

A Study on the Healing Function of Healing Dramas

—Focusing on the K-Drama “My Liberation Notes”

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Abstract: This study explores the role of healing dramas as a conduit for disseminating cultural ideals and influencing collective behaviors. As society advances, dramas have seamlessly integrated into daily life, becoming a cultural touchstone. The contemporary emphasis on mental well-being has given rise to healing dramas, rooted in Japanese Shinto traditions. In the fast-paced modern urban life, “healing” has gained renewed significance, evident in the popularity of “healing” dramas and literature, offering solace. This paper investigates the healing potential of dramas through the K-drama “My Liberation Notes.” It is chosen for its resonant themes, such as “I hope we were happy” and “Liberate ourselves from our individual lives!” Dramas, as cultural assets, entertain, educate, and reflect societal values. Healing dramas surpass mere entertainment, fulfilling emotional needs, and enhancing well-being. Their popularity mirrors a modern desire for emotional engagement. Analyzing their impact deepens understanding. Beyond commercial success, healing dramas fulfill societal needs and promote positivity. This investigation of “My Liberation Notes” enriches drama development, offering insights through comprehensive analysis, advancing the field.

Keywords: “My Liberation Notes”, liberation, elements of healing, methods of healing, healing drama, humanistic therapy

1. Introduction

The drama serves as a significant medium for the transmission of popular culture, and its cultural and societal values often unconsciously influence the values and behaviors of the masses. With the progress of society, drama has become an integral part of people’s lives. In recent times, there has been a heightened interest in individuals’ psychological well-being, leading to the emergence of healing dramas as a noteworthy genre of TV dramas with therapeutic functions. The term “healing” first appeared in Japanese Shinto shrines and signified the process of restoration of human physical functions through divine salvation. Subsequently, “healing” has been frequently used in clinical medical contexts and has become an expression of the outcomes of medical treatment [1]. In the present context, as advancements in science and technology continue and the pace of social life accelerates, the lack of supplementary mental and cultural activities has led modern individuals to experience heightened psychological stress. In such an environment, the concept of “healing” has for the first time entered the human psyche and is frequently employed in expressions like “healing”

books, “healing” dramas, and “healing” movies. Healing dramas are defined as dramas that provide viewers with relief from negative emotions such as anxiety and stress, offering a sense of tranquility, comfort, and warmth. These dramas artistically depict everyday lives and human relationships, guiding viewers to reflect upon themselves, express their emotions, and ultimately help them overcome challenges and experience a sense of peace and serenity.

This paper aims to explore the healing function of dramas through the lens of the Korean drama “My Liberation Notes” (note 1). The choice of “My Liberation Notes” as the focal point is due to its core message encapsulated in phrases like “I hope we were happy” and “Let’s liberate ourselves from our individual lives!” This drama captures the irresistibly heartwarming journey of the three siblings enduring challenges with an undeniably rustic charm. Furthermore, considering its viewership ratings and popularity, the first episode of “My Liberation Notes,” which aired from April 9th to May 29th, 2022, recorded national viewership ratings of 2.941% and metropolitan viewership ratings of 3.057%, while its final episode achieved national viewership ratings of 6.728% and metropolitan viewership ratings of 7.616%. The drama consistently gained positive reception, with its viewership ratings on a continuous rise and generating significant buzz for several weeks, garnering widespread public attention [2]. Additionally, it recently received the ‘Baeksang Arts Grand Prize’ for Best Screenplay.

The themes of healing dramas primarily originate from everyday life, often portraying the stories of ordinary people. The protagonists of such dramas are typically relatable figures who draw inspiration from real-life situations, sometimes appearing as active participants in our surroundings, and at other times, prompting viewers to reflect upon aspects of their own lives. “My Liberation Notes,” among other dramas, embodies such characteristics, reflecting the nuances of ordinary life. With meticulous details and a harmonious blend of the viewers’ life experiences, these dramas evoke emotional empathy and connection. “My Liberation Notes” aims to trigger thought and foster empathy by setting off from the commonplace. In his narration, the protagonist expresses:

“Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever sincerely said, ‘Ah, this is good. This is life’? Isn’t it strange that throughout a long life, we’ve never experienced that emotion even once? Isn’t it unreasonable to live in such a listless manner? How can we experience such emotions?” [3]

One of the standout features of this drama is its dialogue. It garnered considerable attention and favor due to its powerful dialogue. For example, a famous line spoken by the female lead Yeom Mijeong, “After I do something I’ve never done before, I become a different person than before,” has become an empowering quote that offers solace to others [4]. In the subsequent analysis, more examples will be explored.

Dramas are cultural commodities that serve not only to entertain viewers but also to fulfill functions such as social education and value transmission [5]. Therefore, healing dramas have the potential to not only meet the entertainment and cultural demands of modern society but also to promote the psychological well-being of individuals by providing positive emotional experiences. The popularity of healing dramas reflects the demands of modern society’s viewers for emotional experiences, human relationships, and the quality of life. Studying the impact of such dramas on viewers’ psychological states and needs can lead to a deeper understanding. The success of healing dramas is significant from a market perspective and in their ability to fulfill viewers’ needs and generate positive societal effects. By investigating the healing elements and approaches in the Korean drama “My Liberation Notes,” this paper seeks to offer insights and inspiration for drama creation and development, contributing to the advancement of the drama industry. The paper aims to gather relevant literature related to “My Liberation Notes” and draw conclusions through in-depth analysis and interpretation.

2. Interpretation of Drama and Healing

In drama therapy, the concept of ‘healing’ is contrasted with ‘therapy,’ which refers to a sense of ‘wholeness’ related to well-being. Healing signifies a process of restoring the fragmented self into a complete state. Depending on culture, ‘wholeness’ carries a relative meaning and is connected to self-healing. Engagement in such healing activities can be termed therapy. Drama therapy researchers emphasize the formation of healing relationships through drama, facilitating internal psychological changes, interpersonal adaptation, and social adjustment [6]. ‘Dramatic healing’ refers to the healing effects implemented within television dramas. This suggests that television dramas, enriched with dramatic and cinematic elements, ultimately generate catharsis, nurturing viewers’ empathetic abilities to understand and console the suffering of others. This empathetic engagement is intrinsic to the essence of the dramatic genre, and the healing aspect of drama is profoundly embedded within television dramas. Therefore, ‘dramatic healing’ signifies viewers’ capacity to sort out their emotions, enhance understanding and empathy for others, all through watching television dramas.

‘Catharsis’ refers to the process where viewers or audiences experience emotional transformation and psychological healing through artworks such as drama or theater. This process not only purifies emotions but also alters perceptions, which is possible through ‘psychological distancing.’ Catharsis does not equate with empathy; rather, it entails an awareness of psychological paradox, the coexistence of conflicting feelings, thoughts, and self within an individual. Catharsis involves an understanding of “psychological paradox” – the ability to reconcile and accommodate contradictory thoughts and feelings within oneself. Aristotle defined catharsis in his “Poetics” as the emotional experience of ‘pity and fear’ in the dramatic world, leading to emotional purging. While catharsis can be understood as involving concepts like ‘discharge’ or ‘pleasure’ linked to vicarious satisfaction, drama therapy explains the healing effect that occurs in viewers when they watch a play as catharsis [7].

Viewers can experience emotional responses through the characters and stories portrayed in dramas, thus fostering empathy. Studies show that the human brain contains “mirror neurons,” which activate when observing others’ actions, inducing emotional sharing between viewers and characters. Furthermore, the narrative and themes of a drama can align with viewers’ experiences and values, thereby evoking empathy. Such empathy assists viewers in better understanding their own and others’ emotions, promoting personal growth and social interaction [8]. Mirror neurons, first discovered at the University of Parma in Italy, are a network of neurons that simulate actions and emotions observed in others, akin to a mirror reflection. Due to these mirror neurons, when audiences watch a play, the brain’s motor pathways are activated as if they were personally performing those actions, creating a sense of empathy and identification [9]. Consequently, drama, through mirror neurons, allows the experience of empathy and identification, enhancing the recognition and regulation of one’s own emotions and maintaining emotional equilibrium. Moreover, when viewers empathize with the characters’ struggles and experience catharsis along with the actors during climactic scenes, they may undergo a release from impulsive discharge and inhibition, which contributes to healing. This experience helps alleviate daily stress and emotional repression, ultimately contributing to healing [9].

In “My Liberation Notes,” characters embark on a journey of self-exploration and personal growth through the narrative activities of the drama, forming the healing elements of the work. They find the meaning of “liberation” belonging to themselves through theatrical expressions and empathetic connections, leading to psychological healing. Viewers provoke emotional reactions through the characters’ experiences and achieve emotional resonance with them. In this process, emotions are liberated, and emotional healing is achieved. The following section will delve into the healing elements within “My Liberation Notes.”

3. Healing Methods in “My Liberation Notes”

The title of the Korean drama, “My Liberation Notes,” signifies a form of narrative akin to a journal, portraying the protagonists’ internal growth, transformation, and the pursuit of liberation. In this drama, liberation entails breaking free from the constraints and oppression of reality. The protagonists seek this liberation by venturing into fictional spaces like the Liberation Club and Sanpo City, where they explore their lives, relationships, and the essence of liberation. This journal-like format accentuates the characters’ internal evolution and underscores the significance of empathy and shared experiences among the protagonists, resonating with viewers.

In “My Liberation Notes,” healing occurs through means such as dialogue, counseling, psychological support, and emotional connections. The characters listen, understand, support, and console one another, resulting in a process of mutual healing through interaction. The drama also highlights the significance of attachment relationships and self-formation in the protagonists’ healing journey. They explore their attachment relationships, strengthen their self-identity, and undergo a process of stability and recovery. These healing mechanisms are expressed through situational contexts and dialogues, illustrating the protagonists’ journey towards healing [10].

To elaborate further, creating an emotional empathetic connection is paramount for a drama to play a healing role. Emotional contagion activities should facilitate identity linkage [11]. Engaging with drama-induced empathy enhances emotional self-awareness and regulation, promoting emotional equilibrium. In addition, when viewers empathize with the challenges faced by the protagonists and experience catharsis alongside them during climactic scenes, they encounter liberation from impulsive outbursts and emotional repression. Such experiences facilitate the release of stress and emotional suppression from everyday life, thereby contributing to healing [9]. In “My Liberation Notes,” everyday scenarios, dialogues, internal monologues, and character growth engross viewers, enabling healing of their internal emotions and wounds. An example of such a monologue occurs in episode 4 through Yeom Mijung:

Yeom Mijung: “People get scared when there’s a thunderstorm, but I feel very calm. Finally, the world is ending. It’s what I hoped for. It seems like it’s cleared up, but I don’t know where or how to break through, so I guess I’m just hoping it will all end together. I’m not unhappy, but I’m not happy either. I don’t care if it ends like this. We’re all on our way to the grave, so why is it so exciting? In some cases, aren’t broken people much more honest people than those who are living well? is it so. I don’t know where I’m trapped, but I want to break through. I hope you feel really happy and really happy. So, I want to say things like ‘Ah, this is life’, ‘This is life’.” [12]

This monologue articulates internal conflicts and yearnings, drawing out contemplation and empathy for life’s struggles. It reflects the contemporary pursuit of truth, happiness, and the desire to surmount challenges for inner contentment.

Furthermore, the drama employs spatial transitions to establish a connection between the protagonists’ narrative desires and the viewers’ aspirations. By applying the principles of temporal realism, “My Liberation Notes” positions one fictional space within another, charging and recharging narrative desires. The protagonists’ narrative desires involve exploring experiences beyond reality and pursuing novel possibilities. These desires resonate with the viewers, aligning with their aspirations. The drama employs temporal realism to interlink the protagonists’ desires and those of the audience. The Liberation Club and Sanpo City, distinct from reality, become exclusive spaces fostering the protagonists’ liberation and growth. These spaces also offer viewers fresh possibilities and freedom, constituting pivotal components of the drama’s aesthetic and narrative framework. For instance, the phrase “You will encounter something good today” seen through the window of a train,

projected onto the Liberation Church, symbolizes the connection between the protagonists' narrative desires to escape constraints and the fictional spaces of the Liberation Club and Sanpo City, utilizing a narrative device to evoke a sense of liberation [2].



Figure 1: “Good things will happen to you today” [12], at 1st episode.

In “My Liberation Notes,” several protagonists possess introverted dispositions, diverging from outgoing personalities. This quality permeates the drama’s narrative, dialogues, and atmosphere, generating an overall sensation of restraint. “True Self State” is a term introduced by Donald Winnicott, referring to a state where individuals recognize, accept, and express their existence. It involves acknowledging one’s existence, embracing it, and expressing it freely. True Self State evokes the desire for freedom and autonomy, expanding into boundless territories. True Self State and liberation are interrelated [13]. Liberation denotes the discovery and acceptance of one’s true self. True Self State encompasses acknowledging one’s existence, accepting it, and freely expressing it. By reflecting one’s essence as if in a mirror, individuals embrace their authentic selves, experiencing freedom and autonomy. Consequently, liberation emerges as an iterative process towards True Self State [13]. The transformation of Yeom Mijung, one of the drama’s protagonists, exemplifies this. From the beginning to the final episode, profound changes occur within her, imparting liberation to the viewers.

Yeom Mijung: “I’m exhausted. I don’t know where things went wrong or how to fix it; I’m just tired. Every relationship feels like labor. Every moment I open my eyes is a labor.” [12]

Yeom Mijung: “I must be crazy. I’m too lovable. My heart has nothing but love. That’s why I’ll only feel love.” [12]

“My Liberation Notes” extends emotional empathy and shared experiences to viewers through its protagonists’ internal growth, transformation, and pursuit of liberation. The drama serves as a vehicle for empathetic emotional resonance and employs fictional spaces to engender a healing narrative, contributing to viewers’ inner emotions and wounds’ healing.

4. Societal Significance of Healing Dramas

Healing dramas are grounded in everyday life, catering to the aesthetic sensibilities of the masses while expressing their emotions. Every aspect is shaped around the populace. Simultaneously, healing dramas provide services for the public, sufficiently manifesting their societal functions, thus transforming into a ‘companion effect,’ comforting the inner selves of those who listen by conveying their own stories, akin to a friend beside the viewer. Utilizing unique dialogues and empathetic approaches, healing dramas exhibit their curative capabilities, demonstrating heightened perceptiveness in accordance with the principles of empathy. The authenticity and sincerity of emotions and dialogues within the drama render them more amiable, affectionate, and easily embraced within the viewer’s psyche [1].

Throughout the viewing process, viewers can potentially fulfill their mental and cultural needs while also receiving a certain degree of emotional solace and healing services from the drama. In this entirety, the individual viewer's influence essentially resembles providing psychological counseling to the viewers. Society is a conglomerate of numerous individuals, and extensive promotion of healing dramas can facilitate appropriate psychological guidance within the social environment, alleviating negative emotions hindering societal progress and promoting a more stable advancement of modernization.

Healing dramas play a vital role in contemporary society, carrying profound societal implications. They not only fulfill viewers' emotional needs but also offer emotional comfort and healing to some extent through their potential influence. Throughout the process of drama consumption, viewers can experience positive emotions and warmth conveyed through the plot, thus attaining inner peace and stability. The societal significance of healing dramas transcends individual boundaries and is intertwined with the progress of the entire society, given that society consists of numerous "individuals." The extensive promotion of healing dramas can provide proper psychological guidance within the social realm. The positive energy and proactive attitude these dramas convey can aid in alleviating stress and negative emotions in society, offering relief from inner concerns and anxieties. Such liberation contributes to enhancing the social atmosphere, fostering a more harmonious and stable societal environment.

Moreover, healing dramas can induce people to take an interest in social issues, offering stimuli for thought and inspiration. Through real stories and characters, these dramas evoke viewer empathy, prompting contemplation about societal phenomena and human relationships. By showcasing human kindness and beauty, healing dramas stimulate empathy and affection, thus fostering social harmony. In essence, healing dramas offer emotional solace, transmit positive energy, and elicit societal contemplation, bearing crucial significance for both individuals and society. They provide psychological support to viewers, aiding them in confronting difficulties and challenges while enhancing their mental well-being. Simultaneously, they exert a positive influence on the social environment, promoting societal progress and advancement. Therefore, healing dramas fulfill an undeniable role in contemporary society, continually providing hope and solace to individuals.

5. Conclusion

In drama therapy, the concept of 'healing' entails restoring wholeness and a sense of well-being, allowing individuals to reconnect with themselves and experience internal psychological and interpersonal transformations. Dramas possess profound healing effects due to their dramatic and cinematic elements, facilitating empathy and understanding among viewers. Through the process of conveying catharsis via mirror neurons in the brain, emotional empathy and shared experiences between characters and the audience are realized. Through drama, individuals can enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, and empathy skills, thus fostering personal growth and healing. "My Liberation Notes" serves as an example, offering viewers emotional liberation and healing experiences through the exploration of character self-identity, personal growth, and psychological healing via its narrative.

"My Liberation Notes" is a healing drama that addresses societal interactions and individual development. The dialogues contain deep contemplation and empathy by encapsulating the characters' emotions and wisdom. Conversations within the Liberation Club demonstrate differences in character attitudes, allowing for reflections on the balance between personal growth and societal interactions. The protagonist, Yeom Mijeong, desires freedom and liberation, undergoing pain due to societal pressures and imperfect human relationships. This reflects the challenges and concerns faced by many in modern society, evoking empathy for the aspiration for freedom and mental liberation. Additionally, Yeom Mijeong's soliloquies play a significant role in revealing the character's inner thoughts.

Through her soliloquies, the drama portrays the loneliness and complexities of human relationships commonly experienced in contemporary society, exposing the struggle for genuine connections and contentment.

The drama depicts Yeom Mijeong and other characters building the Liberation Club together, illustrating their pursuit of personal growth and freedom. Through this, viewers can contemplate how to navigate their social demands and individual characteristics, considering ways to seek healing and progress. “My Liberation Notes” resonates with viewers as a healing drama, delivering empathy and inspiration while addressing societal exchanges and personal development, freedom, and liberation. Moreover, music plays a pivotal role in healing dramas, as elements such as melody, lyrics, and instruments convey mood, story, and evoke emotions. Tones and visual aesthetics also foster a serene and tranquil atmosphere, contributing to the healing effects. These musical and visual elements convey comfort and serenity to viewers, playing a role in healing their minds.

The drama’s title, “My Liberation Notes,” signifies a kind of journal format that encapsulates the inner growth and transformation of the characters and their pursuit of liberation. In this drama, characters explore their lives and human relationships in the fictional space of the Liberation Club and Sanpo City, unraveling the meaning of liberation. Through dialogues, counseling, psychological support, and emotional connections, characters support and heal each other, emphasizing attachment relationships and self-formation. The drama contributes to healing inner emotions or wounds in viewers through emotional empathy and transitions in the environment. It connects the narrative desires of the characters with those of the viewers. Additionally, the protagonist’s introverted nature and the concept of “true self” enable her to discover herself and achieve liberation through expression.

In conclusion, healing dramas, like “My Liberation Notes,” are rooted in everyday life, fulfilling the aesthetic senses of the public and expressing their emotions. These dramas offer services to the public, exerting social functions and transforming into a ‘companion effect,’ comforting viewers by sharing their stories as if a friend were beside them. Utilizing unique dialogues and empathetic methods, healing dramas exhibit their healing capabilities, fostering increased perceptiveness through empathetic principles. The authenticity of dialogues and emotions within dramas renders them more approachable, affectionate, and readily embraced by viewers’ inner selves. These healing dramas not only cater to viewers’ emotional needs but also provide emotional solace and healing through their latent influence, thus potentially promoting societal development.

Notes

Note 1. The drama, directed by Park Hae-young and Kim Seok-yoon, aired as a 16-episode series on channel JTBC and was available for streaming on TVING and Netflix from July 12th to December 28th, 2021. It starred Lee Min-ki, Kim Ji-won, and Son Seok-gu, among others.

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