

## **Feminism Without Morality, Neoliberalism as Feminist Praxis: A Computational Textual Analysis of Womad, a South Korean Online “Feminist” Community**

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Womad, a South Korean online “feminist” community, has since its inception been the center of national controversy stemming from its avowed belief in the biological superiority of women (and the innate inferiority of men). Using computational textual analysis (topic modeling), we reveal how Womad’s espousal of biological essentialism is inextricable from a neoliberalist belief in individual capacity. That is, neoliberalism allows the community to reconceive feminism as a means to advance individual cis-women’s power over other identities. Womad’s communal rhetoric is thus closely linked to its users’ enthusiasm for neoliberal self-fashioning as the means to overcome female oppression, an optimism simultaneously complicated by the desire to escape Korea and the latter’s patriarchal nationalism. In sum, Womad’s vision of female emancipation—problematic as it is—needs to be situated alongside both its criticism of South Korean nationalism and its faith in neoliberalism as a means to escape the patriarchy.

*Keywords: feminism, right wing movements, neoliberalism, antinationalism, South Korea, topic modeling*

On May 4, 2019, there appeared in New York’s Times Square—off 54th and Broadway, to be exact—an advertisement with the cryptic message “Womad Release the Truth.” Beneath the message was a silhouette of a woman—meaningless perhaps to the bulk of the American public, but easily recognizable to South Koreans as the silhouette of Geun-Hye Park, former South Korean president who was impeached in 2017 and is currently serving a more than 25-year sentence for a total of 21 charges, including abuse of power, coercion, and bribery. Often overshadowed by her late father Chung-Hee Park, the dictator who ruled South Korea for two decades, Park the younger (also known as the “Princess” to the South Korean public) was a conservative leader who

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symbolized nostalgia for the days of rapid economic growth and anticommunist solidarity: a living relic from Park the Elder's regime. The advertisement was crowd-funded by members of Womad, a South Korean online community that identifies itself as "feminist" (what this means exactly will be the focus of this article), to call for the release of the disgraced president (who embodies "the Truth" according to the advertisement). According to the Womad user who proposed the advertisement:

All the work we do [in Womad] is for the sake of all women; advertising in Time Square [for Park's release] is the most effective way to achieve our goal to impeach Moon [the current president of South Korea, also known for his liberal-progressive views] and free Park.  
(anonymous user, December 19, 2018)

Womad's politics is definitely more extreme than most mainstream online feminism examined in the literature (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Sadowski, 2016) in that its tactics reach beyond those aiming to raise awareness of everyday sexism. This article will situate Womad's radical feminist politics—referring to its espousal of radical feminist-cum-separatist politics (Whelehan, 1995), which has been translated in Womad into a championing of female superiority over male inferiority (J. Choi, 2018)—within a feminist media studies discourse that examines how neoliberalism has influenced online feminist activism. Baer (2016) notes how neoliberalism has led feminist activism to shift away from an emphasis on building lasting coalitions and place greater stress on activism that mobilizes participants to partake in individualized, ephemeral behavior largely taking place online (e.g., retweeting hashtags). However, one other thing to consider is how Womad's ideological leanings—as its full-hearted support for the ousted authoritarian president signals—can hardly be interpreted as fulfilling a straightforwardly progressive feminism (this in spite of its endorsement of women's reproductive rights and its investment in raising general awareness among women regarding misogyny and sexism; e.g., Ryu, 2018). This is especially evident when Womad is compared with similarly "radical" feminist groups such as FEMEN and Pussy Riot: groups which also exemplify an individualized feminism influenced by a neoliberalist worldview (Baer, 2016). This is because despite their limitations, the agendas of both FEMEN and Pussy Riot are understood as falling broadly under a left-wing politics that opposes oppressive regimes (Eileraas, 2014; O'Keefe, 2014).

This article explores how Womad relies on the logics of neoliberalism—specifically, the emphasis on self-empowerment—to both justify the community's unquestioned faith in the necessity of oppressive hierarchies *and* criticize South Korean patriarchy. In doing so, we will avoid pigeonholing Womad as either unquestionably liberating for South Korean women or simply toxic in its use of radical feminist ideas in support of essentialist logics. Our study thus complicates how the literature on women's participation in neoliberal and/or conservative movements have associated women's involvement in either movement with the inability to critique the patriarchal status quo. Scholarship on neoliberal feminism highlights how neoliberalism has defanged feminism's radical potential by valorizing individual experience over collective action (Banet-Weiser, 2018a; Brown, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). The literature overall underscores how neoliberalism forecloses the critique of patriarchal power structures in its myopic focus on individual bodies as the locus of desire, value, and agency (Gill & Kanai, 2018). Research on women's participation in conservative movements has focused predominantly on nuancing our understanding of the motives undergirding women's involvement in patriarchal religious and/or nationalist movements (Bacchetta & Power, 2002). Mahmood (2001) writes of how, for the conservative women of the Egyptian mosque

movement, agency may be less about achieving liberation from the status quo and more about the capacity to wield power via adapting to the structures of power one is situated within. In recuperating these women's agency, however, the scholarship also uncovers how such expressions of agency ultimately rely on the same patriarchy that relegates these women to second-class status (Blee, 2002; Dworkin, 1983).

As our analysis will show, Womad's enthusiastic embrace of the neoliberal mantra of self-improvement enables the community to not only dream of domination (through economic prowess) over individual men, but also critique the South Korean nation-state for inhibiting women from developing their capacities as successful neoliberal subjects. The article will explore why Womad considers the current South Korean government to be anathema to women's freedom—which it associates with untrammelled neoliberal subjectivity—and how it recapitulates the logic of Western exceptionalism when critiquing the South Korean status quo (being pro-American in Korea being indicative of conservatism, e.g., D. C. Kim, 2017). Our study will show that, as problematic as Womad's vision of freedom is, Womad's desire for freedom should still be appreciated for how it reflects Womad users' recognition of female oppression in contemporary South Korea. In the literature review we position Womad within research on online misandry (which in the case of Womad is intertwined with its conservative, hierarchical worldview), South Korean feminism, and South Korean neoliberalism. In the analysis, we explain how Womad users channel their desire for economic empowerment into a critique of South Korean patriarchy and a concomitant desire to escape South Korea.

### **Hating Men, Empowering Women: Where Did Womad Come From?**

Womad's relationship with the status quo is, to say the least, complicated. This is because the Womad collective is explicit about their belief that a social hierarchy is not only necessary but also natural. Their beef is not with the notion of hierarchy (supported by capitalism), but with how the system has been rigged against women. Womad can be read as co-opting the language of the alt-right in its belief that "we" the "oppressed" must return to a Hobbesian natural state, and that "we" have been denuded of our natural right to power because of political correctness (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). Womad's adaptation of alt-right discourse is also apparent in the community's disdain for intersectional feminism (more on this below). South Korean media have also noted the characteristics Womad share with other South Korean right-wing groups: xenophobia, homophobia, and the hatred of President Moon, who is often considered a liberal-progressive. Womad users were part of an admittedly awkward coalition of right-wing groups (of mostly men) who protested against President Moon in August 2018.

Here, it might be useful to contextualize Womad in the history of the South Korean progressive movement (including feminism). After liberation from Japanese colonization, and following a long hiatus due to ensuing dictatorships, women's movements picked up steam in the 1980s alongside social transformation (i.e., democracy) movements, with the former playing a subservient role to the latter (Jung, 2003). This was because social transformation movements in South Korea were spearheaded by labor movements and were heavily Marxist and nationalist in orientation—and thus male-dominated (Herr, 2003; S. K. Kim & Kim, 2014). Women's rights-related agendas (such as increased awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault) gained more traction with the rise of democratically elected governments in the 1990s. However, some feminist groups voiced concerns that mainstream South Korean feminism was becoming too institutionalized via its integration into government agencies (culminating in the founding of the Ministry of Gender Equality

in 2001) and policies (K. H. Kim, 2007). Such concerns formed the backdrop to the emergence of “young feminism” in the mid-90s. The young feminists combined the second-wave mantra “the personal is the political” and the second-wave’s investment in sexual emancipation for women with the third-wave’s emphasis on individuality and difference (Y. Jeong, 2015; Oh-Jang, 2004). The young feminists were particularly adept at using the Internet to create online feminist communities, newspapers, and webzines, and are notable for their efforts to include various identities into the feminist fold, such as LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and foreign workers. On the one hand, Womad explicitly rejects the intersectional feminism of the young feminists for an essentialist TERF feminism (trans-exclusionary radical feminism; B. M. Kim, 2018). On the other hand, Womad can also be understood as aggressively embracing a particular strand of the second-wave (radical feminism), in addition to transforming the third-wave’s openness to difference into an emphasis on neoliberal capacity: A shift in discourse scholars have identified with a postfeminist sensibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018b).

Ortner (2014) notes that the postfeminist sensibility is ambivalent toward actually achieving unequivocal liberation from the patriarchal status quo—with this in mind, one may rightly hesitate to take Womad’s endorsement of female biological superiority too seriously. We can thus consider Womad’s biological essentialism, which is used to justify the community’s man-hating discourse, as part of a broader tactic community members deploy to *parody* the sexism and misogyny of the alt-right and other men’s rights activists (that is, rather than to seriously advocate for the wholesale destruction of the patriarchy and its ensuing hierarchies). Furthermore, Ringrose and Lawrence (2018) show that misandric memes are not only exercises in ironic bravado, but also mediators that enable their creators and audiences to cultivate solidarity. Womad’s immediate predecessor, the online feminist community Megalia, was known for actively using misandry to both critique everyday sexism and misogyny and forge a sense of community among members (E. Jeong & Lee, 2018). The lightheartedness and/or communal nature of misandry notwithstanding, Jane (2017) reveals that misandry can fuel us-versus-them mentality which may prevent any productive discussion between the two contending parties. Koo (2020) has shown that this is indeed the case for Womad’s brand of feminist irony, which focuses on shaming men and shooting down anyone who dare criticize the community’s exclusionary feminism.

Womad’s feminism may be confrontational and unorthodox, but our analysis will show it is still identifiably postfeminist in its emphasis on individual freedom. Our analysis will reveal that Womad’s misandry leads *not* to an unequivocal demand for the structural overhauling of the patriarchy, but rather to a worshipping of individual agency as means to ultimately escape altogether from state-sanctioned misogyny, via leaving the nation-state. To understand why this is the case, our study situates Womad within the rapid neoliberalization of South Korea after the 1997 economic crisis. We define neoliberalism as a “rationality” that upholds economic efficiency as the organizational logic underpinning state and citizenship (Brown, 2015). Under neoliberal rationality, the individual alone is responsible for making the “cost-benefit calculus” required to become a successful economic subject (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420). Neoliberalist rationality thus downplays the effects of structural inequality and fetishizes individual effort. Neoliberalization in South Korea has led to two interrelated developments. In the state bureaucratic level there emerged an increased emphasis on the “family”—and its metonymic counterpart, the patriarch—as the “deserving” beneficiary of government welfare programs (in contrast to unemployed, single women; Song, 2006). Yet the dismantling of state assistance for the socioeconomically vulnerable has also been

accompanied by the growing belief on the part of this very population—including women—of their own ability to pursue individual-cum-economic freedom (Fedorenko, 2015; Song, 2010).

In this historical context, the primary objective of the current study is to understand how Womad repurposes both neoliberal and radical feminist ideas—the latter, as we mentioned, being a characteristic of the community already noted by both the South Korean media and existing studies—by conducting a close analysis of conversations going on within Womad itself. Our goal is to uncover how exactly Womad’s subscription to a neoliberalist worldview allows its users to critique the structural inequalities (attributed to patriarchal nationalism, not capitalism) undergirding female oppression.

### **Data, Method, and Topic Structure of Womad Community**

#### ***Time Frame and Analytical Framework***

Our analysis of Womad (<https://womad.life>) focuses on a specific time frame (May 1, 2018, to August 31, 2018), which centers around the controversial Hongik University hidden-camera incident. This time frame begins when a Womad user posted images of a male nude model from an art class (May 1, 2018). A reporter wrote an exposé on the images the very next day, resulting in an investigation through which the culprit was caught 10 days later. Womad users claimed that the culprit was caught so quickly because of her gender; this accusation eventually led to a series of protests against both hidden camera offenses in general and the allegedly biased nature of rulings against female criminals. The four-month period encompasses four of the five protests total organized against hidden-camera crimes (May 19, June 9, July 7, and August 4, 2018). We chose this time frame because the hidden-cam incident and subsequent protests brought Womad to public attention, and the rather swift arrest of the culprit served as a fulcrum for Womad users’ renewed awareness about unequal gender dynamics underlying South Korea. For this reason, we believe that this four-month time frame illuminates how Womad as a community understands feminism, sexism, and South Korean patriarchy.

The data size (23,356 documents), along with its toxic content, poses a unique challenge to conducting rigorous analysis of the community using traditional close reading techniques (e.g., cyber-ethnography or manual content analysis). First, the large size of textual data makes it practically impossible to conduct manual coding. Second, the content of the posts, which often includes toxic material (e.g., sexualization of male children or graphic images featuring bloody fetuses), renders it difficult for researchers to directly engage with all of the content. To address these challenges, the current study used a computer-assisted textual analysis method called topic modeling (specifically the latent Dirichlet allocation algorithm; Blei, Ng, & Jordan, 2003) to assist our critical reading of Womad posts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> LDA identifies the main theme of a document (a term referring to the unit of analysis—in this article, the unit of analysis is a post) by analyzing co-occurrence patterns of words (e.g., nouns, verbs). Topic modeling assumes that (a) a set of documents contains a number of topics (themes) and (b) a certain set of words tend to appear together in each topic (Guo, Vargo, Pan, Ding, & Ishwar, 2016).

### ***Text Preparation and Topic Modeling***

#### *Text Preprocessing*

The following text preprocessing procedure was implemented to extract nouns from each post. This is because nouns are considered most relevant in capturing the thematic structure of a certain document (Kang, Song, & Jho, 2013). A set of terms including slang, names, and technical terms were added to the software dictionary to correctly identify nouns. A Korean part-of-speech tagging software (KoNLP; Jeon, 2016) was used to extract nouns from the corpus. The KoSpacing package (Jeon, 2018) was used for any words longer than seven Korean characters to correct grammatical errors due to incorrect use of spacing. Finally, we removed less frequent terms (appearing in less than .1% of documents), too-frequent terms (e.g., *한남*; Korean male), and nonnoun terms that KoNLP program incorrectly identified as nouns. This procedure left us with a total of 20,419 documents with 4,239 unique nouns See Online Appendix A (<https://osf.io/bjtgp/>) for more details about the procedure.

#### *Topic Modeling*

The following three steps proposed by Maier et al. (2018) were taken to create a topic solution: (a) estimating candidate models, (b) excluding noncoherent topics, and (c) labeling topics through close examination. The last two steps involve qualitative judgment as to topic theme and relevance on the part of the researchers (Maier et al., 2018). This procedure resulted in a total of 31 topics. Table 1 presents a total of 31 topics, along with the five most frequently appearing nouns for each topic. Online Appendix B (<https://osf.io/bjtgp/>) outlines a detailed description about the procedure.

**Table 1. Topic Structure of Womad Community.**

Topic labels and top five frequent terms	Daily % (SD)	Rank (Daily %)
Hidden Camera Offense (Five Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.37$ , $SD = 1.82$ )		
4. Problematization of Hidden Camera Offenses against Korean Women: Hidden cam, Shooting, Investigation, Site, Illegal	2.19 (1.43)	23
12. Mirroring Hidden Camera Offenses: Hidden Cameras, Photos, Restrooms, Install, Project	2.66 (1.31)	12
20. Reflection Following Hidden Camera Offense Protests: Protest, Hyehwa, <i>Café</i> , Demonstration, Moon Jae-In	2.66 (2.45)	13
26. Advocating for the Innocence of Hong-Bonjwa: <i>Bonjwa</i> , Innocence, Protest, Admin, Defense	2.31 (1.84)	19
29. Trolling Hongdae Nude Model: Nude, Model, Photography, Hongdae (Hongik University), Hidden Cam	2.05 (1.91)	26
Radical Feminism (Seven Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.65$ , $SD = 1.07$ )		
2. Belittlement of Korean Men's Masculinity: Cocks, Testicles, Bitch-man, Small Penis, <i>Jae-gi</i>	2.91 (0.87)	8
5. Non-targeted Misandry: <i>Dentured-senior</i> , Yelling, Today, People, Cocks	3.38 (1.18)	3
8. Ranting about Patriarchal Family Structure: Father-vermin, Fetus-vermin, The Creator, Hyoong-ja, Mother-Father	2.58 (.0.81)	14
15. Advocating Radical Feminism against other Feminisms: Hyoong-ja, Community, Misogyny, Thoughts, <i>Corset</i>	3.29 (1.15)	5
17. Looking Down on Heterosexual Relationships: Marriage, Husband, Friend, Love, Thoughts	2.18 (0.84)	24
18. (Fantasizing) Male objectification: <i>S-man</i> , Face, <i>It-man</i> , <i>Sho-kids</i> , Thoughts	2.37 (0.83)	16
31 Biologization of Female Superiority and Male Inferiority: Male, Human, Animal, Nature, Genes	1.87 (0.73)	29
Neoliberalism (Three Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.16$ , $SD = 1.70$ )		
6. Authentication of Elite Status: Authentication, Universities, Study, Schools, Educational background	1.95 (2.67)	27
11. Escaping South Korea: Tal-Cho, Thoughts, <i>Mutt-and-Swine</i> , Motherland, Life	2.36 (0.84)	17
21. Self-improvement through Acquiring Skills (e.g., Foreign Languages, coding): English, Words, Study, Language, Problem	2.18 (0.91)	25
Rightwing (Three Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.85$ , $SD = 1.61$ )		
3. Islamophobia: Refugee, Petition, Muslims, Islam, Military	2.51 (2.04)	15
19. Comparing Two Presidents: Moon Jae-in, <i>The Sun</i> , President, North Korea, Impeachment	2.73 (1.34)	10
25. Feminizing Uncivil Heterosexual Men as Homosexuals: Anus, Fag, <i>Hosik</i> , Father-vermin, Asshole	3.32 (1.22)	4

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General Feminism (Seven Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.34$ , $SD = 1.71$ )		
10. Endorsement and Defense of Reproductive Rights (i.e., Abortion): Abortion, Pregnancy, Sex, Doctors, Giving birth	1.93 (1.01)	28
13. Reflection on Media Representation of Women: Movies, Protagonist, Misogyny, Games, Objects	2.24 (0.76)	21
16. Patriarchy in Religion: Jesus, Religion, Eucharist, Catholic, Church	1.84 (3.08)	30
24. Relationship Between Celebrity and Feminism: Video Clips, Celebrities, Advertisements, Song, Consumption	2.31 (1.71)	18
27. Regarding Crimes Against (Korean) Women: Police, Victim, (Criminal) Case, Crime, Perpetrator	2.68 (1.17)	11
28. Advocating for Female Representation in Politics: Politics, Candidate, Voting, Liberal, Conservative	1.71 (1.33)	31
30. Reflections on Escaping Gender Norms: <i>Corset</i> , De-Corset, Hair, Makeup, Thoughts	2.93 (1.47)	7
Empowerment Feminism (Four Topics; Proportion: $M = 2.60$ , $SD = 1.05$ )		
7. Criticism of Mainstream (i.e., intersectional) Feminism: Society, Feminism, Self, Hatred, Patriarchy	2.25 (0.88)	20
9. Reflections on Women's Status Regarding Power: Power, Thoughts, Society, Bo-topia, Cocks	2.22 (0.86)	22
14. Advice on How to Overcome Feelings of Inferiority Due to Patriarchy: People, Thoughts, <i>Mutt-and-Swine</i> , Self, Capabilities	2.88 (0.86)	9
23. Sharing of Ambitions for Empowerment: Thoughts, Life, People, Will power, Mind	3.06 (1.28)	6
1. Call to Participating in Shaping (Online) Public Opinion: Article, Women power, Comment, Ilbe, News	3.54 (1.23)	2
22. Policing Community Norms: <i>Newbies</i> , <i>Peeping-penis</i> , Wording, Small penis, Comments	3.75 (1.85)	1

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Note. For *italicized* terms, see Online Appendix C: Glossary (<https://osf.io/bjtgp/>).

### **Topic Structure of Womad Community**

We classified the 31 topics into six topic groups based on the shared theme among topics so as to ease interpretation. All posts included in this article were originally written in Korean and translated into English by the authors.

#### *Hongdae Hidden Camera Incident*

The topics categorized under this topic group are composed of responses to the aforementioned Hongik University hidden-camera incident.



*Radical Feminism*

The topics classified under this label reflect the many characteristics the South Korean media have ascribed to the community, such as hatred directed toward Korean men, heterosexuality, and the South Korean patriarchal social structure. The topics also endorse a women-versus-men worldview that reflects the community's broader investment in gender separatism and biological essentialism.

*Neoliberalism*

The topics in this group focus on individual aspirations to move up the social ladder as a means toward female empowerment.

*Right Wing*

The topics in this group represent the political conservatism of the community, reflected in its hatred of outsiders (Muslims and North Korea), marginalized groups (homosexual men, transgender women), and President Moon's liberal government.

*General Feminism*

The topics in this group criticize the existing gender inequalities in South Korea.

*Empowerment Feminism*

The topics in this group address the sexism structuring South Korean society and propose a feminism promoting the overcoming of gender inequality via individual empowerment.

*Building Collectivity*

Topics in this group work to motivate Womad users to shape public opinion by (a) leaving comments on online newspaper articles and (b) policing community norms so as to build a shared identity as Womad users.

*Analysis and Discussion*

Our analysis shows that in addition to topics that correspond with what the South Korean media and existing scholarship have already noted as the defining features of Womad's communal identity—such as Womad's separatist politics and its misandry—there also were a cluster of topics that reveal Womad's investment in a type of feminism we call "Empowerment Feminism." Our discussion will focus on specific topic groups ("Neoliberalism" and "Empowerment Feminism" in particular) and their subtopics (e.g., "Escaping Korea") that illustrate how Womad's belief in neoliberal empowerment contributes to its brand of feminism and notion of feminist agency. Our analysis also explains how the topic groups gesture toward larger trends within South Korean politics and history. Of note, to maintain the anonymous nature of the

community, we do not provide any information that can be used to trace the posts back to their original users. Therefore, we will identify individual users with sequential letters, from #a to #l.

### ***Womad and Neoliberalism as Feminist Praxis***

Topic 7, or “Criticism of Mainstream (i.e., intersectional) Feminism,” is part of a larger topic group we call “Empowerment Feminism.” Topic 7 illuminates how the Womad community fuses its aspirations for female supremacy with an espousal of individual capacity to resist patriarchal oppression. Indeed, the two stances often appear simultaneously in Topic 7, which centers around users’ theorizations about their brand of—in the words of one user—a “moralless” or “advanced” feminism (Anonymous User #a). In posts from this topic, we see Womad users turning away from an inclusive feminist politics to advocate for what one user calls a “pure feminism” based on biological essentialism (Anonymous User #b). According to one user, existing feminisms are “paradoxical” in their pursuit of both women’s rights and morality:

Progressive feminist leaders feel obliged to squeeze in a bunch of miscellanies into their pursuit of feminism, they try to include gays, transgenders, refugees. . . . But is feminism essentially progressive? No. In reality the world needs to be women-centric, this is the “law of nature.” We differ from unnatural beings who want to . . . disrupt the order of nature. (Anonymous User #c)

As another user exhorts on the importance of individual effort to subvert male oppression, “Who can save these brainwashed women who criticize ambitious pussies [like us] because they think that women are too weak to achieve their own power without men? Only YOU can, you who feels guilty upon reading this” (Anonymous User #d).

The emphasis on individual awakening in becoming a power-wielding agent dovetails with Womad’s overall faith in the role individuals themselves must play in defeating men in the race toward the top of the social hierarchy. Womad’s stress on individual empowerment is also evident in how users resort to fantasies of individual “revenge” against men, as well as their mistrust of the government to bring about structural change (as we shall soon see in our discussion of the “Escaping Korea” topic). Womad’s misandry mirrors what scholars identify as misogyny’s seemingly interpersonal register: both manifesting itself, for example, via threats of sexual violence levied against specific individuals. For example, the Topic group “Radical Feminism” includes Topic 5, or “Nontargeted Misandry,” which contains posts entertaining violent fantasies against random yet identifiable men, such as the hapless subway manspreader whose photograph is posted on Womad. Of course, unlike misogyny, misandry lacks the institutional legitimacy (Hess, 2014; Jane, 2018; Manne, 2017) that would have enabled Womad users to resort to such threats with relative impunity—an impunity Womad users do not have, as the media furor over Womad’s misandry attests. Indeed, we can locate the putative “moralless[ness]” of Womad’s feminism in the community’s lack of moral “good will” from the point of view of those who have internalized patriarchy’s assumption that the woman is always the “giver” of services to the man (Manne, 2017, p. 301). That is, Womad’s self-proclaimed “moralless[ness]” lies in its rejection of patriarchal norms that evaluate women’s morality via her offering of “moral attention, sympathy, and concern” to men (Manne, 2017, pp. xix).

Furthermore, the similarity in theme between Topic 21 (“Self-Improvement Through Acquiring Skills”) and Topic 23 (“Sharing of Ambitions for Empowerment”) reveal the interrelationship between *neoliberal* self-improvement, or the enhancing of one’s economic value, and female empowerment in Womad. Whereas we have categorized Topic 21 under the broader topic group Neoliberalism, because of posts’ stress on acquiring skills (e.g., posts with “Tips on how to acquire English effectively”; “Book recommendations for Womad users interested in coding”), Topic 23 was categorized under Empowerment Feminism because of posts’ encouragement to fellow users to keep faith in their own capacity to improve their economic prospects. For example, a post answering questions from other Womad users addresses how this particular user came to open her own business (instead of working as an employee for a bigger company). The user responds:

I realized that with the Hell-Chosun<sup>3</sup> slave mentality, it is difficult to survive working as an employee. Hence, I was an ambitious pussy who studied advertising and marketing in college, thinking to myself, “How can I make money?” . . . I [now] make my own advertisements and do everything on my own. (Anonymous User #e)

The valorization of economic agency (“How can I make money?”), and the role education plays into this narrative of self-empowerment (“I was an ambitious pussy who studied advertising and marketing in college,” Anonymous User #e), fuses the neoliberal impetus with the long-standing East Asian tradition of emphasizing education to improve one’s class status (stressing education is also a legacy stemming from the history of Korean feminism, as we shall see).<sup>4</sup> Womad’s exclusionary vision is thus inextricable from its vision of female empowerment; neoliberalism as ideology provides Womad users with the language needed to envision a way out of cis-women’s subjection.

Topic 14 (“Advice on How to Overcome Feelings of Inferiority due to Patriarchy”) reveals the close connection between what Brown (1995) calls “wounded attachments” and Womad users’ desire for social power based on financial mastery (p. 52). Brown argues that identity politics, by relying on trauma and mourning (i.e., wounded attachments) as a means to build a collective identity, end up relying on the state—or rather, the neoliberal social structure it holds up—to maintain a sense of political efficacy. Womad users’ “wounded attachments” to social inferiority provide a rallying point for users’ desire for the power to overcome this inferior state of being. A post titled “Ways to gain power within a group” conflates “man-hating,” “ambition,” and “Tal-cho” (i.e., escaping Chosun, a concept which will be discussed in the next section), as a user gives advice on how to not be hampered by past wounds (Anonymous User #f). This

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<sup>3</sup> Chosun refers to the dynasty that ruled the Korean peninsula for 500 years before Japanese colonization. Chosun is often associated with stagnation and backwardness and is used in a derogatory sense to refer to South Korea by South Koreans themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have noted that the East Asian tradition that emphasizes education as a means of achieving status and power is rooted in Confucianism (Seth, 2012). In addition, the increased privatization of the South Korean education sector after the 1997 financial crisis contributed to a study abroad boom in the 2000s (Lo, Abelman, Kwon, & Okazaki, 2015). Many families—including lower middle class ones—would send their children to study in English-speaking countries in the belief that English proficiency would lead to better chances at class mobility (J. Kim, 2015).

particular user's discussion of her wounded attachments ("I was born in a poor household and had no friends . . . due to my social awkwardness. . . . As I think back on my past self, I realize that I was like a dog begging for love in my obsession with approval," Anonymous User #f), starts by identifying class (rather than sexism) as the reason behind her early wounds. However, the user ends the post by linking her call for self-improvement with animosity toward men ("don't waste your time pondering over relationships, just work on developing yourself and hating men," Anonymous User #f) This post thus mobilizes past wounds to give rhetorical urgency to the language of self-empowerment—an empowerment the South Korean patriarchal power structure prevents Womad users from achieving.

Womad can be seen as exemplifying Brown's insight regarding identity politics that are based on shared trauma, which for Brown ultimately leaves intact exclusionary structures of power reinforced by the partnership between neoliberalism and state.<sup>5</sup> Womad, however, deviates from Brown's argument about identity politics' implicit reliance on the beneficence of the neoliberal nation-state. The Womad collective considers neoliberalism the only way they can be powerful *without* the state. This move results in a hybrid identity politics that does not rely on the nation-state for recognition of one's economic-cum-political agency, since the successful neoliberal subject is ideally a subject without (national) borders. Thus, it may be more accurate to say that for Womad economic agency stands in for (if not replacing altogether) political agency. This is consistent with the literature on neoliberalism and its insight on how neoliberalism aims to erase the political subject altogether via its replacement with the economic subject (Brown, 2015).

### ***Womad and Hatred of Nation***

Topic 11 which revolves around the theme of Tal-Cho (i.e., escaping South Korea) is a fascinating topic due to its connection with not only Womad's embrace of neoliberalism but also Womad's engagement with conversations surrounding the crisis of nationalist sentiment characterizing modern South Korean society. Topic 11 suggests that Womad's response to the South Korean government can be viewed in part as part of a widespread hatred of nation which has afflicted many South Koreans millennials, both male and female. In addition, the topic is where class divisions within Womad become most evident via the split between those who *want* to escape South Korea versus those who cannot (or do not—the distinction is unclear). In a post titled "Don't write on Tal-Cho, you stinking penises," a user complains of how some users have written that they would rather stay in Korea than Tal-Cho. This particular user's ire against potential deviations from the opinion that South Korea is not worth salvaging conflates those who are complacent to the status quo ("If you want to stay, don't drag other pussies down with you"), those who may not have the economic ability to emigrate ("To the idiot who . . . doubts her ability to make a living once out of Chosun"), and those who still harbor lingering hope for change ("This country is ruined . . . are there still bitches who love this country?"; Anonymous User #g).

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<sup>5</sup> Some may question our drawing on Brown's much criticized argument on identity politics. We nevertheless believe Brown's concept of wounded attachments offers a partial lens that helps us understand how Womad's mobilization of identity politics is a move that ultimately aims to legitimize one's desire for empowerment—which in Womad's case *does* explicitly endorse inequality (i.e., an inverted gender hierarchy). We also qualify Brown's concept of wounded attachments by showing how in Womad, wounded attachments become the means through which Womad users dream of freedom *from* the nation-state.

Indeed, the issue of Tal-Cho—whether escaping South Korea for a presumably more egalitarian Europe or United States is a matter of choice or a matter of class privilege not available to all women—is a point of contention within the community. While some users acknowledge how Tal-Cho is difficult for those without the economic means to do so (e.g., a post titled “How can a highly-educated but dirt poor pussy escape Chosun?” details the writer’s difficulty in procuring enough funds to pursue an education in law abroad, as she wants to be a lawyer—but not in Korea), many posts end up simplistically equating Tal-Cho with individual grit and capacity. A post titled “Even without information, if you want to leave you should” describes how a user, who identifies herself as only high school educated, has found precious information that allows “a dirt poor pussy” to leave Korea (Anonymous User #h). The user repeats the neoliberal mantra in her exhortation that “the most important thing in your life is your own will. You must not forget how influential you can be.” Once again, economic disparity becomes less a determining factor that reinforces female oppression than an obstacle to be overcome through individual will.

We noted earlier how the desire to escape Korea may not be just a Womad phenomenon. Declining social mobility and widening social inequalities have resulted in what younger generations call “Hell-Chosun,” denoting how South Korea is a country with no hope for socioeconomic advancement (Cho-Han et al., 2016; A. Kim et al., 2016). Such self-defeating views of Korea, in conjunction with the idealization of First World countries, drive the desire to leave Korea behind in the search for a better life. Moreover, in South Korea learning English has long been touted as the best means to move up the social ladder, English competence functioning as a de facto class marker (e.g., Park, 2009). Indeed, the fact that the Womad community calls English their “Mother Tongue” as opposed to Korean, which is derogatively called the “Language of Penis-country,” reflects a larger social trend that reiterates the logic of Western exceptionalism.

How are we to read Womad users’ capitulation to a Eurocentric worldview to reject South Korean nationalism? As Grewal (2012) notes through the example of the conservative Somali writer Ayann Hirsi Ali, postcolonial feminists are—even now—at a loss when confronted by postcolonial women who defy the expectation that they form a blanket contrast to Western imperialist logics. Grewal points out that Ali’s critique of Islam as backward in its repression of its womenfolk reveals her internalization of the “colonial habitus,” or the belief in Western exceptionalism (p. 585). But Ali’s criticism of Islam is at the same time undeniably based on her own harrowing experience of being constricted by familial and cultural expectations. The Womad collective’s stance is similar to Ali’s in that their reliance on Western exceptionalism provides a means through which to critique a South Korean patriarchy that oppresses them. Yet, in relying on such a logic, the community becomes uncritically beholden to the notion of the West as the (presumably more woman-friendly) ideal from which South Korea falls woefully short. As a result, Womad falls prey to a “slave mentality” that reinforces their sense of inferiority when compared with an ideal—in this case, the West—even as they decry the “slave mentality” of South Koreans in general via their call for neoliberal empowerment (as seen earlier in the post from the topic group Empowerment Feminism).

### ***Womad and South Korean Feminism***

We can see traces of Womad’s “slave mentality” in the collective’s selective historical memory as well. The genealogy of Womad’s feminism can, in fact, be traced all the way back to the late 19th century, to an era when American missionaries were attempting to instill Christianity within Korean women through

religious education. The first Korean feminists were recipients of missionaries' educational efforts and have been broadly construed as believing in social uplift via women's increased access to education (H. Choi, 2009). Womad users seem aware of this history in their collective upholding of Hwal-lan Kim, the founder of Ewha Women's University and one of the most controversial women of the Japanese colonial era, as their role model for a successful, empowered woman. In a post titled "Why the Pro-Japanese Hwal-lan Kim is the original Girl Crush," a user claims that anticolonialist movements are often just as sexist as the colonial masters (the United States and Japan) they criticize. The user makes the provocative—in the eyes of most Koreans—claim that Hwal-lan Kim is actually a role model for all Korean women:

Women worked years for liberation [from Japan] and all they got in return was rape and humiliation [from Korean anti-colonialists in the 1920–30s]. . . . What need does a pussy have for a pro-Japanese or pro-American stance anyway? A pussy has no nation. The nation does not protect the pussy. (Anonymous User #i, Topic 23)

For this user, the anticolonial legacy of modern Korean progressive movements imbricates them in the reinforcement of a patriarchal nation-state which has repeatedly fallen short of granting equal rights (including the right to neoliberal self-improvement) to women.

Here we must note how Womad's approval of Hwal-lan Kim's brand of feminism is symptomatic of Womad's subscription to Western exceptionalism. It is misleading to align Hwal-lan Kim with the claim that women have "no nation" (Anonymous User #i). After all, Kim did not simply forgo Korea: she merely shifted alliances from one (Korea) to another (Japan). Kim believed that a strong state was required to protect Korean women—and Asians in general—from the "invasion of the Anglo-Saxon race" (H. Choi, 2009, p. 153). Korean women could achieve full subjecthood, in Kim's thinking, if they could fulfill their duty as loyal imperial subjects. Once again, we see the reliance on an outside entity—the Japanese empire for Kim, the West (in particular the United States) for Womad—which is perceived to be both morally and sociopolitically superior to Korea. Womad's selective reclamation of South Korean feminist history leaves out other colonial feminists who also potentially share Womad's antinationalism and criticism of patriarchy without resorting to an internalization of Western imperial logics, such as Hye-soek Na, a radically liberal feminist who preached free love and criticized male Korean nationalists' double standards (H. Choi, 2012).

Is Womad's criticism of South Korean patriarchy little more than a byproduct of the community's adherence to Western exceptionalism? For an answer to this question, we might want to turn to how Womad's brand of feminism can also be situated alongside the community's antagonism toward a previous generation of "mothers." The community even has a special term for these people—the *hoong-ja-mo* ("imitative mother"), which refers to an older generation of women who are considered complicit with the patriarchy. As one user puts it, Womad users must "kill the Creator [another term for the mother]" if there is to be any future for ambitious women who refuse to be discouraged by the patriarchy (Anonymous User #j, Topic 8). Antagonism toward "mothers," who may very well include an older generation of South Korean feminists, may have a basis in the recent history of South Korean academic feminism. Here we should note Womad's embracing of lesbians as an ally to their second-wave separatist-cum-neoliberalist feminism. For lesbian activists, South Korean academic feminism has yet to shake free its heterosexism (Koh, 2013; Park-Kim, Lee-Kim, & Kwon-Lee, 2007). A perhaps extreme, but often cited, case in point: In November 2001,

Suk-Ja Kang, a feminist academic, presented a paper in a Women's Studies conference claiming that the concept of "political lesbianism" (which she conflates with radical feminism) is not appropriate for South Korean feminism ("han-gug," 2005). After arguing that political lesbianism is not "real" lesbianism because it involves choice and not biology, Kang proceeded to argue that "real" lesbians seemed to desire a society no different from the heterosexual ones they were already a part of (the butch/femme dyad, fighting for marriage equality)—the implication being that "real" lesbians are freaks of nature, a lesser imitation of the heterosexual ideal Kang subscribes to ("han-gug," 2005). Kang refused to apologize when Kirikiri, a South Korean lesbian rights group, accused her of both distortion of facts and ignorance.

It may be useful to point out that the pivotal event that led to Womad's founding was a debate—within its predecessor the online feminist community Megalia—about the potential relationship between an all-women online community and the South Korean LGBTQ+ population. In a protracted argument over how to conceive of feminist solidarity, those who believed biological womanhood as the only criteria worth salvaging broke off from Megalia to form Womad (B. M. Kim, 2018). Within Womad, confusion still remains over whether lesbians experience heterosexism as often as heterosexual women do. In a post upvoted to the "Womad Recommended" board (composed of posts with high upvote numbers), a user wondered whether lesbians "hate Korean men as much as heterosexual women? . . . Articles on domestic violence and relationship violence [after all] might not be as relevant to lesbians" (Anonymous User #k, Topic 27). A day later, another user wrote a separate post in response, "annoyed that such an ignorant post was upvoted to the Womad Recommended board. . . . Why are you trying to sow discord among pussies? . . . Lesbians and Bis were also socialized in a penis-country that hates women" (Anonymous User #l, Topic 15). The very fact that such discussion exists gives the lie to observations that Womad is unequivocally hostile to debate (Koo, 2020). While the collective may be antagonistic toward men, this example shows how the community does express a willingness to engage in discussion, as long as it pertains to the shared experience of female oppression.

### *Conclusion*

The current article analyzed the various strands of conversation going on within the Womad community through a combination of topic modeling and close readings of exemplary posts from relevant topics. The findings reveal how Womad's criticism of South Korean patriarchy is inextricable from its unabashed enthusiasm for neoliberal subjectivity. Specifically, we discovered how Womad's progressive potential—its criticism of South Korean patriarchal nationalism—manifests itself *through* the perpetuation of a neoliberalist worldview that also endorses Western exceptionalism. Our study shows how Womad draws on neoliberal ideology to imagine not only the freedom *to* develop an individual's potential but also the freedom *from* the patriarchal nation-state, which denies South Korean women opportunities to develop such potential (which may be rectified via emigration to Western Europe or the United States). Womad's resistance to the patriarchal nation-state is therefore grounded on an implicit assumption that South Korean women have been denied their inborn right to (neoliberal) self-improvement.

A few limitations warrant examination. First, the current study only focused on textual data without examining the visual images often accompanying the text. Because focusing only on textual data may have left out important aspects regarding how Womad users communicate via images, a future study would

benefit from systematically analyzing how the community circulates visual information. Second, the current study only examined the community's topical structure by focusing on a specific time frame. A future study could examine how certain topics within the community evolve via longitudinal analysis, allowing researchers to see more in-depth when and why certain issues emerge/disappear.

A final reflection on Womad's will to freedom: The collective's will to freedom—a freedom based on the abandoning of the nation-state—can be read as stemming from an insight into the nature of national citizenship. Scholars have highlighted how citizenship is founded on an us-versus-them logic that relies on an excluded "them" to bestow citizenship on an "us" (Ore, 2019; Wilderson, 2010). What becomes constitutive of an inside, a body politic, is determined by who becomes designated as its outside. The "Escaping Korea" topic signals the Womad collective's awareness—however caught up the desire for escape is in the fantasy of absolute individual autonomy—of how South Korean citizenship is built on a systematic denigration of women as its constitutive exclusion, the exclusion being South Korean citizenship's very condition of possibility.

Hence, for Womad freedom becomes only possible when one escapes being in the state of exclusion. Whether such freedom can be obtained through neoliberal self-fashioning may be questionable. However, we would like to conclude with the exhortation that, although we must acknowledge the collective's problematic adoption of conservative ideologies, Womad's utopian *urge*—that is, its desire for *change* (Jameson, 2004)—must not be ignored despite the ideological form mediating this longing.

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