Harmonizing The Past And The Present In The Korean Series Rooftop Prince

Abstract

The past, the present and the future are three relative concepts that explore the contemporaneity of existence. Despite the extensive research being done in historical studies, there has been no definite conclusion regarding the working of the world back in time. The few possible ways of making sense of the past do not provide a complete picture of history. The future too remains an obscure speculation. But where science flounders literary imagination conquers. The growing number of art works on time travel is a consequence of man's attempt to master the uncertainties of the times past and time unknown.Time travel has always been a fascinating topic for both scientific scholars as well as literature lovers. Great number of works builds on the theme of time travel into the future. Cinematic expression, that is, the visual presentation of the imaginative world also explores this uncertain yet alluring idea of being able to make that leap into the unknown frame of one's own future in an advanced space and time. Rooftop Prince is a Korean television drama series that unfolds the adventures of a Joseon crown prince, who in an attempt to solve the mystery of his wife's death, time travels into the future. This paper is an endeavour to analyse how this Korean television drama series, by making a temporal travelogue through Korea, gives the audience a glimpse of the spectacle of the exotic culture and landscape of the country and in doing so attempts to reclaim and reshape the past. The elements of historical fiction inspire and motivate the spectators to explore a new destination i.e. the Korean history and understand better, the past and present/future as a harmonious continuum.

KEYWORDS: Time travel, Korean Culture, Rooftop Prince, Joseon era, haan

Travelling and exploring the world has, for a long time, been recognised as a means of education. Travelogues and other travel writing make it possible for the audience/readers to share the ecstasy of experiencing an unknown land, by humanising distant places. If traversing geographical space is so intriguing, how much more overwhelming and enlightening would it be to travel across time! Surprisingly, Einstein's special theory of relativity simplifies the bemusement and warrants the possibility of such an endeavour. The presence of wormholes can take human beings through space-time connecting them to very distant parts of the universe. Only delimiting factors being our inability to travel faster than light, and our failure to assemble the gasoline, which is necessary to energize a time machine.

Even though there is no scientific proof for explorers who have travelled forward or back in time, there are numerous accounts of literary characters who have made the impossible possible. Literary imagination that time-shift the protagonist not only unveils an imaginary time zone but also inquires into other places, or the same places at other times, thereby seeking the audience's attention to certain details that the narrator wants to highlight. This paper attempts to analyse how the Korean television drama series Rooftop Prince, by making a temporal travelogue through Korea, gives the audience a glimpse of the spectacle of the exotic culture and landscape of the country and in doing so attempts to reclaim and reshape the past.

Rooftop Prince is a Korean television drama series of 20 episodes that unfolds the adventures of a Joseon(last and longest ruling Confucian dynasty of Korea which ruled from 1392 to 1910 until Japan annexed the land) Crown Prince (Lee-gak), who in an attempt to solve the mystery of his wife's death, time travels into the future along with his royal scholar, bodyguard and royal eunuch. All four of them fall onto the female protagonist Park- ha's rooftop house. Three hundred years forward in time, the crown prince meets many familiar faces; among them is Se-na, the spitting image of his beloved wife who was found drowned in the eighteenth century. Despite some known faces, the new world appears to be a completely strange place for the four men with the changed geographical settings and a new way of life. They aren't even able to realise whether it's Earth or after world and mistake the people for ghosts, for they appear in strange clothes and style. Though astonished and perplexed in the beginning, the crown prince soon believes that there is a reason for his coming to the future and believes that some cosmic force is playing part in trying to solve the question of his wife's murder. The story then progresses with how Lee-gak pretends to be his look alike Tae-yong, a rich heir of a business conglomerate who had been missing for two years, so that he might be able to get close with Se-na(who he believes is his wife's reincarnation), solve the mystery of his wife's death and return to Joseon. However as the story proceeds, Lee-gak and Park-ha fall in love with each other and with that, a number of events and revelations follow. Finally, in the last episode the crown prince along with his attendants, return to Joseon after having found out the truth about his wife and his sister-in-law who happens to be Park-ha in her past life. Arriving back in Joseon, Lee-gak solves the murder and punishes the traitors. The ending, though ambiguous, pictures the crown prince from Joseon and Park-ha from the present, together and reunited.

Rooftop Prince does not fit into the strict category of a travelogue, for the primary motive of the drama is not to make a travel commentary on the protagonist's experiences. Nonetheless, by providing the audience with different cultural contexts and geopolitical setting, the work becomes a virtual, heritage voyage. The travel that the protagonist undertakes is not a spatial one but a temporal one. Therefore the travel experience of the crown prince differs from that of the audience. For the crown prince life in future Korea discloses a world of surprise and wonderment with the drastic changes brought about by industrialisation and globalisation; and for the audience Joseon represents a cherished yet lost world. There is no shared experience of awe here. The series attempts a hyper realistic picturization of South Korea's development over a long 300 years of time so as to emphasise the changes.

Even though most part of the drama is set in the present times, the short glimpse of the past provides a spectacle of a fascinating culture, landscape and social life. Filmmakers created an imagery of Joseon Korea aimed at attracting international audience by showing the exoticism of a culturally and geographically distant people. By combining elements of historical fictional narrative, the drama re imagines the past and thereby reclaims and re presents 'his- storical' narratives on Korea. Despite its rise in global market and its recent political progress, Korea is still an understudied country according to Joo, Min &Kwak. "From misinformed stereotypes to outdated information, Korea has been treated as an addendum to China or Japan" (Joo et al. 12). Therefore repainting the past in their own terms as a means of resistance is an important attempt from the part of Korean filmmakers.

Rooftop Prince deliberately defies the concept of 'haan' that defines the Korean ethos. Kwak defines haan as a "concept of emotion, variously described as some form of grief or resentment among others that has been said to be a characteristic of Korean culture." Be that as it may, the idea of haan is a relatively new one which originated during the Japanese occupation of Korea.

The idea of haan, as proposed by the Japanese philosopher Yanagi Soetsu, reflects the colonial stereotypes and the characterisation of Korean art and culture as sorrowful. No English thought holds the exact depth and extent of the sorrow, spite, rancour, regret, resentment, and grief that haan embodies. At the best, haan can be compared to African-American blues in terms of oppression and emotional expression. This theory called the ‘beauty of sorrow’ is increasingly being criticised both in Korea and Japan dismissing it as ‘undertheorised’ and prejudiced. The melancholic nature of Korean art, according to this popular theory, arises from the inferior status of Koreans and their inability to be independent and self-reliant. Rooftop Prince subverts this very notion of Korean culture as a representation of helplessness and resentment.

The plot does not permit a detailed observation of the historic setting, but the limited sequence that develops in Joseon Korea presents a positive and confident Korean state as opposed to weak and unstable. Through constant aestheticisation of the past and characters aestheticisation of others, new memories are made of the past. This picture of the past is that of a politically contentious but socially and economically stable state. Therefore by presenting the otherness of the past as a form of spectacle, the historical fiction offers a compelling means for re-appropriating and reformulating the past. The Korean drama series by reclaiming the past restores a new perspective and history to the nation as well as the world to counteract the colonial cultural hegemony and its attempt to misrepresent nation’s past.

However, in the attempt to recover the submerged history, Rooftop Prince does not glorify the past as it’s not free from social evils such as class division, slavery, and women’s oppression strictly decreed by Confucian teachings. The audience are not forced to adopt the seemingly naturalistic social orders. Rather the drama makes an attempt to harmonize the past and the present (i.e the future for the Joseon people) by showing the people from the past easily adapting to new world order where the values of equality and democracy reigns. Though with much difficulty, the Joseon men let go of their superstitious adherence to past customs after living for some time in the present world. Their adaptation to the modern life and integration of the new age Korean culture reaches a high point when even after getting back to the Joseon Korea, they follow ways of modern Korean life. The three royal attendants take back the memories of preparing a modern dish ‘omurice’ and lay foundation for the idea of an eatery that was unlikely during those times. The king and the attendants share room and food, which was also unimaginable during the rigidly hierarchical Joseon times. Rooftop prince not only reclaims the past but also attempts to reshape it to better the picture and understanding of the nation’s history by reworking the traditions.

Rooftop Prince is thus an attempt to annul the distortion of Korean history as that of melancholy and misery owing to the uncivilised people of the territory. The drama presents the temporal travel of four Joseon men who takes a leap into the future, and their quick adaptation to the modern globalised world which is a deliberate attempt to emphasise that Korean past, present and future are a harmonious whole and there was absolutely no necessity for a colonial power to civilise the people and establish the continuity as claimed by the coloniser. Thus by painting the concept of a self-reliant nation, Rooftop Prince raises a postcolonial voice against the history of ideological oppression and subjugation.

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