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Movies

11 K-Dramas With Strong Women Characters & Empowering Storylines

Lately, there have been some compelling K-dramas where the female lead is more than just an object of desire.



BY JAE-HA KIM

K-dramas often rely on a tried-and-true formula that has worked well for decades. One of the most popular plot devices is the *second lead syndrome*, where two handsome men vie for the attention of one woman. Before they ever get to that first kiss (about halfway through the series!), there will be an awkward hug where the man wraps his arms tightly around the woman, who remains rigid – and in a state of disbelief at his *shocking* show of affection.

Yup, it's corny. But come on, it's part of the fun of Korean dramas.

Lately, there have been some compelling K-dramas where the female lead is more than just an object of desire. Rather, *she* is the capable one who is an integral part of the plot. Here are 11 K-dramas from recent years that exemplify female empowerment.

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Kingdom

Whenever zombies are involved, it's the men who do most of the fighting. But as much as Ju Ji-Hoon is the star of this series, Bae Doona as the brainy physician's assistant is just as important. Her survival instinct and knowledge not only keeps *them* alive, but also helps a child prince who has been infected. Putting a twist on the damsel in distress concept, it was highly entertaining watching the bearded Jeon Seok-ho literally hide behind Doona for protection against the undead. (Netflix)

My Name

You know how in most action series, there's always that one guy who can fight a team of thugs and still manage to bounce right back the next day? In this revenge thriller, that guy is a kickass woman (superbly played by Han So-hee), whose *raison d'être* is to avenge her father's murder. The actress went through months of physical training to pack on muscle. The result is a performance that embodies strength of character and body, with So-hee nailing every single element of her gritty fight sequences. (Netflix)

Happiness

Sae-bom (Han Hyo-joo) is an elite police officer who is career minded and wants one thing for herself: a place of her own to call home. She fake-marries her long-time friend Yi-hyun (Park Hyung-sik), because that somehow qualifies her for an apartment rental in a fancy new development ... which is quickly infested with residents who have zombie-like symptoms. When she is ordered to save herself at the expense of others, she refuses and puts her own life on the line to help others. Though she and Yi-hyun are equals in every way, it was *oh so* satisfying to watch *her* come to *his* rescue at a particularly crucial time. (Viki)

Sweet Home

There are a lot of men and even more monsters in this gory apocalyptic series, but the most fearless, take-charge character is a firefighter played by Lee Si-young. The actress has played her share of helpless ingenue roles in the past, but she is at her prime here, showing off her six-pack abs and gutsy survival skills. A trained boxer, Si-young is 100 percent believable as someone who can keep an apartment full of scared residents alive – for a while, anyways. (Netflix)

The Uncanny Counter

Ha-na (Kim Se-jeong) and Mae-ok (Yeon Hye-ran) are demon fighters with supernatural strength. Unlike the male Counters, whose primary superpowers are physical, Ha-na can kick someone's butt *and* read their minds while doing so. Meanwhile, Mae-ok is powerful enough to cause bodily harm, but she also has the power to heal her victims' broken bones afterwards. They are tough, but fair, and add much-needed humanity to this series. (Netflix)

Mr. Sunshine

Ae-Shin (Kim Tae-ri) is a noblewoman, whose parents were assassinated for being freedom fighters. She is expected to quietly wait for a marriage she doesn't want, but instead chooses to follow in her parents' path. Women can't become snipers, so she secretly trains and becomes a feared marksman (because she has to disguise herself as a *man*). There are many tragic romances in this K-drama, but Ae-Shin's desire to protect her country from imperialism is what drives her, as well as this series. (Netflix)

Search: WWW

A rarity for K-dramas, this series focuses on three alpha women, while the male characters are relegated to secondary boyfriend roles. Leaders in the tech world, these women give as good as they get. There is a revenge scene with two of them destroying a man's car with bats and taekwondo kicks. Even though what they're doing is highly illegal, their vengeance is satisfying. The pièce de résistance is when they throw a bag of money at the car owner and simply walk away. (Viki)

The K2

While Im Yoon-ah has the role of the pretty young thing needing to be rescued by Ji Chang-wook, Song Yoon-ah plays the meatier character you love to hate in this action thriller. Her strength isn't derived from physical prowess, but rather her unrelenting thirst for power. Smart, savvy, and sexy, she elevated herself, because none of the men in her family (or society, for that matter) thought that a woman was capable of taking charge in any meaningful way. Is it no wonder many fans were rooting for Chang-Wook's character to find romance with hers? (Viki)

Flower of Evil

What to do when you're married to a potential serial killer? For detective Cha Ji-won (Moon Chae-won), it means you do everything in your power to find out who he really is, even if the answer could be disastrous. Ji-won makes some morally ambiguous decisions, but she isn't overtaken by her love for Hee-sung (Lee Joon-Gi). Though she knows her investigation could make her own life miserable, she does everything in her power to root out the truth. (Viki)

Hellbound

There are attorneys who can fight in the courtroom. And then there's Min Hye-jin (Kim Hyun-joo), who figures out that in order to protect her clients (and keep herself alive), she needs to use her trusty baton, Taser, and Formula 1-style driving skills. Woe to all the fanatical cult leaders who get in her way. When she goes into full-on fighting mode, Hye-jin doesn't stop until she or her opponent can't move anymore — and it's almost never her who's left behind. (Netflix)

Bring It On, Ghost

Kim So-hyun had just turned 17 when she started filming her role as the spirit of a high school girl, who helps Ok Taecyeon send evil ghosts to a netherworld where human beings will never encounter them. She displays strength, agility, and compassion as she tries to figure out who killed her, and how to save others who were unjustly murdered. Kudos to the showrunners who didn't rely on So-hyun's cuteness to drive this K-drama. Rather, they let her leap (literally!) into a role that displays youthful girl power and action. (Viki)

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