

Scapegoat Mechanism in Korea

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the persistence of the scapegoat mechanism (희생양 메커니즘) in contemporary Korean society. Through the lens of gendered double standards, hierarchical oppression, collectivism, and historical-cultural continuity, it examines how marginalized individuals—particularly women and other “non-normative” figures—become targets of collective aggression. Using the case of actress Kim Sae-ron and contrasting responses to similar cases involving male celebrities, the study reveals how traditional patriarchal Confucian values, military culture, collectivist psychology, and post-colonial trauma continue to shape the Korean psyche and institutional behaviors.

KEYWORDS: Scapegoat, Ideological Roots, Culture, Korea

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern South Korea presents a paradox: a democratic nation that has impeached two presidents in the name of justice, yet sustains deep-rooted misogyny, conformity, and collective violence against outliers. This contradiction reflects a societal structure powered by what René Girard termed the scapegoat mechanism—a system in which violence is collectively redirected onto a marginalized figure to restore social unity and psychological balance.

2. CASE STUDY: KIM SAE-RON AND THE GENDERED DOUBLE STANDARD

Kim Sae-ron, a young female actress, became a subject of intense social condemnation after a drunk driving incident. Meanwhile, male celebrities guilty of similar or worse offenses returned to the public sphere with little resistance. The discrepancy highlights not only a gendered double standard but also the selective moral panic triggered when the transgressor is a woman, especially one who deviates from expected behavior within patriarchal norms.

3. HISTORICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF SCAPEGOATING

3.1 CONFUCIAN LEGACY AND GENDER HIERARCHIES

The Joseon dynasty, rooted in Neo-Confucianism (성리학), institutionalized the namjon yubi (남존여비) ideology—meaning male superiority. Women were considered subordinate and emotionally or physically “weaker,” making them natural targets for moral scapegoating.

3.2 CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: FROM SILLA TO THE PRESENT

Historically, the Silla kingdom, allied with Tang China, attacked fellow Korean kingdoms, establishing a legacy of prioritizing group loyalty over minority rights. This cultural inclination for internal aggression under external pressure has become embedded in Korean society.

3.3 MILITARISM AND THE ABUSE OF POWER

The South Korean military enforces a rigid masculine hierarchy, institutionalizing misogyny, violence, and groupthink. Terms such as “관등성명” (forced hierarchical identification) and “빵셔틀” (slang for bullying scapegoats) justify abuse and reflect broader societal attitudes.

3.4 COLLECTIVISM AND GROUP SURVIVAL

Collectivism—a cultural emphasis on group harmony and loyalty—pervades Korean society. Rooted in Confucian ideals and reinforced by postwar survivalism, collectivism encourages individuals to prioritize social unity over personal dissent. As a result, deviation from group norms often invites punishment. Scapegoating functions as a tool to preserve group cohesion by ejecting nonconformists.

4. MODERN REINFORCEMENTS: MEDIA, ONLINE SPACES, AND WORKPLACE CULTURE

4.1 SCAPEGOATING AS ENERGY SOURCE

In a society driven by appearance and status, individuals who fail to embody mainstream ideals—such as emotional superficiality or participation in drinking culture—become targets.

4.2 WORKPLACE AND SURVIVALISM

Modern Korean workplaces inherit military and Confucian hierarchies. Speaking up invites social punishment. Since employment is tied to survival, many conform, perpetuating oppressive dynamics.

5. INTERSECTIONALITY AND GENDERED AGGRESSION

The term “가해자” (perpetrator) does not apply solely to men, but to anyone who embodies and perpetuates oppressive conformity. Misogyny is not only male-driven; women excluded from conventional attractiveness may also attack others. Social aggression stems from internalized inferiority and the desire to align with dominant group norms.

6. DISCUSSION

KOREAN DEMOCRACY AND THE IRONY OF JUSTICE

Despite democratic protests, Korean society often fails to extend the same justice to women, the poor, and the socially unfit. Practices like “집단 따돌림” (collective ostracism) and online witch hunts reflect unresolved collective trauma and a collectivist drive to purge dissenters.

7. CONCLUSION

The Korean scapegoat mechanism is a deeply embedded system fueled by patriarchy, collectivism, historical trauma, and militaristic values. Real progress lies in confronting these structural roots—acknowledging difference, embracing empathy, and deconstructing inherited hierarchies.

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