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FRAGMENTS OF NOSTALGIA: KIM TAEHYUNG'S ARTISTIC JOURNEY THROUGH MEMORY

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Abstract:

Kim Taehyung, also known as V, is an integral member of the globally renowned South Korean boy band BTS. This research article delves into the thematic and emotional depth of Taehyung's music, specifically exploring his use of nostalgia as a core element. Through reflective and restorative nostalgia, his songs such as Inner Child, Blue & Grey, Scenery, and Winter Bear encapsulate personal growth, longing, and belonging. Drawing on cultural and psychological theories, the study examines how Taehyung's introspection and emotive artistry resonate universally. Furthermore, the article highlights his artistic integration of winter imagery, aligning it with themes of solitude and solace. By weaving literary and musical analysis with personal anecdotes and external influences, this article reveals the multifaceted dimensions of Taehyung's work, offering a lens through which his art contributes to contemporary cultural discourse on memory and identity.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Longing, Negative Capability, Winter Imagery, etc.*

Nostalgia- A Bittersweet Allure to Past:

‘For I must now confess to you that I suffer from home-sickness — that I long so ardently and earnestly for home, as sometimes, when no one sees me, to pine for it. My heart is a little lightened when we turn towards it, even for a few miles, and with the knowledge that we are soon to turn away again. So dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness. O so dearly, O so dearly!’- Little Dorrit (Dickens, 416)

‘Nostalgia’, a Greek word derived from *nostos* (return) and *algia* (pain), often conveys a bittersweet longing for the past. The word was coined by the ambitious Swiss student Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688. Delving into nostalgia, it is found that there is a predisposition, often caused by cognitive biases, for people to view the past more positively and future more negatively. When applied to one's beliefs about a society or institution, it is called declinism. It is an emotional strategy, to cope up with something comfortably in the present day which seems intolerably bleak.

Nostalgia's definition has changed greatly over time. Consistent with its Greek word roots meaning ‘homecoming’ and ‘pain’, nostalgia was for centuries, considered a potentially debilitating and sometimes fatal medical condition expressing extreme homesickness. The modern



view is that nostalgia is an independent, and even positive, emotion that many people experience often.

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia- “Nostalgia (from nostos – return home, and algae – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym). She categorizes nostalgia into two types. The first is Restorative Nostalgia, meaning a desire to recreate the past as it was. The second, as known as Reflective Nostalgia, is a wistful acknowledgment of the past’s impact on the present. Reflective nostalgia does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones. It loves details, not symbols. It cherishes shattered fragments of memory and demoralizes space.

Rhetorician William Kurlinkus argues that nostalgic rhetoric generally contains three parts: A loss or threat in the present, a nostalgic crux- where a person or group is blamed for the loss of the nostalgic ideal and Hope. Finally, Kurlinkus argues that though nostalgia is often performed ironically it almost always has a true hope for recovering the good memory whether this means some kind of true restoration or a more symbolic recovery of an ethic. Such hope differentiates nostalgia from similar emotions like melancholia, which contains all of nostalgia's longing for lost ideals without a desire to move out of that past.

Sigmund Freud, in *Mourning and Melancholia* explains that “Reality-testing has shown that when the loved object no longer exists, the mind proceeds to demand that all libidos shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object happens through the medium of a wistful psychosis” (Freud, 244).

Nostalgia and Literature:

Nostalgia is dominant and can be found in many type of literary expression. Some of the examples can be found in the works of Wordsworth, Dickens and others. *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud* by William Wordsworth is a beautiful poem that’s often held up as one of the summits of the Romantic Movement. The poem presents exemplary elements of personification, imagery, movement, and more. However, the nostalgic element in the last stanza has often been seldom analysed. This work can be categorized as reflective nostalgia because rather than mourning the fact that the past is gone and one can’t return to it, the speaker uses his memories as a source of comfort. He turns to them when he can’t escape back into nature and needs to feel the same way he did when he was with the daffodils. It reads:

“For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude” (Wordsworth)

The extract at the beginning of the paper has been taken from *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens. It conveys a profound sense of nostalgia, where the speaker yearns for a home that represents both a literal and emotional place of warmth, comfort, and love, even if that place is marked by poverty. The emotional connection to the past, the warmth of kindness, and the bittersweet awareness that they must leave, all evoke the powerful, complex nature of nostalgic feelings. Thus, it is characterised by Restorative nostalgia where there is a strong yearning to return to a specific place.



Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* similarly explores nostalgia's dual role in illuminating the past while revealing its inaccessibility. *In Search of Lost Time* embodies the interconnectivity between love, art, time, and memory. Through the transcendence of present reality towards nostalgia, Proust encapsulates the human experience through reflections of the past thereby embodying both forms of nostalgia.

"You can't repeat the past" (Fitzgerald) – this is a famous line from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. All the major male characters in the novel demonstrate longing for the past. Nick, Tom, Wolfsheim, and Gatsby are characterized by their desire to relive the former glory and excitement of their past days. Each indulges in nostalgia at some level, and each is driven at least partly by futile longing for the past. Fitzgerald uses the obsession with the past that these men share to represent the nostalgic culture of America during the 1920s along with the reflective and restorative nostalgia.

The Artistic Legacy of V:

Kim Taehyung, widely known by his stage name V, is a prominent figure in the global music industry and a member of the South Korean boy band BTS. Born on December 30, 1995, in Daegu, South Korea, Taehyung has transcended the boundaries of conventional K-pop artistry, establishing himself as a versatile singer, songwriter, actor, and cultural influence. Taehyung debuted with BTS under Big Hit Entertainment in 2013. He earned wide spread fame due to his unique tonal quality, baritone voice and emotive singing that enriches BTS's diverse discography. His contributions to BTS underscore his unique artistry and global appeal. His solo tracks such as *Stigma*, *Singularity*, and *Inner Child* highlight his vocal versatility and personal artistic vision. One must note his visual art projects and acting roles, which intersect with his musical themes, further enriching his exploration of memory and identity.

Taehyung is the eldest of three siblings, with a younger brother and sister. His family played a pivotal role in nurturing his dreams of becoming a singer. Encouraged by his supportive parents, he pursued music and eventually trained as a vocalist before debuting with BTS in 2013 under Big Hit Entertainment. Beyond his musical endeavors, Taehyung has demonstrated considerable aptitude in other creative fields. His acting debut in the historical drama *Hwarang: The Poet Warrior Youth* (2016) was well-received, reflecting his ability to convey nuanced emotions on screen. His enthusiasm for photography and visual arts has led to collaborations with prominent brands and artistic projects. He is a vocal advocate for mental health and self-love, often using his platform to inspire positivity and resilience.

He has a deep affection for classical and jazz music, often citing artists like Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. as inspirations. He enjoys art, fashion, and experimenting with unique styles that reflect his individuality. As a multifaceted artist and global icon, Kim Taehyung continues to shape the landscape of contemporary music and culture, leaving an indelible mark on the world.

V's Lyrical Monologues: Nostalgia, Growth, and Self-Acceptance:

V's music primarily incorporates the concept of reflective nostalgia (Boym), where songs like *Rainy Days* and *Inner Child* process memories not with an intent to relive them but to understand their significance in shaping his identity. His reflections resonate with Adorno's view that nostalgia in music fosters emotional connection by reanimating past experiences.



V uses artistic expression to bridge the gap between memory and the present, inviting listeners to find solace in shared experiences. In his coming-of-age song *Inner Child*, Kim Taehyung retraces the painful yet worthwhile steps from adolescence to adulthood, he sings:

“Now I wish we would smile more
It will be okay, because today’s me is doing fine.” (Genius English Translations –
BTS - Inner Child (English Translation))

These lyrics are a monologue which reflects upon his younger self, blending longing with hope for growth and self-acceptance. The concept of the ‘inner child’ originated with Carl Jung, the same person behind the album title’s concept. The inner child is a young part of our psyche that influences how we think and react as adults. Often used in psychotherapy and spiritual settings, the inner child can symbolize hardship, trauma, and even triumph we experienced during our youth.

Producer ARCADES mentioned in an interview: “He (V) wrote it as a story where he is reflecting on his childhood. He is an incredible story-teller and can convey emotion in his performance in an unbelievable way” (UK).

Nostalgia has a dual role in V’s life, while it allows him to connect with a more innocent and fulfilling past, it also serves as a means to process current challenges. Songs like “Blue & Grey” and “Scenery” encapsulate this. “Blue & Grey” expresses a sense of emptiness and melancholy and “Scenery” reflects on missing specific moments in time and wishing to relive them, as seen in lines like:

“Oh, this ground feels so heavier
I am singing by myself
I just wanna be happier
Am I being too greedy?”- (BTS - Blue & Grey (English Translation))

“My heart feels sad, having missed the very scene at the very moment.
I regret it and hope that the very moment comes again” - (Scenery, V)

His lyrics frequently capture fleeting moments of love, connection, and even a yearning for the past.

Longing and Belonging: V’s Emotional Tapestry in Music:

V often intertwines longing with regret-portraying a subdued melancholy at the possibility of losing the moment or the inability to “seize the moment”. This partially aligns with the famous Horatian maxim, “Carpe diem”, suggesting the importance of living in the present. Both perspectives are rooted in an awareness of time’s passage but they diverge in their response to it: one seeks to preserve and reflect, while the other demands action and immediate fulfilment.

“On a street full of flowers, I see you, today as well
Would I be able to hold this scene in me”- (풍경 (Scenery, V))

At the same time, his longing is filled with hope as projected in the recurring phrase

“I still wonder wonder beautiful story



Still wonder wonder best part”- (풍경 (Scenery, V))

This is an indication towards his focus on waiting for better days and finding accomplishment in growth. The ideas of Solitude and Introspection become fertile grounds for artistic creation.

“I like the feeling of longing. When I’m alone, it makes me think beautiful thoughts. I could be longing for performing, or it could be directed toward the other members, or I could be feeling overwhelming affection. But, anyway, those beautiful feelings collect one by one and become a song” (V Paints a Picture through His Music).

The lyrics of his song *For Us* exemplify the positive side of waiting-

“I'm still waitin' for ya
Will you change your mind?
I would give it all up
For us” (“V (부) – for Us”)

V explained the theme of his first solo album *Layover* in a 2023 interview with Picknon Youtube platform that ‘Layover’ is to stay at a stop for a short time. The meaning of layover is a short stopover and that obviously the mood of each layover can be different. Before he gets to his destination, he thinks it’s a good time to take a break and see if he is on the right track or has, he gone too far.

Rey Chow, who is a cultural critic, specializing in 20th-century Chinese fiction and film and postcolonial theory, has argued that music allows for the articulation of emotions too complex for words, particularly those rooted in longing and memory. She talks about how Chinese popular songs ‘demonstrates the power of music to harmonize popular emotions’, and the example given was Dong Wenhua’s *Blood-Stained Spirit*. For Rey Chow, music ‘is a kind of storage place for the emotions generated by cultural conflicts and struggles’ and ‘emotions have become portable’ (Chow, 144).

In an interview, the artist himself talked of how he was upset during the time of covid pandemic. This led to the composition of his song *Blue& Grey* a song from the album *BE* released on November 20, 2020, “I wrote “Blue & Grey” during my hardest times. It was a time when I debated on whether or not I should continue this career. It seemed difficult to enjoy work and the road I was on seemed meaningless. It felt like I was in a tunnel and I couldn’t see the exit. I think it’s correct to say that I couldn’t see the path that I was supposed to be on” (Koreaboo).

In musicology, scholars like Philip Tagg have argued that certain melodic choices evoke nostalgic feelings, creating an emotional resonance in the listeners. This argument completely resonates with V’s thought. In one of the *BTS Festa 2020* interviews, he answered the question of what he focuses on the most. He replied, “I believe a song is complete when my voice completes the theme throughout the song. When it doesn’t work out the sentiment or the vibe, I try to fix that part rightaway. No matter how long the song is, I want the complete story to fit in that song.”

([2020 FESTA] BTS (방탄소년단) Answer: BTS 3 UNITS ‘친구’ Song by v & Jimin)

V’s baritone voice, often described as warm and melancholic, enhances the emotional weight of his songs, adding depth to his reflections on longing and belonging. The themes of longing and belonging often intersect in narratives of displacement or personal growth. V’s music integrates these themes by drawing on personal struggles, such as missing his family during his



trainee days or navigating the uncertainties of fame and isolation. His father's supportive words encouraged him to explore alternatives and provided an environment that helped him navigate through emotional challenges. In *Singularity*, the mask imagery in the song's music video enhances this interpretation, as the persona wrestles with revealing or hiding true feelings.

Comfort in Sadness and Yearning—a Negative Capability:

V's acceptance of sadness as a source of beauty provides dimensions for him to transform these feelings into works that comfort and resonate with fans. According to the twentieth-century British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, the ability to tolerate the pain and confusion of not knowing, rather than imposing ready-made or omnipotent certainties upon an ambiguous situation or emotional challenge is called negative capability. The recurring lines of the song *Scenery* "I still wonder wonder beautiful story...", thus are in accordance with Bion's thought of negative capability.

John Keats wrote a letter to Richard Woodhouse, a barrister and Keats' friend

"What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the chameleon Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation" (John Keats – 'the Chameleon Poet' -- Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27th, 1818).

The word "negative" is defined in opposition to the positivism (*positivism* was imported in the 19th century from the French word *positivisme*, derived from *positif* in its philosophical sense of 'imposed on the mind by experience'). Just like chameleons are 'negative' for *colour*, according to Keats, poets are negative for *self* and *identity*; they change their identity with each subject they inhabit. This dynamic is also evident in his aspiration to be like a chameleon—adaptable and multifaceted—capturing the depth of human emotion. Thus, we see that Keats' concept of Negative Capability echoes in V's theme of longing, where embracing uncertainty and doubt enhances creativity.

In a "BE-hind Story" video, Suga asked V about his favourite part in "Blue & Grey"

"When I was first coming up with the melody, I tried singing it once. As you already know, I believe in my angel. So, I believe in my angel, and when I was working on my guide track, I thought, 'I should hum the melody like this,' and I started humming, and I said this phrase, 'Where's my angel?' And I loved the phrase" (BTS (방탄소년단) V's BE-hind 'Full' Story, 2021).

It is well known that V has a strong belief in angels, a belief he has openly expressed in various reality shows and interviews. He once shared that whenever he is deep in thought or is faced with a decision, he imagines an angel in his mind. He closes his eyes, reflects, and hopes that the angel will listen to his feelings. On one occasion, while doing this, he found himself wondering why the angel wasn't responding, and in that moment, he asked, "Where is my angel?" This thought, he mentioned, brought him a sense of comfort.

Winter as a Motif in V's Songs:

Winter is often seen as a season of dormancy and death in a manifold literary idea. Yet, Taehyung juxtaposes this with the beauty of snow and the serenity of the season. His portrayal of winter embraces both its stillness and its emotional warmth, crafting a layered narrative that combines personal experiences and universal themes.



Kim Taehyung's fascination for the winter season is deeply subjective. Born in December, Taehyung associates the winter with a sense of nostalgia and introspection. This is very evident as winter becomes a recurring motif in his music. The season is explored as a symbol of death, solitude, and beauty in literature; and as sense of solace in the works of Kim Taehyung. By analyzing songs like "*Winter Bear*", "*Snow Flower*", one can conclude how winter serves as a canvas for capturing themes of alienation, solace, and ethereal beauty.

In the song *Snow Flower*, V has used an imagery of the world getting covered in white. V made references to 'white angels,' which is symbolic of how people working in the medical field and our Frontline Heroes were our salvation amid the pandemic. The white colour, as pointed out by him in an interview, refers to the white aprons which the Doctors wear. Thus, there is a passing reference to the comfort which the health facility brought during the time of cold and depression in times of covid.

"The whole world gets filled up with white flowers,
making our time even more special
In these paused times,
I wish that the flowers come down, onto your sad smile"-
("Genius English Translations – v (BTS) - Snow Flower Ft. Peakboy
(English Translation)")

In *Winter Bear*, he creates an atmosphere of tranquillity and dream-like monologue, combining the coldness of winter with a serene aesthetic. The song was inspired by a movie named *About Time (2013)* as told by Taehyung in a V-Live, a South Korean live video streaming service that allows Korean-based celebrities to broadcast live videos on the internet and live chat with fans from around the world. ((ENG sub) [V LIVE] BTS - BTS talking about V's new song 'Winter Bear', 2019)

"Looks like a winter bear
You sleep so happily
I wish you good night, good night, good night" - ("V (뷔) – Winter Bear")

Conclusion:

Kim Taehyung's music exemplifies the complex interplay of memory, emotion, and artistic expression. His reflective approach to nostalgia invites listeners to explore their personal journeys while embracing moments of longing and growth. Songs like *Inner Child* embody a dialogue with his younger self, offering hope and reconciliation, while pieces like *Blue & Grey* and *Scenery* portray the duality of melancholy and comfort. His fascination with winter serves as a metaphor for introspection and the beauty of transient moments, as seen in *Snow Flower* and *Winter Bear*.

Through his baritone voice, lyrical depth, and thematic focus, Taehyung creates a space for communal introspection, resonating across cultural and linguistic boundaries. His ability to transform personal vulnerability into universal messages underscores his role as a poignant storyteller and cultural icon. Be it his father's encouragement during the trainee days or his struggles during the pandemic, his songs translate his thoughts and experiences into universally relatable themes, fostering a sense of belonging among fans. By interweaving nostalgia with hope and self-discovery, Taehyung not only enriches the artistic landscape but also offers a profound



commentary on the human experience. His work continues to inspire and provide solace, affirming the timeless connection between art, memory, and identity.

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