

Korean Popular Culture in Bangladesh: Deconstructing the Idea of One Asia

By

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requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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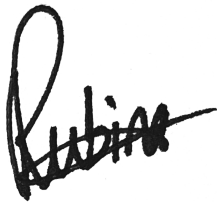
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rubina', with a large loop at the top and a horizontal line across the middle.

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Approval

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Abstract

At present, the consumption of Korean popular culture is very widespread across the globe. What is interesting, however, is the people's propensity, particularly in Bangladesh, towards the content produced from the aforementioned country. From an outsider's perspective, this propensity may be explained as a result of belonging to the same continent—Asia. However, in reality, that is far from the truth. Thus, the study explores why Bangladeshi audiences find Korean popular culture appealing by using Chen's concept of inter-Asian referencing. It analyses the influence of this culture in Bangladesh by referring to Asian scholars and experiences from Asian societies to highlight the similarities or differences that reside within the region. The research is based on Korean dramas and Korean popular music as the main media texts to analyse the popularity of the phenomenon. To study these in-depth, qualitative research methodology was employed by conducting a small-scale interview in order to study their reception among the audience in Bangladesh. The result of this research highlights that the presence of foreign elements in Korean dramas and popular music plays a significant role in their popularity in the country. It reveals that the appeal of Korean popular culture lies not in a shared Asian identity, but in the complex negotiation between differences and similarities. So, an apparent similarity is not all there is to Asia. The findings demonstrate the multiplicity of Asian identities and the diversity that reside within the region, deconstructing the notion of 'one' Asia.

Keywords: Korean popular culture; Hallyu; Inter-Asia; K-drama; K-pop

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Table of contents

Declaration.....	ii
Approval.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	v
Table of contents.....	vi
Chapter 1.....	1
Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Korean Popular Culture in Bangladesh.....	3
1.3 Research Objectives and Questions.....	5
Chapter 2.....	7
Literature Review.....	7
2.1 Theoretical Context: Asia as Method.....	7
2.2 Evolution of Korean Popular Culture: Beyond Borders.....	9
2.3 Korean Popular Culture in Asia.....	12
2.4 Korean Popular Culture in Bangladesh.....	15
Chapter 3.....	20
Methodology.....	20
3.1 Research Design.....	20
3.2 Data Collection.....	21

3.3 Participants.....	21
3.4 Data Analysis.....	23
3.5 Limitations.....	23
Chapter 4.....	25
The Appeal of Korean Dramas.....	25
4.1 The Element of Foreignness in K-dramas.....	25
4.2 The Process of Identification and Distancing.....	30
4.3 A Welcome Alternative to American TV.....	32
4.4 Aspirational Aspects: Aesthetic Visuals and Soundtracks.....	34
4.5 The Language Gap.....	37
Chapter 5.....	42
The Allure Behind Korean Popular Music.....	42
5.1 Hyperreality and the Concept of ‘The Self’ in K-pop.....	42
5.2 The Psychological Appeal of K-pop.....	45
5.3 A Shift From Western Music as Mainstream Media.....	48
5.4 The Role of Online Platforms in the Dissemination of the Korean Wave.....	50
5.5 Representation of Masculinity in K-pop.....	53
Chapter 6.....	59
Conclusion.....	59
Works Cited.....	63

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

From binge-able dramas like *Queen of Tears* with 1 billion views to catchy songs like “Cupid” by FIFTY FIFTY with 178 million views, the world is now familiar with Korean popular culture like never before. In recent years, it has found its way into people’s lives from all over the world. As days pass, its influence is becoming more immense and prominent. From the late 2000s, Korean popular culture¹ moved beyond the borders of Korea and into other countries such as Japan, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as well as the European countries and the US. This rapid movement and global dissemination of Korean popular culture is what is now called the ‘Korean Wave’ or ‘Hallyu.’

The Chinese news media first used the term ‘Hallyu’ when there was an unexpected and massive success of Korean cultural products in China. The sudden rise in this popularity among Chinese youth occurred in the late 1990s when Korean dramas, henceforth K-dramas, were first exported to the country (Akter 11). As media liberalisation spread throughout Asia, the number of K-dramas being exported increased over time. Many believe that the Korean Wave gained popularity internationally when China first broadcasted the drama *What Is Love All About* in 1997 (Shim 25). It became immensely popular once it was aired on China’s national China Central Television (CCTV). In fact, in 1998, due to its popularity, the channel rebroadcasted the drama again. From that point onwards, K-dramas became a huge hit among Hong Kong,

¹ Throughout the paper, reference to Korea or Korean popular culture denotes South Korea and their popular cultural products

Vietnam, and Taiwan audiences. On the other side, a boy band called H.O.T. and a musical duo named Clon were also becoming quite popular due to their attractive appearances and impressive dancing skills. Eventually, people around East Asia became more familiar and involved in the popular culture which later came to be known as the Korean Wave (25). What started from the exporting of K-dramas has now turned into an export of various other popular cultural products such as Korean popular music, famously referred to as K-pop, animation, games, movies, fashion, food, beauty products, and most importantly, merchandise and tourism. These are mainly what Korean popular culture consists of. While at the beginning their popularity was confined to the borders of Asia, now these products have reached countries such as Iraq, Mexico, Egypt, the US, and Europe. This marks the route of “a major global circulation of Korean popular culture in history” (Kim 1).

After the 2000s, Korean musicians’ popularity, for example, Girls’ Generation, Super Junior, and Kara started to soar across the Asian market charts (Cheol-min 16). This mainly marks the beginning of the popularity of K-pop. Later in 2012 when “Gangnam Style” by PSY was released, it immediately became a hit reaching billions of views. This played a huge role in the further dissemination of K-pop bringing more spotlight to it from the global audience. A more recent case that made K-pop a bigger sensation was the popularity of BTS, a boy band and BLACKPINK, a girl group. They are among the most well-known idol groups in the K-pop world. It took the Korean wave to a whole new level, spreading it to the corners of the world that were previously oblivious to anything Korean. In the beginning, this was thought to only be “an Asian phenomenon,” but after the 2000s, it was soon realised to be “a transnational phenomenon” (Kanozia and Ganghariya 2). As a result of this, South Korea is now emerging “as a new centre for transnational pop culture production” (Akter 11). Not only that but they are now

among the major non-Western sources that create and transmit transnational popular culture which become an immediate hit, penetrating the global market (Maqsood et al. 330).

Now, this global spread of the Korean wave would not have been possible without the role of the media. Media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Spotify, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Viki etc. as well as video streaming websites are facilitating the expansion of the spotlight on Korean popular culture with more ease than before, making it more accessible to international audiences. K-dramas as well as Korean music are posted on these services along with subtitles in multiple languages such as English, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese to make them more accessible to the audiences (Kim 2). Platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube and Spotify, which were once dominated by Western series, movies, and music, are quickly getting replaced by Eastern, more particularly Korean cultural products like K-pop and K-dramas. For example, K-dramas such as *Reply 1988* (2015), *Squid Game* (2021), *The Glory* (2023), and *Queen of Tears* (2024) are some of the most streamed K-dramas on Netflix.

1.2 Korean Popular Culture in Bangladesh

Among the places where the Korean wave has had a major breakthrough, Bangladesh is one of those places that have felt its effects. Bangladesh is a South Asian country whereas South Korea is an East Asian country. From religiously watching K-dramas and listening to K-pop, Bangladeshi audiences have become major consumers of Korean popular culture. The fans in Bangladesh have gone from purchasing overpriced imported merchandise to building strong fan communities to exchanging information about their favourite artists, expanding the impact of the Korean wave in the region. On social media platforms like Facebook, many fan community groups have been built where devoted consumers of Korean popular culture not only share

information but also their feelings and affection towards Korean culture. As a result of this huge popularity, there are now multiple Korean restaurants like Koryori, Korean convenience stores like Seoul Mart, and Korean cosmetics stores like Korean Mart—the list goes on—in Bangladesh. Furthermore, this devotion to Korean popular culture has led many people to show interest in learning the Korean language and use certain words unconsciously that they have picked up in their daily utterances.

In the past decade, the number of fans has snowballed in Bangladesh. For example, from Facebook fan communities alone, there are over 20,000 fans of Korean cultural products in Bangladesh and more considering the ones that were not documented. This rise in popularity makes Bangladesh “a hotbed for K-Pop fan culture and good research fodder” (Arif 103). The transfer of culture from Korea to Bangladesh is considered to be a transcultural flow and while cultural proximity is one of the defining elements of transcultural flows, it is missing in this case. Thus, it is intriguing that Korean popular cultural products are able to go beyond these barriers and leave such impactful marks in Bangladesh. It is a country that has a history stained by colonialism and where India’s culture plays a dominant role. Bangladesh’s choice of entertainment is therefore heavily influenced by Bollywood or the West (110). This leads to a big question regarding the popularity of Korean culture in Bangladesh which makes it a special case and an interesting research locale. Moreover, the spread of the Korean wave in Bangladesh is not put under the spotlight and analysed as much. Their avid consumption of such content is a point of research intrigue as the interaction between Korean popular culture and Bangladeshi audience denotes a presence of inter-Asian cultural flow, whose rationale and mechanisms are understudied.

The strong reception also raises questions about the various cultural connections within Asia and puts forward the question of ‘one’ Asia. This is because the propensity of Bangladeshi audiences towards Korean popular culture may be rounded off to belonging to the same continent—Asia. However, there is more to what meets the eye. Despite both the studied sites being parts of Asia, there is a presence of several other factors that distinguish them apart such as ethnicity and language. This indicates that despite having one point of connection, there are numerous loose ends. The idea of Asia in history has always been quite singular and linear in nature (Sun 9). Under one name, the numerous countries, cultures, and people that are part of Asia have been collectively grouped together as one homogenous entity. So, the question of Asia is etched into the thread of the intellectual history of the world. It is important to recognise various societies that reside within Asia and their unique historical, social, economic, political, cultural, and geographical specificities. However, the concept of Asia is difficult to deconstruct because with this comes many interconnected factors such as hegemonic play between the East and the West.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

Overall, the paper aims to analyse the popularity of Korean popular culture in Bangladesh and examine the concept of ‘one’ Asia. Firstly, it explores the underlying reasons behind why Bangladeshi audiences interact with Korean popular culture with such fervour. Here, Korean dramas and Korean popular music are analysed as the main media texts of the study. This unique case of inter-Asian cultural flow was studied by interviewing seven participants who have been consuming its products, more specifically K-dramas and Korean music, for a long period of time. The research is formulated and in line with Kuan-Hsing Chen’s theory called ‘Asia as Method.’

Thus, an inter-Asian study was conducted to understand the interactions between Asian cultures using Asia as a reference rather than the West. It is a new field of inquiry for producing knowledge in analysing Asian cultures, societies, politics, and overall, an understanding of self. This leads to the availability of numerous sites of reference and identification. Inter-Asian studies are an alternative for Asian intellectuals to the hegemony of the “West as method” (Chen and Chua 1). Therefore, the purpose of conducting an inter-Asian study here is two-fold. It is an attempt to link the circles in Asia together and to represent Asia in the global discourse. So the research contributes to the field of inter-Asian studies by analysing how a product from East Asia is being consumed and interpreted by the South Asian audiences. Through the exploration of the Bangladeshi audience’s engagement with Korean popular culture, the research contributes to the understanding of inter-Asian cultural flows. All of these play a huge role in deconstructing the idea of a singular Asia. As a result, the research aims to address the following questions:

1. Why does the Bangladeshi audience find Korean popular culture so appealing?
2. How does the consumption of Korean popular culture in Bangladesh, an inter-Asian cultural flow, challenge the notion of ‘one’ Asia?

Therefore, this paper analyses why popular Korean cultural products are consumed, highlights where the allure lies, and challenges the assumed concept of Asia as one entity.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

With the broader frame of inter-Asian referencing, this chapter discusses how scholars across Asia have studied Korean popular culture and its impact on audiences from parts of the region. So far the studies conducted on this phenomenon show that it has been studied for its reception as well as consumption, trying to rationalise its popularity among the audience. The literature review starts by discussing the theory which has largely contributed to the foundation of the research, Chen's idea of using Asia as a method. Later, the chapter sets the scene by discussing the birth and development of the Korean wave. Next, it accounts for the reception of this wave in countries such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Armenia. The rationale behind this is to understand how and why different parts of Asia, a large and diverse continent, interact with Korean popular culture. Lastly, the chapter concludes by studying the reception of the Korean wave in Bangladesh.

2.1 Theoretical Context: Asia as Method

The following paper is informed by Kuan-Hsing Chen's theoretical approach, 'Asia as Method.' This theory primarily suggests using Asia as a reference instead of the West. This is known as inter-Asian referencing. It encourages academics to set aside Eurocentric points of view and use rich Asian experiences in their studies. The theory presents that doing this will change the sphere of knowledge production. Chen believes that knowledge production is a crucial field in which imperialism can function and influence. So, he puts forward the proposition of using Asia as a method to change the existing source of knowledge production as well as to help advance the efforts of "decolonization, deimperialization, and de-cold war." This method is seen as a limitless

space to produce intellectual work as well as a prospect that allows numerous opportunities. So much so that he believes it “has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history” (212). Further, this highlights how challenging it has been to build connections and have interactions within Asia itself for generations now. It is due to the disparity among the “big countries” and “small ones” which is found in, for example, India and others in South Asia, China and others in Northeast Asia etc. The reason behind this is due to the “twentieth-century colonialism and nationalism” (213).

Chen identifies the understandable fixation on the West and then proposes a shift towards Asia as a potential means of redirecting one’s reference point. In following this method, Asia is no longer viewed as a mere “object of analysis” but it comes the very way knowledge production can be transformed. In the past knowledge production solely focused on using the “West as method.” The West served many different purposes. It was a system for classifying various societies according to their qualities. It was the standard by which the “backward” and “disposable” were distinguished from the “desirable” and “progressive” to the point that the third world sought and at the same time resented the West. In doing so, anxiety arises about Asia’s representation in the global discourse. Chen critiques this dichotomy. He suggests that to break away from this we have to deconstruct the idea of “the Other.” We have to realise that although the West is a substantial part of Asia’s cultural resources, they are like other regions of the world and a mere outcome of history. They are not universal and cannot be the sole point of reference. In shifting away from the singular and simplistic Western-centric point of reference to non-Western perspectives, Asia’s diversity gets more recognition and acknowledgement. This, as a result, poses a challenge to the East-West dichotomy. Moreover, ‘Asia as Method’ facilitates Asian communities to learn from and about one another surpassing the borders of their historical

and cultural differences. In doing so, it solves the problem of having Western-dominated studies in the existing knowledge structures.

2.2 Evolution of Korean Popular Culture: Beyond Borders

Korea, once known as a place between China and Japan that exported electronics and cars, has made a name for itself because of its culture, writes Kim in an introduction to the book *The Korean Wave*. Before, the image of this region was linked to concepts such as “demilitarised zone, division and political disturbances.” In contrast, now they have a more positive impression related to “trendy, transnational entertainers and cutting-edge technology” (Kim 3). Around 1997, the Korean government took up the initiative to develop the Korean culture industry as a means of bringing modernization as well as economic, political, and cultural flourishing after the Asian financial crisis. This modernised transformation of Korea happened very quickly. For the rapid progression of their economy, they aimed to bring in foreign revenue by exporting their media culture due to Korea’s shortage of natural resources. Thus, they began to promote foreign sales of “culture, technology and services, including TV programs, popular music, online games, movies and distribution services” (4). This added with the fact that Asian countries opened their doors to other cultural products in the 1990s because of the IMF and WTO, the Korean cultural market was able to seep into other Asian countries and eventually join the global cultural forces. The Korean culture industry largely capitalised on this shift in the market which led to the eventual growth of Korean popular culture. This not only elevates and promotes the nation’s image but also establishes a form of soft power. Soft power is the ability to have influence over audiences across the globe without the use of any tangible force (Kim 5).

Discussing the Korean wave in the East Asian context, Chua and Iwabuchi continue with the same line of thought, foregrounding the external socio-historical factors that contributed to the popularity of Korean culture in East Asia. They credit the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which left Korea's economy in shambles, as the reason behind the start of exporting its culture (4). The introduction of Korean dramas into East Asian markets and households is believed to have occurred as a result of fortunate timing during the late 1990s. The Asian financial crisis did not only affect Korea's economy but also the other regions in East Asia. Due to this, the entertainment industries of the East Asian countries started looking for inexpensive dramas in place of the comparatively pricey Japanese dramas. As a result of Korea exporting their dramas and East Asian countries importing inexpensive dramas, a quick spread and broadcasting of Korean dramas started to take place in all of East Asia excluding Japan. The gradual increase in the creation, promotion and consumption of Korean popular culture, the authors concluded, points to "the presence of an East Asian pop culture that co-exists side by side with US domination in the global media industry" (12). Korean media thus has come to present an Asian alternative to the American counterpart.

Over the last twenty years, this cultural flow has only grown stronger as Yoon and Jin point out in the book *Korean Wave Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*. Geographically it has surpassed the borders of East Asian countries into other regions such as the Middle East, North America, Latin America, and Western Europe. Content-wise the Korean wave also saw an expansion. In the beginning, the Korean Wave consisted of the exporting of a limited scope of cultural products such as dramas, movies, and songs. Now, it has met more developments with the inclusion of more products such as technology, cosmetics, and games. Yoon and Jin's study offers more insights into the phenomenon, offering a classification of the cultural products that

make up the Korean Wave now. Firstly, “essential content” which includes Korean dramas and music. Secondly, “semi-essential content” which includes food and games. Next comes “para-Hallyu goods” which also include services such as language, tourism, fashion products, cosmetics, and plastic surgery. There are also “distribution channels” which are platforms where their media content is promoted and broadcasted. Lastly, there are “effects” which include their product sales, the way their national image is portrayed etc (Yoon and Jin xi). Among all these levels of penetration, Korean music also known as K-pop became influential in its reach and popularity, especially with audiences in their teens and twenties around the world. In addition to the above, the production and technological sphere surrounding the Korean Wave has gone through major changes as well. The introduction and utilisation of social media, and OTT platforms have transformed the “transnationalization” of the Korean Wave. So due to its easy accessibility, K-dramas, movies, and K-pop became just a click away from audiences.

In an effort to understand the appeal behind Korea and its media content, Worthy et al.’s study focuses on the growth of the film and drama industry in South Korea in the late 1990s. Big corporations, known as ‘chaebol’ in South Korea, like “Samsung, SK, and Daewoo” stepped into the entertainment sector and promoted “South Korean cinema’s industrialization,” observes Worthy et al. (157). Their research notes that after the release of *Winter Sonata* (2002), K-drama’s rise to fame marked an expansion of cross-cultural exchanges among countries across Asia surpassing the borders of culture and history. This transnational cultural flow was further intensified when *Jewel in the Palace* (2003) was released. Including countries such as Taiwan, China, Japan, and other Southeast Asian countries, *Jewel in the Palace* had viewers from 70 countries where people from Islamic countries of West Asia were also included (171). The female characters wearing the hanbok, due to its conservative and non-revealing nature, helped

make the content more suitable and appropriate for audiences in West Asia, the study confirms. It also highlights two primary factors that make these K-dramas so popular across cultures which are their structure and their theme. Furthermore, their research delves into the appeal behind K-pop. The setting, music, and themes together make it a total package. Not only that, but following their music release these artists do numerous promotion events such as attending variety shows, fan signing events, as well music events. All of these contribute to capturing fan's attention from all over the world.

2.3 Korean Popular Culture in Asia

The first sustained interaction between the Korean wave and India took place in its Northeastern region in a state called Manipur, states Reimeingam in his research on the consumption pattern of Korean media content in Manipur (2). Interestingly, this was facilitated by a ban on all Hindi channels in the early 2000s due to their undermining of the local culture. As a result, the streaming of K-dramas and K-movies was introduced in the region. From this grew an interest in all things Korean which eventually spread to other parts of India. His study also points out that the Korean wave in India has influenced the youth more than any other age group (8). They are more prone to adopting what they see in their lives. However, it also suggests that older people are interested in Korean media products because of their content, which showcases familial relationships and other cultural traits, to which they can closely relate to.

In a more recent study, Kanozia and Ganghariya discuss that Indian viewers find Korean cultural content to be “clean entertainment” when put next to the content produced by Hollywood and Bollywood (7). This piques their interest even more in popular Korean products like dramas, movies, and music. The reason behind this interest can be linked to the viewer's

need to connect with the tradition and ideals that they are familiar with from their own culture while simultaneously interacting with a contemporary and global phenomenon known as the Korean Wave. Thus, their research notes that this perfectly exemplifies how Korean cultural content has surpassed and penetrated the borders of individual cultures not only because of their relatability but also the right balance of foreignness as a global force for the Asian audience.

In a study based in Pakistan that studies their consumption of Korean content, Maqsood et al. note that Pakistani viewers opt for Korean content largely due to its style. Korean dramas like *Crash Landing on You* (2019) were a huge hit in Pakistan and it was mainly due to having a great deal of similarities in terms of cultural and societal values. According to them, they have an “Asian essence” in them (334). Due to the portrayal of Asian cultural values and qualities in Korean content, the viewers feel more connected to them. They also point out that the concept of “Asian-ness” is getting normalised through Korean content unlike how it used to be marginalised before. Furthermore, Korean dramas meet the needs of Pakistani viewers in terms of emotional dialogue, unique music, beautiful visuals, comedy, action, and romance. Thus, they conclude by stating that the Korean wave is a response to a cultural sphere that was once dominated by the West. However, the Korean wave still remains distinct in so far as “they encourage globalised and traditional Korean cultures” which adds an element of the unfamiliar to the mix (334).

Similarly, research done in Malaysia about Korean content’s influence on their audiences states that the dissemination of Korean popular culture in the country happened due to K-dramas, which are now among the top favourites of Malaysian viewers. Ariffin et al. note that the reason why Korean cultural content tends to have a strong grip over Asian viewers, in particular, is due to meeting their emotional demands “by being easy to assimilate to a similar lifestyle, cultural proximity and expressiveness (10). In other words, the study found out that Korean cultural

products that are popular not just in Malaysia but all over Asia are due to their quality of carrying something familiar; something that feels like home. Unlike what is often found in Western content where anything Asian is either racially or ethnically stigmatised due to their particular race or ethnic group. Thus, the popularity of the Korean Wave in Asia is driven by the desire to fit in and participate in something that is mainstream. While Korean dramas and movies also have their faults in the execution of their content, it is completely different from Hollywood movies where they directly show discrimination. Korean cultural content has features that can quench the thirst of Asian viewers. Although Western popular culture has easily made its way across every Asian country, the viewers of this foreign culture feel a void of desperation due to the lack of cultural proximity. Hence, Korean content swoops in to fill the void that Western content was created by meeting the consumer's emotional needs. Lastly, the research reveals that Asians had compassion towards Asian cultural norms such as strong morals, family values, and generosity, and this is what propels their success in Malaysia, and in the bigger picture, Asia (13).

In contrast to what has been said so far, research on Indonesian fan's consumption of Korean content shows that they are attracted to such content due to their unique creativity. It states that from the early 2000s, there has been an increase in the consumption of Korean content to the point that it is currently "one of the fastest growing K-pop markets in Southeast Asia" (Jeong 2288). What Jeong's study adds to this discussion is the gender aspect. It's just not a certain age, but the main consumers in Indonesia are overwhelmingly female, from teens to women in their 40s. Korean dramas especially are quite different from Indonesian dramas in terms of creativity which keeps them coming back for more. Whereas, Indonesian drama's storylines tend to be slightly boring and monotonous. K-pop and K-pop-related entertainment

shows, too, became a huge hit among the Indonesian crowd around 2010. Jeong goes on to claim that K-pop became so popular that it is now the dominant form of popular culture in the region. Reasons for such hype and popularity, according to the fans lie in the fact that it is a concoction of trendy and contemporary “Western popular culture forms such as American hip-hop and R&B, European electronic music, and pop and visual elements from J-pop” (2293).

In contrast to the trendiness that is attributed to K-pop’s foreign elements by Indonesian consumers, Alada’s study on the influence of K-drama on Filipino students highlights the uniqueness of the overall story and plot of Korean drama that makes them popular among the crowd. Participants in Alada’s study point out that Korean dramas not only focus on the main characters but also give layers of subplots to the minor characters as well (4). This, for them, makes the dramas multi-dimensional and characters complex. In addition, each drama is very different from the other in terms of plot which takes the repetitive element out of it and makes it very engaging. Alada further states that Korean dramas shape the idea of relationships, ranging from family to friends to lovers, in the viewers. According to them, Korean dramas execute the romantic element in such a way that is impossible to find in any local or even American dramas (15).

2.4 Korean Popular Culture in Bangladesh

As the above discussion shows, the Korean wave has gained popularity across various cultures, from Asians to Americans to Europeans, and the reason why Asians particularly gravitate towards it is the right balance between proximity and foreignness. In Korean dramas, Asians see a way of living that they hope to follow. Akter’s research on Bangladeshi viewers shows that the stark difference between Korean and Western dramas pulls them in (37). Her findings suggest a

strong affinity with Asian values that the K-dramas uphold, along with their traditions and values, which help the audience connect with the ones of the Bangladeshi viewers. For example, they showcase the act of respecting elders, prioritising family, maintaining good friendships, and pursuing education. These qualities of the Korean culture intersect with the Bangladeshi cultural values and thus make way for the Bangladeshi viewers to relate to them (38). Her findings echo those of the earlier ones in that they, too, emphasise K-drama's interesting plotlines that are not as exaggerated as Indian dramas and not as hard to connect with as Western series. In Bangladesh, Indian media plays almost the same hegemonic role as American media. Moreover, the majority of Korean dramas tend to run only for 12 to 16 episodes unlike Indian or Western series that keep stretching the plot to the maximum and become boring and monotonous. Thus, Bangladeshi audiences prefer Korean dramas. The research also found that Korean music is another part of Korean popular culture that people in Bangladesh are fascinated with. Korean music not only has a wide range of themes but also these themes have a very deep underlying message. This attracts the attention of Bangladeshi listeners. These include themes about life, growing up, hard work, loyalty, family, and friendship which at the same time contain messages of mental well-being and happiness among viewers. So, it is the universal quality of K-dramas and K-pop that keeps Bangladeshi viewers coming back for more (42). However, it is not only about the theme but also the lyrics which tend to be very unique, and meaningful.

K-pop had a big impact in South Asia including Bangladesh which Roy talks about in the book *Korean Wave in South Asia*. In 2012, within a month following PSY's 'Gangnam Style' the young people in Bangladesh were obsessed with it. Their obsession was not only limited to playing the song on repeat but also performing it out in public. After talking to multiple fans, Roy notes that some of them are also very active in the fan communities. Being a fan of the

Korean Wave does not only involve consuming their content but also sharing their emotions, feelings, and opinions in a community full of fans. K-dramas, on the other hand, feature a blend of genres filled with thrilling twists and swoon-worthy romance. According to his research, this combination is lacklustre in Bollywood and Hollywood and the Bangladeshi television industry is just simply falling behind. A handful of them instead see Korean content as an alternative to Western TV shows and to relieve themselves from the Bollywood hype. In line with other scholars mentioned earlier, Roy also highlights the importance of online platforms like social media that allow fans to communicate and exchange information about K-dramas and K-pop. There are multiple fan communities like this such as ‘BD K-Family,’ ‘K-Corner BD,’ ‘BTS Fanclub Bangladesh,’ and ‘K.Escoop’ on Facebook (69). In Bangladesh, the fans in these communities are very active in participation as well as sharing information. For K-pop, it was found that their lyrics and themes were highly motivational and inspirational, discussing social issues and promoting positive thinking and mental well-being in life. Not only that, but they loved how the content was devoid of any sexual implications both in their lyrics and music videos. His research also highlights that the fans of BTS in Bangladesh consist of young women, mostly teenagers. The reason behind this is due to the “cute” and “non-macho” appearance of the BTS idols which makes them look very adorable (71).

In agreement with Roy’s research, Arif writes about the extensive fan base of K-pop in Bangladesh as well as the clashes that occur between the fans and the non-fans. Due to the soft and non-macho looks of Korean artists and actors, they garner “irrational hate” from the public due to their racist, homophobic, and xenophobic nature. This is because, due to Bangladesh’s colonial past as well as Muslim history, the country’s cultural setting is strongly based on the duality of masculine and feminine. Thus, men are expected to behave and look masculine in a

specific manner that is accepted to be blatantly macho and masculine in nature. Thus, when K-pop brings in the element of soft masculinity, it is not well accepted among the general public of Bangladesh, mainly men. Due to a lack of beard and appearing cute, “BD people would generalize K-pop, J-pop and C-pop idols as Transgender/Gays/Lesbians,” writes Arif (112). On the other hand, for the fans of K-pop, participating in fan culture is very crucial. This is where the role of social media factors in a significant amount. The fans not only follow and promote their artists but also create content such as “fanfictions, fan news sites, blogs, memes, forums for intellectual discussions, charities on behalf of the artists, etc.,” which garners attention from other fans (112). The best place to do this is on social media especially on Facebook considering it is the most popular social media in Bangladesh. This community as well as social media platforms provides a medium for K-popers all over the country to unite and discuss their passion. They arrange events like ‘K-Meet’ where the fans come together and hang out. However, it is not only limited to this. These meetups also have “life-size artist cut-outs, along with merchandise stalls, the streaming of music videos, performance” (119). Arif highlights that these events arranged by the fan communities usually host around three to four thousand fans. Other than this, the fans in Bangladesh also participate in buying albums and merch as a means of supporting their favourite artists and groups despite the high international shipping costs. Overall, the K-Popers in Bangladesh participate thoroughly in the fan culture to show their interest in Korean popular culture. This proves how not only big but also active the fans of Bangladesh are.

After reviewing the literature, a gap was identified among them. Despite studies being done on K-drama and K-pop in the context of Bangladesh, not many look at the mechanics behind the popularity in a comprehensive and sustained manner. This lacuna paved the way for the current study which explores the appeal of Korean popular culture, particularly K-drama and

K-pop, in Bangladesh through inter-Asian referencing. In doing so, this paper contributes to filling the gap in the research. This paper studies the aforementioned media texts and their popularity in Bangladesh by referring to Asian scholars and studies conducted on the various experiences found in Asian societies. The research looks into two very different parts of Asia, Bangladesh and Korea, using Asia itself as a method. The idea was conceived from Chen's theory and has been used to study this inter-Asian cultural flow. This contributes to the de-Westernized production of knowledge. In an attempt to describe and analyse the aforementioned, the research concludes by establishing that there is no 'one' Asia; Asia is diverse, all with different histories and cultures. Finally, the study aims to stand as a part of Asia's representation in the global discourse.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter presents an overview of the foundation on which the research has been conducted: the design of the research, how the data was collected, information about the participants, how the data was analysed and the overall limitations of the research.

3.1 Research Design

This research is broadly an exploration of the Bangladeshi audience's experience of Korean popular culture, and more specifically, an attempt at understanding why they find it so appealing. By engaging with this inter-Asian cultural flow, the study aims to reinvestigate the mainstream understanding of Asia as one entity. It is mainly informed by Chen's idea of inter-Asian referencing in "Asia as Method," as mentioned in the previous chapter. The research has been carried out by conducting qualitative research which follows the pathway of phenomenological research. Phenomenological research focuses on studying the lived experiences of any event or phenomenon from a group of people. It describes in detail the experiences they have gone through and how they have experienced them, if there is anything in common or otherwise (Creswell and Poth 121). Thus, the following paper studies what the consumers in Bangladesh have experienced in terms of Korean popular culture, more specifically K-drama and K-pop, and how they have experienced this phenomenon. This has been done by collecting and analysing data both through primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected through interviews with individuals who have experience with Korean popular culture. The secondary data was the literature reviewed for the research as well as additional works from prominent Asian scholars that studied their individual societies in Asia. Lastly, the data collected was

analysed to find a larger meaning which was broken down into categories and themes through description.

3.2 Data Collection

The data for the research was primarily collected from interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a set of questions prepared beforehand. The questions were open-ended in nature and tried to prompt the interviewees to speak more freely and in detail instead of a simple yes or no answer. Moreover, based on the participant's responses, further questions were asked. Both of these set and improvised interview questions played a significant role in finding answers to the research questions. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed to move to the process of data analysis. Each of the interviews has been combed through, analysed, and later discussed in detail in their specific chapters with their emerging themes.

3.3 Participants

A total of seven Bangladeshi participants were chosen for the interview of this research. They were chosen following the criteria of a particular age range (17-25), class (from middle to high-income group), and gender to address the most prominent factors suggested by the existing literature on the topic. As the most important criterion for selection, it was ensured that all of them had some form of experience with Korean popular culture with varying exposure and involvement with K-drama and K-pop. Whereas some of the participants chosen were self-proclaimed fans, the research also included fans who were once a part of fan communities in Bangladesh and partook in multiple functions and events. Moreover, these seven participants were chosen based on different backgrounds. For example, a high school student, a high school

graduate, and an undergraduate student. The common theme is that all of the participants were students. This is because, firstly, the main age group for this research were the youth, thus, people who were in their early twenties were chosen. The existing literature suggests this significant age group. Secondly, interacting with Korean content in terms of accessibility and comprehensibility requires people from a specific class. They need to have the means of technology to access the content and the capability to read and understand the translated language which is in English for the majority of the cases. Additionally, there was an attempt to have an equal number of female and male participants for the interviews to see how Korean popular culture as a phenomenon has been experienced by both genders. However, while gathering consumers of the Korean media content a pattern was observed. Such content is liked by females more than males. Regardless, to represent how males perceive and interact with Korean popular culture in Bangladesh, three male participants were chosen for data collection. Each of the interviews were carried out individually to make the participants talk about their experiences without external bias or any peer pressure and provide quality information. Lastly, pseudonyms have been used instead of the participant's real names. Their demographics are listed in the table below.

Participants	Gender	Age	Education level	Fan status
A	Male	17	High school student	Self-proclaimed fan
B	Female	20	High school graduate	Member of a fan community
C	Female	21	High school graduate	Self-proclaimed fan
D	Male	22	Undergraduate student	Self-proclaimed fan

E	Female	22	Undergraduate student	Self-proclaimed fan
F	Female	23	Undergraduate student	Former member of a fan community
G	Male	24	Undergraduate student	Self-proclaimed fan

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

3.4 Data Analysis

During data analysis, the data collected from the interviews were transcribed and then thematically analysed. This process is one of the most common forms of data analysis in qualitative research. By following a systematic approach the data has been organised into patterns and categories. From these identified patterns, numerous themes emerged. These themes later helped in presenting a better and clearer analysis of the data collected from the participants' experiences of Korean popular culture. They have been discussed in a more organised manner by splitting the themes identified in the chapters.

3.5 Limitations

There were some limitations to the research. First, there were more female participants than males. An equal number of participants would have led to a more precise exploration and analysis of the phenomenon. Second, attempts were made to interview members of the fan community in Bangladesh. However, it was hard to get in touch with the members as an outsider. Regardless, the research tried to be as thorough as possible in its capability to acknowledge the role and influence of the fan community of Bangladesh through secondary sources and other contacts such as former fan community members. A combination of the aforementioned

limitations resulted in a smaller sample size due to the limited number of participants. Lastly, the research would have been further validated if the element of observation had been included as an instrument for data collection. However, due to a lack of time as well as the political situation in Bangladesh, the research was unable to do so.

Chapter 4

The Appeal of Korean Dramas

Riding the Korean Wave, K-dramas are one of the most consumed Korean popular cultural products in Bangladesh. Despite being Asian countries, Bangladesh and Korea are not culturally proximate. Nor has Korean culture found a strong market in Bangladesh because of their cultural affinity and Asian roots. Contrary to popular conjectures, foreignness and differences, either from the immediate Bangladeshi context or from the Western culture rather than a ready identification with Asian identity and values drive the ever-growing popularity of K-drama among its Bangladeshi audience. In the case of K-dramas, foreignness manifests itself in various ways such as unfamiliar narratives, aspirational themes, aesthetic visuals, and hybrid cultural elements. All of these factors highlight how different societies in Asia are and in turn, challenge the notion of 'one' Asia.

4.1 The Element of Foreignness in K-dramas

K-dramas captivate Bangladeshi audiences mainly because of the presence of the element of foreignness. This is found in their unique plots and experimental genres in contrast to Bangladeshi dramas and Western shows. When it comes to plot, K-dramas pay attention to perfecting every detail such as narrative, genre, and theme. In the case of narratives, one element that serves as a very appealing factor is their new and refreshing quality in comparison to other forms of content that the Bangladeshi audience interacts with. They have the creativity and ability to take a concept that is overdone in the entertainment industry and recreate it into a completely different story. An example of such an occurrence is seen in a drama called *Dreaming of a Freaking Fairy Tale* (2024). It is the reiteration of the Cinderella story, in which the original

plot is completely changed. The drama is about a girl who dreams of becoming Cinderella and marrying someone rich. She eventually falls in love with a wealthy man who does not believe in its existence. Hence the narrative moves forward unlike the original story where Cinderella lives with her evil stepmother and stepsisters until a handsome prince falls in love and offers her freedom. The retelling of a globally renowned story into something brand-new emphasises K-drama's ability to find the balance between creativity and accessibility. By infusing the original plot with unique cultural and narrative elements, these dramas project a sense of foreignness while simultaneously ensuring that their audiences do not feel alienated from the content. Due to this, Bangladeshi audiences enjoy K-drama's creativity which takes away the element of predictability.

Moreover, the narratives of K-dramas are oftentimes so unrealistic that they add more entertainment value. The world they portray and the characters they design are completely different from how things are in real life. In other words, it presents an imaginary world to the audience. This quality of K-dramas encourages Bangladeshi audiences to interact more with such content as it helps them to escape from the hustle and bustle of reality and distress with something completely fictional. One participant illustrates this with the example of a K-drama called *Moving* (2023). This drama is about a group of people with superpowers who try to take down a corrupt organisation. It is a sci-fi and supernatural fantasy drama that is far from reality as a result of which becomes appealing to the viewer. It also has a blend of multiple genres besides sci-fi and fantasy such as romance, comedy, and suspense. One participant says, "Life is already so hectic, you don't want to watch it somewhere as well." This indicates that since Bangladeshi dramas mostly present relevant and relatable scenarios, when K-dramas bring in foreign narratives that are refreshing, creative, and fictional, Bangladeshi viewers find the latter

more appealing. This points to the fact that the presence of foreignness is a key element for the enjoyment of K-dramas. In fact, Chua, in his study of the popularity of K-dramas among Singaporean viewers, brought in the concepts of “foreignness” and “exoticism” to explain why they find pleasure in consuming an imported product (130). Despite sharing some similarities such as lifestyle and familial responsibilities, there were differences between Singaporean people and other East Asians. These differences contributed to establishing an element of foreignness in K-dramas. The quality of these dramas being imported also played a significant role in their enjoyment as there was a distance between their identification of the self with what was being shown on the screen. This distance enabled the audiences to be in a state of watching other’s lives solely in a voyeuristic way. The pull towards foreignness and voyeuristic watching can be found in the Bangladeshi context as illustrated above. When K-dramas bring in plotlines that are new and unfamiliar to the audiences in Bangladesh, they find it very interesting. Moreover, due to having a certain foreign quality to the dramas, they watch and interact with the content from a safe distance. Hence, it can be said that the concept of foreignness and exoticism plays a huge role in the Bangladeshi context. This suggests that the exotic and voyeuristic experience rather than cultural affinity serves as the main driver of appeal here.

While these elements are also present in Western shows, that all of the participants have more or less been exposed to and accustomed to, Hong’s concept of cultural discount can be deployed to make sense of the popularity of K-dramas in the region. Hong, in an investigation into the consumption of the Korean wave worldwide, discusses the element of cultural discount which came from cultural economics to see the association between the Korean wave and East Asia as well as the discourse of East Asian identity. Cultural discount refers to how much a phenomenon or a media text is culturally accessible in a region based on its knowledge about the

cultural background of the product (74). In this regard, the Korean wave is said to have a low cultural discount in the East Asian regions which highly works in their favour. This is because the countries in East Asia are more culturally proximate, sharing almost a similar cultural background based on Confucian beliefs. According to Hong, the lower the cultural discount, the higher the chances of cultural exchange taking place due to having an idea about the cultural background of the product to fully enjoy it. As a result, the cultural discountability between Korea and other East Asian countries is lower which makes way for more cultural exchange between them. Now, in the case of Bangladesh, the region has a moderately lower cultural discount when it comes to Korean content compared to Western ones. This is because despite differences such as language, Korea and Bangladesh have a few things in common when it comes to values and beliefs, for example respecting elders, modesty, etc. On the other hand, where Western content is concerned, there is a high cultural discount considering how distant the Bangladeshi audiences are from the cultural background of their media. As a result, despite both of these contents serving as something “foreign” in the eyes of the Bangladeshi audience when K-dramas portray a narrative that is closer to the familiar territory, it facilitates more engagement. Here, cultural exchange is also taking place in terms of values, language, and lifestyle (discussed in 4.5). K-drama, thus, becomes comfortably foreign for the Bangladeshi audience. This push and pull between familiarity and foreignness places K-dramas as a unique cultural product in the eyes of the Bangladeshi audience. The presence of this foreignness also proves that within the same region, Asia, differences exist.

Additional factors that help create the foreignness in K-dramas are their experimental genre and production style. Instead of sticking to one genre, they incorporate a combination of genres into one K-drama that keeps the audiences intrigued and wanting more. For example, the

drama *Gyeongseong Creature* (2023) is about two adults who discover the unethical conduct of Japanese forces on their civilians and fight against monsters. Their fight for survival is set against the backdrop of the Japanese rule in Korea in 1945. Overall, this drama features a fusion of genres such as thriller, suspense, horror, mystery, historical fiction, action, and romance. The unlikely combination of such genres serves as an alluring aspect because the diverse genre can cater to a wide range of audiences that may not enjoy one genre but love the other. Moreover, in one drama, the viewers are able to experience multiple things at once. With the historical fiction element, they can enjoy the historical setting including set design and costumes. With thriller, suspense, and horror, the viewers can enjoy the highs and lows of the eerie moments. Lastly, with romance, they can enjoy the emotional moments as well as become invested in the characters. Another drama, for example, called *See You in My 19th Life* (2023) is about a woman who carries the memories of all her past lives. After passing away tragically in her eighteenth life, when she is reincarnated again for the nineteenth time, she is determined to find the people from her former life. Such a plot deals with elements of fantasy, romance, and comedy all at the same time which makes the drama very interesting and binge-worthy. Considering that most, if not all, K-dramas incorporate a blend of genres like this, K-dramas feel like “a breath of fresh air” to Bangladeshi audiences.

There are three types of audience or consumer positions when interacting with popular cultural products such as K-dramas (Chua 127). In the first position is an audience who is interacting with a product that is locally produced. The second position is an audience who is a “diasporic subject” interacting with a product that has a theme related to their local culture. The third and last position is an audience who is interacting with an imported product. In this case, the audience is far away from the location and has limited knowledge about the culture of where

the product was produced. Now in the case of Bangladeshi audiences and K-dramas, they fall into the third category. This is because, in their interaction with K-dramas, the differences between the production and consumption sites become obvious. These audiences have limited knowledge about the culture of the production site, Korea, since it varies significantly from the consumption site, Bangladesh. Thus, the meaning of the product gets shifted to the audience's local cultural setting. This shift in connection when reading and understanding any cultural product occurs when they are imported or exported in different regions due to economic reasons. As a result of this, here, K-drama being an imported product is said to have crossed a "cultural boundary." The level of self-investment of the audience is observed to decrease the less connection the cultural products have with their "'home/national' self-identification. In the Bangladeshi context, there is less, if not none, home and national identification of the audiences with K-dramas. As a result, this allows Bangladeshi audiences to watch them solely for entertainment purposes.

4.2 The Process of Identification and Distancing

The two concepts called identification and distancing play a huge role in promoting the appeal of K-dramas among Bangladeshi audiences. These occur through the portrayal and inclusion of motivational and inspirational undertones in the dramas. For example, the drama *Doctor Slump* (2024) is about two childhood rivals who meet again as adults, both at the lowest point of their lives. The way the show portrays the characters dealing with their challenges in life while simultaneously uplifting and comforting each other to overcome their predicament is very motivating. One participant mentions that the drama made them think about themselves and the challenges they may face in their professional life in the future. Another K-drama such as

Itaewon Class (2020) is inspirational as this drama is about a group of people struggling to manifest their ambitions and dreams into reality. For another participant, the way the protagonist worked hard to achieve his dreams served as an aspiration they hoped to follow. Akter stated in his research that in K-dramas, Asians see a way of living that they aspire to have or follow (57). So, here, not only does foreignness contribute to the Bangladeshi audience's interest in K-dramas but their motivational character developments or plot also keeps them hooked. While not being able to fully relate, they see a future or start to aspire for a future seen so prominently in these dramas. However, there are some similarities between Korean and Bangladeshi values starting from respecting elders to familial responsibilities. A participant stated that the dialogues in K-dramas reflect their way of thinking which serves as a point of validation. For example, in the drama *Love Next Door* (2024), the female protagonist faces several challenges within her traditional family structure to fulfil her dreams. She is expected to not make any mistakes while her younger brother gets a pass for everything. This allows the participant to relate and identify with the character and become invested more in the drama. The Asian positionality becomes crucial in this identification process. Speaking of identification with what is being shown on the screen during viewing time, there are two types of identification that can occur while consuming media. The first one is being able to relate on a human level and the second is on an Asian level. The presence of an ideological awareness that "we are not like non-Asians" is what drives the "we are Asian" reaction, creating and validating a sense of "Asian-ness." This proves that there is a feeling of "Asian-ness" while the site of production and consumption is still different. Iwabuchi defines this phenomenon as cultural proximity (qtd. in Chua 83). However, despite traces of identification that are displayed on the screen, the foreignness and the difference found in K-dramas still exist. They are always lurking in the background. In fact, the minute that the

narrative or the character goes against the audience's beliefs and values, the foreignness and differences resurface and they distance themselves from what is on display (89). This back-and-forth is what is known as “a process of identification and distancing” which is always present in the consumption of K-dramas. This concept of identification and distancing is exactly what is found to be happening when Bangladeshi audiences are interacting with K-dramas. Here, the audiences keep shifting from identifying and distancing themselves from the content depending on whether the characters or themes are “like me/us” or “unlike me/us”. Based on a very lightly similar background, there are moments where these audiences can relate to what they are seeing on the screen both on a human and Asian level. This draws them in. However, when and where a character or a theme opposes their views, they continue to interact with the K-drama but from a distance. As stated earlier, foreignness is a key element in imported products for the audiences to stay engaged. Thus, in this process of identification and distancing, foreignness still serves as an alluring point instead of deterring them. This reveals that Bangladesh audiences consume Korean content not because of the presence of uniformity but because of the negotiation between identification and distancing.

4.3 A Welcome Alternative to American TV

Bangladeshi viewers relate differently to K-dramas than they do to Western shows. Keeping cultural discountability aside, a factor such as the ideas and values disseminated through their content also carries a huge significance. In an essay analysing how Asians perceive and consume media, it was stated that America is “both an object of attraction and repulsion” (Chua 13). This is because their entertainment content encapsulates and promotes their Western liberal values such as individualism. So much so that they also portray the consequences that come with such

liberalism, for instance, the prevalence of divorce, abusing drugs, infidelity, etc. Since these concepts have become so common in Western movies, television shows, and popular music, they are interpreted as representing the “reality” of the country. This, on the one hand, instils a fear that liberalism may seep into their Asian cultural arena and lead to a shift away from their own traditional values. On the other hand, the America portrayed becomes a place of attraction to those who lack the freedom that democracy offers. Taking into account the mixed reception of Western content, when Korean popular culture enters the picture, in this case, K-dramas, they align with Asian tastes perfectly. Fernando in his study of the influence of the Korean Wave in Sri Lanka, highlighted that K-dramas represent Asian beliefs through a Westernised modernity. In other words, the Western culture is being “translated” to “fit” Asian preferences. Thus, through K-dramas, Asian audiences can be surrounded by a culture that does not go against their values while simultaneously enjoying a contemporary Western lifestyle. In Bangladesh’s context, despite the people being attracted to Western culture, its explicit quality serves as a repelling factor considering the modest traditions and values of the country. So, when a cultural product, such as K-dramas, brings elements of Western content that they enjoy while depicting values which align with theirs with respect to lifestyle, manners, and relationships, they are welcomed with open arms. In a way, it serves “as an alternative to Hollywood” (198). Kaisii, too, in his study of the Korean Wave in North-East India, stated that Korean popular culture is hybrid in nature and presented it as “an alternative form of modernization” (80). This is exactly what the Southeast Asian world needed—something contemporary but not Westernised. Therefore, in a world that is largely Westernised, Korean cultural products serve as a source of modernization that quenches the Bangladeshi audience’s thirst for both Western and traditional aspects.

4.4 Aspirational Aspects: Aesthetic Visuals and Soundtracks

K-dramas also contain foreign yet aspirational aspects which are manifested in their visual aesthetics and soundtracks. Starting from casting attractive actors and actresses to filming in aesthetic backdrops to showcasing beautiful eye-catching lifestyles, K-dramas feature it all. These qualities are either completely foreign or serve as something aspirational for Bangladeshi audiences. K-dramas specifically cast attractive actors and actresses to enthrall the audiences and hypnotise them into watching one K-drama after the other. One of the participants states that it is almost like a “domino effect.” When someone watches one drama featuring a certain actor or actress, they want to watch more. During this process, they discover other actors and actresses which introduces them to multiple other K-dramas and eventually, they are stuck in a loop.

Along with this, K-dramas pay a lot of attention to the aesthetic scenarios of their dramas. For example, they shoot a lot of scenes in modern and urban settings or against the beautiful backdrop of soft pink coloured cherry blossoms and snowfall which are very visually pleasing to look at. These modern, urban, and colourful sites stand out for Bangladeshi audiences as a foreign element or an element of the exotic which serves as a source of visual pleasure. This difference in locations and costumes is another marker, besides language, that establishes the feeling of “not us” in the audience. The foreignness is most accentuated in the visuals and not in the discourse. This is because the narrative of the K-dramas is relayed through the visuals where the locations are marketed as tourist sites for the fans. Here, the foreign visuals are being exoticised in the gaze of the fans. Moreover, it also allows for “visual tourism” where the local audience is transported to a foreign space for a brief period of time. In fact, this appreciation of the scenic locations soon turns into “must visit places” (Chua 130). In cross-cultural reception,

there are two ways in which imported popular culture products are perceived by the local audiences. In the first empirical study, Iwabuchi looked into the interaction between Japanese audiences and East Asian popular culture (qtd. in Chua 80). He found that the Japanese considered themselves more progressive than the rest of Asia in terms of their development of capitalist-consumerist modernity. Thus, when the Japanese audience interacted with the representations of other parts of Asia, they viewed them with a sense of nostalgia and loss. In the second empirical study, Thomas studied the reception of Japanese dramas in Vietnam (81). In the portrayal of Japanese wealth, class, and success, the Vietnamese audiences felt a strong desire and urge for a society that has a similar capitalist-consumerist modernity as Japan. Thus, while watching Japanese dramas, these audiences start to consider what is being shown on screen, a modern urban setting, as a measure of “realism.” Now in terms of the two ways in which cross-cultural reception may occur, the findings of this research show that K-dramas create a longing among Bangladeshi audiences to have a modern society like them. In other words, to have a capitalist-consumerist modernity similar to how Vietnamese audiences looked at Japanese dramas. In this case, K-dramas show a modern and urban setting lacking in Bangladesh which not only makes them visually pleasing but also a source of aspiration. This aligns with the statement that Asians tend to share the same belief of a capitalist-consumerist modernity with Japan assuming they are ahead of the rest of Asia and Vietnam imagining Japan to be their future (81). This huge discrepancy between the status of the societies in Asia is explained by Chen in “Asia as Method.” According to him, the huge imbalances existing between the “small” and “big” countries in Asia are mainly due to colonialism and nationalism. These factors are further made obvious when the historical conflicts in the region are observed such as Japan’s aggressive treatment of East and Southeast Asia as well as the disparity between resources and money in

first and third-world countries in Asia (213). In fact, this argument is further solidified in the Bangladesh audience's aspiration to have a forward and modern society like Korea that K-dramas display. Korea belonging to a first world country and Bangladesh in the third, there is a huge gap between the availability of resources and freedom that one country has compared to the other. The presence of aspirational and modern aspects in K-dramas highlights the different lifestyles and economies that reside in Asian societies. This diversity showcases how the inter-Asian flow between Bangladesh and Korea is occurring due to difference instead of a shared identity.

The Korean industry, with its bountiful resources, goes a step further to fully utilise the scope of technology to bring its vision to fruition in K-dramas. This adds to the legitimacy of Korean culture being more advanced. What Japan was for Vietnam, Korea is the same emblem of modernity for the Bangladeshi audiences. For example, one of the participants highlighted the usage of virtual production through AI in a K-drama called *Queen of Tears* (2024). The drama is about a couple going through numerous marital crises and their journey towards finding love again. In a scene depicting the female protagonist's mental state and reality, to differentiate between these two, the producers used technology in its best form. They used large curved LED screens and virtually produced the background of that specific scene. This utilisation of technology resulted in beautiful and seamless shots. Such high-production scenes play a huge role in maintaining the loyalty of Bangladeshi audiences to K-dramas. In fact, in a study, it is highlighted that during each episode of a K-drama, following their beautiful cinematography feels just like watching a high-budget movie (Kim 38). In another drama called *Parasyte: The Grey* (2024), Korea's utilisation of technology, particularly CGI is over the top. The plot of this drama revolves around parasites that take over human bodies and start attacking other humans to

establish their reign. This results in a battle between parasites and humans to see who survives. Typically, the parasites hide in hindsight by maintaining their host's original human appearance. It is only during attacking other humans or parasites that a host's head splits open to reveal the parasite. This is where CGI is craftily used to make the transition as well as the appearance of the parasite both smooth and realistic. Such scenes in K-dramas serve as defining moments and encourage audiences to continue watching. Had it looked animated and cartoonish rather than natural and realistic, it would have been off-putting in the eyes of the viewers. This says a lot about the production quality as well as the effort that is put into the visuals in K-dramas. Lastly, K-dramas incorporate very soft but catchy soundtracks that add more layers and depth. In addition to good acting and a beautiful aesthetic background, their own soundtrack is just a cherry on top. For example, in the drama *Alchemy of Souls* (2022), a soundtrack called "Scars leave beautiful trace" was played in the background during every significant scene. This element helps to add more punch to a scene than it would otherwise. Due to the catchy nature of the song added to its repetitive appearance in the drama, audiences get hooked and listen to the song on repeat even after the drama ends. Thus, by capitalising on the continually evolving nature of technology, K-dramas have not only reached but turned Bangladeshi fans into loyal audiences.

4.5 The Language Gap

K-dramas, a product that has crossed international boundaries, come in two versions—with subtitles and voice-overs—to make them more accessible and comprehensible to their diverse audience. These translation and dubbing practices bridge the gap between the main foreign aspect of K-dramas, language. From the participants of the research, a pattern was observed where watching K-dramas with subtitles was more a common and preferable method. This

reliance on subtitles shows the presence of a linguistic divide between Bangladesh and Korea. However, it does not serve as a deterring point for the audience. This is because dramas are readily available on OTT platforms and websites with English subtitles which eases the viewers in. Kaisii, in his research on the Korean wave and North-East Indian youth, mentioned that English subtitles had to be included in K-dramas for them to be universally applicable and marketable (86). It lifted the language barrier for people who know English but not Korean.

Now influenced mainly by historical, economic and societal factors, in Bangladesh, English is highly prioritised to be taught to individuals as a second language. Serajuddin, in studying the acquisition of English in Bangladesh, highlighted that because of Bangladesh's colonial experience with the British, the English language was brought into the country (435). Even after achieving independence, the repercussions of this encounter are still apparent in the significance they give to the language. In schools, English is a mandatory subject whereas in universities, English is the medium of instruction. Due to these factors, the youth in Bangladesh is not only familiar but is also fluent in the English language. As a result, when K-dramas are uploaded with English subtitles, language does not serve as a barrier. Rather it is the opposite—it inspires viewers to take an interest in the Korean language and eventually start learning it. In fact, Touhami and Al-Haq in their study of the influence of the Korean wave in Algeria, stated that it is a “Korean-English culture with a “double-language” impact” (604). This influence is particularly apparent among individuals who are familiar with and can speak English such as the audiences from Bangladesh. From the interviews, it is found that over time, the acquisition of a few words and phrases took place due to the continual usage of certain lines in the scenes of every drama. For example, one participant states that she learned how to say hello, thank you, and bye in Korean. So, besides merely interacting with K-dramas, regular viewers emulate their

language through the learning of a few words. Some even pursue their interest in the language by acquiring a basic level of knowledge about reading and writing besides speaking. Two participants shared that they have learned enough to use the language during any situation such as if they get lost by asking “Jogiyo, eodiseo, dowajuseyo” which means “Excuse me, where am I, please help me,” or even asking someone for water by saying “Mul jom juseyo?” which means “Can you give me some water please?”

Fernando, in his study of the Korean wave in Sri Lanka, discussed the concept of cultural assimilation in relation to how a foreign culture might get assimilated into a society that is different in linguistic, cultural and social aspects (187). In Sri Lanka, he observed that some locals travelled to Korea and some learned their language. Sri Lanka and Korea, despite being parts of Asia, do not have any historic or cultural element in common except for their Buddhist beliefs, making the latter a distant, foreign, and exotic place. Thus, their locals going to Korea and acquiring the language demonstrated how assimilating to a popular culture causes shifts in behaviour and taste (189). In the context of Bangladesh, cultural assimilation is taking place in a similar manner. From all sides including linguistically, culturally, and socially, Bangladesh and Korea are very different despite both belonging to Asia. This makes Korea an exotic place from a Bangladeshi person’s perspective as well. Thus, when the audiences from Bangladesh are not only learning the language but also aspiring to visit Korea one day, it shows how popular culture slowly gets assimilated into society.

Another trend that was observed from the interviews was how audiences admire the food culture in Korea that is largely showcased in K-dramas. This food culture mainly consists of an extremely healthy diet including lots of vegetables, fermented food, and rice. The portion sizes of their food are also quite small, being exactly the amount that is necessary for daily intake.

While Bangladeshi and Korean cultures are similar when it comes to having rice as a staple food, the participants showed an aspiration towards incorporating more healthy and colourful vegetables in their diet. Some even showed the desire to follow their portion sizes. In this aspiration to follow their meal plan, the visual element also plays a role. In the way their spread of food is shown during any mealtime in K-dramas, the table is full of vibrant colours that make someone who does not like vegetables want to try the dishes. One of the interviewees also mentioned that he found the usage of chopsticks very interesting because, unlike Korean culture, Bangladeshis mainly eat with their hands. Another habit that was observed among the interviewees was their enthusiasm towards learning how to make 'ramyeon.' Ramyeon noodles is a Korean product that is directly inspired by Japanese ramen. This dish is one of the trademarks of Korean popular culture. In other words, it is showcased in every K-drama. However, ramyeon is not a part of the Bangladeshi food culture. By seeing it on screen, Bangladeshi audiences developed an attraction towards ramyeon and brought it into their households. This shows that Bangladeshi youth started to bring some changes in their lifestyle by following what they saw. Hence, showing more ways in which cultural assimilation is taking place in Bangladesh. Another phenomenon that can be said to be taking place here is the process of Koreanization. Kaisii in his essay on globalisation, hybridization, and cultural invasion in North-East India, discussed the concept of Koreanization (12). He defined the process as the increasing consumption and adoption of Korean popular culture. So, when closely looked at what is happening in Bangladesh, with more and more consumption of Korean popular culture as well as adopting its elements such as language, food culture, and eating habits, a form of Koreanization is taking place. Thus, Koreanization can be said to be a form of cultural assimilation.

In analysing the popularity of K-dramas in Bangladesh, it was found that there are significant differences between Korea and Bangladesh despite both belonging to Asia. The findings of this chapter reveal that the presence of foreign elements, aspirational aesthetics, and hybrid modernity adds to their appeal among viewers. These illustrate that inter-Asian cultural flow does not occur due to the presence of a shared Asianness but rather through the interplay of foreignness and similarity. This dynamic interaction highlights the diversity within and challenges the singularity of Asia when looking at cross-cultural exchange through the lens of other Asian scholars and societies. In the end, it points to the presence of multiple Asias through the differences that make these inter-cultural flows work.

Chapter 5

The Allure Behind Korean Popular Music

The second most popular Korean cultural product in Bangladesh is their popular music, also known as K-pop. A decade after the release of Gangnam Style in 2014, the fan base of K-pop in Bangladesh has doubled. It is, after all, a defining aspect of the Korean wave, which has been a widespread phenomenon in Asia since the 1990s (Pal and Saha 127). Besides globalisation and media liberalisation, one of the key elements that played a major role in the dissemination and popularity of products of the wave is the technological revolution. The current digital era paved the way for the wave to cross multiple geographical and national boundaries. This denotes that nowadays media flow is not restricted to “the West to the Rest” pathway (Chandi and Trehan 153). As a result, this chapter studies the inter-Asian cultural flow occurring between Korea and Bangladesh through the consumption of K-pop which showcases the presence of diverse identities in Asia.

5.1 Hyperreality and the Concept of ‘The Self’ in K-pop

K-pop is famous for its catchy music that is followed by synchronised and energetic choreography. It can be easily differentiated from other media because of its music and how perfectly the tune is aligned with its dance moves. There is not only action in the music itself but emotions pour out from their dance moves complement the music and keep the audiences hooked. This evokes auditory and visual delight at the same time. In a research on the Kolkata audience, Pal and Saha noted that K-pop’s unique format of music alongside synchronised and choreographed dancing was connected to the notion of “intimacy.” It played a huge role due to K-pop’s capacity to connect intimately with their youth through the creation of a hyperreality

(133). It also revealed that these fans have the desire to find “order in and through K-pop,” and the appeal lies in being able to do it through their experience of the music, which had a significant impact on the formation of their “self” (137). This “self” can be defined as how the audiences interpret what is being shown and sung in relation to their thoughts of self. Similar to how the listeners in Kolkata perceive and react to K-pop, the same is found to be happening in Bangladesh. Not only are they attracted to the music, but for them, the format of K-pop, which comes with choreographed dancing is very fascinating. It is a total experience, something that is experienced both physically and mentally. The body is as much involved as the mind, which works towards creating the connection. The key component here is their growing desire to be able to intimately connect with something. This is the void that K-pop has been able to fill. With the arrival of the digital era, intimate experiences have become more possible by enhancing sensory experiences. An aspect that distinguishes K-pop from any other music, be it local or Western, is the immersive experience it provides, which makes the listeners feel more connected with the artists and their songs. These artists do promotional interviews, share the behind-the-scenes of the song and music video, do constant live streams as well as interact with fans on social media. All of these are absent when it comes to Bangladeshi artists as a result of which there is a hypothetical distance between them and the listeners, which fosters less connection. As a result, in this age of technology, the audio-visual experiences are amplified in K-pop, which gives the illusion of what Baudrillard calls a hyperreality (qtd. in Pal and Saha 133). In doing so, the listeners, now turned viewers, experience something that seems more real than it is in reality. Baudrillard in fact defines hyperreality as a real that has no origin or a reality. Regardless, due to the illusion of ‘the real’ in the hyperreality found in K-pop, it provides a feeling of intimacy and connectedness at a sensory level for Bangladeshi audiences. This not

only intrinsically adds to the experience of K-pop but also contributes to the audience constructing and deconstructing their idea of the self on a loop while listening to their music. So, through K-pop's hyperreality, Bangladeshi audiences are exposed to a sensory-rich experience that causes the lines between reality and fantasy to blur. The audiences form a sense of closeness and identification with the artists due to the immersive experiences they provide. Such connection is built on the premise that the audiences see themselves in the artist's struggles and aspirations. This not only provides them with a sense of validation but also plays a significant role in the construction of their sense of self. This process serves as a testament to how K-pop's hyperreal experiences are an entertaining form of media as well as a medium for identity construction.

Music videos also serve as one of the main factors in driving K-pop's popularity. These videos include beautiful shots and cinematography along with intricate set designs which is as entertaining as watching a short movie. This is because their set designs, costumes, and makeup are dependent on the diverse themes of their music videos. For example, a participant shared how one music video may follow a very laid-back aesthetic while another follows a horror one. These varieties of themes make the audiences experience something that is not only exciting but also new and unfamiliar. While local music sometimes offers similar features such as music videos featuring choreographed dances, they do not prioritise aspects such as cinematography and elaborate set designs. So while K-pop music videos are cinematically and aesthetically driven, the local content contrasts sharply with their comparatively simpler and narrative-based music videos. This apparent difference in visuals brings out the exotic and aspirational allure of K-pop. The settings in K-pop music videos range from heavily fantastical sceneries to futuristic city landscapes. These visuals directly contrast the backdrop often present in their local music

videos that are shot in a familiar urban or rural setting. This adds to the aspirational quality of K-pop and leads the audiences to imagine a lifestyle that is not only fascinating but also far from their reach. On the other hand, K-pop stands out in stark comparison to Western content. One participant highlighted that it is hard to imagine Western artists dancing in their music videos. While some female artists dance to their songs, it is “crazy” to think about male artists doing the same. Thus, in K-pop, the visuals are simply “masterpieces” with their prioritisation of themes, costumes, and settings. This amplifies their foreignness for Bangladeshi audiences. All of these point to the uniqueness of K-pop and how it stands out from the local music scene. This illustrates that within the perimeters of Asia, the cultural products coming from different parts significantly vary.

5.2 The Psychological Appeal of K-pop

Similar to K-dramas which contain motivational and inspirational undertones, K-pop incorporates messages in its lyrics which range from addressing social issues to mental health. In fact, one participant highlighted that due to their distinct concepts and themes, K-pop feels like it has “a personality of its own.” These themes are related to concepts of mental well-being, growing up, independence, hard work, friendship etc. which attract a lot of attention and interest from Bangladeshi listeners. A similar result was seen amongst the fans of K-pop in Kolkata where the themes and messages had a “personal appeal” for them. As a result of incorporating concepts that were quite prevalent yet rarely addressed in their social networking communities, K-pop carried a cathartic element for them and became a therapeutic tool. In other words, K-pop served as their coping strategy (Pal and Saha 138). In the same way, in the Bangladeshi context, when quotidian problems such as self-love, anxiety, ups and downs of life, etc. are portrayed in

K-pop music videos, the listeners not only connect with it but also feel seen and safe. They, too, see a personal appeal in K-pop when it delves into thematic content that is intimate and personal to the listeners. It allows a strong emotional link to be formed in individuals who suffer from multiple struggles and triumphs in life. As a result, K-pop becomes a medium through which they experience catharsis and see it as a therapeutic tool. For example, one of the participants talked about the song “Amygdala” by August D. The message of this song is that despite all the struggles and hardships in life, like a lotus flower that grows in muddy water, people can grow too. This song provided reassurance that no one is alone in their struggles and they can rise from their situation no matter how impossible it may seem. Another song called “Spring Day” by BTS, a Korean boy band, was mentioned. This song is about friendship, platonic love, and how to cope with loss. The participant specifically highlighted a verse from the song that relayed the message that nothing lasts forever so the hardships they are facing right now will pass and everything will be okay again. The message that is integrated into the lyrics of the song makes the listener feel a sense of comfort and relief. Another participant talked about a song called “Life Goes On” by BTS. It was released during the global COVID pandemic and addressed the relevant circumstances to provide comfort to their listeners during a time of unrest and anxiety. The main message of the song was that despite the world coming to a halt out of the blue, life continues to move on and so should we. This embedded message motivated the participant and helped her “do something more productive by staying in [her] home.” The pattern that was observed from all the songs mentioned and the participant’s experience with them is that K-pop, in a way, serves as a constant source of inspiration to its listeners. Due to their songs having motivational messages, their fans gravitated towards BTS to fulfil their psychological needs. As a result, this also served as a coping strategy for them during times of difficulties. The main

reason why K-pop has such a huge impact on the Bangladeshi audience may be due to the fact that these elements are almost taboo in the region's culture. This presence of otherness helps channel anxiety and promotes free expression without invoking judgement. Here, K-pop is serving as a buffer that helps Bangladeshi audiences explore sensitive topics like mental health without the risk of societal disapproval. Its inherent foreignness makes the audience feel safely distant as they get to channel their emotion and partake in an otherwise socially uncomfortable discourse in which they have limited local platforms to engage without being castigated. This makes K-pop a safe avenue for emotional catharsis for audiences in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that with the progress of time, mental health is gaining some amount of recognition in the country, it is still a newly introduced concept. Thus, when K-pop makes such issues accessible it becomes a high point of relatability and comfort. Such thematic reach and breadth in K-pop solidifies the difference between the two locations and goes on to show that Korean culture, despite the common Asian factor, is different from the familiar Asia. This illustrates how different cultures reside within Asia and that all of them do not follow the same beliefs and ideologies.

Moreover, Bangladeshi fans are selectively using K-pop to satisfy their psychological needs. A research on Indian fans of BTS emphasised their desire to attain “self-esteem and self-actualisation” through K-pop (Chandi and Trehan 160). This is studied using Katz and Blumler's uses and gratification theory as well as Maslow's theory of the hierarchy of needs. The uses and gratification theory posits that media is used by individuals selectively in order to gain gratification for their needs. On the other hand, Maslow's hierarchy of needs explains human motivation on a hierarchical level when it comes to fulfilling their needs. Using these two theories in studying why Bangladeshi audiences interact and are so taken with K-pop, it can be

said that their motivation lies in their dissatisfaction with unfulfilled needs. This is because according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human motivation is derived from the lack of their needs being met. Thus, due to K-pop's defining feature of containing universal messages that cater perfectly to the youth, such as mental health, fans depend on this to reach as well as fulfil their self-esteem and self-actualisation needs. Their self-esteem needs are being met through K-pop when these audiences find validation and encouragement in it while present in an otherwise society. For example, songs such as "Amygdala" and "Life Goes On," as mentioned above, empower their listeners to find meaning and strength in their hardships. This not only validates their emotions but also addresses their need for self-esteem. Similarly, in terms of self-actualisation needs, for Bangladeshi audiences, K-pop is largely an aspirational platform. Through their heavy emphasis on topics that are otherwise treated as taboo in Bangladesh's society such as mental well-being, it inspires the audiences to reach self-actualisation. This is done through K-pop's encouraging quality that facilitates audiences to look at and channel their potential that is sometimes constrained by local cultural norms.

5.3 A Shift From Western Music as Mainstream Media

The listeners of K-pop in Bangladesh interact with media content coming from a range of countries besides their own such as India, China, America, and Japan. However, as found from the data of the research, the propensity of the audience to opt for mainstream media, specifically Western music, is less common nowadays than before. In other words, their preference when it comes to content, in this case, music, has shifted to media produced outside the mainstream. This selective preference can be analysed by using Giddens' notion of ontological security (qtd. in Chandi and Trehan 160). The concept of ontological security refers to an individual's feeling of

security and stability in life. Having ontological security means having a positive view in regard to life experiences, the self, and the future. This is necessary for a person's well-being. In the context of Bangladesh, it was found that connecting with K-pop offered them ontological security. Activities such as listening to K-pop, watching their performances, and following the journey of the artists gave the audiences a form of comfort and stability in conditions where reality is often distressing and chaotic. In this space where the audiences interact with K-pop, not only are they emotionally connecting with the content but also exploring parts of themselves which posits K-pop to have a very appealing quality despite the availability of other media cultural content in the palm of their hands.

Another reason for this shift could be K-pop's ability to provide clean and well-crafted content while also maintaining its quality. In a research on Korean popular music among East Asian youth, Lie pointed out that K-pop effectively filled the void created by both the traditional popular music produced by their local artists, as well as the urbanised and explicit American artists who glorified sex and aggression. Both of these fall on two extreme ends of the spectrum. Here, K-pop devoid of any violence, deviant behaviour, or sexual explicitness serves as an ideal representation that carries a universal appeal (355). Similarly, in Bangladesh, it was found that part of the attraction towards K-pop lay in its ability to provide elements of Western pop music such as catchy tunes while eliminating its excessive features. Here, K-pop brought into the region perfectionism in the form of an ideal package that met all of their needs in terms of tunes, hypnotising dance moves, photogenic looks, polite manners, and good fashion sense which is quite different in their regional music content.

5.4 The Role of Online Platforms in the Dissemination of the Korean Wave

Online platforms are the cornerstone in the spread of Korean popular culture across the globe. Its important role in this phenomenon made some scholars name the Korean wave present in the digital era to be called the New Hallyu or Hally 2.0 (Kim 26). From what has been discussed, it can be stated that Bangladesh boasts a large fan base of Korean popular culture. The reason behind this extensive fan base is accredited to their style of approaching and presenting their creativity. The space where this fan base interacts with a popular culture coming from outside the border of their country is online through the accessibility of social media. Social media and over-the-top (OTT) media platforms not only allow but also encourage the hype for Korean popular culture to spread and multiply. It is due to the significant difference between Korea and Bangladesh that OTT platforms and social media are the main mediums through which the Korean wave entered the region. Korean popular culture first spread across East Asia in the 1990s and then eventually to the rest of Asia in the 2000s. However, its presence in South Asia has only been observed in recent years. One of the reasons behind this lag in the spread of the Korean Wave is the slow emergence of technology and the internet in these regions (26). Consumers were required to have access to digital technology since the spread of Korean popular culture is largely dependent on it. Due to a few per cent of the population being able to access such technology in South Asia, Korean popular culture arrived in this region much later. Thus, with the broadening of the technological sphere in Bangladesh, the Korean wave seeped into the region and is now seeing rapid popularity among the youth. However, the quick spread of the Korean wave in East Asia and the slow emergence of it in South Asia slows the discrepancy of technological resources between two parts of the same continent. In fact, Chen highlighted that throughout generations it has been difficult to establish a connection and a link between

numerous regions in Asia. The credit for this goes to the huge imbalance that exists between the first and third-world countries in Asia (213). In the case of the slow emergence of K-pop in South Asia compared to East Asia due to the lag in technological advancement, the spread of the phenomenon serves as proof of what Chen has stated. East Asia mainly consists of first-world countries that are far ahead of South Asia which mostly has third-world countries. As a result of this, they are far ahead in the game and full of resources compared to South Asia.

Unlike Bangladeshi and Indian content, Korean ones are not broadcast on TV channels in Bangladesh. However, this has not served as a barrier to the spread of Korean popular culture in the region. Due to the presence of online streaming platforms and websites, K-dramas and K-pop content are easily accessible. The rise of over-the-top (OTT) media platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney+, YouTube, and Spotify has completely transformed the role of media in facilitating Bangladeshi audiences to consume the top two popular products of the Korean wave. Other than this, the Bangladeshi fan community is spread across the online space. Online, the fan communities are mainly on Facebook as it is the most preferred social media platform in Bangladesh. In such communities, fans come together to share as well as know about the updates for their favourite actors or artists. They also talk about any new show, particular scenes or characters they love etc. These communities, or Facebook groups, serve as a common hub where they post pictures, videos, and edits to discuss with one another. There are several other types of groups on Facebook where fans buy and sell K-pop merchandise such as photo cards and albums. They also host and promote charities on behalf of their favourite artists. Some of these groups are “BD-K-Family, Get Your “K” On, K-Pop Fandom Bangladesh, K_Covers, BTS ARMY of Bangladesh, EXO-L Bangladesh, and Blinks Bangladesh” (Arif 115). A sense of community is also built in this space. In a research conducted in Kolkata about the appeal of

K-pop, it was found that the active participation of the fans on social media created a “social camaraderie” and “affective spaces” (Pal and Saha 134). This led to the virtual online spaces turning into social spaces where fans shared information about K-pop as well as built good relationships. In Bangladesh, the spaces of camaraderie were also present which served as an alternative way for K-pop fans to talk about their emotional feelings regarding the genre. This emotional spillover of the fans turned the social media sites into affective spaces due to how it is being used. Here, social media is not only being used to watch or listen to Korean popular cultural products but also as a platform to share their emotions and thoughts. These affective spaces, while being completely virtual, are both personal and interactional at once. This is done by acts of making posts about K-dramas or K-pop music or even liking and commenting on posts that are related to such content. The presence of such a large number of fans actively participating in Facebook groups translates into community building. This eventually leads to establishing a fully functioning social space for the fans. The physical spaces, on the other hand, serve as a mere extension of the virtual social space. Sometimes these fan communities organise and host events as well as fan meetups. For instance, an online K-pop fan community called BD K-Family arranges a K-meet from time to time for fans to meet and come together (Arif 116). In these events, fans gather from all over the country. There are also some events like concerts where there is singing and dancing, all performed by the fans. An example of such an event would be the KBS World K-Pop Festival that BD K-Family arranges annually with the South Korean Embassy in Bangladesh (116). On occasions like these, fans perform covers of songs from K-pop as well as follow their choreographed dances in their performances. There are also plenty of stalls that sell Korean products such as food, clothing, merchandise, and cosmetics.

5.5 Representation of Masculinity in K-pop

While the spread of Korean popular culture is being enjoyed by fans all over the world, it is not happening without a spiral of criticism being present in it. These negative attitudes arise from the representation of the concept of gender roles, masculinity, and femininity in Korean content. The fan base of Korean popular culture in Bangladesh consists largely of females rather than males. This was not only observed during the selection of the interviewees but was also a fact that all of them openly acknowledged. Both K-dramas and K-pop music feature very attractive men which female viewers find very appealing. One interviewee highlighted that these dramas always showcase “the perfect man.” These men are always “six foot two with a nice body, zero per cent body fat, and wealthy and ... very educated and smart.” While these are the common traits of the modern hero in both Indian and Western media, what distinguishes the male personalities of Korean content apart is their lack of facial hair coupled with soft personality. From the way they maintain their appearance to how they express their emotions, these men display certain traits that are stereotypically linked to femininity. Such images of these men oppose how the actors in Bangladesh are portrayed. A combination of these factors contributes to the creation of a very desirable image in the minds of female audiences that makes them want to watch more of their work. Similarly, in a research based in Kolkata, Pal and Saha highlighted that Korean content portrays “alternative” gender norms and ideals in addition to defying the concept of heteronormative sexuality (140). This is done either through their content or their artists with the way they appear on screen both personality and attire-wise. This was a huge appealing factor in the eyes of the female fans in Kolkata. In Bangladesh, the portrayal of this alternative gender norm challenged the idea that female fans had about masculinity. Korean content also prompted them to question the gender roles that are socially accepted and imposed on individuals in

society. Not only in Bangladesh but in various parts of South Asia, people are subjected to follow the strict and binary gender norms already set in place and abide by them all the time. On the other hand, in Korean content, the Bangladeshi audiences see a more modern and diverse way of thinking and living. It sets forth new ideologies on gender and sexuality, showing young people an alternative gender perspective.

However, the difference that pulls the female audiences in, drives the male audiences in Bangladesh away. They show a certain kind of aversion towards anything Korean popular culture-related. In most cases, someone's fascination with Korean content is met with homophobic remarks from men. It is done in order to insult or make fun of Korean stars by calling them homosexuals. This is quite prevalent in Bangladesh's society, where if one thing does not align with the typical definition of masculinity, it immediately gets labelled off as "gay" as an attempt at humiliation. In fact, this association points to what Herek says about homosexuality. According to him, the concept of homosexuality is barely seen as "flesh and blood humans." Rather, they are perceived as a sign of "sin" "sickness" or even "predator" (qtd. in Pradhan 234). This is proved to be true in the case of Bangladeshi men's repulsion as well as reference to Korean artists as homosexuals. Anything or any man that displays near-feminine traits and serves as a threat to their identity as it goes against their concrete definition of masculinity. So when Korean popular culture represents men as completely the opposite of what Bangladeshi men view to be masculine, it results in a clash. This clash leads to them turning away from consuming any form of Korean content be it K-drama or K-pop. The definition of masculinity that men in Bangladesh believe in is associated with the cultural ideology of the country. According to Herek, cultural ideology is a set of values, ideals, and practices that serve as the foundation for a community's collective understanding of the world around them (227).

So, the cultural ideology of Bangladesh associates the definition of masculinity with intellect, independence, competence, and power. All of these traits men find aspirational in other men. They are not effeminate, which is one of the visible traits found in Korean stars. On the other hand, the definition of femininity is the exact opposite, consisting of irrationality, frailty, and vulnerability. So, this narrow definition of masculinity is what Connell refers to as ‘hegemonic masculinity.’ Hegemonic masculinity is a set of standards in a culture which dictates the ideal way of being a man. It necessitates every man in that culture to abide by those standards. Following the concept of hegemonic masculinity, when Bangladeshi men look at Korean stars or idols, they find them not manly or macho enough. This is because, within the concept of hegemonic masculinity, there is only one way of being a man. It does not allow men to put effort into their looks and appearances, which Korean men do.

In a study conducted in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Pradhan found that the respondents carried a very concrete definition of masculinity in mind. For them, being a man means being “tough and muscular.” Thus, when they saw the attire of K-pop idols they were not only critical about it but also stated that their sense of fashion is for the females (233). In the current research, two of the male participants highlighted that their male friends not only find their interest in K-drama and K-pop weird but also discourage and mock them for it. This is because these contents typically feature attractive men who are softer when it comes to their personality, the way they carry themselves, and clothing choices which do not align with the definition of masculinity of the people in Bangladesh. As a result, they receive remarks such as “You must be a girl” or “You must have girly feelings” since Korean content is mainly popular among females. This serves as proof that not only does defying the definition of masculinity bring criticism and degradation but even associating with such content results in being compared to their female

counterparts. Thus, soft masculinity or effeminacy is one of the major reasons why Korean content is received negatively by the men in the region. This emphasis on the divide between masculinity and femininity aligns with what Diamond put out as being the ‘Dis-identification hypothesis.’ According to this hypothesis, the crucial element of being a man is that they are not a woman. So when Korean content represents men that have delicate physical characteristics representing soft masculinity, they are considered to be too effeminate by the male audiences in Bangladesh. Thus, they are received very negatively.

From this difference in reception of Korean popular culture between females and males, it can be concluded that in Bangladesh, K-drama and K-pop are presumed to be for girls. This is because while Korean celebrities are very beautiful and attractive in an Asian way their beauty values do not reflect the South Asian ones. South Asian sense and norms of beauty are very different from East Asian norms, especially when it comes to men. Their men tend to be more soft and along with this their definition of masculinity is also very different. In other words, their sense of ‘macho’ men is very different from the South Asian sense. These softer metrosexual men are ridiculed in Bangladesh as their traits are thought to not be masculine enough, hovering more on the feminine spectrum. So when this cult of Korean celebrities signifies these different identities, it points to something the Bangladeshi culture represses. They lack even the space to explore or talk about it in their culture. While different gender construction is widespread in the Bangladeshi cultural sphere, their cultural texts do not have space for the celebration of these nuances. They are very binary and rigid when it comes to understanding men and women. Arif in her study notes that this binary definition of masculinity and femininity arises in Bangladesh due to its past colonial history and Islamic background. As a result, the men in Bangladesh strongly hold onto this concept of masculinity and dress in a very masculine manner. So, when the

concept of “soft masculinity” was seen among the Korean idols, it was not accepted well among them (112). Due to the presence of such binary definitions of gender in Bangladesh, society attaches a lot of value to the concept of traditional masculinity. As a result, when any other form of masculinity is portrayed is criticised and faced with highly negative connotations. Thus, due to the presence of soft masculinity, females consuming Korean content is deemed normal, and males doing the same would lead them to become a target of mocking and bullying. This signifies the presence of certain cultural politics which deter them. Thus, even if the males in Bangladesh like the content featuring metrosexual men, they will lack the courage to say it openly. This is what Neumann called ‘the spiral of silence’ (qtd. in Pradhan 234). According to him, when an individual sees that an issue or a matter is the dominant one, receiving approval of the majority, in the midst of it the individual suppresses their own opinion. This stems from a fear of being cast off by the majority. Overall, this major difference in beliefs and ideologies when it comes to gender roles, masculinity, and femininity, highlights how vastly different the cultural spheres of Korea and Bangladesh are. Whereas the former allows as well as showcases a more flexible representation of masculinity, the latter strongly believes in the concrete and binary definition of the term.

Overall, the allure of K-pop in Bangladesh lies in various aspects that go beyond mere entertainment. It is not only pleasing to the eyes but also touches the audience on a psychological, social, and visual level. Through K-pop, the Bangladeshi audience is being offered a relatable yet exoticized form of Asianness that varies significantly from their local culture and media spheres as well as the West. In doing so, the intra-Asian cultural flow that is occurring through the consumption of K-pop in Bangladesh, the concept of ‘one’ Asia is being

challenged through the demonstration of how a cultural product coming from a part of Asia, is very different from the other part of Asia that is consuming it.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Asia as a concept and a continent is misunderstood. Contrary to popular belief, that Asia is ‘one,’ that it is a big homogenous entity with a mass of people and land who are familiar with each other’s social, cultural, historical, economic, and political backgrounds, the truth cannot be farther from it. While Asia as a whole has a shared history of colonialism, a common factor marking the face of Asia, each part of it still stands distinct. This is highlighted when the popularity of Korean popular culture is analysed in Bangladesh, where both the production and consumption sites are from different parts of Asia. The main goal here was to understand the overwhelming pull towards a popular culture that is coming from a proximate yet distant land. Bangladesh, a South Asian country and Korea, an East Asian one, are merely distant relatives. Thus, analysing why Bangladeshi audiences are interacting and consuming Korean popular culture, particularly Korean dramas and Korean popular music, leads to the formation of a diverse image of Asia. This study was conceived and informed by Chen’s perspective on inter-Asian referencing as a knowledge-making project. He believed that studying an Asian society and its culture using Asia as a point of reference helps to build theoretical discourse and contributes to knowledge production. This particular study on the Bangladeshi audience’s extensive consumption of Korean popular culture serves to offer some insights into this inter-Asian cultural phenomenon with the hope of rethinking bigger issues like the concept of Asia itself.

In Korean dramas, Bangladeshi audiences find several factors appealing to their senses. The obvious presence of elements of foreignness and exoticism in their narratives served a key

role in their enjoyment of the dramas. Foreignness was found in the way they conducted their lifestyle, culture, as well as language. These qualities helped them to watch the dramas from a distance in a voyeuristic manner. It was found that Bangladeshi audiences do not watch K-dramas to enjoy any relatable aspects but rather for plain entertainment. However, what distinguishes the attraction towards K-dramas from Western shows is that Bangladeshi audiences have a lower cultural discountability when it comes to the former than the latter. In other words, compared to Western shows, which portray a very liberal lifestyle through the inclusion of explicit and violent scenes, K-dramas feel more proximate and accessible. Another finding of the research was the element of identification and distancing with what was being shown on screen. For Bangladeshi audiences they related to K-dramas on a human level due to the incorporation of some universal messages and on an Asian level due to the portrayal of certain shared values. Regardless, the minute the visuals contradicted their ideologies or beliefs, they distanced themselves from the scene. This back-and-forth play contributed to the appeal of K-dramas in the eyes of the audience. Here, aesthetic visuals and soundtracks also played a huge role in exacerbating the popularity of K-dramas in Bangladesh. The visuals especially are so vastly different and foreign which embodies a consumerist-capitalist modernity for the Bangladeshi audiences. It is a type of modernity that they aspired to have. Moreover, despite the language barrier, instead of turning away from K-dramas, these audiences found them more appealing. Cultural assimilation was found to be taking place through the acquisition of their language as well as adopting certain habits into their lives. Overall, it was seen that despite being socially, culturally, economically, and linguistically different from each other, Korea's popular culture was very loved and admired among Bangladeshi audiences.

In the case of K-pop, different aspects worked together to make it so popular among the listeners in Bangladesh. Its catchy tunes along with choreographed dancing provided both auditory and visual pleasure at the same time. Not to mention, K-pop offers an immersive experience that is new and missing in any other type of media—local or Western. It allowed the audiences to connect with the artists and songs intimately. This connection that they were able to have filled a void. This immersive and intimate experience is further enhanced due to K-pop's utilisation of technology. It amplified the listener's audio-visual experience by forming an illusion of hyperreality. In doing so, it added to the feelings of intimacy and connectedness. Moreover, due to containing themes such as quotidian problems or mental well-being, listeners found a personal appeal in K-pop. This not only formed an emotional link between the two but K-pop also became a source of catharsis and a tool for therapy. It was also found that through K-pop the fans achieved ontological security. Through the immersive experiences, the fans found comfort and stability in a life that is otherwise. Social media, in facilitating K-pop, played a huge role. It was a space of camaraderie which served as an alternative way for K-pop fans to talk about their emotional feelings. This emotional usage of social media turned it into an affective space. Lastly, it was found that K-pop's definition, as well as its portrayal of masculinity, defied the idea of masculinity present in Bangladesh. For the females, it challenged the gender norms and prompted them to question the gender roles that are socially accepted and imposed on individuals in society. However, among males, it was received badly. This has occurred due to the difference in values and ideologies that the two countries have.

Among all of the findings of the research, the differences between Bangladesh and Korea were observed. Culturally, socially, linguistically, ideologically and economically, Korea was proved to be on a different level compared to Bangladesh. What mainly contributed to this

difference is that Korea is a first-world country in Asia whereas Bangladesh is a third-world country. This gap between the two facilitated the differences which when showcased in K-dramas and K-pop served as a point of attraction and aspiration.

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