

## MYTHICAL UNDERTONES IN *MY LIBERATION NOTES*: REVISITING THE *SHIVA PURANA*

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### Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to explore mythical implications in the K-drama *My Liberation Notes*. The paper affirms that the characters in the drama allude to mythical characters in the *Shiva Purana* (also spelt Siva Purana). The primary focus of the paper is to analyse characters like Gu, Mi-jeong, Baek, Sam-sik, and the dogs and to compare and contrast them to their mythological counterparts. Gu and Mi-jeong are related to Shiva and Parvati, while Baek and Sam-sik are reminiscent of Daksha and Nandi. The dogs have more symbolic functions here in the drama as they represent fear present in the individual's mind. Following this, the paper deals with an in-depth analysis of the *panchakrityas* or the five principal actions of Shiva. The last part is about the three dance forms or *nriyas* of Shiva and how these dance forms can be related to Gu's actions in the drama. Often, it is difficult to look for mythical implications in texts since characters and settings are cloaked in human garb. However, when a reader or critic decides to explore further and bring newer meanings to the text, then the very process becomes a different kind of co-creation that opens a new world of interpretation.

**Keywords:** Mythical, *Shiva Purana*, *My Liberation Notes*, Shiva, Parvati, Daksha, Panchakrityas, Gu, Mi-jeong, the Dance of Shiva.

### OBJECTIVE AND SCOPE

This paper aims to analyse the use of myth in the K-drama *My Liberation Notes* through its setting and dramatis personae. A close and critical inquiry into the drama unravels strong mythical undertones (apparently not intended by the author/screenwriter). In other words, some of the characters and events in *My Liberation Notes* allude to those in the *Shiva Purana* and Shaivism (the cult of Shiva, also spelled Siva), thus transmogrifying the seemingly plain and realistic K-drama into a mythopoeic rendering. For a more comprehensive analysis, the focus is restricted to the characters Gu Ja-gyeong (henceforth referred to as Gu), Yeom Mi-jeong (henceforth referred to as Mi-jeong), Baek, Gu's former girlfriend, Sam-sik, Chang-hee, and the dogs. The study aims to relate these characters to their mythical counterparts and examine their roles and implications in the drama. Therefore, the setting also plays an important role and is a point of study here. Further, the paper also focuses on key concepts of Shaivism, like the five actions of Shiva and the dance of Shiva, since they offer more insights into the central characters.

### ***My Liberation Notes:***

*My Liberation Notes* (henceforth, also referred to as the drama or *MLN*) is a Korean drama that "...aired on JTBC from April 9 to May 29, 2022" (*Wikipedia*). Based on information gathered from *Wikipedia*, it can be observed that this drama consistently held the top place among K dramas from the ninth to the sixteenth episodes, except for the tenth episode where it ranked second. In certain areas, this drama is also available on the *Netflix* platform. *My Liberation Notes*, written by Park Hae-young, and directed by Kim Seok-yoon, revolves around the story of the three Yeom siblings

who lead a monotonous, mundane life in the fictional village Sanpo in Gyeonggi-do. They struggle to build a social life because of how far their home is from their workplace (Apurado, 2022, para 2). Although it does not deal with streamy romance or fantasy, “the acclaimed slice-of-life drama” (Conran, 2022) is undoubtedly one of the most popular K-dramas.

### **Myth and Its Manifestations**

Mythology is a fascinating concept because it appeals to the human imagination and the depths of the subconscious mind where diverse archetypes dwell. Myths are primordial and form the vast database of mythemes that inspire authors and readers perpetually. As Pattanaik (2018) rightly opines,

Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For conventionally myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth. But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith. (p. 1)

Since myth is subjective and cultural, it offers more scope for revision and modification. As Chandramouli’s (2024) remarks, on Indian mythology apply to most myths that have their genesis in oral traditions:

... slavish parroting of ... stories ... is a foolhardy attempt since nothing is set in stone. Ours was originally an oral tradition, all the better to preserve the entirely organic and assimilative quality of this ever-shape-shifting entity called Mythology. Every story has many variations and even more permutations are happening even as this is being typed out, in the hands of myth makers and new-age storytellers. (p. 15)

Just as the gods in Hindu mythology (particularly Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva) manifest themselves in diverse forms to save the world from destruction, myths manifest themselves in a medley of revisionist forms to save the human mind from creative and critical inertia. To put it simply, the decentring of myths is a recurring factor that provides literary interpretation with a dynamic outlook. However, to understand the nature of revisionism, one has to have an in-depth knowledge of older myths. Thompson and Schrempp (2020) opine that it is best to have a balanced, scholarly and investigative approach to myth (p.3).

Mythopoeia or mythmaking is often seen as part of the authorial intention. This is seen in most cases where the characters bear the same names as their older mythical counterparts or where the narratemes/ mythemes bear a similarity to those in the older myths. However, intertextuality becomes part of the reader’s domain when the author chooses to conceal the characters behind modern-day names and settings. Miola (2004) calls it a paralogue.

In the age of intertextual *écriture*, this ... category consists of what any audience brings to a text rather than what the author puts in. The focus moves from texts and traditions to the circulation of cultural discourses... This means in practice whatever the literary critic perceives as revelatory of cultural poetics; he or she, not the author, brings the text to the table. (p. 23)

*My Liberation Notes* is a play that, on closer scrutiny, reveals a wide range of mythical undertones from Hindu mythology, particularly Shaivism, thereby making it an interpreter's paradise. Since Shaivism is based on the power and glory of Lord Shiva, it would be best to start with him.

### **Shiva: The Greatest of the Gods**

Shiva is the presiding deity of Shaivism and is also called *Mahadeva*, the greatest of the gods. He is also called *Tryambaka* or the three-eyed one whose third eye, when opened, causes destruction. In *MLN*, Gu is the modern-day image of Lord Shiva, the third in the Hindu trinity, who symbolises death and destruction. He is a rugged, grumpy loner who isolates himself in Sanpo, a fictional village in Gyeonggi-do, which is surrounded by mountains. Although Mount Kailash is considered his abode, Shiva is the archetypal siddha or saint who wanders about from place to place. In the second volume of the *Siva Purana*, Narada prophesies Parvati's future. "Your husband...will be free from lust. He will have neither father nor mother. He will be indifferent to honours. His dress and manners will be inauspicious" (Chapter 8, verse 11, p. 502).

In the drama, Gu is mostly seen in a t-shirt and shorts. Like Shiva, who meditates in the Himalayan mountains, Gu drinks and stares at the mountains in the evenings. In the tenth episode, Yeom Mi-jeong tells Hyeon-a, "You'll be surprised if you see him. You might think he is homeless" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, 16:58-17:03). Unlike his cosmic divine counterpart, Gu's penance (drinking and staring at the mountains) is a form of escapism to evade the ghosts of his past. John Keats' desire to escape from a misery-filled world to a sylvan world using wine as an interface is quite understandable here. Even Yeom Je-ho's wife Sye-huk wonders, "Why has he turned his back on the world?" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 3: 13.15).

### **Shiva and Parvati:**

Although *MLN* deals with the lives of the three Yeom siblings and their attempts to find love, the emphasis is on Mi-jeong (the youngest) and Gu, a stranger who suddenly finds himself in Sanpo by a stroke of chance. Gu and Mi-jeong form close links to the cosmic couple Shiva and Parvati in Hinduism. Stories of the celestial duo are mainly featured in the *Shiva Purana* and the *Skanda Purana*. Their divine love and quarrels are dominant themes of Shaivite (the cult of Shiva) literature. For instance, the great poet Kalidasa affirms that they are inseparable, like a word and its meaning, in his opening lines of the epic *Raghuvamsa*. The poet invokes their blessings so that he (as a poet) may be blessed with the right sense of word and meaning (Canto 1, verse 1, p. 1).

Gu and Mi-jeong first meet each other face-to-face during a snowy winter in the mountainous village of Sanpo. In Shaivism, Shiva is frequently linked to snow-capped mountains, and Parvathi is the daughter of Himavan, the king of the mountains. The long looks that they share indicate that they are meant to cross paths in future (*MLN*, Ep. 9)

According to the fourth chapter of the *Shiva Purana* titled Sandhya, Shiva was different when he was without his consort Parvati (also called Shakti or Uma).

Originally, when Siva was separated from Shakti, he was pure consciousness. He was without qualities, without form, beyond being and unbeing. When he was united

with Shakti, he had attributes... He had a form and divine features; he was with Uma forever. (Chapter 4, Sandhya)

In the drama, Gu is sans identity and emotion. His full name and whereabouts are unknown. He has no other attributes than being an alcoholic. Even when his nose is bleeding (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 2) or his left foot is injured and bruised (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 4), he exhibits no emotion. He is constantly in a trance-like state and is hardly aware of the danger when a live wire falls to the ground with sparks (where he drinks in the evening) following thunder, lightning, and heavy rain. He has a blank look when he works, eats, commutes to the convenience shop to buy soju, and stares at the mountain or the moon. He displays his customary insipid expression in the first and second episodes, even when responding to Mi-jeong.

Mi-jeong, on the other hand, is as persistent as Parvati in winning his heart. According to Bharata-Muni's *Natya Sastra*, there are eight types of *nayikas* or heroines. Seven heroines wait for their *nayaks* or heroes to come to them and to be united with them. But the eighth heroine, *abhisarika*, casts aside her modesty and sets out to meet her lover all by herself (*Natya Sastra*, 1950, p. 469).

Mi-jeong is a typical *abhisarika* who casts aside all inhibitions and meets Gu. Usually, it is the man who confesses his feelings for a woman. But here, in the drama, Mi-jeong is the one who, at the end of the second episode, asks Gu rather imperatively to worship her. She tries to convince him, saying that in doing so, he will make her a different person, and she will also be transformed in the process. This implies that in the twenty-first century, worship does not entail prayers, hymns, flowers, and offerings in the literal sense. To Mi-jeong, worship means persistent encouragement and respect, culminating in a greater sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. Here, Mi-jeong's intention is twofold. She wants a man in her life and to make Gu a better person.

Gu's response to Mi-jeong's proposal is conveyed through flashbacks where he dismisses her saying he is an asshole who cannot be trusted. When Mi-jeong cries out, saying she has never felt whole before, Gu's question stuns her: "What about you? Have you ever made anyone feel whole?" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 3: 52:13-52:17) This turns out to be her revelation where she realises that she must first 'worship' someone selflessly and make that person feel whole to be 'worshipped' in turn. Parts of her conversation with Gu are also reflected in the fourth episode by way of recall. "Gu: How do you worship someone?/ Mi-jeong: You cheer them on. You tell them they can do anything and that everything is possible. You cheer them on" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 4: 1:04:08-1:04:21).

Although Gu initially spurns her proposal to worship her, Mi-jeong's act of saving his life brings about a radical transformation in him. Sodhi (1999) discusses the evolution of the *abhisarika* in Bundi art (a form of Indian art). In this type of art, the *abhisarika nayika* "...braves the storm and lightning, snakes and other dangers of the forest to meet her lover" (Sodhi, 1999, p. 53). Towards the end of the fourth episode, Mi-jeong also braves lightning and heavy rain to meet Gu.

Kim Seok-yoon deftly employs pathetic fallacy in this scene where the thunder, lightning, and heavy rain symbolise the tumultuous feelings of Gu and Mi-jeong. The stormy weather is more related to Gu, who is confused about how to respond to Mi-jeong's proposal. Mi-jeong often states that the world should end when there is thunder and lightning. But this time, she rushes out instinctively to save Gu, who is

seated outside in his alcoholic trance and drags him into the house, thereby rescuing him from a possible electric shock caused by a live wire. Usually, the abhisarika braves thunder and lightning to unite with her lover. In contrast, Mi-jeong's purpose in braving lightning is not *sambhoga* or union but *samrakshana* or protection. In the next scene, the weather is calm and pleasant, and so is Gu. He is clear about worshipping Mi-jeong.

Mi-jeong gradually brings about a change in Gu. He waits for her calls and messages to hang out with her after office hours. She is open about her feelings for Gu, like Parvati, who openly admits her love for Shiva. Once, when her mother, Kwak Hye-suk, questions her on why she was at Gu's place, Mi-jeong responds by saying they were talking. When Hye-suk persists (perhaps she was tipped off by Mi-jeong's elder sibling Gi-Gyeong), she casts aside her shyness and admits that they are dating. Her openness catches her mother and sister off-guard, leaving them shocked and embarrassed.

Whenever Gu meets someone from his past (from Seoul), he tries to withdraw into his shell of isolation. Mi-jeong is the one affected since she is the only one who constantly communicates with him. One finds Gu treating her with an air of indifference after meeting Baek and after meeting Hyeon-jin. Despite it all, Mi-jeong is persistent in her love for him.

Even when Gu tries to avoid her in the ninth and tenth episodes, she lashes out at him, asking him why he prefers dogs' wrath to a woman's love. The former will only tear him to shreds, while the latter will give him hope for a better life. When Gu still doesn't reconcile, it is Mi-jeong who takes the initiative of making up. It is on her insistence that Gu decides to continue the relationship. When her sister Gi-jeong ridicules her for choosing an alcoholic as her man, Mi-jeong has her answer ready, and there is not an iota of uncertainty about her. Her answer clearly outlines her intentions and the reason behind her change in attitude towards Gu.

I've never given my everything to someone or vice versa. I'll never do something like that again. If my partner finds success and I am afraid of losing him, I'll gladly let him go. Even if he hits rock bottom, I won't be embarrassed of him. Even if everyone points the finger at him, I'll always treat him as I always did and just support him. Even our own parents never gave us that kind of support. (MLN, Seok-yoon, Ep. 6 24:08-24:48)

Like Parvati in the Puranas, who was austere in her ways, Mi-jeong is serious in her outlook. Except for hanging out with friends or colleagues once in a while, she is happy to be at home helping her mother in the kitchen, lending a helping hand to her father in the field, and trying her best to edge closer to Gu. The later discovery of Gu's wealth (his Royce car) results in a change in her siblings' attitude. Her sister Gi-jeong tells her that she will borrow money from Mi-jeong now that her man is very rich. However, Mi-jeong is reluctant to share a ride in Gu's car. She is unaffected by his wealth because that is not what she wants.

Mi-jeong also endeavours to engage in self-destructive behaviour or reach a state of extreme adversity, mirroring her celestial counterpart, Parvati. According to the Puranas, Parvati experiences profound distress upon realising her abandonment and then immolates herself by leaping into the sacrificial fire. However, she consistently emerges unharmed on every occasion as a result of her unwavering commitment. In the instance of Mi-jeong, she attempts to inflict harm upon herself upon perceiving

Gu's abandonment. One instance occurs when Mi-jeong embarks on a leisurely stroll and encounters a wild dog. In other words, abandoned meets abandoned. The dog growls on seeing her, but Mi-jeong is not afraid. The thought of being abandoned is so intense that she wants to metaphorically "bleed like a fountain" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 13). This intensity makes her appear more aggressive and sensing this, the dog retreats with a whimper.

The second time Mi-jeong tries to harm herself is when her colleague and friend Han Su-jin betrays her. Su-jin has been having an affair with their boss, Choi Jun-ho. But he saves Su-jin's name as Yeom Mi-jeong, thereby causing speculation that she is having an affair with him to secure a permanent position. Mi-jeong is unable to control herself, and with Gu no longer there to mitigate her anger, she hits Su-jin on her head with her handbag only to be hit in return and to be sued for assault. She tries calling Gu repeatedly, only to find that his number is no longer in use. Feeling abandoned and let down, she sits down on the platform where Gu previously used to sit and drink and takes out a cigarette to smoke. At that time, a fruit closely resembling a rambutan falls on her head and makes her drop the cigarette. This prevents her from becoming a smoke addict in the long run (what she often refers to as hitting rock bottom). The third occasion is when Mi-jeong decides to go to her ex-boyfriend Chan-hyeok's wedding and walk away with the congratulatory money (the money Chan-hyeok had borrowed from Mi-jeong but had not returned). But this time, Gu himself calls her and asks her to meet him, thereby ushering hope and love in her life and preventing her from destroying her personality.

When Mi-jeong tells Gu that she broke a glass while arguing with Chan-hyeok, Gu is unnerved. He sees a parallel between her and the customer in the nightclub who breaks a bottle and attacks Gu with a piece of glass (*MLN*, Seon-yoon, Ep. 15). But while the lady customer does hit rock bottom with her despicable behaviour, Gu's call rescues Mi-jeong in the end.

Gu responds to Mi-jeong no doubt and even jumps to get her cap as a gesture of worship. But he finds it difficult to come to terms with the idea of worship and tries to ignore Mi-jeong on a few occasions. For instance, when Mi-jeong sees Gu riding the truck, she thinks that she will be offered a ride, but Gu ignores her. Soju bottles that adorn the seat next to him are his top priority (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 4). When he sees Mi-jeong near the metro station, he tries to stride past, but Mi-jeong has to run after him to keep pace. However, though not explicitly expressed, it is obvious that Gu is eventually smitten by Mi-jeong's love, which is expressed through her patience, care, and encouragement. He admits that he waits for her every day, although her sharp, instinctive nature and temper unnerve him (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 7: 55:06-55:24).

Gu's love, however, goes through its own ups and downs. As far as the shringara rasa is concerned, it has two bases – *sambhoga* or union and *vipralamba* or separation (Natya Sastra, 1950, p. 108). One sees instances of both in the drama. Whenever Gu encounters anyone or anything related to his past (Baek or Hyeon-jin), he withdraws into his shell and, in the process, gives Mi-jeong the cold shoulder, thereby trying to detach himself from her. He even tells her that getting a diamond for her is easier than worshipping her. When he tells her that he does not know how to worship, he metaphorically tries to destroy Kama or love (*MLN*, Ep. 9). In the *Shiva Purana*, Kama or Kandarpa, the God of love, tries to shoot arrows of attraction at

Shiva to make him fall in love with Parvati. But Shiva notices Kama and burns him to ashes by opening his third eye of destruction. In the drama, although Gu ignores Mi-jeong, she does not relent. Like the typical abhisarika, she braves the odds and tells him they should continue their relationship. But at the end of the twelfth episode, Gu destroys Kama when he tells Mi-jeong that he is leaving, and everything is over between them. Although Mi-jeong persists in saying that she will be in touch with him even if he responds grumpily, it is clear to the viewers that they will be separated for at least a while.

Just as Parvati meditates on Lord Shiva, Mi-jeong thinks about him and often tries to call him, but in vain. Pattanaik (2017), the Indian mythographer and writer, aptly remarks,

When Shiva opened his third eye and destroyed the love god Kandarpa, it was clear to the gods, and to the Goddess, that Shiva was no ordinary ascetic who could be seduced. He had to be forced to abandon his ascetic ways through a display of unshakable resolve and absolute devotion. So, the Goddess decided to make Shiva open his eyes, not as a nymph, but as a hermit. (Seduction of Shiva, The Fiery Glance, Para 5)

Unlike the case of the *Shiva Purana*, there is no question of physical attraction in the case of Gu and Mi-jeong. However, with Gu's abandonment, Mi-jeong experiences a sense of depression and displays a certain instability in character. Yet, like Parvati, she does not seek another man but mentally focuses on Gu and hopes he will return to her soon. The very idea that she is not clingy makes her stand out. Finally, it is her open-mindedness that leads Gu back to her.

Sambhoga, or union, occurs towards the end of the fourteenth episode and continues until the end of the drama. Gu starts pining for Mi-jeong and realizes that he is incomplete without her. After his driver, Sam-sik leaves for his hometown, Gu realizes he also needs to go home. For him, Sanpo is his home, where his beloved Mi-jeong lives.

The *Shiva Purana* describes Parvati's penance to attain Shiva as her husband. Here, in the drama, it is not just Mi-jeong whose mind calls to Gu, asking him to be united with her, but also Gu who longs to be reunited with her. After meeting her father and getting her mobile number, Gu calls her, asking her to meet him. This time, the change in Gu's personality is evident. He cracks jokes and tries to warm up to Mi-jeong. In turn, unlike most heroines who feign anger or who pick up a quarrel, Mi-jeong displays her happiness upon seeing him. At the same time, she confirms the nature of their relationship with her question, "Are we two? Or just one against one?" (Ep. 15: 00:04:41- 00:04:43). Gu is taken aback after a moment's silence asks if she is drawing a line between them (Ep. 15: 00:04:56- 00:04:58).

When Gu takes Mi-jeong home, she lies down next to him. This is indicative of the sambhoga that is to follow. But before that, their conversation is significant in character delineation.

Gu: "Was I an asshole too?"

Mi-jeong: "Not anymore. You called in the end."

Gu: But was I an asshole till yesterday?" (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 15: 24:07-24:22).

One sees a complete change in Gu's attitude. He wants to appear impressive to Mi-jeong. In contrast to the third episode, where he calls himself an asshole, the Gu that the viewer sees in the fifteenth episode is different. He does not want to be seen as an asshole and wants affirmation in this regard. Earlier in the episode, when he is grazed in the cheek by a piece of glass, he feels embarrassed about showing Mi-jeong his face. He wants to appear unblemished (except for his drinking) and feels uneasy when Mi-jeong notices the cut on his cheek. But when Mi-jeong tells him that one should count one's happy moments, such as counting blessings, he accepts it and begins to follow her ideology. Mi-jeong's selflessness finally pays off, and Gu's life takes the right trajectory under her guidance.

### **Shiva and Sati**

Like the Hindu deity Shiva, who experiences the loss of his consort Sati, the character Gu, too, undergoes the unfortunate separation from his romantic partner. In the *Skanda Purana*, Shiva tells Sati to attend her father Daksha's sacrifice after she furiously asserts that she must find out Daksha's reasons for not inviting her and her husband. Upon her departure, Shiva tells his ganas, "On being insulted by her father, Sati, the daughter of Daksa, will never come back to her city again" (Chapter 2, verse 68, p. 12). True to his words, Sati, unable to bear Daksha's insult, jumps into the sacrificial fire and dies. In the *Purana*, Shiva guides Sati towards her demise in an indirect manner, driven by a divine intention that she will be reunited with him after her reincarnation as Himavan's daughter, Parvati.

In the drama, Gu faces a similar situation. One comes to know about his past only through his conversations with Baek and Mi-jeong (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 9). Gu's girlfriend was depressed but was reluctant to undertake treatment. So he suggested therapy to his girlfriend as the best solution. To make her understand that seeking therapy might modify her perception of problems, Gu cited the example of a mountain in the United States, which was best known as a suicide spot. Some people contemplated suicide but survived in the end. This was because they realised that life was worth living after climbing two-thirds of the cliff and as a result, made a comeback. Their problems, once threatening, appeared trivial thus prompting them to lead a normal life. Gu's girlfriend however misinterpreted his words and leapt to her death like Sati.

In the *Shiva Purana*, following the demise of Sati, Shiva is aggrieved and heartbroken, while Gu is burdened by feelings of guilt after the loss of his girlfriend. He experiences torment as a result of having provided the wrong message to an individual who was already in a mentally susceptible state. Later, in the tenth episode, Gu tells Mi-jeong that he may have inadvertently caused the demise of his former girlfriend.

### **Daksha the Antagonist**

One can draw parallels between Daksha and Baek in the drama, with the sole distinction being that Daksha is Sati's father while Baek is Gu's girlfriend's older brother. Baek deprives Gu of his company and income, much as Daksha deprives Shiva of his portion of the sacrifice. When Sati asks Shiva why he did not invite them to the yagna, Daksha makes fun of him. Similarly, while at Sanpo, Gu runs into Baek, who taunts him for masquerading as a vagrant. Finally, Shiva's ascent to prominence following Daksha's death in the Puranas is parallel to Gu's ascent in *MLN*. According to the *Shiva Purana*, the warrior god Virabhadra, whom Shiva



creates, kills Daksha and destroys the yagna (sacrificial ceremony), resulting in Shiva's rise to power as a powerful deity. In the drama, Gu informs his pal Hyeon-jin about Baek's drug dealings. As a result, Baek is hounded by cops and jumps to his death (like his sister) while attempting to flee from them. Subsequently, Gu resumes his position as the nightclub 'boss' whom everyone fears and respects.

### **Nandi: The Vehicle and Attendant of Shiva**

Sam-sik is Gu's henchman and driver who serves Baek after Gu disappears from Seoul. He is a metaphoric representation of Shiva's vehicle and attendant, Nandi the bull. Sam-sik is a true attendant who serves his boss faithfully, regardless of who he is. For instance, when he sets eyes on Gu in Sanpo, he informs Baek about it. Further, when Chairman Shin asks him to find out Gu's whereabouts to invite him back as the 'boss,' Sam-sik drives around Sanpo and manages to locate Gu's place. Even while serving Baek, he is happy to see Gu back and treats him with due respect. He is subservient to Gu the way Nandi is to Shiva. He treats Gu as his lord and master and drives him to places. He never questions his decisions and obeys him without a demur.

Sam-sik is intelligent and caring. He advises Gu never to skip his meals and to take care of himself. (Episode 13). His responses to Gu's questions are instant and pertinent. This is best seen in chapter 13,

Sam-sik: You should have dinner, sir. You haven't eaten anything today.

Gu (looking at his watch sleepily): If you eat at 4 a.m., is it dinner or breakfast?

Sam-sik: I think it's dinner if you eat before you go to bed and breakfast if you do after you wake up. (*MLN*, Seok-yoon, Ep. 13 15:14-15:41)

The relationship between Gu and Sam-sik is one of *dasya* (where the devotee considers himself/ herself the attendant of god).

Sam-sik, in addition to being a faithful follower, plays the role of the catalyst in uniting Gu with Mi-jeong. When Gu is reminded of Mi-jeong after seeing the sweet potato stems on his plate, he addresses Sam-sik as Mi-jeong and asks him what he wants. Sam-sik tells him that he wants to go home to Naju (situated in South Jeolla Province, South Korea). Gu gives him money and lets him go home. After Sam-sik leaves, Gu realises that he also needs to go home to Sanpo, where his beloved Mi-jeong lives. When Sam-sik chooses a new name for himself (Kim Woo-bin), Gu is displeased at first. Later, after meeting Mi-jeong in Seoul and changing for the better, he realises that freedom of will is an individual's basic right. In the last episode, Gu calls Sam-sik by his new name wherein the latter feels elated and fights the loan shark's henchman along with Gu.

### **The Dogs:**

The three wild dogs make their brief appearance in the drama and are hardly worth a thought at the surface level. However, with mythical implications underway, they represent the *vahanas* or vehicles of Lord Bhairava, one of the forms of Lord Shiva. In Shaivism, Bhairava rides a dog and has a fierce appearance. According to Pattanaik (2011), "Bhairava rides the dog to remind us of our animal instincts and our amplified fears..." (Bhairava's Secret, para 53). This is true as far as *MLN* is concerned. The three dogs (who have turned wild after being abandoned) bark and bare their teeth at those who enter their territory. Mi-jeong tells Gu not to go near

them. Symbolically, this is her way of advising him to stay away from his fears. Gu, however, tries to pacify the dogs by offering them food. In other words, he tries to mollify his fear of being hunted down or his fear and guilt for being responsible for his ex-girlfriend's death. Pattanaik's (2011) interpretation is highly relevant in this context:

Fear of death leads to two kinds of fears as it transforms all living creatures either into predator or prey. The fear of scarcity haunts the predator as it hunts for food; the fear of predation haunts the prey as it avoids being hunted. (Bhairava's Secret, para 3)

Despite placating his fears, they do attack his psyche like the dogs that attack him one night. Gu is so drunk that he is unable to feed the dogs properly. Enraged, they bark menacingly and advance towards him to tear the food out of his hands. When Mi-jeong comes to his rescue by driving the dogs away, Gu turns upon her saying she is the one who terrifies him.

When Gu decides to return to Seoul, he is certain that he has gained mastery over his fears. The dogs being caught and caged by the authorities symbolizes Gu's victory over his fear. This is further affirmed by Baek's death. But only when Gu discovers the path to mental peace does he truly overcome his fear. When Mi-jeong tells him to drive the demons of his past with a smile, Gu realises that it is the road to mental health and inner peace (MLN, Ep. 16). This marks his transition as Bhairava, the lord who eradicates fear.

### The Panchakrityas of Shiva



Figure 1: Nataraja

In Shaivism (the cult of Shiva), Shiva performs the five main actions or *panchakrityas* that keep the universe going – *Srishti* (creation), *Sthithi* (preservation), *Samhara* (destruction), *Tirobhava* (release from illusion), and *Anugraha* (blessing). These are denoted by Lord Shiva as the four-armed Nataraja or the lord of the dance. Srishti is symbolised by the drum in Nataraja's hand, the hand that shows the sign of blessing

stands for Sthithi, and the fire in Nataraja's hand symbolises destruction. The foot that presses down upon the dwarf demon Muyalaka (who symbolises illusion and evil) stands for Tirobhava, or release from

illusion and the foot raised high stands for blessing or salvation (Anugraha). The hand that points to the foot held aloft guides the devotee as if saying, "This is where you get salvation."

The postmodern Shiva, Gu, performs his panchakrityas in Sanpo and Seoul both in the presence and absence of his Sivagami or Parvati (Mi-jeong). Gu lends a helping hand to the Yeom family in farming and growing fresh vegetables and does not want to be paid for it. He and Mi-jeong are often seen together in the field, enjoying each other's company while working. He mainly creates or designs sinks at the factory. This is Srishti, or creation in the modern sense. Sthithi, which could mean protection and preservation, is best seen when Gu protects Mi-jeong from a possible rape or abuse at the hands of two suspicious men who are spotted one day in her area. He protects the secret of her bank loan by agreeing to have her letter delivered at his place. When Chang-hee enters his house without invitation and starts probing his cabinets, Gu is apprehensive that he might spot Mi-jeong's letter. So he snaps at Chang-hee, making him stop dead in his tracks and beat a hasty retreat.

Nevertheless, one must admit that in the present situation of gender equality trying to rear its head, it is not Shiva alone who protects; Parvati does, too. In the drama, Mi-jeong saves Gu's life on two occasions. Through analepsis, the viewers decipher that her loud call, "Get off," which was meant for her drunken brother Chang-hee, made Gu get off the train at Dangmi station instead of getting off at Oido. Only after taking a taxi to Oido, Gu finds that the text message from his henchman and driver Sam-sik asking him to wait at Oido was a trap. The text message was sent by Baek, who had seized Sam-sik's mobile. At Oido, there are goons hired by his girlfriend's brother, Baek, who waiting to kill him. So, it was the voice of Mi-jeong that saved his life that day. The second time, Mi-jeong saves Gu from an electric shock. These life-saving incidents also emphasise how, in the post-humanist set-up, Parvati is as much responsible for the pancha-krityas as Shiva.

Samhara or destruction should not be taken in the literal sense. Gu is not like his mythical counterpart in vanquishing demons with a trident or other equally powerful weapons. He destroys the ego of dishonest people. He destroys Baek's drug dealings and leads him to his ultimate downfall – death. He exposes Hyeon-jin as a cheat and gambler by tearing the sofa and discovering the money hidden within. He shows no mercy to the young woman who drinks at the club and who cheats by not paying the amount. He kicks up a tantrum at her workplace, eventually getting her fired. Towards the end of the drama, one finds him fighting the goons of the loan shark who runs the gambling den. Although he doesn't kill, he beats them all black and blue.

Tirobhava, or release from illusion, is not something that is within Gu's reach until the end of the drama. While Shiva in the Puranas singlehandedly crushes Muyalaka (also called *Apasmara Purusha*) under his foot, here, Gu cannot handle his Muyalaka or alcoholism all alone. Alcoholism creates an illusion wherein Gu feels haunted by all the people whom he hates or who deceived him in life. Due to this, he faces anxiety, despair, and a deep sense of insecurity.

In the sixteenth episode, Gu hears the sound of the mobile phone ringing only to realise that it is a mere hallucination. But taken at a symbolic level, the ringing of the mobile phone signifies the warning that Muyalaka (alcoholism) will ruin him if he continues to drink. Gu himself admits that he deserves such a fate because he drinks almost all the time. Yet, all is not lost. Things are different with Mi-jeong back in his life. Towards the end of the drama, Gu walks out of a convenience store with liquor in his pocket. As he takes the bottle out of his pocket, a 500-won coin falls out and rolls into the road till it stands poised over the cover of the gutter. Wheeler (2022) views the incident metaphorically. The coin represents Gu himself, who, like a cat on a wall, stands between two destinies that he may choose from. The first is alcoholism, the road to destruction where he is plagued by fears and illusions and like the coin, he faces his downfall. The other option is a life filled with love where he and Mi-jeong worship each other and cherish their relationship. Gu's retrieval of the coin, his act of leaving the bottle near a tramp, and his confident stride towards life (his work and Mi-jeong) lend an optimistic tone to the entire drama, making it a tragic-comedy in the true sense. Shiva finally conquers Muyalaka, not single-handedly, as in the Puranas, but with the active assistance of Parvati or Shakti (meaning power).

Gu's very acts of forgiveness are his Anugraha or the blessings/ gifts that he bestows. Although Chang-hee irritates him by being clingy and by yammering constantly, Gu does have a soft corner for him (mainly because he is Mi-jeong's elder brother) and lends him his Royce car to ride. Despite being furious with Chang-hee later for damaging his precious car, he forgives him eventually and even enquires about him, much to Mi-jeong's surprise. Depicted as unrelenting and daunting in episodes thirteen to sixteen, Gu does manage to change and forgives Hyeon-jin for cheating him and fleeing with his money. Although Chairman Shin asks Gu to 'end' things with Hyeon-jin, Gu gives him a last chance and tells him to keep the income steady at 80 million won every day.

Towards the end, when Hyeon-jin hits him on the head and flees with the money, Gu recalls what Mi-jeong had told him. She had advised him to welcome those who haunt his memories with laughter and a forgiving heart. That is the first thing Gu does on waking up the next day. He calls Hyeon-jin on his mobile, but he is not reachable. Gu then leaves a voice message saying that despite Hyeon-jin being a despicable human being whom he would curse every morning, he is still ready to forgive him and welcome him back into his life.

### **The Dance of Shiva**

Shiva is considered the lord of dance or Nataraja. In India's classical dance Bharatanatyam (the dance of Bharata), the 108 movements or karanas are considered the dance postures of Lord Shiva. Ananda Coomaraswamy, a great Ceylonese metaphysician, philosopher and interpreter of Indian art and philosophy, classifies the dances of Shiva into three categories in his seminal essay, "The Dance of Shiva." Here, in *My Liberation Notes*, Gu's actions form the various dances of Shiva. When he entertains Mi-jeong in the evenings by treating her to her favourite food, giving her a ride home, and offering her comfort and advice thereby placing her on a high pedestal, it is metaphoric of the evening dance, otherwise called *Pradosha Nrityam* or *Sandhya Tandava*. Coomaraswamy quotes the *Shiva Pradosha Stotra*:

Placing the Mother of the Three Worlds upon a golden throne studded with precious gems, Shulapani dances on the heights of Kailasa, and all the gods gather around Him... Gandharvas, Yakshas, Patagas, Uragas, Siddhas, Sadhyas, Vidyadharas, Amaras, Apsarases, and all the beings dwelling in the three worlds assemble there to witness the celestial dance and hear the music of the divine choir at the hour of twilight. (p. 61)

The second dance of Shiva is the Tandava. In Shaivism, Shiva performs this dance with his *ganas* (fierce-looking followers) at the burial ground at midnight. As the boss (something like a general manager) of night clubs with his henchman, Gu performs the Tandava too. He is fierce and formidable, and his actions like collecting dues, checking the accounts, and punishing those who err, are suggestive of the Tandava.

The third dance is the cosmic dance performed at Chidambaram or Thillai, which is considered the centre of the universe. Thillai also represents the fifth element – ether or the sky, which transcends the other four elements (earth, fire, wind, and water). When Gu defeats illusion, it is clear that he is on his way to evolving into a more mature and insightful person. He is now ready for his mystical cosmic dance with Mi-jeong. Storl (2004) is right in stating,

What is dance, but the continual loss and instantaneous regaining of balance? Shiva's dance is the fine edge of the universe tumbling into chaos and destruction and the simultaneous recreation of poise, in a continuous, ecstatic, spontaneous whirl of creation-destruction... (Shiva's Dances, para 2)

Similarly, Gu's act of putting an end to alcoholism and his negative traits and creating a more positive outlook is the universal dance most human beings need to perform for the smooth functioning of the universe. Although Sanpo symbolises Mount Kailash, Gu and Mi-jeong don't have to return to Sanpo physically, for Sanpo exists in their hearts. Therefore, whichever place they dwell becomes Sanpo.

In short, to the general audience, *MLN* is a realistic drama that is highly appealing in terms of theme and character delineation. However, to a myth lover or a scholar of mythology, it is a revisiting of the Shiva Purana, where most of the characters reveal their true mythical personalities behind their ordinary human masks and names.

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