

# Reason versus Instinct: Exploring Conflict in Korean Omegaverse Manhwa

**Snigdha Sarkar and Saikat Banerjee**

## **Abstract**

As the popularity of homosexual tropes exploded in Japanese manga during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Korean manhwa industry, second only to the Japanese, experienced an influx of these genres. Among these genres, the omegaverse sub-genre has been gradually gaining popularity among domestic as well as international readers. Omegaverse narratives are based in an alternate reality where the stereotypical male-female gender binary is deconstructed. Instead, males and females are further divided into three genders of alpha ( $\alpha$ ), beta ( $\beta$ ), and omega ( $\Omega$ ), resulting in a total of six genders. The omegaverse society follows the ‘wolf’s hierarchy’ where alphas dictate the norm and exploit omegas. Even though omegaverse can be used to present lesbian as well as heterosexual tropes, gay male omegaverse narratives continue to be the most popular ones among them. This article focuses on understanding the conflict between reason and instinct that is often represented in omegaverse narratives, through a study of three omegaverse manhwa, namely *Gold Gray*, *Unromantic*, and *Love is an Illusion*.

**Keywords:** Manhwa, Omegaverse, Alpha, Omega, Beta, Pheromones, Reason, Instinct, Secondary Sex, Rut, Heat

## **Introduction**

The Korean commercial comics industry, despite being relatively new, is rapidly expanding in terms of both productions and translations, and currently rivals Japan’s manga production. Casey Brienza writes that:

The Korean commercial comics industry, despite its relative infancy, is enormous, encompassing both impressing and rapid translations of a mind-boggling number of Japanese releases and a ballooning domestic creative sphere. In the past, Japanese manga were published and sold in Korea illegally and unlicensed, with mangaka uncredited.<sup>1</sup>

Manhwa is inherently different from manga in the sense that they are read left to right, unlike the traditional right to left format that is customary in Japan. Manhwas are often in full colour as compared to black and white manga, as well as being printed and distributed in larger formats rather than the traditional smaller format of manga. The

---

Dr Saikat Banerjee is Assistant Professor at St. Xavier’s College (Autonomous), Ranchi University, Jharkhand, India. Email: saikatenglish2013@gmail.com.

Ms Snigdha Sarkar is a PhD Research Scholar at Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India.

<sup>1</sup> Casey Brienza, “An Introduction to Korean Manhwa”, *Aesthetics*, 6 February (2004). At: [http://caseybrienza.com/BRIENZA\\_MANHWA.pdf](http://caseybrienza.com/BRIENZA_MANHWA.pdf).

two are quite similar in their art styles since Korean art was highly influenced by Japan in the past. Korea had experienced multiple invasions by Japan, particularly during World War II, which were accompanied by cultural domination, forced prostitution, and the slave trade. The Japanese presence brought major changes in education system of Korea, previously based on Chinese characters, and introduced Korean characters.<sup>2</sup> The spread of Japanese pop culture meant that Japanese television shows, anime and manga penetrated the Korean market and became popular. Manhwa was created as an imitation of the Japanese manga art form and developed its own style later, with the influence extending even to the popularity of homo-eroticism among female Korean artists. Yet, the production of homo-erotic content in Korea lags behind due to stigmatization of homosexuality in Korea.<sup>3</sup> Much of the literature, particularly online, is produced by amateur artists for non-commercial purpose; these artists use popular stories by incorporating different tropes than in the original ones, mostly involving same sex relationships, called slash-fiction. These are mainly produced by women or those who do not conform to heterosexual stereotypes. Even among same sex relationships, the explicit portrayal of male/male relationships predominate, while the majority of artists and readers are women. Though slash-fiction can be mistaken as pornographic in nature, it also puts great emphasis on romance and emotion as compared to gay pornography, arguably a blend of pornography and romance.<sup>4</sup>

Many mangas are translated into Korean within weeks of release. Unlike the Japanese, Koreans do not necessarily interpret boy's love and other sexually explicit manga as a harmless fantasy for girls of any reasonable age; boy's love manga are 'adults only' in Korea, due to the stigmatization of homosexuality. The spread of the Korean Wave, encompassing Korean pop cultures such as K-pop and K-dramas, has merged into global pop culture. With the advent of the digital age, Korean manhwas have also developed to cope with the rapid technological advancements and emerged as 'webtoons'. Webtoons are a form of hybrid re-creation of cartoons in a digital format. The system of Korean webtoon production has also spread and become rooted in the comics industry in many foreign countries through the active participation of international webtoon fans.<sup>5</sup> Many manhwas are published on online platforms such as *Lezhin* and *LineWebtoon*, with recent interest in the LGBTQA+ community leading to a surge in the production of Yaoi and Shounen-ai manhwas. This article explores three omegaverse manhwas through the alpha-omega gender dynamic and how it differs from or is similar to its Japanese counterpart. We focus on the study of the omegaverse sub-genre, mainly their representation in *Yaoi* graphic literature originating from South Korea. Through a thorough analysis of the three manhwa, namely *Gold Gray*,

<sup>2</sup> Yamanaka Chie, "Manhwa in Korea: (Re-)Nationalizing Comics Culture", in *Manga's Cultural Crossroads*, eds. Jaqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 85-99.

<sup>3</sup> Brienza, "An Introduction To Korean Manhwa".

<sup>4</sup> Milena Popova, "'Dogfuck Rapeworld': Omegaverse Fanfiction as A Critical Tool in Analyzing the Impact of Social Power Structures on Intimate Relationships and Sexual Consent", *Porn Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2018), p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Wonho Jang and Jung Eun Song, "Webtoon as a New Korean Wave in the Process of Glocalization", *Kritika Kultura*, no. 29 (2017), p. 170.

*Unromantic* and *Love is an Illusion*, it will emphasize on the dehumanizing conflict between reason and instinct that take the centre stage in an omegaverse narrative.

## The Omegaverse

The term ‘omegaverse’ is a portmanteau word derived from ‘omega’ and ‘universe’; the omegaverse is an alternate reality in which, in addition to the fundamental genders of male and female, three secondary genders exist: alpha ( $\alpha$ ), beta ( $\beta$ ), and omega ( $\Omega$ ), resulting in a total of six genders, with each major gender further subdivided into three secondary genders. The concepts behind the omegaverse can be traced to an 1967 episode of television series *Star Trek*. The episode “Amok Time” introduced the concept of the Vulcan mating cycle called *pon farr*, which allowed the inclusion of non-human relations tropes in human settings within fan fiction. The society is normally directed by the ‘wolf’s hierarchy’, in which alphas are superior and omegas are inferior, albeit it with hermaphroditic principles underlying procreation. Though there are also heterosexual and lesbian omegaverses, it is most widely used for boy’s love genres like Yaoi and Shounen-ai, often referred to as a world where men can get pregnant, creating a new sub-genre called Mpreg.<sup>6</sup> Alphas, like male wolves, have knots in their penises and go through ruts every month during the mating cycle, where their mating impulses become more intense and they emit pheromones to attract omegas. Omegas, on the other hand, exude feminine traits like female wolves who go through monthly heat during which they seek alpha partners and exude omega pheromones. Alphas and omegas are frequently compared to beasts, who frequently lose their senses during ruts and heats and are no longer human. Many omegaverse tropes incorporate the idea of a lifelong psychological bond formed when alphas mark omegas in the nape of their neck.

In East Asia, omegaverse as a subgenre did not emerge through any active production of fan fictions, but was directly adopted in the Japanese publishing industry from the West as a trope in boy’s love stories.<sup>7</sup> While the concept of male pregnancy responds to the fantasies of innumerable homosexual couples about having a socially acceptable family, it also takes humans a step further away from being human by limiting their cognitive power. Comprehending the alpha-omega binary also reveals the real-world male-female divide and can aid in comprehending the gender power play that occurs in society. Jessica Bauwens-Sugimoto argues that mpreg is not transgressive, noting that this genre was slow to gain popularity as pregnancy and child rearing are not considered to be romantic since it destroys the notion of free gender roles and the pregnant male is “stuck in the role.”<sup>8</sup> These types of stories and narratives seem to be quite controversial among fans, with their seemingly interpretive aspects of bestiality, but also the extreme gender and power inequalities being reinforced in

<sup>6</sup> Yvonne Gonzales, “How Omegaverse Came to Dominate Fanfiction, and Why That Might Not Be Such a Bad Thing”, *Pop Junctions*, March 22 (2023). At: [henryjenkins.org/blog/2023/3/20/how-omegaverse-came-to-dominate-fanfiction-and-why-that-might-not-be-such-a-bad-thing](https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2023/3/20/how-omegaverse-came-to-dominate-fanfiction-and-why-that-might-not-be-such-a-bad-thing).

<sup>7</sup> Gonzales, “How Omegaverse Came to Dominate Fanfiction”.

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Bauwens Sugimoto, “Subverting masculinity, misogyny, and reproductive technology in SEX PISTOLS”, *Image & Narrative*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2011), p. 143.

fictional worlds. Even the Women's Studies Email List, a group founded on extremely liberal thought and who accepted many taboos and kinks, split when 'pregnancy without women' stories were introduced. Most omegaverse stories are highly pornographic in nature, as they are primarily written for the goal of sexual pleasure. Despite this, the majority of its readers are aware of the characters' socioeconomic inequality and the concerns around consent that are highlighted in the setting and use it as a method to further explore the genre.<sup>9</sup>

Marianne Gunderson argues that the omegaverse genre might help one comprehend gender and sexuality without being constrained by real-world structures, arguing that every author is free to create their own version of the genre's numerous clichés and tailor them to their specific interests. Aside from the fundamental animalistic traits of the omegaverse, authors are free to incorporate some while rejecting others in their plot or create their own unique omegaverse.<sup>10</sup> Power, desire, intimacy, and consent are all important characteristics of the omegaverse genre; however the unconventional execution of gender roles in a universe where male and female share similar social constructs allows readers to objectively analyse gender inequalities and power play from a third person perspective, as well as how these gender dynamics affect relationships in the real world. The setting's unfamiliarity offers a distance that allows its users to examine society more logically. While much of the omegaverse details remain similar amongst stories and authors, each author tends to bring in their own interpretations and needs for independent plot structures. Most omegaverse stories depict alphas as the society's top class, filling high-ranking posts in every sector, and omegas as insignificant beings present solely for reproduction and exploited by the alphas for their heat. Almost every omegaverse contains negative misconceptions about omegas and their heat, with omegas expected to surrender to the superior alpha, who is only interested in knotting and impregnating when he comes into contact with an omega in heat. Consent appears to be non-existent in an alpha-dominated culture where omega submission is regarded an inherent right.

### **Survival of the Elite: Alpha Heirs and Omega Commodification in *Gold Gray***

Lee Green's *Gold Gray*<sup>11</sup> is set in a post-apocalyptic omegaverse society where omegas had been wiped out by an unknown virus, leaving only betas and a few alphas. Won Lukas, an alpha of the elite class, urgently requires an omega to birth a perfect alpha heir to inherit Roenjoy, the pharmaceutical company owned by his father. In normal circumstances, he would have chosen any omega from the secret facility of Roenjoy that produces artificial omegas to continue the alpha bloodline, but this is impossible now due to an accident that blew up the facility along with all the omegas. Though society itself is not completely negative towards omegas, the commodification of omegas as child-bearing machines among the few elite alphas continues. They are seen

<sup>9</sup> Popova, "Dogfuck Rapeworld", p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Marianne Gunderson, *Rewriting Sex And Gender In Omegaverse Fanfiction* (Masters Dissertation University Of Oslo, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Green, *Gold Gray* (Bomtoon, 2018).

as objects; the omega producing facility made them in such a manner that they are programmed to die after giving birth. This stopped them living a normal life after fulfilling their purpose and not becoming a burden on their alpha benefactors.

Lee Rain, the only surviving omega from the facility, is living his life as a theatre student unaware of his origin or true identity. Lukas accidentally comes across Rain in a hotel when Rain was trying to escape from a prostitution fraud. The younger generation of the society is even unaware of the past existence of alphas and omegas. Unknowingly, Rain had been a frequent victim of sexual assault and was often approached by his colleagues or superiors who had faint alpha characteristics. With the lack of omegas, the alpha characteristics in the society are rapidly decreasing, with only a few remaining people with weak alpha characteristics and even rarer alphas like Lukas who retain all the alpha characteristics intact.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, it is the pheromones that give away Rain's identity. Rain, on the other hand, associates the pleasant smell with perverts, because of the numerous times he was sexually harassed.

The facility where Rain was born was solely dedicated to producing female omegas for the satisfaction of the male alphas. Rain is a defective product, code-named Gray, since the facility would use a colour naming system for their omegas, where the value of the product was determined by its name. Valuable products were named after bright and vibrant colours and tones such as Rainbow, Yellow, and Red, with the least desirable being Gray, defective for being born a male. Rain is the only surviving omega born within the facility as his mother escaped with him when the authorities running the facility decided to destroy him, due to his uselessness as a male.

Lukas is no different from any other perpetrators that Rain had faced in his life. After learning the truth about Rain's existence, possibly the last omega in the whole world and also the only means for Lukas to achieve his goal, he is ready to employ any necessary means to possess Rain before somebody else snatches him away. Using Rain's accident as a cover, Lukas and his subordinates plan to subject him to heat-inducing drugs, forcing him to bear Lukas's child and then dispose of him later. Rain is falsely kept locked in a hotel as a test subject and made to undergo treatments to develop his uterus for pregnancy under the pretense of medical treatments. Unaware of the truth, Rain's body gradually changes to become a full-fledged omega. Rain as a thinking and independent individual does not exist for Lukas, he simply exists only as an object needed to carry out his plans. Even when Rain takes on lessons in music and dance to pursue his dream of becoming a theatre actor, Lukas questions this saying "I believe the creative arts belong exclusively to humans."<sup>13</sup> Lukas pretends to love Rain to gain his favour so that he accepts the uterus treatment without raising suspicion. When Rain finally learns that he is an omega, and what that really means for both himself and Lukas, he faces an identity crisis that proves to be highly mentally damaging. No matter how much Lukas tries to comfort him the damage is done. The dormant omega qualities in Rain have fully manifested, such that even if Lukas sets him free to live his life as he wishes, in a desperate attempt to repent for his wrong

---

<sup>12</sup> Anon, *Gold Gray*, Yaoi Wiki (2024). At: [https://yaoi.fandom.com/wiki/Gold\\_Gray](https://yaoi.fandom.com/wiki/Gold_Gray).

<sup>13</sup> Green, *Gold Gray*, p. 17.

doings, Rain can never go back to his previous lifestyle. The changes in his body cannot be undone and he will experience his heat every month, disrupting his life and reminding him of the injustices he had faced at the hands of his loved one.

Lukas is not the only alpha that mistreats Rain to profit from his omega self. Worse than Lukas is his elder half-brother Won Joshua. Unlike Lukas, Joshua is not a perfect alpha and did not receive his father's favour. For Joshua, Lukas symbolizes the destruction of his family and the death of his mother, and finally has a chance of destroying Lukas' future by snatching away his omega and the only chance to inherit Roenjoy. In an organised plan, Rain is hired by a theatrical company owned by Joshua and is given the role of the omega protagonist in a play. This role leads to Rain gaining immense popularity and he becomes extensively publicized, only to increase the impact of his downfall and Lukas along with him. Rain had only been informed of his identity as an omega, but not his origin, which he learns the bitter truth about during his final performance when Joshua broadcasts a documentary about the secret facility and its connection to Roenjoy, featuring a young Rain, on the stage in front of everyone. For the destruction of Lukas, an insignificant omega is a small price to pay. Rain learnt the hard way that the mother who saved him was not his own; rather he was created in a lab, his identity as a human being is questioned again and this time by the entire world. Unlike typical omegas, Rain had always managed to refrain from completely surrendering to his instincts. Despite giving in to Lukas' pheromones during heats, Rain still had the willpower to stand on his own. This last hope of living his life as a human being is completely shattered after Joshua's brutal act of revenge. Now, not just the Won family, but the entire world, know him to be an artificial omega.

### **Redefining Elite: Omega Supremacy in Jeong Seokchan's *Unromantic***

Jeong Seokchan's *Unromantic*<sup>14</sup> is not a typical omegaverse story about the domination of omegas by alphas. Instead it has a unique dynamic that places omegas in a superior position to alphas. Though this does not mean a reverse in their biological functions, omegas in this omegaverse have the power to make alphas submit to their pheromones and choose their partner. Chu Gain is a renowned, unrivalled third-generation chaebol and comes from a rich lineage of dominant omegas. He is the current head of the Sunghwa group which is an omega-centred matriarchy. Oh Hyeono is just an average alpha and a university student aspiring to be a freelance reporter. Even the stereotypical alpha perspective of omegas is reversed, as now it is Gain, an omega, who views alphas as animals and uses them to relieve his sexual desires. Gain has no issues in controlling his pheromones to make alphas beg for his attention. Unlike stereotypical omegas, Gain is neither weak nor feminine. He is an ex-amateur boxing star and strong enough to hold down Hyeono who is larger than him. He uses his dominant pheromones to make a stubborn Hyeono lose his rationality and stimulate his rut for his entertainment. Hyeono too views omegas as discriminating and arrogant beings who do not consider alphas as their equal. Even among omegas, Gain is far superior in terms of his

---

<sup>14</sup> Jeong Seokchan, *Unromantic* (Bomtoon, 2020).

physicality as well as social status which contributes to his pride as a dominant omega. Even though Hyeono is a dominant alpha, he does not have the social standing to go against Gain. After being caught by Gain for sneaking into a high-class establishment meant only for certain elite members, Hyeono is unable to maintain his pride as a dominant alpha in front of the all-powerful Gain who enjoys a hobby of “eating up”<sup>15</sup> the alphas that cross paths with him. Gain treats Hyeono akin to a sex worker, leaving him money for the night spent together, crushing any hope for the attraction that the naive Hyeono innocently mistook for love at first sight.

Unlike the alphas encountered in various omegaverse narratives, Hyeono is more down to earth, given his upbringing and the kind of society he lives in. He cannot see himself as superior by being a dominant alpha, because his society is not one that favours alphas. Their instinctual attraction towards omegas is not considered a normal involuntary physical phenomenon but their lack of control and a savage display of their animalistic tendencies. Hyeono constantly struggles in his daily life to earn his living by reporting truthfully and helping those in need. His belief in the ideal understanding of having sexual intimacy with the one that he loves is shattered with his encounter with Gain. For Gain, sex is only a means of meeting his daily needs, irrespective of the wishes of the other person. They are no more than disposable sex toys and Hyeono is no different than any other alpha. The two contradicting perspectives constantly clash as Gain uses Hyeono for his satisfaction in every encounter, and Hyeono, on the other hand, tries to appeal to his affection as a prospective future partner. He is constantly reminded by his superiors and Gain himself that alphas are “just a delicacy that they (omega) can eat and throw away.”<sup>16</sup> The only factor that sets Hyeono apart from other prey is that he did not willingly kneel for his lust like the other alphas. Gain ultimately caves into his persistent approach and agrees to give their relationship a chance.

Apart from his omega superiority, Gain’s wariness towards alphas also stems from his innumerable experiences with alphas who approached him for sexual, as well as financial, benefits due to his body and status. His distrust towards alphas and betas was heightened after he experienced the harsh treatment of his family towards non-omegas. He manifested as an omega only in his twenties. Before that, his secondary gender examination presented him as a beta. This was unacceptable for a family which laid great emphasis on the secondary gender. If not an omega, an alpha can also be put to some advantage for the well-being of the family; but a beta, with no traits whatsoever, is completely useless. Gain was excluded from any sort of inheritance but was brought back to be educated as a successor the moment his omega traits manifested, being dominant was just an added bonus for the family. Trusting Hyeono’s intention based on their initial encounter is difficult for him as Hyeono was without question looking for scandals among the elite class. Hyeono comes to view Gain as an independent individual and not just an omega, giving him a temporary escape from the responsibilities dumped on him for being an omega. The orthodox and inflexible way of lifestyle is shown through the portrayal of Gain’s grandmother who is the head of

---

<sup>15</sup> Seokchan, *Unromantic*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Seokchan, *Unromantic*, p. 11.

the family. She refuses to let Gain marry an alpha who does not match their status and wealth and cannot contribute anything towards the expansion of the Sunghwa group. She maintains her opinion till the very end until she finally sees her great-grandchild and is overcome by maternal love.

Gain's portrayal as a strong and proud omega is refreshing and also liberating in a way. Omegas, who at the very bottom of the society in every omegaverse are finally put into the position of alphas and are shown living a life of privilege. Despite this reversal, the treatment of alphas is not as severe as the omegas in other typical omegaverse narratives. Despite being inferior to omegas and being exploited by the elite group, alphas are not ostracized by society and are equally desirable as betas among ordinary people.

### **Bonded and Bound: The Omega Experience in *Love is an Illusion***

Fargo's *Love is an Illusion*<sup>17</sup> is one of the most well-known omegaverse manhwas. As in typical omegaverse stories, it revolves around an elite alpha, Dojin, and a poor omega, Hye-sung. The omegas are portrayed in a very stereotypical feminine manner who are discriminated against for their heat cycles. Though there are a few elite omegas, their main goal is to seduce a rich alpha to maintain their social standing. The omegas of this omegaverse, like women, are subjected to intense brainwashing by alpha leaders of the society thus proving their inferiority and their primary need for an alpha partner to live a normal life. Omegas are not favoured for normal day-to-day jobs, due to the monthly heats which disrupt their working conditions. Employers are wary of giving jobs to omegas since they are entitled to take leave every month, making them far less productive than alpha and betas and thus, less desirable as employees adding to their poverty. Even if they are unwilling, omegas are forced to look for a stable alpha partner to control their heat. Once an omega is bonded their heat becomes less intense and only their mate can sense their pheromones. This keeps them from disrupting the alphas in their workspace even if they go into heat in public.

Hye-sung had always believed and lived as an alpha. Even though he was not physically as strong and muscular as other alphas or excelled intellectually, he did not doubt his secondary gender. Dropping out of school early due to family issues and being unable to secure a stable job, Hye-sung's last resort as an alpha was to seduce and marry a rich omega. This plan leads to an utter failure as he suddenly manifests as an omega during a party and he is helped by Dojin, a dominant alpha and the youngest son of the esteemed Seon family, who seems to prefer betas than omegas for temporary relief. Growing up as an alpha, Hye-sung himself looked down on omegas and believed that it is only the laws of nature for an omega to submit to their alpha partners. As a school boy he considered being an omega to be extremely degrading, taking pride in dating omega girls. After finding out that he is a recessive omega, one with weak pheromones, his failures in life become even more prominent. He is fired from his waiter job and scammed into prostitution by human traffickers posing as a medical agency specializing

---

<sup>17</sup> Fargo, *Love Is An Illusion!* (Seven Seas Entertainment, 2021).



in changing the secondary gender. He has no place of his own to live and is given shelter by his best friend, Hyunsoo, who is an alpha. Even there he is harassed by his alpha roommate who gropes a sleeping Hye-sung with the excuse of taking a look at the 'low-class omega' that Hyunsoo brought home. Hye-sung is time and again reminded of his changed identity and the hardships on omegas whom he used to look down on. He finally comes to associate alphas with animals for exploiting omegas.

Dojin harbours a hatred for omegas and, as always, his reasoning lies in his alpha-dominated lineage. In the Seon family, apart from his mother, his father and all of his siblings, as well as nephews, are alphas. Surprisingly, Dojin's family does not look down on omegas as child-bearing machines. Instead, they mourn the fact that their family had been unable to produce any omega offspring for the last three generations. The reason Dojin is repulsed by omega pheromones is because his parents and elder siblings kept setting him up with prospective omegas from the moment he was presented as an alpha, irrespective of his opinion, in an attempt to fulfill their desire to welcome an omega into the family. Unlike other alpha families, Dojin's mother is highly respected as an omega and enjoys an equal position with their father.

Unable to cope up with his changing body Hye-sung is unable to suppress his instincts and often desires Dojin unknowingly during his heat, only to forget about it the next morning. Hye-sung cannot keep his mating instincts from taking over his reasoning capability until finally Dojin too loses himself in his rut and ends up bonding with him. In the omegaverse bonding is like a physical contract between an alpha and omega, making them lifelong partners. A bonded pair can no longer sense the pheromones of any other alpha or omega or mate with them. The bonded omega's body physically rejects any other alpha's advances. Unlike other omegaverse narratives, the bond does not give the alpha authority to possess the omega as they wish rather the bond makes them equal as life partners. As the omega's body rejects other alphas, the bonded alpha deteriorates physically when he is far from his omega for too long. Despite the various physical characteristics of omegaverse narratives that gives alphas the upper hand in society, the bond acts as a means to bring those who wish to be together to an equal position capable of influencing their lifestyles. After bonding, the alpha cannot neglect or mistreat their omega for the fear of sickness or even death if the omega dies or decides to run away.

While it is only natural for alpha and omega to be together, this stereotypical view is challenged by the portrayal of Dojin's elder brother's marriage. Dojun, the elder son of the Seon family, was married to Chowon Lee, a renowned violin prodigy and a dominant omega. Despite being an alpha and omega, they shared a very toxic relationship where Dojun was suppressed and forced to maintain their marriage by the domineering love that Chowon had for him. He finally crumbles under the immense pressure of keeping up his image as an elite alpha and, unable to take anymore, divorces Chowon. Despite being an alpha, Dojun finds solace in the company of a much younger Heesu, the beta son of their driver and Dojin's subordinate. Dojun and Heesu's relationship is outside the norm, proving that love can be free of involuntary instincts.

## Conclusion

Korean women encountered LGBTQI representation only in 1995 with the launch of the cable industry, which introduced a large number of Western dramas that often portrayed LGBT characters or themes, which were hardly prevalent in native Korean media at the time. This inflow experienced a greater push in 1998 when the ban on Japanese cultural exports was lifted leading to a drastic increase in the circulation of Yaoi and Shounen-ai in Korea. Developments in digital media increased access to global gay-themed media.<sup>18</sup> Omegaverse manhwa, and homosexual manhwa in general, was highly influenced by the Japanese style via the import of Yaoi and Shounen-ai. These were some of the first introductions to gay themed media that Korea experienced. These styles share all the basic omegaverse traits of heat, rut and pheromones that are present in *Shounen-ai* manga.

Omeegas are second-class citizens who are in a constant struggle to secure their rights as human. They are beautiful and slender whereas alphas are strong, muscular and handsome. Apart from the basic gender and class difference, omegaverse manhwa often present strong omega characters. Despite the obstacles of functioning in the society, omegas have the luxury of being independent and have a stable life through suppressants. Though heat and rut suppressants are also present in omegaverse manga, they do not play much of a role in stabilizing society.

Some omegas are more empowered, as in the case of Hye-Sung and Chu Gain. Chu Gain is special in his portrayal as an elite omega who dominates alphas. His existence breaks gender distinctions. He is not weak or feminine and is physically strong enough to overpower any alpha. Hye-Sung too is not just a typical omega. Despite being weak and at the bottom of the society, he is mentally strong to not idealize Dojin for his alpha self and strives for independence, ignoring Dojin's financial status. A major difference from Japanese omegaverse that can be found is the use of 'marking.' Omegaverse manhwa does not use the system of biting or marking their omegas in the nape to show their ownership. The negation of this trait helps in portraying a sense of individuality by removing this symbol of physical ownership of a human being. Manhwa, like manga in Japan, has many genres and subgenres, and omegaverse manhwa is not a predominant form.<sup>19</sup> However, it is a complex and interesting publication niche, and one that female authors, artists, and readers dominate.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jungmin Kwon, "Straight Korean Female Fans and Their Gay Fantasies", *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 32 (2019), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> D. W. McKinney, "Riding the Wave: The Steady Rise of Korean Manhwa", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 October (2020). At: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riding-the-wave-the-steady-rise-of-korean-manhwa/>.