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Mobilizing the Transnational Villainess: Affective Circulation and Feminist Resistance Across Korea and Japan

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ABSTRACT

The villainess character has recently emerged as a transnationally circulating archetype across Korean and Japanese media, particularly within manga, manhwa, web novels, and webtoons. While existing scholarship frequently relies on nation-bound, comparative frameworks to analyze this phenomenon, such approaches risk overlooking how the archetype gains subversive meaning precisely through the process of cross-border mobility. This paper frames the villainess archetype as a “transnational icon” (Bruce, 2015), illuminating how she continuously circulates and generates tangible friction against distinct patriarchal scripts. Through textual analysis of the manga *The One Within the Villainess* (*Akuyaku Reijō no Naka no Hito*) and a qualitative examination of audience reception, I demonstrate how a single narrative functions as a site of shared discursive resistance. Specifically, the villainess serves as a transnational icon by allowing Japanese readers to interpret her uncompromising revenge as catharsis against domestic cultural scripts of femininity, while Korean readers are drawn to the close female relationships that disrupt compulsory heteronormativity. The villainess archetype’s shifting legibility reveals the emergence of “ambient” solidarity (Rickert, 2013) —an uncoordinated ecological attunement where readers are drawn into transnational circulation to enact shared, yet culturally specific forms of feminist resistance.

KEYWORDS

transnational icon, villainess archetype, ambient solidarity, feminist resistance, audience reception, manga and manhwa

The “villainess” character has historically been positioned as the antagonist within the *otome isekai* fantasy genre, in which the protagonist is transported or reincarnated into another world resembling an *otome* game (a romance-focused game targeting women) or a historical romance novel. However, in recent years, the villainess has emerged as the dominant heroine across Korean and Japanese popular media, particularly within web novels, webtoons,

and manga available on digital platforms. The contemporary villainess genre finds the modern protagonist reincarnated into the body of the doomed antagonist. Relying on foreknowledge and strategic calculation to resist her fated demise, she often rewrites the narrative to become the true heroine. While overarching tropes remain consistent, the villainess is characterized differently across contexts: Korean villainess narratives tend to center darker tonal registers and structural retaliation, whereas Japanese iterations often retain lighter *shoujo* manga ideals that privilege relational harmony and emotional restraint. Despite these differences, villainess titles circulate widely between Korea and Japan through continuous translation and platform distribution, generating massive popularity.

While it is tempting to analyze this popularity through a traditional comparative lens, strictly nation-bound frameworks overlook how the villainess archetype creates meaning through the very act of moving across borders. I argue that Japanese manga and Korean manhwa infrastructures form a deeply entangled shared ecology. Here, the villainess operates as a circulating transnational icon—a highly legible figure who can be read within different contexts. As readers project their own gendered constraints onto the villainess, she enables divergent feminist readings to coexist and reveals the emergence of what I term “ambient solidarity.” Korean and Japanese readers are not engaged in an intentional, coordinated political movement, but their shared attunement to the villainess as a disruptive archetype reveals profound transnational resonance.

I illustrate how the villainess trope facilitates divergent yet similarly subversive processes of meaning-making by centering a textual case study of the Japanese manga *The One Within the Villainess* (*Akuyaku Reijō no Naka no Hito*). I position the manga not as an isolated domestic product, but as an assemblage produced by transnational circulation. By examining the narrative’s internal

collision of Korean and Japanese archetypes alongside contrasting reader interpretations, I demonstrate how the protagonist functions as a feminist killjoy against localized scripts. To unpack this phenomenon, this essay proceeds in three parts. First, I historicize the relationship between Japanese manga and Korean manhwa, establishing a foundation of transnational mobility characterized by colonial power and accelerated by modern webtoon platforms. Second, I outline the mechanics of circulation within this shared ecology, detailing how the villainess is transformed into a transnational icon. Finally, I analyze how the manga operates as a shared discursive space of feminist resistance, enabling ambient solidarity to be cultivated across borders.

The Transnational Mobility of the Villainess

The transnational circulation of the villainess must be situated within the historically entangled development of Japanese manga and Korean manhwa. Rather than treating these media as parallel but separate national developments, I trace their overlapping history to reveal a foundation of cultural and political mobility characterized by coloniality.

The manhwa industry, which established the foundation for modern webtoons, has roots in the early 1910s where it was originally known for satirizing political interference from Japan and Russia to arouse patriotism (Parc et al., 2023). However, the Japanese Occupation (1910-1945) severely hindered its development. The Japanese colonial government announced Japanese as the official language in 1911 and banned the use of Korean completely in 1938, subjecting the once-popular genre of satirical manhwa to strict political control (Parc et al., 2023). Furthermore, the colonial government weaponized manhwa as a propaganda tool to persuade the Korean public to support imperial policies, leading Korean audiences to temporarily view the medium with

deep skepticism (Parc et al., 2023).

Following Korea's liberation in 1945, the manhwa industry experienced rapid growth as political constraints were released. However, this postwar period was defined by intense stylistic hybridization and piracy, frequently pulling content from Japanese publications (Yamanaka, 2013). Because the Korean government strictly regulated domestic content to ensure "more coherent storylines, less violence, and correct orthography, producers sought to meet market demand by imitating and pirating Japanese works" (Parc et al., 2023, p. 179). Through this process, Korean readers became familiarized with Japanese manga formatting, serialization patterns, and magazine structures (Yamanaka, 2013). Although the import of Japanese popular culture to Korea remained legally prohibited in the post-war periods, which forced publishers to intentionally conceal Japanese influences, the medium was already fundamentally cross-pollinated (Yamanaka, 2013, p. 89). In other words, Japanese manga and Korean manhwa have historically been enmeshed within the pushes and pulls of cross-border mobility contextualized by colonial power. My examination into the circulation of the villainess genre requires an unsettling of nation-bound frameworks to properly account for these transnational flows, tracing how Korean and Japanese media forms have absorbed, adapted, and remediated one another.

Digital developments, particularly the rise of webtoons, further necessitates the need for a transnational lens. Webtoons are a neologism combining the word "web" and cartoon" (Jin, 2023). Typically released as chapters or "episodes," webtoons are incredibly smartphone friendly and read vertically, which differs from webcomics in the US and manga in Japan, both of which are read horizontally (Jin, 2023). Webtoons have created new transnational cultural flows, disrupting the traditionally unidirectional model of Global North to Global South by successfully competing in global markets

(Jin, 2023). Thus, while Japanese manga was historically imported into Korea, the rise of webtoons has now led Korean mediated texts to be exported into the Japanese market. The popularity of Webtoons in Japan is revealed by a 2024 study by the Mobile Marketing Data Labo, in which 59.8% of interviewees revealed that they paid to read webtoons on platforms such as "LINE Manga" and "Piccoma," the primary digital infrastructures for webtoons in Japan (Seno'o, 2024). Recognizing this major platform shift, Japanese legacy publishers have restructured their traditional publication processes to better account for webtoons. In 2023, Shueisha Inc. launched a vertical manga editorial department called "JumpTOON." Kadokawa Corporation followed suit by hosting the "Tate-Suku" (Vertical Scroll) Comic Award, and Shogakukan, Inc. established the creative studio "STUDIO SEED" in 2022 to merge the webtoon format with their traditional manga award-to-publication pipeline. These infrastructural changes reveal that Korean webtoons are influencing the Japanese manga industry, further underscoring the need to account for transnational mobility not only as historic context but to understand contemporary digital media consumption.

While the preceding sections have traced top-down transnational flows—namely, colonial histories and institutional publishing infrastructures—the contemporary villainess archetype is also constituted by bottom-up, decentralized media practices. Specifically, the organic popularity of self-published web novels reveals a reader-driven process of circulation. Unlike traditional novels, web novels are digital books published directly online, often serialized chapter by chapter, allowing independent authors to share their stories instantly with a public audience. Korean platforms have formalized a pipeline of adapting popular web novels into webtoons (Jin, 2023). Similarly, Japan's web novel ecosystem has become one of the primary sources for manga adaptations (Iida & Scott, 2025).

Both channels appear to have emerged around the same time and share the distinct trait of capitalizing upon web novels that gained virality. Additional bottom-up phenomena include “cultural intermediaries” or fans who engage in unauthorized translations of web novels and webtoons to share them with global readers (Shim et al., 2020). These decentralized channels cannot be adequately explained by a nation-bound lens; rather, they require a framework capable of acknowledging both the transnational histories of manga and manhwa, alongside the rapid cross-border circulation of web novels and webtoons in the digital age.

To better account for such flows, I draw on Jenny Rice’s (publishing as Edbauer, 2005) theorizations of “rhetorical ecologies.” Edbauer argues against reducing public discourse to unidirectional models composed of discrete, “conglomerated elements” such as sender, receiver, and text anchored to a singular event (2005, p. 9). Instead, Edbauer proposes a critical shift towards “affective ecologies that recontextualize rhetorics in their temporal, historical, and lived fluxes” (2005, p. 9). Affect has been defined by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010) as an “inventory of shimmers” (p. 1), or the visceral, bodily capacities to affect and be affected that arise in the in-between spaces of bodies, texts, and environments, often registering before conscious articulation. For Edbauer, affect is the key to unsettling the rigid categorizations that have traditionally bound rhetorical processes. The capacity for affect to “pass between body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise),” to occasionally stick to our bodies and worlds, requires an ecological framework that accounts for fluidity (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1). Within an ecology, there is no isolated starting point; rather, rhetoric exists in an “ongoing social flux” where the traditional boundaries of a situation “simply bleed” into wider public interactions and histories (Edbauer, 2005, p. 9).

When applied to the villainess archetype, an

ecological framework reveals that contexts, texts, readers, and platforms are not isolated actors within a static situation. Rather, each component generates affective intensities, forming ecologies where meaning is continuously made through an “amalgamation of processes and encounters” (Edbauer, 2005, p. 20). Consequently, the villainess archetype emerges from a complex foundation of circulatory exchange between Korea and Japan. These ongoing encounters, which span across colonial histories to contemporary digital platforms, have forged the villainess into a shared transnational archetype. Furthermore, an ecological framework accounts for the character’s divergence between Korean and Japanese narratives, demonstrating how affect mobilizes readers differently based on localized cultural constraints. Ultimately, this approach allows us to recognize both the villainess’s shared legibility and her culturally specific manifestations. To better illuminate this continuous remaking and renegotiation of meaning, I situate the villainess as a transnational icon and offer a brief overview of how the villainess archetype differs across Korea and Japan.

The Villainess Archetype as a Transnational Icon

The affective intensities generated by the villainess must not only be mobile but also legible to readers across borders. This can be explained by Caitlin Bruce’s (2015) theorization of the “transnational icon.” Bruce argues that as certain figures circulate globally, they become “affect generators” or “supercharged image[s] that enable multiple claims and performances of solidarity and identification to take place” (2015, p. 44). Bruce examines how a radical feminist performance group from Russia used the balaclava in their “Punk Prayer” at the altar of the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow in February 2012. Months later, dozens of protesters in New York City also wore the balaclava in front of the Russian

Consulate, St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, and in Times Square to protest the Pussy Riot's incarceration. They held signs such as "Free Pussy Riot," and "Mother of God, Free Pussy Riot" (Bruce, 2015, p. 43). The reverberating image of the balaclava became a transnational icon, which Bruce defines as "generic representations that circulate globally indexing a particular entity or group, yet enable identification through the instantiation of the simplified face" (2015, p. 44). I suggest that the villainess archetype acts similarly. The iconicity of the balaclava is replicated in the recognizable visual markers of the villainess's aristocratic dress and sharp gaze, as well as her narrative tropes of reincarnation and revenge. This allows her to move seamlessly between Korea and Japan as a transnational icon or, in this case, as a transnational archetype.

The legibility of the villainess is partly what characterizes her iconicity, but she also maintains multiple claims and identification. When popular media moves transnationally, the message undergoes a process of decontextualization-recontextualization (Montgomery & Itoh, 2023). In their analysis of the anime *Shingeki no Kyojin* (*Attack on Titan*), Montgomery and Itoh (2023) demonstrate how original cultural messages and collective memories are stripped away (decontextualized) as they cross borders, only to be subsequently reconfigured (recontextualized) by foreign audiences to serve entirely new localized needs. I argue that the villainess archetype is also enmeshed within this fluid process of decontextualization and recontextualization precisely through her transnational iconicity. Both Korean and Japanese readers are exposed to her character and narrative, identifying with the villainess through her recognizable markers while still finding her malleable to apply their own gendered frustrations and desires. Importantly, the iconicity of the villainess is not dependent upon the intentional erasure of racial, bodily, or cultural markers to make a product universally

palatable without carrying the "cultural odor" of its origin (Iwabuchi, 2002). Rather, her iconicity is reinforced through her capacity to serve as an affect generator, to facilitate cultural accumulation.

These dual characteristics of transnational iconicity—across generic legibility and cultural specificity—can be observed in the way the shared villainess archetype varies across Korean and Japanese narratives. In the following sections, I offer brief definitions of the Korean and Japanese villainess to highlight their differences.

Defining The Korean Villainess (악녀)

The Korean villainess figure can be traced to 2012-2013, when the romance fantasy genre gained popularity on web novel platforms (Miki, 2021a). Generally, Korean villainesses are transported or reincarnated into the world of a web novel they recently read, likely because many webtoons are adapted from web novels. Furthermore, Korean villainess titles often follow dark and serious storylines. The most popular stories on SMARTOON are the ones that carry the possibility for a bad end, such as dire scenarios that threaten death (Miki, 2021b).

Within Korean romance fantasy and webtoon discourse, the villainess is frequently discussed as a reconfiguration of femininity. Conventionally feminine traits, such as being submissive, is represented by the original heroine and painted as the "unideal feminine" (Chertian, 2023, p. 139). Instead, the Korean villainess archetype is idealized because of the way she embodies ambition, calculation, and emotional hardness (Chertian, 2023). By flipping the script to reimagine villainous qualities as heroic ones, the Korean villainess archetype disrupts traditionally valorized traits of passivity and domesticity.

Furthermore, the modern villainess is heralded for her sense of agency, which is refreshing in a genre that used to "sideline women into more submissive roles" (Stella&, 2025). This inversion of the typical helpless girl narrative may be what readers find so appealing (Stella&, 2025). Rather

than positioning the heroine as morally superior through kindness or self-sacrifice, Korean villainess narratives often legitimate retaliation and revenge as rational responses to structurally unjust worlds.

Defining The Japanese Villainess (悪役令嬢)

The Japanese villainess archetype can also be traced back to the early 2010s, as the *shoujo* manga and *otome isekai* tropes similarly flourished on web novel platforms (Miki, 2021a). Like her Korean counterpart, the Japanese villainess is often transported or reincarnated into a novel they were reading or a game they were playing. She then seeks survival rather than domination, using foreknowledge to avoid narrative destruction and reframe her social position in ways to avoid conflict.

The Japanese villainess is strongly informed by *shoujo* manga traditions. For example, her story often tends to take place, at least in part, on school campuses and there tends to be an essence of romantic comedy that lightens rather than darkens the tone (Miki, 2021b). Furthermore, the male-centeredness of the *shoujo* genre often persists within the Japanese villainess archetype. *Shoujo* narratives tend to characterize the female protagonist based on her relationship to the male characters (Kargbo, 2024). This heteronormative romance plot often takes center stage.

Finally, there is an emphasis on moral frameworks that privilege emotional sincerity, relational harmony, and eventual narrative recuperation (Ma, 2006). Japanese villainess narratives tend to emphasize misunderstanding and repair rather than open antagonism or revenge (Kim, 2021). Instead of fully embracing cruelty or emotional detachment, the Japanese villainess archetype is thus characterized by withdrawal from romantic competition, quiet self-management, or moral restraint. These patterns reflect long-standing *shoujo* conventions and domestic reader expectations regarding femininity and emotional labor.

The divergent manifestations of the Korean and Japanese villainess do not represent two isolated genres, but rather, the dynamic and continuous circulation of a single transnational icon. To understand how the villainess achieved this transnational legibility, her historical trajectory must be accounted for. As Japanese digital subculture blogger Kazenotori (2021) observes that the villainess archetype resists a unidirectional origin story. Both Korea and Japan possessed distinct, independent precursors that developed simultaneously from shared foundations in the women's romantic fantasy genre. While Japanese web novels like *I Will Live, Using Humility and Dependability as My Motto* (2013) were translated into Korean and circulated amongst Korean readers, it did not invent the villainess genre abroad (Kazenotori, 2021). Korean web novels like *Rashita!* (2011) were already popularizing "book possession" tropes, in which the protagonist is reincarnated into a novel, concurrently (Kazenotori, 2021). Because the villainess emerged through this "convergent evolution" (Kazenotori, 2021), she was never a foreign export or import, but an archetype born within a shared ecology.

However, the villainess archetype's legibility alone does not account for her subversive resistance. It is her transnational circulation that allows her to move between localized platforms, continuously undergoing what Laurie Gries (2015) terms a "consequential unfolding," where every remediation allows the circulating entity to accumulate new rhetorical weight (p. 21). As Catherine Chaput (2010) explains, such acts of circulation actively generate "affective energy" which binds disparate readers together through shared intensities (p. 11). Thus, understanding the villainess archetype as a transnational icon reveals how she is rendered continuously mobile, absorbing localized cultural tensions, and carrying those remediated meanings across borders to generate new narrative possibilities.

For example, the villainess archetype has

circulated to absorb and apply the affective energy of Korean feminist discourses. Online activism, propelled by communities like Megalia, brought severe patriarchal critique into mainstream digital discourse, mobilizing campaigns such as #MeToo and #IAmAFeminist (Kim, 2021). The villainess character emerged as a fictional affect generator for real-world frustrations, channeling feminist resistance into a narrative landscape. The Korean villainess combines female agency and strategic retaliation in the satisfying package of a revenge fantasy to ultimately provide a form of “palatable feminism” (Molisso, 2023), or a story with feminist undertones that resonates widely without triggering severe backlash to real-world activists. Crucially, because the villainess archetype is a transnationally circulating icon, this specific Korean affective energy is not locally contained. Rather, it flows back to Japan, altering the villainess archetype’s trajectory. Scholars have noted a gradual shift in Japanese villainess narratives toward a greater acceptance of strategic self-interest, a change directly linked to the increasing influx of Korean webtoons within the Japanese market (Kim, 2021). Such shifts have allowed the Japanese villainess to increasingly disrupt her domestic *shoujo* script, withdrawing from compulsory romantic competition and pushing back against expectations of feminine emotional labor. The villainess archetype, then, must be understood as a transnationally circulating icon to recognize how she continuously remediates and renegotiates feminist friction across borders.

Narrative Tensions: *Shoujo* Traditions and Structural Revenge

To ground these theoretical frameworks in material practice, I now turn to an analysis of the *The One Within the Villainess*. Rather than analyzing this manga as an isolated domestic product, I position it as a localized node within this broader transnational circulation—a text

whose very narrative structure is animated by the iconicity of the villainess archetype. By examining how the protagonist actively dismantles localized patriarchal and heteronormative scripts, *The One Within the Villainess* reveals how a single text accumulates affective intensities, providing a shared discursive space for feminist resistance.

Critically, the text physically embodies the transnational amalgamation of the villainess archetype. The story was originally serialized as a Japanese web novel on the site *Shōsetsuka ni Narō* before being adapted into a manga by the artist Makibro, mirroring a highly common pipeline within the contemporary Japanese publishing system. However, the manga’s transnational legibility is evidenced by its success in Korea. After earning a nomination for Japan’s Next Manga Award in 2022, the series was subsequently licensed on South Korea’s major digital platform, *Ridibooks*, in 2023 where it achieved widespread and sustained popularity among Korean readers.

I map how *The One Within the Villainess* functions as a transnational affect generator by conducting a close textual analysis of the manga, reading the content in its original Japanese to examine how its narrative architecture synthesizes the villainess archetype and disrupts localized scripts. I then capture the active circulation of the text by examining digital reader reception, examining Japanese user comments from *Comic Cmoa*—one of Japan’s largest digital manga storefronts—alongside translated reviews from Korea’s *Ridibooks*. Because this study relies exclusively on textual analysis and the observation of publicly accessible online reader comments, it did not require formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. In accordance with ethical guidelines for internet-based qualitative research, no direct interaction with users occurred. To maintain data integrity while respecting user privacy, commenter pseudonyms were reported exactly as they appeared publicly on the respective platforms, which included preserving the site-

level masking automatically applied by *Ridibooks*. Through such methods, I illuminate how both Korean and Japanese readers use *The One Within the Villainess* to articulate and negotiate their own distinct gendered frustrations.

Finally, I note that this analysis does not seek to uncover the author's original intent, nor does it attempt to define a singular monolithic reader agenda. Within a framework of transnational circulations, meaning is not fixed at the point of origin; rather, meaning-making processes are everchanging. I thus focus on how the text's transnational circulation creates a discursive ecology where divergent interpretations of the villainess can coexist and even cultivate possibilities for cross-border solidarity.

Two Competing Souls in One Body

The One Within the Villainess distinguishes itself from standard *otome isekai* narratives through a unique psychological framework: two consciousnesses sharing a single body. The story begins when a modern Japanese girl reincarnates into the body of Remilia, the designated villainess of an *otome* game. While playing the game, Emi was overwhelmed by the mistreatment Remilia faced, regretting that she could not give Remilia the love she deserved. When Emi—the reincarnated protagonist—found herself within the game as Remilia, she used her foreknowledge to act with kindness, trying to clear the game's original route and avoid Remilia's fated doom. The consciousness of the original Remilia was forced into a back chamber of sorts, where she could observe but could not act. Although Remilia was initially frustrated with her predicament, over the years, she developed a deep appreciation for Emi. Both girls came to share unconditional love for one another.

But despite Emi's best efforts, Remilia is betrayed by her friends and accused of committing a despicable crime. This is due to the game's original heroine, Pina, triggering the villainess's condemnation event out of jealousy. Emi's heart

is shattered by this string of events, sending her consciousness into a deep coma. And it is at this moment that Remilia's original consciousness is unleashed, free to take back control of her body. Remilia is furious that Emi, the only person who ever truly loved her, was deceived and double-crossed by her so-called lover and friends. Remilia thus embarks on a ruthless, highly calculated revenge spree against the heroine and the male leads, motivated to clear Emi's name and reconstruct a perfect world for her to eventually wake up in.

Failure of the Shoujo Ideal

The narrative conflict in *The One Within the Villainess* hinges on a subversion of the traditional *otome* game structure. In standard iterations of the genre, the heroine is a figure of innate purity who naturally earns the affection of the male capture targets. However, the manga reframes the original heroine, Pina, as the true antagonist. Pina operates as the embodiment of a rigged patriarchal script. To ensure that the narrative proceeds exactly as programmed, she resorts to using cheat items and charm magic, forcefully manipulating the male characters into loving her and turning them against the designated villainess.

Pina's loyalty to the original game narrative is portrayed as extreme and myopic, as she forces compliance to a "good girl" script that is fundamentally toxic. Pina's increased reliance on magic is painted as unethical and even stupid in juxtaposition with Remilia's moral and cunning strategies. By positioning the traditional *otome* heroine as a manipulator, the manga exposes the fractures within conventional Japanese *shoujo* narratives, critiquing the artificiality of a script that demands female compliance at any cost. Put differently, *The One Within the Villainess* makes a mockery of Pina's dedication to following the *shoujo* heroine narrative, while celebrating Remilia's subversion of those same tropes.

The One Within the Villainess also underscores the failure of the *shoujo* ideal by showcasing Emi's

failure. Although Emi is reincarnated into the body of the villainess, she attempts to survive and disrupt the narrative by relying entirely on traditional *shoujo* orientations of moral goodness. Emi is characterized by emotional sincerity, hard work, and a desperate desire for relational repair. She attempts to clear Remilia's name by playing the role of the ideal, passive feminine figure. However, the manga makes a radical intervention by demonstrating that this approach is not viable. Emi's adherence to the traditional *shoujo* trope does not save her, and instead, the cheat codes orchestrated by Pina destroys her. Framed for crimes that she did not commit and publicly condemned by the male leads, Emi is pushed to her breaking point, eventually losing consciousness entirely.

Emi's tragedy operates in tandem with Pina's eventual downfall to explicitly expose the limitations of patriarchal scripts of femininity. The manga intentionally demonstrates that traditional *shoujo* tropes of femininity are an impossible and self-destructive system. Pina's unquestioning belief in the *shoujo* heroine narrative leads her to toxic entitlement and moral bankruptcy, while Emi's desperate reliance on karmic goodness and emotional labor leaves her utterly defenseless against systemic manipulation. By punishing both the artificial heroine and the passive victim, *The One Within the Villainess* signals the definitive structural collapse of the traditional *shoujo* script.

Remilia as the Transnational Icon

Where the *shoujo* ideal fails, the villainess archetype succeeds. It is precisely in the mockery of Pina's efforts and the tragedy of Emi's failure that *The One Within the Villainess* reveals its status as a transnational affect generator. When Remilia regains control of her body, the story radically shifts not only to a villainess narrative, but to portraying an accumulative villainess archetype. More specifically, *The One Within the Villainess* fully rejects Japanese *shoujo* passivity

to embrace the retaliatory characteristics of the Korean villainess archetype. Remilia's subsequent revenge plot is not characterized by the self-preservation or relational repair routes typical of the Japanese villainess archetype. Instead, Remilia is cold, highly calculated, and unapologetically cruel, demonstrating tropes familiar to Korean narratives that prioritize structural subversion over moral purity. For example, instead of immediately attacking Pina or her former fiancé the prince, Remilia withdraws to the Demon Realm and uses her intelligence to revitalize the demon economy. She introduces new medicines, cosmetics, and agricultural practices while simultaneously cutting off the human kingdom from vital resources. In doing so, Remilia is not merely concerned with preserving herself and Emi but also seeks to achieve absolute structural and financial domination over her enemies.

However, Remilia does not simply replace the Japanese villainess archetype with a Korean one. Rather, she synthesizes them, demonstrating her capacity to act as a true transnational icon. While weaponizing Korean style revenge, Remilia's entire behavioral principle is driven by an intense devotion to Emi. She prioritizes saving Emi over obtaining the validation of the male leads, abandoning the compulsory heteronormative traditions that tend to haunt the Japanese villainess archetype. Furthermore, Remilia's inner monologue frequently depicts her speaking tenderly to the comatose Emi. She repeatedly states that every cruel thing she does is an act of pure devotion to ensure Emi wakes up in a beautiful and safe world. The love that Remilia exhibits towards Emi, not towards a male lead, is a clear departure from the existing Japanese villainess archetype. Yet, in the final chapters, Remilia chooses to partner romantically with the Demon King. This narrative conclusion fulfills a quintessential Japanese web novel trope, in which the condemned villainess finds refuge with the misunderstood antagonist-turned-hero. The romantic recuperation here is a callback to

the *shoujo* traditions embedded within Japanese villainess stories.

Ultimately, Remilia cannot be neatly categorized as strictly a Korean or Japanese villainess archetype. Rather, she functions as a transnational assemblage, a textual manifestation of the affective weight the archetype has accumulated through continuous circulation. This hybridity is what elevates her to the status of a transnational icon. By combining the structural retaliation of the Korean villainess archetype with the relational catharsis of the Japanese *shoujo* tradition, Remilia embodies the function of a fluid and malleable “affect generator” (Bruce, 2015). She provides the generic legibility necessary to seamlessly cross borders, maintaining recognizable narrative markers like the condemnation event, the aristocratic setting, and the Demon King romance.

Yet, Remilia’s hybridized narrative ensures that she does not become a diluted cultureless export. Instead, she emerged from the text as a transnational icon capable of holding and deploying multiple forms of feminist resistance. To understand how this affective potential is actively taken up by readers across Korea and Japan, it is necessary to move beyond the narrative itself and examine the localized gendered frustrations.

Divergent Reader Reactions: Possibilities for Ambient Solidarities

Because the text itself functions as a transnational assemblage of competing gendered scripts, its ongoing cross-border circulation cements Remilia’s status as a true transnational icon. As the manga’s sustained popularity across both Japan and Korea demonstrates, Remilia is a continuously circulating affect generator. Her transnational mobility allows readers in vastly different contexts to project their own localized patriarchal restrictions onto her. Consequently, rather than extracting a singular and fixed

message from the author, readers can decode and recontextualize Remilia as a narratively sanctioned disruptive force tailored to the gendered frustrations of their own specific cultures.

Japanese Reader Reception: The Catharsis of Structural Retaliation

For Japanese audiences, the localized patriarchal restriction projected onto Remilia is the burden of *shoujo* moral economies, which historically demand emotional restraint, self-sacrifice, and forced conviviality. By consuming Remilia as a circulating icon who embodies Korean-style structural retaliation, Japanese readers experience profound affective catharsis. They frame her refusal to forgive as emotionally satisfying precisely because it dismantles domestic cultural scripts of femininity. Japanese readers appreciate Remilia’s rejection of common *shoujo* tropes by praising her villainous actions. One comment on the popular online manga platform *Comic Cmoa* noted, “This is so different from the other reincarnation stories I have read ... Remilia is not as pure as Emi” (fu, 2022). The characterization of Emi as “pure” conveys the Japanese commenter’s understanding that Emi represents the moral superiority embedded within the *shoujo* traditions which are inextricable from the Japanese villainess archetype. Yet, the excitement that can be gleaned from the commenter’s remark about the novelty of this narrative implies excited anticipation of Remilia’s revenge, or the thrill of reading a more severe retaliatory framework.

Furthermore, readers express intense appreciation that Remilia’s vengeance is not motivated by traditional, male-centric plot points (such as reclaiming a stolen fiancé), but rather by her devotion to Emi. Fan comments include quotes such as, “She is motivated by wishing for the true happiness of just one individual—this is not a revenge story for herself, and that’s what makes this story stand out” (Eldorado 3rd, 2024) and “Not a traditional template story

where the villainess is hated by everyone and pursues revenge. Instead, it's a story where the villainess is upset that someone precious to her was hurt, and so she pursues revenge on her behalf" (Rano, 2022). These comments reveal a productive complication in the Japanese reception of the text: readers are not simply abandoning the Japanese villainess archetype in favor of unchecked vengeance. Instead, they celebrate how Remilia's violence is anchored by a traditional *shoujo* ethic of selflessness. The catharsis stems not from cruelty for its own sake, but from the fact that her revenge is an act of profound care.

It is Remilia's duality, observed in her capacity to be simultaneously read as a ruthless villain and devoted protector, that cements her function as an affect generator. Because Remilia is a fluid, circulating assemblage, Japanese readers can project their domestic expectations of the *shoujo* heroine onto her, while enjoying Korean-style structural retaliation that disrupts patriarchal scripts of the traditional *otome* protagonist. But as the comments have revealed, the reception of Remilia's hybridity does not necessarily manifest as an explicitly radical feminist critique. The commenters are not overtly theorizing systemic patriarchy, but rather, are expressing a profound relief at the manga's departure from the traditional *shoujo* traditions. I argue that this affective catharsis points to a latent, underlying frustration with the *shoujo* tradition's historical demands for female emotional labor, passivity, and compulsory forgiveness. While the Japanese readers may not be consciously articulating a formalized political agenda, the very act of collectively celebrating Remilia's uncompromising revenge implies that the transnational icon has successfully generated a shared discursive space. Within these comment sections, Japanese readers are given the opportunity to passively interrogate and negotiate their localized gendered frustrations. Though these constraints are not fully dismantled or resolved, the transnational circulation of the

villainess archetype carves out an environment where readers can explore the boundaries of female resistance.

Korean Reader Reception: Yuri Legibility and the Rejection of Heteronormativity

Conversely, Korean audiences project an entirely different set of restrictions onto the transnational icon: the pervasive demand for heteronormative romantic resolution and male validation. While the Korean villainess archetype traditionally disrupts gendered norms through cold and calculated structural revenge, Korean readers of *The One Within the Villainess* foreground a different affective frequency. They are drawn to the intense emotional relationality between Remilia and Emi—a hallmark of Japanese *shoujo* traditions. However, Korean readers are not merely appreciating their emotional softness. Rather, they are drawn to the intense female-to-female devotion precisely because it radically decenters men from the central narrative.

Reader commentary frequently interprets this dynamic through the lens of *yuri* (girls' love), celebrating the emotional exclusivity of the two women to disrupt compulsory heteronormativity. Comments actively frame the relationship as queer-coded, even in the absence of explicit textual confirmation, noting, "The protagonist of a pure love comic grows not through a man's love and salvation, but through a love that supports, believes in, and embraces her" (goo***, 2025). There is admiration for the way *The One Within the Villainess* seemingly defies heteronormative romance tropes to privilege the unconditional love Remilia and Emi have for one another. Other comments express a similar affective resonance, writing, "This is... a beautiful love... There's nothing more beautiful than women who care for and love each other... I just hope they live happily together..." (did***, 2023) and "The love between Emi and Remilia is dazzling. It's truly pure love. That's why I consider it *yuri*" (wnd***, 2024). By eagerly queer-coding the love between

Remilia and Emi, readers evolve this imported *shoujo* relationality to push back against gendered frustrations that a female protagonist's ultimate reward must be a male savior.

Perhaps most strikingly, Korean readers use this queer-coded devotion to actively overwrite the story's heteronormative milestones. Although Remilia ultimately marries the Demon King, readers interpret this not as a romantic triumph, but as an act that is ultimately in service of Emi. As one commenter argued, "Of course, in the original, Remilia marries a man and gets pregnant, but Emi is the foundation of it all. She marries and becomes pregnant for Emi. That's love... What else is love? These two are in love..." (wnd***, 2024). In this reading, even biological reproduction and romantic partnership with a male lead are subversively reframed as supreme acts of queer dedication to another woman.

I argue that this reception highlights how Remilia functions as a transnational icon, providing Korean readers with the familiar satisfying architecture of a structural revenge plot but injecting it with a female relationality that destabilizes patriarchal romantic scripts. Much like the Japanese reception, these digital comment sections operate as a shared discursive space. The Korean readers leaving these comments may not be consciously organizing a formalized queer political agenda, but they are expressing a felt, affective relief at the complete irrelevance of the male leads. The transnational circulation of the villainess archetype thus allows Korean readers to safely explore a radical reorientation of female desire, expanding the boundaries of who women are permitted to center in their own lives.

Cultivating Ambient Solidarities

While the specific patriarchal tropes disrupted by Remilia are fundamentally different in Korea and Japan, the continuous circulation of the villainess connects these readers within a shared discursive ecology. This dynamic creates what I term "ambient solidarity," a concept grounded

in Thomas Rickert's (2013) theorization of "ambient rhetoric." Rickert argues against reducing persuasion to the deliberate exchange of messages between discrete human actors, instead framing rhetoric as a distributed phenomenon accomplished by the environment itself where audiences are moved through an "attunement" to their surroundings, technologies, and shared ecologies (p. 3). By applying Rickert's framework to the transnational circulation of the villainess, we can reimagine how cross-border feminist resistance operates. Traditional, coordinated transnational feminist movements are often organized around an explicit, unified political agenda. Ambient solidarity, conversely, is formed through uncoordinated environmental attunement.

When Japanese and Korean readers consume the villainess as a circulating transnational icon, they are not collaborating on a formal political manifesto, nor are they even directly speaking to one another. Yet, they are using the same affect generator (Bruce, 2015) to push back against their respective patriarchal constraints. This is observed across Japanese and Korean readers' comments on *Comic Cmoa* and *Ridibooks* respectively, as they negotiate expressions of femininity and relational boundaries. The solidarity here is "ambient" precisely because it is an affective ecological resonance, one which allows divergent culturally specific feminist readings to coexist and thrive.

By maintaining these diverse readings, the villainess archetype demonstrates that a transnational feminist solidarity does not require the erasure of local contexts to achieve a unified message, nor does it prioritize a global coalition over culturally specific frustrations. Instead, as a transnational icon, she reveals the complexities and multiplicities of feminist resistance. By shifting our focus away from the search for a formalized, unified political movement, we can observe what Rickert (2013) describes as a "dynamic interchange of powers and actions in

complex feedback loops” (p. 10). The continuous circulation of the villainess archetype performs this precise function. As Japanese and Korean readers consume and remediate the villainess, they are attuned to different elements of the character archetype and empowered to reimagine entirely new “ways of being-in-the-world” (Rickert, 2013, p. 33). Furthermore, because these reader comments exist within circulatory ecologies, Japanese and Korean readers become “co-respondents who dwell collectively” (Rickert, 2013, p. 37). It is within this concept of collective dwelling that the significance of ambient solidarity is revealed. Although they are not explicitly coordinating, Japanese and Korean readers are inextricably linked within the same circulatory accumulations of the villainess icon. Their shared consumption draws them into an ecological attunement with gendered frustrations and narrative catharsis, expanding the boundaries of feminist theory by proving that affective resonance can foster meaningful shared resistance.

Conclusion

This essay began by unsettling nation-bound comparative frameworks, tracing the deeply entangled development of Japanese manga and Korean manhwa from their historically fraught origins to their modern convergence on digital webtoon platforms. By framing these overlapping infrastructures as a shared rhetorical ecology, this paper has demonstrated that the contemporary villainess archetype is far more than a popular media trend: she is a dynamic, circulating site of feminist friction. As she continues to circulate, she is transformed into a highly legible transnational icon and functions as an affect generator (Bruce, 2015).

The textual architecture of *The One Within the Villainess* perfectly encapsulates this phenomenon. As the analysis demonstrated, the manga functions as an assemblage of

colliding cultural scripts. By making a mockery of Japanese *shoujo* tropes and deploying Korean-influenced structural revenge, Remilia emerges as a transnational icon. Her hybridity reflects the affective accumulations that the villainess archetype has gathered through her cross-border circulation. As readers consume the narrative, they develop conflicting interpretations that respond to localized gendered frustrations. For example, Japanese readers use Remilia’s uncompromising revenge to experience catharsis, pushing back against domestic expectations of emotional restraint and forced conviviality. Conversely, Korean readers understand Remilia and Emi’s relationship through a *yuri* lens, decentering male validation to disrupt compulsory heteronormativity. These divergent understandings of the text are possible precisely because the villainess archetype functions as a transnational icon, generating affective resonance and creating a shared discursive space where readers can negotiate feminist resistance.

These meaning-making processes point to the emergence of ambient solidarity. By applying Rickert’s (2013) framework of environmental attunement to transnational media circulation, this paper offers a model for understanding how uncoordinated textual consumption may function as collective feminist resistance. Ambient solidarity challenges traditional models of transnational feminism that rely on formal coalitions, institutional agendas, or traceable human-to-human communication. Instead, it reveals that transnational consumers can “dwell collectively” (Rickert, 2013, p. 37), using the same circulating artifacts and archetypes to push back against their respective local patriarchies. In an age characterized by transnational media flows, the framework of ambient solidarity invites future scholarship to examine how other widely circulating icons might similarly mobilize passive attunement into disruptive resistance.

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