

EXPLORING KOREAN TV DRAMA THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHICAL LENSES OF ARISTOTLE

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Abstract

Korean TV drama has achieved unprecedented success throughout the world, through its rich narrative structure and its emotional depth. The paper examines the dramas through the philosophical lenses of Aristotle. By focusing on a few key concepts like the three unities and the elements of tragedy such as catharsis and hamartia, this analysis looks at how the classical principles are both observed and adapted into the modern Korean storytelling. This discussion uses specific examples from popular Korean dramas to illustrate the same. This is done to emphasize the timeless relevance of Aristotelian theory in today's world to have an effective storytelling narrative which is not just culturally specific but also contributes to global fame.

Keywords: *aristotle, korean drama, three Unities, catharsis and hamartia.*

Undertaking – I hereby declare that the paper submitted by me is original and has not been previously published or submitted for publication elsewhere. I affirm that all sources used are properly cited, and any content that is not my own has been appropriately attributed.

Biographical Note

Rashmi Naik – Research Scholar

Based in Bengaluru and pursuing her doctoral studies at Bangalore University, she focuses on the narrative structures of South Korean dramas. Her research examines their construction, global reception, and cultural impact. It explores how K-dramas influence viewers' perceptions and behaviours, reflecting and shaping broader social dynamics. This study aims to understand the role of Korean dramas in cultural exchange and interpersonal understanding in the digital era,

highlighting how media narratives shape the contemporary human experience.

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Prof. Bhasker is a Senior Professor at the Department of English, Bangalore University, specializing in English Language and Linguistics. She holds a doctorate in English and a PGDTE from the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. Additionally, she has a Diplôme Supérieure in French and a Certificate in German. Prof. Bhasker has published extensively in national and international journals and books. Recognized with six National Awards, she has over three decades of teaching and research experience, making her a dedicated educator and respected mentor in her field.

In the early 2020s, Korean media gained international acclaim as a leading source of entertainment, captivating global audiences with its

diverse cultural stories. This phenomenon has been widely covered in newspapers and online platforms. Prominent publications, including *The Magazine of The Hindu*, various sections of *The Sunday Times (Times of India)*, and the *Deccan Herald*, regularly featured print and digital articles highlighting the diverse appeal of Korean culture. These articles delved into the enticing cuisine, the energetic beats of K-Pop, and the gripping plots of K-Movies and K-Dramas.

There have been innumerable studies across the world trying to study this phenomenon through various perspectives. This paper looks at the Korean drama from the philosophical lenses of Aristotle. Theories of Russian formalism assert that literary texts are distinguished from non-literary texts by special linguistic and formal properties. Roman Jakobson stated in 1919 that the focus of literary science should be "literariness"—what makes a work literary. Instead of abstract qualities like imagination, formalists identify observable devices such as metre, rhyme, and sound patterns that foreground language in texts, particularly poems. Literariness is characterized by defamiliarization, which involves deviations from ordinary language, creating a relationship between different language uses that can shift with context changes (Baldick 188).

David S. Miall and Don Kuiken suggest that the reading of literature can be viewed from various theoretical perspectives. One perspective sees it as a form of discourse processing, similar to understanding ordinary prose or conversation, where cognitive processes are organized in a specific way. Another perspective, rooted in postmodern theory, views it as the result of rhetorical devices that support particular ideologies, suggesting that anything can be considered literature depending on prevailing beliefs. Both perspectives argue that literary texts do not have unique qualities and that the processes involved

in reading literature are not distinct from those used in reading any other text (121). They propose that "literariness" cannot be defined merely by text properties or conventions. Instead, they argue that literariness arises from a distinctive mode of reading, identifiable through three key components namely Stylistic or Narrative Variations, Defamiliarization and Modification of Personal Meanings. Literary texts often feature unique stylistic elements or narrative structures that stand out from ordinary language use, creating a sense of strangeness or unfamiliarity that challenges readers' conventional understanding and prompts deeper reflection. This defamiliarization process leads to the transformation of the reader's personal concepts or feelings, resulting in new understanding (124).

In the first chapter of *The Trouble with Literature*, titled "Literature and Literariness," Victoria Kahn critiques modern discussions of literariness by scholars like Jakobson, de Man, Attridge, and Altieri, arguing that their narrow focus on self-reflexivity overlooks literature's broader cultural and political impacts. She highlights the shared history of literature and rhetoric, especially their roles in crafting convincing arguments and persuasion from ancient times through the Renaissance (10).

Kahn examines the views of classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle on literature. Plato regarded literature with distrust, believing it could deceive and emotionally manipulate its audience, potentially undermining the rational order of society. His main concern was the ability of poetry to stir emotions that might contradict reason and truth. Conversely, Aristotle presented a more refined perspective in his "*Poetics*." He recognized the emotional effects of literature but contended that it also served a cathartic purpose, helping to purge harmful emotions and thereby supporting psychological and social equilibrium. Aristotle

stressed the significance of plot, character, and the moral aspects of storytelling, seeing literature as a valuable tool for exploring human experiences and ethical questions (15). Kahn emphasizes that the Renaissance was a crucial period in redefining literature, highlighting the connection between poesis (creative making) and belief. During this time, rhetorical invention was viewed as a creative act, leading to a greater appreciation of the author's role and the notion that literature could generate new meanings and worlds, rather than merely reflect reality. This suggests that modern ideas about literariness have declined from the more grand and noble view of poetic creation that was prevalent during the early modern period. In contrast, the contemporary views often reduce literariness to more formal and self-referential qualities.

With this in mind, this paper will explore how the concepts of Aristotle highlight the literariness of classical dramas and their relevance to contemporary Korean Television dramas. What is looked at here are the functional elements of Korean TV Dramas which though have a different format of presentation, still do have the concepts formulated by scholars years ago.

The concept of the "three unities" in drama by Aristotle in his work "*Poetics*," discussed the principles of dramatic structure which were later interpreted and formalized into the three unities by Renaissance critics. The three unities are Unity of Action, Unity of Time and Unity of Place. These principles give a more nuanced and cohesive structure to the plays, while maintaining the dramatic impact, and they make it easier for the audience to accept the grounds of the drama even if they are fantastical or implausible, and just enjoy the story. And the K-Dramas (Korean TV Dramas) though not in a strict sense, do comply with the unities through their tightly woven plots, time-constrained storylines, and

consistent settings, which produce an emotional and immersive experience.

The Unity of Action suggests that a play should have one main action with no or very few subplots. In the context of Korean dramas, this principle is often reflected in the focus on central characters and their overarching journeys. To illustrate this, one can look the drama *Squid Game*. The entire plot revolves around Seong Gi-hun, Player 456. The series begins with Gi-hun's story, detailing his desperation, moral struggles, and quest for redemption. The brutal game, with its life-or-death stakes, serves as a backdrop to his personal journey. Despite the extreme desperation and deceit displayed by other players, Gi-hun consistently demonstrates compassion and a strong sense of justice. For instance, during the marbles game, episode 6, titled "*Gganbu*", Gi-hun's empathy is evident when he interacts with Player 001, Oh Il-nam. Rather than taking advantage of the elderly man, Gi-hun treats him with respect and kindness, highlighting his moral character. Even in the final game against Cho Sang-woo, Player 218, in episode 9 titled "One Lucky Day", Gi-hun shows his reluctance to harm his childhood friend. Despite having the opportunity to secure his victory through violence, he instead tries to reason with Sang-woo, emphasizing his desire to maintain his humanity and ethical principles. The whole drama is about Seong Gi-hun, one plot around the decisions of that one character. It is also evident through the fact that we, as the audience, are also familiar with the background story of Gi-hun and those around him only.

In the drama *Itaewon Class*, the story centres on Park Sae-ro-yi, who aims to avenge his father's death and establish a successful business. The plot tracks his journey as he navigates through various obstacles and corporate rivalries. While the drama includes subplots involving supporting characters,

these subplots seamlessly integrate into the main narrative of Sae-ro-yi's quest for justice and success. For example, the character Jo Yi-seo plays a crucial role as Sae-ro-yi's ally and as the story progresses, his love interest. Each character's storyline intersects with and supports Sae-ro-yi's journey. The drama primarily focuses on Park Sae-ro-yi's transformation from a determined but naive young man into a successful and respected business owner. His relationships, decisions, and struggles are central to the narrative, ensuring that the unity of action is maintained. By keeping a clear and focused storyline centered on Park Sae-ro-yi's goals and development, *Itaewon Class* effectively adheres to the Unity of Action, creating a cohesive and engaging narrative that resonates with viewers.

The Unity of Time suggests that the action in a play should occur over a period of no more than 24 hours. To understand this, it's helpful to consider the context of the ancient Greek theatre. In the Greek era, there were no modern equipment or technologies like camera or lighting or sound systems. As a result, plays had to begin in the morning and conclude by nightfall, as natural light was essential for the performance. Moreover, these plays couldn't be performed over multiple days, because there were no means for re-runs or extended performances. This constraint led to the development of the Unity of Time, ensuring that the entire story was told within a single, continuous timeframe.

However, in the modern day, with television and electricity being basic amenities in almost every household, dramas can be broadcast over multiple episodes and rerun as needed. This technological advancement allows for a slightly more nuanced interpretation of the Unity of Time. Modern dramas are not confined to a single day or continuous timeframe. Instead, they can span weeks, months, or

even years, while still maintaining a coherent narrative structure. The Unity of Time in contemporary dramas is thus on a different scale, accommodating longer and more complex story arcs that unfold over extended periods. This flexibility allows for richer character development and more intricate plotlines, making the unity of time more about the internal consistency and pacing of the story rather than strict temporal constraints.

Taking the example of Korean dramas, prime time dramas typically air over a period of 8 to 10 weeks, or approximately 3 to 4 months. Interestingly, the storyline within these dramas often mirrors this timeframe, with the events in the plot spanning roughly the same duration. This approach maintains a sense of real-time progression for the audience, allowing them to experience the characters' development and the unfolding of the plot in a way that feels natural and immersive. The alignment of the airing schedule with the narrative timeline helps to maintain the Unity of Time on a modern scale, creating a cohesive and engaging viewing experience.

In the drama *Moon in the Day*, the story begins with Kang Young-hwa's heroic act as a firefighter during a rescue mission. On the same day, we are introduced to Han Jun-oh, a famous actor in modern-day Korea, who is portrayed to have a serious heart condition that limits his life expectancy to just three months. Over the course of 9 to 10 weeks, the narrative unfolds as the characters fall in love, regain memories of their past lives, and embark on a journey of healing and redemption from their past traumas. The drama beautifully intertwines their present-day struggles with their historical connections, creating a poignant and engaging story. But the overall actions occur over the period of three months, when the drama is being screened on air.

In *Strong Girl Nam-soon*, Nam-soon books the Air dnd¹ for three months (episode 2 16:40) providing a sense of the duration she intends to stay. Notably, the timeline of the episodes is meticulously detailed through the progression of days and nights, marked by changes in costumes and daylight scenes. The first two episodes, which aired on October 7 and 8, 2023, span seven nights and eight days. The subsequent two episodes extend over nine days and eight nights. Episodes 5 and 6 cover a period of nine nights and ten days, while Episodes 7 and 8 encompass six days. The following two episodes span eight days, and Episodes 11 and 12 cover seven days. Episodes 13 and 14 are shorter, spanning only four days. Finally, the last two episodes extend over ten days. This careful tracking of time enhances the narrative by providing a clear sense of the passage of time and the progression of events in the story. The total number of days depicted in the drama *Strong Girl Nam-soon* spans roughly 55 to 60 days, with a margin of five days either way. The first episode aired on October 7, 2023, and the final episode on November 26, 2023 covering a span of 50 days in between. This alignment effectively demonstrates the Unity of Time, as the series maintains a consistent and coherent timeline that mirrors its broadcast schedule.

Other dramas such as *Kill Me Heal Me*, *Behind Your Back*, *Celebrity*, and *My Demon* also roughly follow a similar format. The close alignment between the on-screen timeline and the actual airing schedule is due to the unique nature of Korean drama production. Prime time Korean dramas are often produced in a live-shoot format, which allows the storyline to closely follow real-time events. This approach effectively mirrors Aristotle's concept of the Unity of Time.

¹ Its Air dnd instead of well know Air bnb to avoid copywrite issues.

In Aristotelian theory, the Unity of Place dictates that a play should be set in a single physical location and not attempt to compress geography or have the stage represent more than one place. This concept was practical in ancient Greek times when transportation options were limited. It would have been challenging for audiences then to understand actions occurring simultaneously in multiple locations separated by distance, especially within the same day.

With respect to the Korean dramas, it is crucial to note, that the major action happens in one place. This is much like Hindi soaps, which often centre their action within a single setting, typically focusing on one or two primary locations such as family homes or businesses, and the story usually unfolds in major cities like Mumbai, Delhi, or Jaipur. This gives the audience a sense of familiarity, making the dramas relatable and engaging for the audience. There is a deeper connection with the characters and their environments through this narrative structure.

Korean dramas often delve deeply into the specific localities in which they are set, unlike Indian soaps that typically use a broader city setting. For example, an Indian soap might be set in Bangalore without specifying particular areas, whereas a Korean drama like "*Itaewon Class*" explicitly highlights Itaewon, a vibrant and diverse neighbourhood in Seoul. The drama meticulously explores various significant locations within Itaewon², such as the Noksapyeong Bridge, which links Noksapyeong to Itaewon. Key scenes unfold at Old Danbam, a restaurant situated near this bridge, and at Itaewon Children's Park, a local playground. This detailed portrayal of specific settings enriches the narrative,

² Ayagamage, Nipuni. "Filming Locations of K-drama 'Itaewon Class' (이태원클라쓰)." *KoreabyMe*, 18 Aug. 2021, koreaby.me/filming-locations-of-k-drama-itaewon-class.

offering viewers a closer look at the unique aspects of Itaewon's cultural and social landscape.

The drama *Reply 1988* is intricately set within the distinct neighbourhood of Ssangmun-dong in Seoul, showcasing the locale's unique cultural and social dynamics. Similarly, *Heartstrings* is primarily situated in Incheon, with a particular emphasis on exploring the city's vibrant cultural and arts scene. The concept of Unity of Place is further taken in dramas like *Sweet Home*, *All of Us Dead* and *Night Has Come* which are set within confined environments, a residential complex and a school complex respectively. Here the narrative is confined to a single location, heightening the intensity and focus of the story. These settings provide more than just a backdrop. They enrich the narrative and deepen the viewer's engagement with the characters' lives and their environments, fostering a sense of belongingness with the location of the drama despite not residing in South Korea.

In these ways, Korean dramas align with the broader principles of the three unities. This alignment showcases how Korean dramas adhere to the literary principles of Unity of Place, Time, and Action. For instance, the specific neighbourhoods in Seoul and Busan not only ground the story in a real-world context, but also enrich the plot and character development, maintaining a tight narrative scope. This adherence reinforces the dramatic unity, ensuring that the storytelling remains focused and impactful throughout the series.

Due to the Unity of Place depicted in Korean dramas, South Korea has become a magnet for tourists from around the world who are eager to visit these locations in person and experience the settings they've seen on screen. This phenomenon, known as Hallyu tourism, has significantly attracted global fans to visit Korean cultural sites and immerse themselves in the lifestyle portrayed in the media. The economic

impact of this tourism is substantial, contributing billions to Korea's GDP, as fans not only travel, but also purchase Korean products and services. The government has actively capitalized on this trend through various promotional campaigns, utilizing popular culture to enhance Korea's image as a vibrant and attractive destination. This strategy includes the promotion of K-dramas and K-pop idols like BTS, who have been instrumental in linking Korean culture with global tourism (Kim2009; Su 2011; Bae 2017; Ians 2021; Kamilia 2022; Saad 2022; Ghansiyal 2023; Kang 2024)

Another literary aspect of drama, as described by Aristotle, is its capacity to induce catharsis. Aristotle used this term to explain the emotional release that viewers typically experience while watching a tragedy. According to him, the purpose of tragic drama is to evoke feelings of pity and fear, ultimately leading to catharsis, or the purification of these emotions. This process is thought to bring about moral and psychological change in the audience.

Catharsis plays an important role in deepening the emotional depth of Korean dramas. The Korean dramas work due to the way they explore complex relationships, moral dilemmas, and intense personal struggles, where the characters on screen go through and the viewers through them. In *Squid Game* for example, the drama masterfully employs high-stakes challenges to underscore significant social and ethical questions, creating moral dilemmas that resonate deeply with the audience. The tension reaches a peak in episode 6 "Gganbu," during the marble game, where players are paired up and only one in each pair can survive, heightening the emotional stakes, especially when one player is an elderly man. Similarly, in Episode 7, "VIPS," the glass stepping stones game involves a perilous crossing over glass panels, some sturdy and others fragile,

reflecting themes of trust, betrayal, and primal survival instincts under severe stress. These games build significant emotional tension, symbolizing far more than just survival. As viewers witness the characters' gruelling trials, they experience a profound emotional response and catharsis, reflecting the struggles and ultimate resilience of the characters. The series culminates in a climax that not only alleviates these intense emotions, but also encourages viewers to contemplate the broader societal critiques woven throughout the narrative. This reflective and cathartic resolution helps to underline the deep, emotional impact of the series on its audience.

Another drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* delves into mental health issues and emotional healing, and masterfully sets the stage for moments of catharsis throughout its narrative. In first few episodes, viewers are introduced to the intricately drawn characters, whose fascinating personalities quickly invest the audience's interest by making these characters dear to them. Whether it is Moon Gang-tae's stoic personality, or Ko Moon-young's antisocial personality disorder or Moon Sang-tae's autism, it makes the audience deeply empathetic and emotionally engaged. As the series progresses, it reveals the deeper layers of each character's psychological struggles and personal histories. The journey towards catharsis unfolds as these characters courageously confront their traumatic pasts. This process is beautifully depicted through evocative scenes of vulnerability, heartrending dialogues, and transformative personal growth. These moments not only provide relief, but also foster a hopeful outlook on overcoming life's challenges. These moments culminate in a powerful cathartic release that deeply impacts the audience.

Furthermore, in Aristotle's *Poetics*, we encounter pivotal terms such as peripeteia, anagnorisis, and

pathos. These concepts are essential as Aristotle delineates the structure and elements of tragedy, crafting a framework that underscores how stories can captivate and profoundly move audiences. Peripeteia refers to a sudden reversal of fortune or change in circumstances, particularly involving the protagonist's situation changing from stable to precarious or vice versa. It is the moment in a drama where the plot takes an unexpected turn, drastically altering the current direction of the story. Anagnorisis is the moment of recognition or discovery; it is when a character moves from ignorance to knowledge. Anagnorisis often coincides with the peripeteia in a tragedy and leads to the resolution of the plot. It is crucial for the emotional development of the narrative, providing the protagonist and the audience with a crucial piece of information that shifts the story's perception. And Pathos is the part which involves invoking pity or sadness in the audience, an emotional appeal that Aristotle considered vital in tragedy. It relates to the emotions the narrative elicits from the audience, often through the depiction of the misfortunes, suffering, or vulnerability of the protagonist. Pathos is used to engage the audience's emotions, making them feel deeply for the characters, thereby enhancing the cathartic effect of the drama. These elements are foundational to the structure of classical tragedy but are also prevalent in modern literature and cinema.

In the context of Korean drama, an exemplary illustration of Aristotle's dramatic principles can be found in *Goblin: The Great and Lonely God*. The drama centres around Kim Shin, an immortal goblin who carries the curse of eternal life due to the blood of the soldiers he killed in battle, symbolized by a sword impaled in his chest. His only release from this curse can be facilitated by his destined bride, who alone possesses the ability to remove the sword.

In the early episodes, the drama introduces us to the playful and endearing interactions between Kim Shin and Ji Eun-tak, a lively 19-year-old girl. By the third episode, it's revealed that Eun-tak is indeed the fated bride. However, by this time, Eun-tak has developed feelings for Kim Shin and is reluctant to end his life by pulling out the sword. This revelation marks the first peripeteia in the narrative, where Kim Shin's longing for mortality is altered. When it is revealed that Eun-tak is the bride, she promises Kim Shin to pull the sword out on the first snow, which is 2 months away. The plot gets more complicated by his love for Eun-tak.

Meanwhile, Kim Shin realizes that the longer he lives, the greater the danger to Eun-tak's life. This recognition reflects the anagnorisis in the drama, as Kim Shin comprehends that his immortality might eventually lead to Eun-tak's death, as a retribution and a punishment for taking the those lives in battlefield. Simultaneously, Eun-tak comes to fully understand her significant role as the Goblin's bride and the powers she wields, which profoundly impacts her identity and shifts her relationship dynamics with Kim Shin. She no longer passively waits, but actively pursues Kim Shin.

The element of pathos is deeply woven into the fabric of the narrative, particularly during the poignant scene where Kim Shin in order to protect Eun-tak pulls the sword out by himself. This pulling of the sword causes his death and makes everyone who knew him forget about his existence. These moments along with the Grim Reaper's sorrowful past and amnesia, invokes profound empathy and sadness from the audience, engaging their emotions on a deep level. This scene particularly becomes important as the audience realises that the one thing he desired the most was death. Yet, he could never die except through the hands of the goblin bride, whom he has come to love. He realises that his death

would cause immeasurable pain to Eun-tak, to the extent of she contemplating death itself. But, Kim Shin who's aware of this, cannot put Eun-tak through this misery and decides to pull the sword out by himself, destroying himself in the process. This scenethrough the visualization, produces a moment of change and reflection among the audiences through pain Kim Shin faces. And this is one of the many other elements which has made this drama quite popular among the female fans at least across borders, who regard Kim Shin with the same romantic idealization as one might view the image of Romeo or Ranjha.

One important element of Aristotle's play was Hamartia, a tragic flaw or the judgemental error of the protagonist which leads to his or her downfall. When exploring the K-drama *Goblin*, Kim Shin's tragedy unfolds through the series of event that lead to his end, which in a certain way evokes pity and fear in the audience. Kim Shin's first tragic flaw is his sense of duty towards the kingdom and his stubbornness to let the king know the truth. Despite the guards stationed at the entrance of the palace who warn him not to step inside, and the shooting of arrows at his soldiers who are unarmed, and finally gathering of his family, who are on the line of being beheaded, Kim Shin proceeds to approach the King. Here Kim Shin shows his Hubris as a general who has won the war, and his impulsiveness to let the king recognise his merits, leads to his death. This action of his leading to the death of several innocents, has cursed him to an immortal life. This results in Kim Shin living an isolated life, and he is lonely and disconnected from the world.

His second tragic flaw is when he meets Ji Eun-tak and is indecisive at the start, which leads to further entanglement among the two. He despite having the sense of guilt, falls in love with her and questions himself if it's the right thing to do. He starts

to believe that the Gods, who have tortured him for nine hundred years, would at least give him what he desires now. He is over reliant on this fate, and assures himself that, he can save Eun-tak from her possible death. Finally, his excessive love for her, leads to Kim Shin pulling the sword out.

The internal struggle of Kim Shin and his sacrifice is an embodiment of Aristotelian tragedy. His Hamartia evokes a sense of sorrow and empathy in the audience. Though this drama in the truest sense is not a tragedy, one should be aware of the commercialised purpose of the drama. The drama is for entertainment. But, weren't the Greek dramas for entertainment too? Didn't the playwrights seek to not only entertain the audience, but also give them the ability to think?

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