



Korean Wave In Wana Countries: A Cultural Dragon Or Dragonet?

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Abstract: Korean Wave has become popular in most of the countries of world including West Asia and North Africa (WANA). Its popularity is now universal in nature but still scholars try to find out specific factors for its fast acceptance in different geographical regions and culture. In the case of WANA countries, finding specific reasons like similar cultural factors or geographical proximity has not given proper answers. Reason for it is WANA countries are neither near to Korean Peninsula or neither have historical cultural relation and cultural exchanges. A traditional and conservative Arab society with some medieval social and cultural practices and strong influence of Islamic values and principles is in contrast to modern and progressive culture being practiced by South Korean society. Korean society is versatile, dynamic and progressive in nature which happily adopts new changes. On the other side, societies of West Asia and North African countries are willingly or by enforcement are following strict social orders and practices even today. Despite these differences in attitude towards daily life, Korean cultural products like K-Drama, K-Music, K-Pop, K-Cinema is very popular and even influencing the sale of K-Products including cosmetic products. The presence of large follower's base of K-Idols in these countries is another proof of this popularity. Therefore, this paper tried to find out reasons for such high level of acceptability of Korean cultural products in these countries and their possible effect on local culture and society.

Key words: Korean Wave, Hallyu, West Asia, Arab World, Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural phenomenon of Korean Wave or Hallyu has spread its wings in every continent and most of the countries with its popular K-Drama and K-Pop. The popularity of K-Drama and K-Pop has also helped in the popularity of other cultural and commercial products of South Korea like Cinema, Food, Music, Literature, cuisine, online games, commercial goods etc (Barnwal, 2024). The popularity and craze for Korean Drama and Korean Pop songs has become so high that it has created madness and obsession among its consumers. These consumers are mostly young people but not restricted to them. The appeal for Hallyu products has crossed the age bar and gradually becoming popular among all age groups. It has also started the behavioral change among its consumers especially in their eating and drinking habit where craze for K-food and K-drink is increasing. The steep increase in the demand of Korean instant noodles (*Ramyeon*), dried seaweed (*Kim*), *Kimchi*, *Theokbokki* in Qatar and other West Asian countries is one example (Kim, 2022). This adoption of culture and behavior of other countries without any coercion is what Joseph Nye termed as soft power in his book (Nye, 1990). This use of soft power has also helped in the overall image makeover of South Korea creating soft image for it. This creation of soft image of Korea and liking for its products is now been also used by Korea as its soft power in track 1.5 and track 2 diplomacy.

The popularity of Hallyu products has also deeply penetrated the West Asia and North African countries despite being located at geographically faraway place and having very less historical cultural exchanges between them. For the fast paced popularity of Hallyu products in East Asian countries are generally attributed to cultural and geographical proximity between these countries and Korea but in the case of West Asia and North Africa, these arguments does not hold grounds. Korean peninsula and WANA (West Asia

and North Africa) countries are very different to each other on cultural and societal level. Arab and West Asian societies are traditional and conservative with some medieval social and cultural practices and under strong influence of Islamic values and principles. On the other side, South Korean society practices very modern and progressive life style. It is very versatile, dynamic and progressive in nature and adopts new changes very happily. In the contrast, Arabian and West Asian societies in which approx 90 percent population follows Islam, willingly or unwillingly follows strict social order and practices even today.

Despite these differences in approach towards social life, the popularity of K-Drama and K-Pop songs are very high among people of these countries and to such level that it influences the consumption of commercial and cultural products like K-cosmetics, food items and products of Korean *Chaebol* like Samsung, Hyundai etc. To understand of this phenomenon could be attributed towards the creativity, cinematography and other factors but some more reasons needed to be find like content of the TV drama and K-Pop for their level of acceptance.

2. WANA COUNTRIES: CULTURE AND PRACTICE

WANA countries or West Asia and North African countries are talked, there are different image comes in one's mind. West Asia is considered as equivalent to Arab countries and everyone following Islam and North African countries are considered as similar to other African countries with some kind of African culture with insignificant relation with Islam. In the case of West Asian countries, most of time Arab culture is considered as synonymous to Islamic culture. This generalization of cultural behavior of West Asian countries or Arab countries is due to misunderstanding or lack of understanding of Arab and West Asian nations. In fact, the Arab people are those people who share a common culture irrespective of religion they follows or countries they live in. Being Arab does not mean that person would be necessarily following Islam. However, all the Arab nations and 90 percent of Arab people follow Islam. Use of Arabic language is one important trait of Arab culture. These Arab nations are Libya, Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Bahrain, Qatar, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, UAE, Tunisia and Yemen. All these countries are geographically located in South West Asia and North African regions. Beside them there are two important countries in South West Asia but still are not considered as Arab is Iran and Israel. Iran follows Persian culture and language they speak is Farsi on the other side Israel is Jews states and their language is Hebrew. Like not all Arabs are Muslim, similarly not all Muslims are Arab. Therefore, there is significant difference in Arab culture and Islamic values and both could not be said as synonymous to each other. These traditional and distinct culture or social practices sometime distinguish them even among Muslims of other parts of world and sometime make them similar to even people of totally different cultural background like Korea. Even Arab world is also divided among themselves based on difference in culture, dialect and traditions like Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Levant, Maghreb, Mesopotamia and Sudan.¹

The wrong understanding about Arab culture due to perceived synonym between Arab and Islam has resulted into ignorance of traditional aspects of Arab culture like relationship within family, attitude towards guest or even food habit or their love for dance. It is popular understanding among non-Muslim world that Music and dance is *Haram* or prohibited in Islam and some hardcore Islamic preacher also preaches about it but in the Arab world music is well loved and received and Arabian music “transcends religious, ethnic, geographical, and linguistic boundaries” (Peter, 1989). Similarly Arabian people loves dance, doing it and watching it. They have variety of folk dance in their culture (Ludwig, 2017) with long history and tradition (Kashua, 2007; Khouri, 2010). Among these the best known Arab dance even non-Arab are well aware of is Belly dance and Dabke (Buonaventura, 2010).

Similarly some less known social values and practices about Arabian society is their interpersonal relations within the family and in the society. In Arabian culture, social loyalty is given great importance and family is considered as core of any kind of relationship. The family loyalty is most important aspect that is part of parental teaching among all the teaching of self-reliance, individuality and responsibility. Arab society also believes in collectivism (Esherick, 2005). For example in the case of Bedouin tribes which has presence in almost every Arab countries, it fosters intense feelings of loyalty and mutual dependence among

¹ Arabian Peninsula consists of 6 GCC member states i.e. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and United Arab Emirates beside Yemen. Levant region consist of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Jordan. The Maghreb consist of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

family members (Gannon, 2004; Samovar et. al., 2010). Arabs are also supposed to give precedence to loyalty and obligation to family over outsiders or outside commitments (Nydell, 2006) and even among all these relationships, status of mother is most revered in the Arab culture despite gender relations are highly imbalanced and in the favour of male.

3. KOREAN CULTURAL VALUE AND PRACTICES

K-Drama and K-Pop is considered as two major components of Hallyu or Korean wave. K-Pop is considered as more glamorous because of its music and dance which resulted in it amassing enormous fandoms of teenagers and young adults across the globe. On the other side, K-Drama, is considered as comprehensive representative of Korean culture for covering wide range of issues like history, culture, tradition, romance etc. through its stories. Among different aspects of Korean culture, one important aspect that is still prevalent in South Korea despite being a modern society is traits of Confucianism. Today there are very few people who would be following Confucianism as religion but its ethics and influence in society is widely acknowledged in real social practices and day to day life. Korean Confucianism in Korean society is practiced in following hierarchical relationship in family, work place, public places which is normally based on age, gender, rank, social order, relation in the family and organization etc.

In Confucius order people of upper class, older in age and high ranked in society, male is given more respect and authority as compared to lower class, lower in age, lower rank and female (Barnwal, 2022). Similarly gender relation in Korean society is not equal even in modern time. The influence of Confucius belief which gives preference of male over female and put male on higher position than female is still prevalent in practices albeit in weaken form. Women are still termed as *Jibsaram* or *AanSaram* by their husband even though she would be earning more than her husband (Lee, 2005). The use of word *Jibsaram* or *AanSaram* shows the division of work within family and between husband and wife, where husband is supposed to do outside work and wife is supposed to do household work. Traditionally women were also supposed to live under the guardianship of male members of family. In Confucius order, an ideal women are supposed to be virtuous and caring (Jang, 2012).

Other important characteristics of Confucianism are Familism and Collectivism. Familism in Korean culture is value oriented mutual care and mutual aid among family members for the welfare of the whole family (Yang, 2002). Familism is part of Confucius beliefs of giving preference to family and clan over other relationships. On the other side, collectivism is clearly seen in interpersonal relations in Korea under the influence of Confucianism. Importance of collectivism is given to harmonise the human relationship. A simple example of this collectivism could be seen in the use of plural form in Korean language like we, our or us in the place of singular words like I, My or me (Park, 1998).

4. HALLYU IN WANA COUNTRIES

Like many other countries, Hallyu spread its wings in WANA countries as well. Despite WANA countries are geographically very far away to Korea, culturally and religiously very different and relatively very conservative and traditional compare to South Korea, Korean drama and K-Pop became highly popular. The reasons given for this success in Muslim majority countries are relatively very less presence of scenes which could not be watched with family, representation of oriental social and family value system where collectivism, familism, gender hierarchy and other form of social hierarchies are well shown. Beside while broadcasting Korean drama on satellite TV or other channels, sensitivity of Arab customs and religious belief are considered (Hong, 2014).

However, there are some occasions when sensitivity of Arab and Muslims are not taken care and causes irritating points. Few examples are incident of 2011 when a Arab person is depicted as terrorist in a TV show *Star King* (Kamarudin, 2011), or use of Quranic verses in the background sound in the songs of Lee Chaelin (Herman, 2016) or keeping Quran at inappropriate place or depicting Muslims or Islamic culture in very awkward or inappropriate manner in the TV drama *Man Who Dies to Live* (Wira, 2017). The recent controversial representation of Arab people is in the JTBC drama series “King the Land” where an Arab prince was shown partying at a nightclub with other women and being seated in a table full of bottles. This depiction was considered as characterization of an Arab character against religious practices (Woo, 2023). Depiction of such Arab characters is criticized by even Muslim lovers of K-Drama. One such criticism was done by an anonymous Muslim girl on website named “Muslimgirl.com” where she criticized Korean drama “Ms. Hammurabi” and she asked “why is my religion [Islam] always used as either a point of humor,

or as one of terror, and nothing else in between? (Muslim girl, 2019). Most recently one Korean webtoon “Marry My Husband” criticized for allegedly having Islam phobic storyline (Koreaboo, 2024) Beside this, Korean culture of drinking alcohol or eating Pork, especially *Samgyeopsal* very fondly and its depiction in their drama is another point which Muslims would like to avoid watching in the program.

5. CONCLUSION

Despite all these controversial issues, question arises is why does Hallyu succeeded in the WANA countries? Among many reasons given like cinematography, storyline, content etc one important reason could be traditional and cultural practices of Korean and Arab society. As mentioned above in the cultural and social practices of Arab countries and Korea, there is commonality of social belief and practices like collectivism, familism, and high respect for guest in both countries or respect a mother command in the family despite gender inequality in both cultures. Even in the case of food habit, despite Pork is prohibited but rice as staple food in both countries are common. Both cultures are having commonality in few more things like leaving sleeper out of the room or eating food by sitting on the floor. Therefore, these reasons could be attributed for the success of Hallyu in WANA countries and that's why it was rightly called as “Blue Ocean of the Korean wave” by Kim (2014).

All these factors influenced the popularity of Hallyu products in WANA countries but there are many reasons for it attracting criticism. However, these criticism and negative factors have not affected the people to people relations or has become diplomatic issue between Korea and Arab world. Korean idols or content producers whenever they were criticized for being disrespectful towards Arab or Islam promptly and sincerely apologized.

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