led to relentless mass circulation of nonconsensual pornography (KCSVC 2020, p. 27). In 1999, Soranet³ opened as a leading online platform where Korean men “played” by sharing countless illegal recordings and nonconsensual pornography (ibid p. 28). Since 2000, users from the online community Ilbe⁴ have mocked Korean women as *doenjang-nyeo*, which means, in the literal translation, soybean paste girls, implying the vanity of Korean women (Park 2013). In 2013, a group called Men’s Solidarity appeared, advocating for the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. This group argues that men now face reverse discrimination and advance the idea that men must be identified as a minority. In 2014, an anonymous 18-year-old male known only as Mr. Kim to the public left for Turkey to join IS, saying, “I hate feminists,” and in 2015, columnist Kim Tae-hoon mocked the resurgent feminist movement with a column titled “Brainless Feminism is More Dangerous Than IS” (Sohn 2017, pp. 96-98). This trend intensified during the 2015 MERS outbreak when unfounded rumors spread that a female MERS patient was breaking quarantine measures and walking around outside. Internet communities were filled with hateful comments directed at Korean women generally.

To combat online misogyny, young Korean women created their own internet community called “Megalia” (MERS + *Egalia’s Daughters*) in 2015. It started on the MERS gallery of the internet community DC Inside and emerged fully-fledged in Megalia. They struggled against misogyny and debated over who is the subject of feminism. Through lengthy debates, one

² This was the same in Korea. For example, when two Korean middle school-aged girls, Mi-sun and Hyo-sun, were crushed by an American armored vehicle, Korean netizens quickly organized a candlelight demonstration. Also, in 2008, they held a demonstration banning the import of American beef due to concerns over mad cow disease. There are many analyses that the women-centered internet communities have made young woman a leading participant in candlelight vigils (Kim 2009).

³ Soranet was forced to shut down in April 2016.

⁴ Ilbe, an acronym of “daily best” stemmed from an online platform Everyday Best Humor.

exclusive stance of Korean radical feminism, "WOMAD" (woman + nomad),⁵ emerged in 2016, which recognizes only biological women as the subjects of feminism. Though their identity politics based on the biological conception of woman enabled powerful solidarity between women, it also was used as a mechanism to justify discrimination against other minorities such as "biologically male" refugees and transgender "women".

These young Korean women took the fundamental stance of radical feminism that advocated for women only and women first. This means that in any political situation, women's problems should not be considered secondary,⁶ and only biological women, the most disadvantaged of all people, are be entitled to be feminists. They began to use an identity politics based on the category "biological woman" when clarifying the distinction between men (offenders) and women (victims).

This exclusive stance of radical feminism never existed in Korean society before the 2000s. Although there were movements against sexual violence in addition to movements against the Miss Korea beauty pageant related to sexual objectification, Korean feminists have always collaborated with other social and national movements. They developed a consciousness arising from the complex topography of Korean society, such as anti-feudalism, national independence, labor liberation, and anti-dictatorship (Lee 1998).⁷ It was not

⁵ WOMAD is a compound word for woman and nomad. WOMAD users described their community as a shelter and practiced "mirroring without sanctuary" in this space.

⁶ Korean feminism developed within the student movements and labor movements of the '80s. However, within these movements, women's problems were still considered secondary. Sexual violence between activists was buried under the pretense of harming the cause of the movement. The same was true of the Candlelight Plaza in 2017, which was mired in criticism of the manipulation of state affairs. South Korean feminists from various positions made hateful remarks in protests, along with criticism of the manipulation of state affairs in Candlelight Square. But this criticism was answered with, "A tsunami is coming and you're picks up seashells," or the issue of feminism "later."

⁷ For example, during the period of Japanese colonial occupation, women's organizations were organized to participate in independence movements such as the National Debt Compensation Movement, the Righteous Army Movement, and the March 1st Movement. In the early 1920s, the YWCA organized enlightenment campaigns to fight women's illiteracy, modern education, and improve their lives. In 1927, the Federation of Women's Groups declared a code of conduct for discrimination against women, freedom of marriage, and wage discrimination. After liberation from colonial rule in 1945, women's organizations continued their activities to obtain the same rights as men, such as campaigning for the abolition of the sexist family system as well as fighting human trafficking and prostitution. During the period of industrialization in the 1970s, the women's movement continued its struggle for the rights of female workers, and in the 1980s, women's organizations succeeded in enacting laws such as the Sexual Violence Prevention Act and the Domestic Violence Prevention Act along with the anti-dictatorship struggle and carried out independent issues such as the recognition of the value of domestic labor and the environmental

until the 1980s that feminists strongly criticized the patriarchal nature of these social movements, arguing for the independence of a feminist movement for women.

Identity Politics of Korean Radical Feminists based on “Biological Woman”

What claim has Korean radical feminism made in the last five years? In the following sections, I will demonstrate the exclusive identity politics of recent Korean radical feminism.

Women’s Community WOMAD: “Crossdressers are Gender Psychopaths”

The first case of Korean radical feminism that openly attacked transgender women was WOMAD. They insisted that not only gay men but also crossdressers, even Jesus, are worthy of attack because they are all biologically men.

This radical stance of WOMAD was evident in their use of the phrase, “Crossdressers are *jensinbyeongja* (gender psychopaths).” WOMAD granted membership only to those women who agreed with this phrase, which uses a neologism combining the words gender and psychopath. According to WOMAD users, crossdressers are psychopaths whose gender does not match their sex and are therefore mentally ill. WOMAD users are equipped with biological sex as a basis for their understanding of feminism. In this sense, only biological women who treat women’s problems as a matter of urgency are accepted as members of the community. The present understanding of the various genders is nowhere to be found.

Allegory of Gender Theory: “The Biggest Beneficiaries Are Pre-Op MTF”

In 2017, Korean radical feminists particularly targeted MTF transgender people, regarding them as a privileged sex class who enjoy privileges as men.

Under the influence of Australian TERF Sheila Jeffreys, Korean TERFs are highly critical of gender theory. From a sex perspective rather than a gender one, TERFs satirize transgender people (MTF) as a privileged class that occupy the top of the gender caste, not a minority. This allegory of

consumption and life movement (Lee 1998).

transgender people as a privileged gender class appeared frequently in several posts on the Facebook page “*majneun mal dae janchi* (party of correct opinions)” in 2017. There, posts sarcastically criticized that in the gender theory where transgenderism is introduced, the highest rank, the position of Brahman, is reserved for a pre-op MTF trans lesbians, followed by homosexual males as Kshatriya, and heterosexual males as Vaishya. Heterosexual women fall under the slave caste, Sudra. Interestingly, they add a class to the gender caste even more miserable than Sudra, to which female lesbians belong. This can be depicted as follows.


Pre-Op MTF Trans Lesbians (Brahman)	Highest  Lowest
Homosexual Males (Kshatriya)	
Heterosexual Males (Vaishya)	
Heterosexual Females (Sudra)	
Lesbian Females (Untouchable)	

FIG. 1.—ALLEGORY OF GENDER CASTE

From their sex perspective, pre-op trans lesbians are not minorities, but a supreme power; in terms of their male bodies, they enjoy all the benefits endowed to men in society, but when necessary, take advantage of belonging to the female gender and use their sexual minority status to escape blame. Thus, their class is comparable to that of a Brahman holy priest whom no one dares to challenge. In contrast, the most undermined in gender caste is (cis) lesbian women. This allegory clearly illustrates their victim mentality that biological women face due to transgender people (particularly, MTF) and biological men.

Only Biological Women Can Join “Uncomfortable Courage”

The Hyehwa Station protest in 2018 also displayed the exclusive identity politics of Korean radical feminism based on biological womanhood. Here is how the protests came about: a WOMAD user was immediately arrested after posting a nonconsensual photo of a male nude model taken with a *molka* (hidden camera). The police immediately responded to the nonconsensual photographs of a man’s body when they were uploaded by a woman. This led women to become indignant because the police generally respond tepidly to cases involving nonconsensual photography or videos that sexually target

women's bodies. The news spread quickly on social media, and women-led protests formed an organization called Uncomfortable Courage.⁸ They called for "equivalent punishment for the same crime," and demanded that "biased investigations must stop."

The problem, however, was that the organizers of the protest restricted participation to biological women only.⁹ Of course, not all protesters agreed with this restriction. For example, one participant declared that she did not agree with the condition of biological women only, but came out to protest anyway because she supported the eradication of nonconsensual videos (*Hankyoreh*, Aug. 8, 2018). However, in so far as the official criterion for participation was being a "biological woman," transgender people and non-binary people were excluded from the protests.

On the website of Uncomfortable Courage, called Protest Against Illegal Shooting and Biased Investigation, there were many articles that excluded transgender women. A picket sign in the demonstration area propagated the phrase "suspected [of being] transgender," calling a caricature of a trans woman a "hybrid" (Figure 2). Many participants appealed to fears of spy cams installed by biological men, such as crossdressers or transgender women, in public toilets despite of the fact that there has been only one verified case of a crossdresser hiding such a camera. The leadership of Uncomfortable Courage reportedly disapproved of participation by not only adult men or transgender people but also male children, mocking them as *hannam yuchung* (Korean male larvae). When the domestic and international media questioned their use of the word "biological," the leadership of Uncomfortable Courage responded to the issue by saying, "even male kindergarten students commit sex crimes" (*World Daily*, Jul. 9, 2018).

⁸ "One, there is no sanctuary above women. There are no interest groups or politics above women. We criticize any male power. In addition, to focus on the stance on 'Women resisting male power' without being swayed by political parties, ideals, and thoughts, we do not act in solidarity with any external organizations. Second, we recapture the deprived power of woman. We demand that the head of the Police Department Lee Cheol-sung and the Attorney General Moon Mu-il be expelled and ask for a female head of the police and female attorney general to be elected. We call for a 90:10 ratio of forward-looking female police. Three, we demand equal investigation and equal punishment. I demand punishment of illegal video distributors and downloaders on male centered sites, which are cesspools of illegal photos and videos. I demand punishment for illegal video sellers and buyers. We require digital funeral home investigations. Korean women won't sit down [and take it] anymore. The government should immediately implement a reasonable and concrete solution to the anger of women. We are ready to burn Korea down" (27 May 2018, Let us know about uncomfortable courage stances).

⁹ The official name of the website Uncomfortable Courage is a protest against the illegal shooting of photos and videos and biased investigations.



FIG. 2.—A PICKET AT THE DEMONSTRATION “SUSPECTED [OF BEING] TRANSGENDER.”

Political Lesbianism, Separatism of Radical Groups

In 2019, radical groups at women’s universities declared lesbianism to be the best method for women’s solidarity. It is important to note that they adopted the term *lesbianism* rather than using the word *queer*. Their version of lesbianism views “biological woman” as a fixed and pure identity.¹⁰ To them, lesbianism conveniently and powerfully connects women based on their shared biological identity. They argued that feminists should adopt lesbianism to broaden themselves beyond the fears and evils of patriarchal heterosexual relationships. Here lesbianism has more of a political implication than a sexual one. It means to politically support biological women beyond ideology.

For example, to celebrate International Women’s Day in March 2019, radical feminist groups at Sookmyung Women’s University launched the Sookmyung Feminists Association (SFA). They emphasized the body-based oppression women face with the phrase, “Women’s pussies and blood are

¹⁰ Butler criticized lesbianism as another fantasy in that it is based on a fixed identity and idealized femininity. “Hence, power can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed. Indeed, in my view, the normative focus for gay and lesbian practice ought to be on the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than on the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence” (Judith Butler 2006, p. 169).

reduced to saints and motherhood and became the basis for discrimination in patriarchal societies.”¹¹ When the Sookmyung Women’s University Student Council criticized alumna Kim Soon-rye, a female member of parliament, for disparaging remarks she made concerning the May 18 Democratic Movement, radical feminists countered that she should not be criticized, regardless of her political ideology, because she is a woman.

Their solidarity for biological women operated like a decree in this context. When it became known that a transgender woman had been admitted to Sookmyung Women’s University in 2020, they opposed to her admission because she was not a biological woman. Furthermore, they argue that they need a strong intimate female community that is wholly separated from males. In advocating for lesbianism, they want to create a safe space for women.

In 2020, Korean radical feminists founded a political party called the Women’s Party with a focus on strong identity politics regarding woman. Ultimately, identity politics centered on the idea of the biological woman exhibited strong and rapid mobility but failed to expand solidarity. In the process, not only biological men but also those who claim to be queer and intersectional feminists were excluded, and the identity of woman and the sex binary were reified.

Critical Analysis on Identity Politics of TERFs in the Urban Imaginary

As shown above, recent Korean radical feminism has developed identity politics¹² that are based on woman as a biological category. This may not be a unique phenomenon of Korea. Issues of radical feminism have been observed across the world, shaped by global capitalism and high-tech digital industry. However, it remains true that there is no place where transgender exclusive radical feminists have obtained such power as quickly as they have in Korea.

¹¹ The organizations that participated in this alliance include Sookmyung Women’s University Central Club SFA, Sookmyung Women’s University feminist group FEMI-POWER PROJECT, Sookmyung Women’s University Radical Lesbian, Feminist Club LABRY, and Sookmyung Women’s University Radical Feminist Club SOOK_DICAL.

¹² Nancy Fraser calls the usual approach to politics of recognition the “identity model.” According to the identity model, one can become an individual subject only by virtue of being recognized by another subject. To be misrecognized means to suffer a distortion of one’s relation to one’s self and an injury to one’s identity. Therefore, members of misrecognized groups reject their negative images to produce a self-affirming culture of their own (Fraser 2008, p. 131).

After a debate over the subject of feminism in 2015, the number of WOMAD users seemed to be much higher than the number of users left in Megalia. At that time, the number of recommendations for monthly best posts in Megalia, which averaged about 1,000 posts per day in 2015, dropped sharply to 300 after the schism of WOMAD and Megalia in January 2016. On the other hand, the number of daily postings in the early days of WOMAD totaled more than 1,000 and doubled after the femicide near Gangnam Station (Kim 2017, pp. 36-39). These numbers explicate that the mainstream of the rebooted online feminism at that time excluded transgender people.

Why, then, did Korean radical feminists in digital era become obsessed with an exclusive identity based on biological women? In this section, I will critically analyze why Korean radical feminism appeals to such an exclusive stance, focusing on the urban imaginary.

Reduction of Woman to a Biological Body in the Misogynic Urban Imaginary

In this section I will begin with the thesis that even in the urban imaginary, women have been ironically reduced to biological bodies. In other words, in the digital and neoliberal era, men aimed to continue the illusion that they are the subject by objectifying women as biological bodies in cyberspace.

It is first necessary to point out that the way online feminists exist as a type of cyborg has led to the fourth wave of feminism. A cyborg is the hybrid of organisms and machines connected to cyberspace through digital media. The cyborg illustrates that the human body can be imagined and experienced differently according to changes in the scientific and technological environment. In the age of digital urbanization, humans are no longer organisms with distinct boundaries separating them from objects or the outside world. In the digital urbanity where cyborg feminists live, reality is no longer what it used to be. It is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Baudrillard 1983, p. 1). Digital urbanity is the hybrid of reality and imagination, each continually influencing the other. Online feminists live in a hyperreality—a world of images that have a stronger influence than reality.

In *Postmetropolis*, Edward Soja (2000, p. 324) explains that what regulates urban space is “the urban imaginary.” This refers to “our mental or cognitive mappings of urban reality and the interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate, and decide to act in the places, spaces, and communities in which we live.” The urban imaginary, which predisposes our perceptions and value judgments, is the effect of repeated images in

digital mass media. Consequently, who circulates what image is a key element in the construction of the imaginary. Likewise, one must first mold an image into a dominant reality to affect everyday life in cyberspace. Soja adds that such regulation of the urban imaginary “plays with the mind” (p. 324). The key lies in whose image dominates within the imaginary.

The Korean urban imaginary is replete with misogyny, a culture of the objectification of women. This is a typical phenomenon of the backlash Susan Faludi theorized. Faludi analyzed that when women began to become competitive in the United States in the 1980s, men began to backlash (Faludi 1992, p. 45). Likewise, Korean backlash did not appear because women and men became equal but arose in situations where women and men were on the precipice of becoming equal. Under the conditions of neoliberal competition, some men perceived the emergence of competitive women as the emergence of rivals and attempted to resolve their neoliberal anxiety by insulting and objectifying women.

In internet communities such as DC Inside or Ilbe, some men indirectly relieve their anxiety over neoliberal competition by mocking women. This is closely related to the anxiety arising from neoliberal competition in the era of low growth and high unemployment. In Korea, neoliberal anxiety was at its peak in 1997 during the Asian financial crisis. In 2001, the Korean government paid off its debts, but following Lee Myeong-bak’s ascent to presidency in 2008, the trend of neoliberal competition accelerated. Failure or success became entirely a matter of personal responsibility. At the same time, young Korean women grew up to be competitive. Thus, some young Korean men who could not achieve as much wealth and power as their fathers had, considered themselves to be “losers” and tried to recognize their superiority by mocking women online.

It has been observed that male misogynic subjects see themselves as very weak victims. This is because under the conditions of neoliberal competition they had very few ways to be recognized for their existence. They focus on trying to be recognized by criticizing or insulting others. For instance, they imagine themselves as superior subjects by depicting women as inferior, dirty, or sexual objects in the urban imaginary. Male misogynic subjects ridicule Korean women as *doenjang-nyeo* or *kimchi-nyeo* (kimchi girls), who act extravagantly regardless of their potentially humble situation. Cyberspace is also overflowing with images that reduce women to sexual bodies. If you enter the term “street” into portal search bar of the Daum portal site, *momjjang-nyeo* (girls with good bodies) or *chomini* (super miniskirt) will appear as suggested searches. There are many platforms that secretly trade

nonconsensual pornography illicitly taken with *molka* (hidden/spy cams). As soon as you open any number of online games, you are also confronted with images of women's sexualized bodies. This is how the male dominant urban imaginary intensifies the image of woman as a biological sexual body in the digital era. This shows that misogyny based on biological sexual dualism has become more visible in cyberspace than in any other space.

Ilbe users "prefer to be recognized as fun people in the internet community and social media," rather than being recognized in the Real by the government or society (Park 2013, p. 14). Because they are well aware that in the Real, they have no abilities. A current affairs critic, Park Ga-bun used Azuma Hiroki's terminology to refer to this tendency as "animalization." Azuma's conception of animal denotes humans who "want to create a self-sufficient mutual recognition order within the internet" (p. 15); that is, their desire for recognition is no longer directed toward the government or society.

What I emphasize here is that cyborg men, like Ilbe users, are no longer in the urban symbolic but instead in the imaginary. This is also why Soja named the regulatory principle of the post-metropolis not the urban symbolic but rather the urban imaginary. For Lacan, the imaginary signifies the world that is related to the imagination or misrecognition, while the symbolic refers to language, structures, and cultural norms which constitute our actions. In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, a child sees itself reflected in the mirror and cheers, fascinated by its completeness (Lacan 2002). The reason why the child cheers is because she/he looks perfect in the mirror. The imaginary subject at the mirror stage is a subject who can misrecognize (imagine) their imperfections as perfection. Similarly, in cyberspace, a computer monitor may act as the mirror that makes this imaginary subject possible. Despite being a veritable loser, he can be imagined and (mis) recognized as a perfect being in the urban imaginary. The images circulating in the internet community he relies on make it possible to (mis)recognize the loser as a complete man. The images of women as inferior objects or dirty bodies that circulate around these internet communities act as mirrors that make the men who consume them mistake themselves for superior male subjects.

It is notable that this (mis)recognition or politics of recognition in the urban imaginary is done thoroughly via biological dichotomy. In fact, men no longer enjoy as much power from masculinity as their fathers once did, but they want to confirm their superiority while reducing women to their genitals and bodies in the digital imaginary. In digital urbanism, we can see images of female bodies being exploited more often and easier than in

industrial urbanism. The urban imaginary ironically recalls the female body as the biological and morphological body based on biological dualism.

Competitive Women's Desire to Achieve

How did Korean young women respond to this misogynistic urban imaginary? How did they also become a group that excludes the Other? In the following section, I will argue that they sought to change the position of women while leaving the frameworks of sexual dichotomy and neoliberal competition intact. Their struggle for recognition based on identity politics does not go so far as to break the frameworks of biological dichotomy and neoliberal anxiety. Instead, they want to develop their own competitiveness and occupy an advantage within these existing frameworks.

As we have examined, the cyborg men who were afraid of becoming losers tried to imagine themselves as subjects by mocking women as sexual objects. However, cyborg women did not involve themselves in the male misogynic imagination, but rather dared to throw down the gauntlet against it. These women were called “young-young feminists,” “net-feminists,” “cyborg feminists,” or the “2030 generation of feminists.”

Cyborg feminists belong to a generation whose members have experienced intense competition over the system of entrance examinations to higher education in Korea. Their parents, though perhaps conservative and patriarchal, have generously invested in helping them get into good universities. According to the *Education Statistics Yearbook* of the Ministry of Education, the college enrollment rate of female students began to surpass that of male students in 2005, and the enrollment rate of female students was 72.7% in 2017, 7.4% higher than that of male students. They had the competitive edge on tests and were aware that women should be just as independent and ambitious as men. They were women who could not afford to lose. They thought they could win so long as the game was fair. They were women who had thoroughly adapted to the neoliberal competition system. In other words, they were more accustomed to surviving competition within the system rather than dismantling or changing the given system.

The Megalia community's use of “mirroring” was the most provocative strategy by which these competitive Korean women tried to win the game in the urban imaginary. Young women had just started to be competitive but had not yet reached equality. Consequently, they began to imagine themselves as subjects, objectifying men as objects. As the name Megalia suggests, mirroring draws inspiration from the novel *Egalia's Daughters*,

which portrays a world in which the gender roles are totally reversed. Mirroring is not simply a change in roles but a power game for who becomes a subject through competition. For example, they countered *kimchi-nyeo* with *hannam-chung*, a compound word combining Korean men and worms, and *mom-chung* (mom + worms) with *heosuaebi* (scarecrow + daddy), a compound word that was used to satirize Korean fathers who do nothing, like a scarecrow, even when their children cry.

Ultimately, mirroring did not stop at puns. WOMAD users targeted their mirroring against refugee men, transgender people, boys, and even Jesus. It was a user of WOMAD who posted a nonconsensual photo of a male nude model in Hongdae University that triggered the Hyehwa Station protest. And their mirroring paid off to some extent. The government has created policies to prevent cyber sexual violence against women and toughen punishment of criminals. To win, Korean radical feminists went so far as to give up political correctness and morality, emphasizing a movement for women only, not for all. They claimed that they could not afford to include other minorities, that it was a luxury to consider minorities in a competitive situation such as their own. To survive the competition, they needed to think about women only.

This was evident in the book *I'm Coming to Save My Pie, Not Humanity* written by a co-representative of the Women's Party, Kim Jin-ah. She considers the actions of radical feminism not pacifism, but "a struggle to reclaim the women's pies that were stolen by the men. In short, it's a turf war" (Kim 2019, p. 3). Here, turf war means the struggles for survival and success by female subjects pursuing self-improvement in the neoliberal era. Kim Jin-ah confesses that she wants to be "someone," not simply "someone's woman." Self-improvement for her means a good job and a promotion. In her mind, to achieve this, women need to break the glass ceiling and be just as immoral as men and even more brutal or cruel than them.

Crucially, she does not question the size or number of pies that are available. Nor does she imagine that she can increase the size of the pie through political and economic transformation. She is very cynical about economic transformation in the neoliberal era, and considers large-scale transformations that might reframe the whole of society to be a kind of fantasy. Thus, she competes for what is already there. The most important thing for women is to get their piece of the pie in the system. In this context, men represent nothing but inferior competitors. Women are considered successful if they claim their share of the pie. Here "fair" judgments for all minorities are neither important nor possible. She believes that through this

“politically correctness,” women cannot claim their pie in this world.

There are times when I am drunk with the “cool me” who is politically correct, supports all minorities and freedom of expression, and makes fair judgments apart from men and women. It’s a white middle-class liberal fantasy that’s easy to fall for if you’ve grown up with American pop culture that leads to MTV, OnStyle, and Netflix. (p. 7)

She argues that the struggle for recognition women face clearly highlights who took the pie and who can retake it. The reason why transgender people, as well as male refugees, are excluded from communities run by Korean radical feminists also can be explained in connection with this neoliberal competition. These competitive women have no reason to break the frame of neoliberalism. There is no reason for them to share their pie with transgender women, who they see as privileged in the gender caste, either. The clearer notion of “someone” results in a stronger dichotomy of female and male. The so-called hybrid beings are nothing but competitors who claim part of the pie.

This way of thinking was also evident at the Hyehwa Station protest. Many participants agreed that the largest number of women would gather when eligibility to participate was limited to biological women. It was a strategy to increase women’s power through a mass gathering without dismantling the existing dichotomous framework. The radical groups at women’s universities also had no reason to share the public goods and space reserved for women with transgender women and non-binary people. Thus, TERFs circulated images of transgender people as intruders into women’s spaces in the urban imaginary. Speed is very important in cyberspace. The simpler and the more spectacular an image, the faster it is propagated. In situations where it is important to respond quickly, it is not possible to consider a variety of minorities together. The aggregation is reduced while considering the intersection of complex identities. Thus, they appealed to what they call “biological women.”

Fear of Disintegration Caused by Nonconsensual Pornography

In addition to their desire to achieve, their fear of disintegration caused by nonconsensual pornography also led Korean radical feminists to an identity politics that excludes others. In addition to the desire to survive neoliberal competition, the wish to escape from the fear of disintegration ignited an

identity politics that creates safe spaces by excluding transgender people.

The acts of making, distributing, and watching nonconsensual pornography are kinds of image exploitation. Image exploitation is the act of crossing the boundaries of one's body image even though one does not agree to this. It does not simply end with the image exploitation of the victim, however, because the victim experiences the invasion of her body not once, but several times through the playback of the video. Thus, when they learned that spy cameras were installed in public toilets, women were seized with the fear that they could become victims of image exploitation.

Image exploitation destroys not only a woman's body, but also her dignity; image exploitation can bring the "fear of disintegration" to woman (Young 1990, p. 144). According to Iris Marion Young, the separated ego maintains the boundary between itself and the Other through objection and repulsion to the Other. It denies the Other because of the fear that ego's boundary will collapse. Therefore, I argue that fear of disintegration led Korean radical feminists to transition from being excluded to excluding the Other.

Women's fear of disintegration comes from two directions, objectification and abjection. First, women can fear disintegration when men objectify them. The dominant urban imaginary urges men to target women. Men, as subjects, despise and violate women. Therefore, women are afraid of men who designate them as targets. When they learned that spy cameras have been installed in public toilets and nonconsensual videos have been disseminated on online platforms, women were seized with the fear of disintegration. In 2016, when a woman was murdered in a public restroom near exit 10 of Gangnam Station in Seoul, young Korean women began to recognize men as violent criminals who destroy women's dignity. They perceived themselves as having survived misogynistic society, which makes women objects, by mere chance. Women's fears have also been exacerbated in cyberspace. In daily life, women suffer from cyberbullying and gaslighting. Comments such as "You're going to be killed" or "I know where your house is" were life-threatening to women.

Thus, Korean radical feminists have created their own safe spaces to cope with fears of men and have implemented a mirroring strategy that targets men (Lee 2018). In this way, rather than dismantling the existing dichotomy between subject and object, they pioneered a way to recapture the subject position within the dichotomy. They also offer safe spaces such as exclusive, women-centered communities, sex-separated toilets, or women's universities where men are forbidden to enter.

Moreover, Korean radical feminists express their fear not only of men but also of transgender women in the process of establishing themselves as subjects. TERFs insisted that transgender women exacerbate the objectification of women. They circulated images that claimed transgender women are men who exploit women's bodies and spread rumors that a transgender "man" (that is, a transgender woman who they judge to be a man) secretly installed a camera in women's restrooms. Why did they spread these unfounded rumors, even though transgender women never had cameras hidden in women's restrooms? How, then, can this unjustified and exaggerated fear of transgender be explained?

TERFs' fear of transgender people can be better explained by introducing the concept of "abjection." According to Julia Kristeva, an "abject" is not something you can name, define, or imagine, it is something that is unrecognizable to a person (Kristeva 1982, pp. 1-2). It is something that was once familiar, but that should have been thrown away (abjected) to become a subject. It must be abjected to become a subject because it is thought to disrupt ego identity and self-integration. It causes more intense fear and phobia than anxiety, as it is thought to annihilate the ego at once. I argue that this form of phobia of abjects creates TERFs' phobia of transgender people, particularly transgender women.

When a transgender woman was granted admission to Sookmyung Women's University in 2020, TERFs argued that feminists should protest the admission. As explained above, TERFs sought to keep women-centered communities and women's universities as shelters for biological women, safe places for political lesbianism. They tried to protect inner unity and identity by drawing boundaries. Of course, they tended to characterize transgender women as "male" wolves in rabbit mask who threaten small young "female" rabbits (Figure 3). But in fact, transgender people are neither rabbits nor wolves. Rather, they are abjects crossing the border; "Something that I do not recognize as a thing," (p. 2) and therefore cannot be defined in one word. They remind me of something that once lived within me but had to be excluded in order to become a subject.



FIG. 3.—POSTER OF ALL-OUT FOR WOMEN’S SPACE SHOOTER

In the above picture, we can observe a phobia, that is, a fear of objects that could deconstruct these women’s identity. In the framework of sexual dichotomy, transgender people, unlike men, are objects who cannot be defined by the biological binary. Kristeva (1982, p. 4) explains that objects are considered that which “disturbs identity, system, order,” and that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules.” Since TERFs presuppose the existing concept of the female identity as being based on biological dichotomy, they respond to their phobia of transgender women by defining them as biological males. They have been trying to understand transgender people as one of two in order to overcome their own fear of disintegration.

Kristeva also argued that a child becomes a subject by creating its own boundaries. Children become subjects by drawing a boundary separating them from the objects. In this sense, becoming a subject means being able to practice abjection. In the system of sexual dichotomy, objects often provoke fear because they expose and threaten to dissolve the border. They are neither subjects who can threaten women with objectification, nor objects that can be defined by subjects. Therefore, those women who wanted to clarify their own boundaries sought to exclude objects from their space.

Paradox of The Identity Model and Paradigm Shift to a Status Model

Are we in fact subjects with clear boundaries? Have we ever been such a being, even once? According to Kristeva, we cannot live without the abject completely. A perfect identity or clear boundaries are illusions. However, like Korean men, Korean women could not escape the illusion of the dichotomy between subject and object with clear boundaries. Because Korean radical feminists wanted a unified ego, much like their male counterparts, they could not escape the enticing and powerful concept of identity.

Of course, the identity politics of TERFs has created a keen sense of identification with the identity of woman. They sought to become competitive subjects by establishing strong boundaries. However, their identity politics based on the category “biological woman” results in the exclusion of transgender people. They also reify sexual differences by re-quoting biological women in their identity politics, such as through mirroring or keeping their communities gated.

Fraser explains that the struggle for recognition has so far been based on an identity model. In this model, it was important for members to acknowledge the group identity to which they belong. But that identity politics which appeals to an “authentic” identity of women “scarcely fosters social interaction across differences, on the contrary, it encourages separatism and group enclaves” (Fraser 2008, p. 134).

Applying this to Korean radical feminism, the politics of recognition based on the category of biological woman understands woman as a powerful and simple identity. Thus, it can exclude differences and changes within women that blur the boundaries of authentic identity. This also is the process by which the identity of a certain faction of women, such as competitive young middle-class women with a uterus and vagina, becomes dominant. As a result, identity politics eventually represents the identity of the dominant faction within the group (pp. 133-134).

Then, is there any way for women to become recognized other than by means of identity politics? Is there a way to counter sexual discrimination without emphasizing the existing dichotomy? Korean radical feminism needs a paradigm shift to escape this paradoxical situation. That is, Korean radical feminists must reconstruct the politics of recognition based on what Nancy Fraser calls the “status model.”

According to the status model, what we have to ask for with the politics

of recognition is not an authentic collective identity, but the equal status of individuals—the status as a full partner in social interaction. That is, insulting or injuring women means to prevent women from participating in social life as peers rather than to devalue the collective identity of women. To overcome the misrecognition means to gain the parity in which one can interact as a full partner, no matter whether he/she/they possess a certain authentic identity.

As Fraser explains, “redressing misrecognition means replacing institutionalized value patterns that impede parity of participation with ones that enable or foster it” (136). As a result, the status model does not focus on justifying what the authentic identity is in order to be recognized. Rather, it focuses on when and how the parity of an individual is guaranteed. For example, in order to correct discrimination against women, it focuses on how a woman’s individual status is undermined because of her group identity, rather than explaining which kind of female identity is authentic.

In this model, feminists do not struggle to become subjects with clear boundaries, but to resist what was excluded as an object or abject because they did not have such boundaries. Therefore, Korean feminists, through a politics of recognition in accordance with the status model, can dismantle the exclusive identity politics based on biological womanhood more effectively. The struggle for recognition that radical feminism originally prioritized is possible not by reclaiming an identity based on biological sex, but by reinstating women in line with parity. In this process, feminists do not need to emphasize the authenticity of their identity.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed why Korean radical feminists came to choose such transgender-exclusive identity politics based on biological woman in the digital era. The most basic reason was the misogynistic urban imaginary that reduced women to sexed bodies. The second reason was that young Korean women who grew up to become competitive needed to resist misogyny but not to dismantle biological sexual dichotomy. They did not afford transgender people the status of feminist peers because it was more advantageous for them to reverse their position within the neoliberal system. In addition to their desire to achieve, their phobia of objectification and abjection led them to transgender-exclusive radical feminism. They yearned to be female subjects with clear boundaries by excluding transgender people as abjects.

Lastly, the paper asserts that Korean feminism needs to reconstruct its politics of recognition in accordance with Nancy Fraser's status model. In the struggle for recognition of parity, they need not be subjects with clear boundaries. Rather, they can expand their struggle for equal status in solidarity with others who are also excluded by objectification or abjection. Once we recognize each other as individuals with abject, we will be able to take care of each other without domination or exclusion.

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