

AVC 604, Visual Cultures, Final Research Paper

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Mary Stayed Out All Night: A Window to South Korean Values



Mary Stayed Out All Night is a South Korean drama which aired from November 8th until December 28th 2010.¹ The show stars Jang Geun-Suk, Moon Geun-Young, Kim Jae-Wook and Kim Hyo-Jin and is based on the webcomic of the same name by Won Su-Yeon.² It was also the recipient of the *Best Hallyu Drama Top Excellence* award.³ This show, albeit a comedy, serves as a commentary on the contemporary clash between the older and the younger generations in Korea particularly the outdated beliefs the older generation tries to implant in the younger. At the same time the show suggests that whilst values are indeed changing, the young generation is lacking in ethics and this needs to be addressed. The drama uses unconventional tricks in order to peak the audiences interest and make the characters more engaging. This paper seeks to examine those tricks as well as to explore the stereotypes the protagonists illustrate and how those stereotypes in turn convey the moral themes of the drama more successfully.

The story follows an unfortunate girl, Wi Mary, whose father Wi Dae-Han is drowning in debts, often abandoning her alone for days whilst on the run from various debt collectors. On one such night, Mary leaves the house with her friends, who employ her from time to time as their driver in order to help her out financially. Accidentally she hits a free-spirited indie rock singer named Kang Mu-Gyul whom she befriends quickly. While she stays out all night with him however her father encounters an old friend, Jung-Suk, from his teenage years who has become a prominent business man. Jung-Suk agrees to clear out Dae-Han's debts but in exchange wishes Mary to marry his son Jung-In. Desperate for help, Dae-Han agrees.

¹ Hannah Kim, "Moon Geun-Young stars in new romantic comedy," *Korea JoongAng Daily* (September 2010): 10-13.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Naturally Mary does not respond well to this news and in order to escape her fate she employs the help of Kang Mu-Gyul by hiring him to pose as her husband. The two take pictures together as proof and she happily sends them to her father believing she has nothing to fear. While this plan seems flawless initially the audience is outraged to discover that Mary's father has stolen her ID card and registered her marriage to Jung-In without her knowledge. From here on the situation becomes complicated. While she and Mu-Gyul had agreed never to see each other again she now has no choice but to beg him to continue the charade they started because, upon finding out about her 'marriage' to him, her father has no choice but offer her a 100 day deal during which she is to spend her time equally with both Jung-In and Mu-Gyul.

The show being a comedy throws the two lead characters into a humorous game of deceit and pretense. Jung-In, Mary's legal husband is the director of a TV drama and upon meeting Kang Mu-Gyul by accident, not knowing who he is, hires him to compose the music of the drama, *Wonderful Day*, he is directing. Mu-Gyul, whose financial situation is not much better than Mary's, although initially apprehensive, accepts. Mary too has become the assistant script writer for the drama and hence the two are forced to work together and constantly lie to those around them much to the delight of the audience who are aware the two will eventually end up falling for one another.

It would be apt to pause here. Mu-Gyul being asked to compose the music in Jung-In's drama is very significant, on several levels. Jang Geun-Suk, who plays Mu-Gyul, is a famous South Korean actor who also happens to be a musician in real life.⁴ Just as Mu-Gyul becomes the composer of the music for *Wonderful Day* on request of the fictional drama's

⁴ Tree J. Company, "About," *Jang Geun Suk*, http://www.princejks.com/about/profile_album.asp (April 2013).

director, the actual director of *Mary Stayed Out All Night*, Hong Suk-Goo, requested Geun-Suk to compose the OST of the show.⁵

Hence, the show becomes a triple lens. A real musician plays a musician in a drama and in the drama itself he is asked to be the composer of the music for a fictional drama. Jang Geun-Suk is also not far removed from the character he portrays in terms of personality, fashion sense and career choice. Mu-Gyul is constantly surrounded by fans, primarily female fans, in turn Jang Geun-Suk is continuously followed by huge crowds and his concerts sell out months in advance.⁶ The eccentric clothes and jewelry Mu-Gyul wears throughout the show are quite similar to Geun-Suk's actual style.⁷ Hence, the two become interchangeable.

Therefore, the protagonist of the show no longer remains fictional and unlike in most cases where the actor takes on the life of the character he plays, in this instance a reverse effect occurs, Mu-Gyul takes on the life of the actor who plays him. The audience, particularly those who are familiar with Jang Geun-Suk, begins to see the real him in his character and as a result Mu-Gyul becomes an expansion of the actor. Simply put, it seems as if Jang Geun-Suk plays himself in the show. As a result, the viewer is struck with a sense of familiarity. They are manipulated into believing that they are getting to know the object of their fandom through the protagonist he portrays and consequently Mu-Gyul becomes even more attractive than what he would have been if he didn't so closely resemble Geun-Suk.

The show is littered with instances which solidify this imaginary connection between viewer and actor. A scene in episode 14 depicts Kang Mu-Gyul as he is watching himself in the music video he had made for the promotion of *Wonderful Day*. Ironically, this video is

⁵ Lisa Wang, "Jang Geun-Suk releases 'Mary Stayed Out All Night OST,'" *AllKpop* (November 2010): 23-26.

⁶ Pak Man, "Jang Geun-Suk is surprised by his own popularity in Paris," *AllKpop* (July 2012): 12-14.

⁷ Hwang Jin-Ah, "Jang Geun-Suk," *Asian Stars* (July 2011): 35-40. Please see page 13, Fig1 and Fig2 for comparison between the two clothing styles.

also used as the official music video for *Mary Stayed Out all Night*.⁸ Just as he is watching himself so we are watching him and thus the TV here becomes an open window into the life of both the protagonist and the actor himself. We can imagine Geun-Suk doing this in his own home, examining his own work and so once again his character becomes all the realer.

Just as Mu-Gyul's talent is discovered by chance in the drama, so Jang Geun Suk was discovered by chance in his own life. The young actor was five years old when a talent agent who was seeking to buy his parents' home saw him playing in the backyard of his home.⁹ Noticing the potential of the child he asked his parents for permission to be his talent agent.¹⁰ Consequently Geun-Suk became a model, later on a singer and actor.¹¹ Similarly Mu-Gyul is noticed by Jung-In when playing the guitar at a bar his ex-girlfriend visits. Granted the situations are profoundly different, but the viewers, mainly Jang Geun-Suk's fans, make the connection immediately.

Mary on the other hand, played by actress Moon Geun-Young, lives out the dream of every fan - she enters the world of celebrities. While Mu-Gyul's character creates a link between the audience and the real Jang Geun Suk, Geun-Young's heroine serves as a repoussoir of sorts between the audience and the show.

Whereas Kang Mu-Gyul actually takes the audience outside the show and partly into the private life of Jang Geun Suk, Mary does not acquaint the viewer better with Moon Geun-Young. Instead, she lives out the viewer's ultimate dream, to meet their favorite actors in real life. Although purely due to a matter of chance, she suddenly finds herself surrounded by the drama stars whose shows she is so fond of watching.

⁸ Wang, 25.

⁹ Tom Vik, *Brief Stories of Hallyu Stars* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 63.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

In the first episode of the show we see her watching a drama, we in turn are watching her in a drama and when she becomes involved in the production of a drama within the drama it somewhat lifts the curtain of what goes on behind the scenes the viewers are seeing. To put it more simply, we become more aware of the illusion the show is creating. Yet, the knowledge it is all posed and practiced is lost and instead the audience becomes even more drawn to the story because they begin to view Mary's situation as an actual possibility.

The result of this is that the viewers see her not just as the protagonist of the show but also as part of the audience itself. In turn the show becomes all the more endearing because we can relate to her as much more of a real person. We become part of the show just as she becomes part of us.

This personal connection the audience forms with the characters of *Mary Stayed Out All Night* allows for the message the story portrays to be absorbed easily. The drama uses traditional stereotypes in order to convey a commentary on morality amidst the younger generation as well as the decaying and archaic views of the older.

Kang Mu-Gyul is presented as the cliché bad boy who never keeps a woman by his side for longer than a month. This behavior of his does not change until he meets Mary and we discover that in fact he suffers from a lifetime of neglect and therefore his 'bad boy' persona is nothing more than the result of hardships which has led him to build a wall around himself, to be distrustful, both of himself and others. That image aside, he is also the 'perfect' example of the so called rock mentality; he is a college dropout, comes from a broken home, and aside from his music he has no interests other than women and alcohol. In terms of symbolism, he represents what older viewers may identify as the decay on modern society.

Mary, his love interest on the other hand is the stereotypical good-girl. At twenty four she has never had a boyfriend, nor has she been kissed. She is inexperienced and foolish. This

is emphasized by the clothing she wears throughout the show. The baggy skirts, long loose sweaters and doll like curls do little to emphasize her femininity but do a marvelous job of highlighting her innocence as she comes across seeming more like a twelve year old girl than a grown woman.¹² She is old-fashioned to the point where she cannot even share a bed with Kang Mu-Gyul unless they have a curtain dividing it.¹³ Therefore, she represents the scruples of the past.

So in the end how do these stereotypes come together? What do they try to tell us? The answer is in fact quite interesting. While the characters as well as the storyline may seem banal, *Mary Stayed Out All Night* is a drama which, whether intentionally or unwittingly, sums up the majority of South Korea's traditions, deeply rooted values such as gender roles, the strict lines of respect between parents and children as well as how all these principles battle to persevere in the modern world. In order to piece this together we must first understand the current social condition of South Korea.

Like any other TV show out there *Mary Stayed Out All Night* is a reflection of the surrounding social environment in which it was created. South American soap operas carry the stigma of Catholicism and as a result the leading heroine is always a virtuous and religious woman who never strays from the morals outlined by tradition.¹⁴ Her opponent is the reverse, a loose woman who cares little for the emotions of those she hurts so long as she achieves her goals.¹⁵ Therefore the 'good' characters and the 'bad' characters are never interchangeable in anyway.

In contrast, in Turkey the protagonists and the antagonists are much harder to distinguish because the serials do not seek to present the audience with a model of goodness

¹² Please see page 14, Fig3 for image.

¹³ Please see page 15, Fig4 for image.

¹⁴ Luisa Garcia, *Latin American Telenovelas* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 1997), 41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

and one for immorality, but rather aim to create characters which are as realistic as possible.¹⁶ While the pull of religious values is very much present, Turkish serial characters are very forward in the way they present themselves, both in terms of values and outlooks on life.¹⁷ The traditions of the past shine through but are integrated into the modern environment in which the protagonists live.¹⁸

South Korean dramas very much fall under the latter category. The level of respect between family members is undoubtedly stricter in Asia than in the West. To this day a woman leaving her parent's home is obliged to touch her forehead to the floor as a sign of final parting, children are still not allowed to raise their voice even when arguing with an elder.¹⁹ Yet, amidst these valued traditions, the progress of time has left its own mark. Korea is not Kazakhstan. The general population lives as liberally as those who live in the West.²⁰ The younger generations naturally have different values and new perspectives on life and this is what causes a clash.²¹ This battle between the new and the old comes across in many Korean dramas aimed at a younger audience such as *Love Rain*, *City Hunter* and *My Girl*.

Society is changing, consequently values are changing with it. What is displayed in *Mary Stayed Out All Night* is the nostalgic sense the older generation seems to experience when observing the younger. While Mary's and Jung-In's fathers wish to keep their children obedient and subversive to their judgment, they still insist on doing things their own way and in the end divorce as a sign of rebellion. The older generation in this show stands for everything which is outdated, old-fashioned and speaks of a world which is slowly fading away.

¹⁶ Asuman Suner, *New Turkish Cinema: Belonging, Identity and Memory* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 51.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Fred Alford, *Korean Values in the Age of Globalization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 39.

²⁰ Ibid 43.

²¹ Ibid 45.

On the other hand the show makes a statement about the condition of the younger generation as well. While the main dispute addressed in the drama is precisely that arranged marriage is not only archaic but disadvantageous to all members involved, it does not fail to try rectifying the morale of the younger age group.

A prominent concern addressed is the materialistic nature of society nowadays and the superficiality of most teenagers. Mary's friends are an ideal example of this. While they are initially supportive of her decision to enter a false marriage with Mu-Gyul in order to escape the fate of an arranged one, their support only lasts until they meet Jung-In. Upon realizing his financial status they immediately begin to encourage Mary to stay with him.

Money has become a predominant aspiration, and as a result, other morals are being ignored.²² Mary and Mu-Gyul's relationship opposes this materialism. Throughout the show, the reason why people try to break them apart is that he is a penniless musician, yet not once does Mary sway from her decision to stay with him. Her reasoning for doing so is always the same – she loves him.

The notion that love conquers all is an ancient one. Mary denying herself riches and luxury fits very much into the 'Sita' character of the *Ramayana*, an ancient Sanskrit poem which was so popular that over 300 versions of it were rewritten and translated in every Asian kingdom, Goguryeo (Ancient Korea) included.²³ Sita much like Mary is faced with the dilemma of choosing riches over love.²⁴ Her husband is a forest dweller yet she catches the attention of the king of Lanka.²⁵ However, all his handsome gifts remain ignored.²⁶ This story

²² Zac Minack, *Values of the 21st Century: An Anthropological Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 75.

²³ R.K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 24.

²⁴ Ibid 25.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

remains the cornerstone of the traditional South East Asian view of an ideal woman – one loyal only to her principles.²⁷

Mary much like Sita prefers to endure cold winters without a heater in the garage Mu-Gyul lives in rather than to sacrifice her, from the perspective of her friends, foolish love in favor of the lavish lifestyle Jung-In can offer her. In a way the show tries to reverse time and instill an ethical code in the younger viewers which seems to be lacking at present. Even as the audience we often wonder as we watch the difficulties she and Mu-Gyul endure whether perhaps it would not be wiser for her to accept her marriage to Jung-In. Yet her silly affection for Mu-Gyul is so charming that the viewers are quickly swayed to believe that so long as they remain together all will be well.

In the last episode of the show Mary's loyalty is rewarded as Mu-Gyul becomes a famous rock star. This in turn rectifies the stereotype that college dropouts have no future prospects, as Mu-Gyul is often the recipient of such discrimination throughout the show. It enforces the belief that so long as you have the support of your loved ones and trust in your own talents you will be able to overcome any obstacle standing in your way and teaches the younger viewers to never abandon those closest to them just because times are hard.

In the end *Mary Stayed Out All Night* is a show about connections. It creates a network of associations. The audience associates Mu-Gyul's character with Jang Geun-Suk thus we feel drawn to him and follow his every move with rapt attention in the hopes of seeing a glimpse of the real star within the character. The viewers form a special bond with Mary because they identify with her as one of them; she is the key to our entry point within the drama world. Within the storyline of the drama we are taught many lessons about family, values and love. The drama states that old traditions and customs will slowly fade away as

²⁷ Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 61.

they have no place in the modern world, however, it also stresses that simply because traditions are slowly fading away, morals and ethics shouldn't in turn be lost as well. The intimate connection the audience feels towards the characters allows for the message to be absorbed on a deeply personal level.

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