



The Image of Tokyo in BTS's RM's Song "tokyo"

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Abstract. K-Pop includes music, choreography, and lyrics that contain meaningful messages. One of its messages is regarding mental health awareness. In this modern era, mental health is essential to fulfilling human health and well-being. However, this aspect has yet to gain attention in society. The K-Pop phenomenal group BTS leader, RM, showed interest in the issues of mental health awareness and it can be seen in some of his self-made songs, for example, his solo song "tokyo" which was released in 2018. This paper will analyze the lyrics of "tokyo" and aims to identify the mental health issues in the song. In this song, RM associates the city of Tokyo with hopelessness, loneliness, and alienation from his surroundings, which then causes depression. This paper will use the structural and dialectical method with the theory of semiotics by Michael Riffaterre. It will also include heuristic and hermeneutic reading and the invention of matrix and hypogram as Riffaterre suggested in his theory. The conclusion is RM's longing for his hometown has motivated him to write the lyrics of "tokyo".

Keywords: Semiotics, Michael Riffaterre, BTS, RM, tokyo

1 Introduction

In Korea, the development of popular culture can be traced to the 1980s during the rapid growth of the economic state. Because of that rapid growth, Korean people may access popular culture and entertainment. At the same time, the Korean political state changed rapidly. After the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in 1979, military dictator Chun Doo Hwan was throned as president. To remove the attention of Korean citizens who did not support Chun Doo Hwan's leadership, the Korean government started to promote television and the entertainment industry. [1]. The spreading of Korean culture worldwide is called the Korean Wave. Chinese media introduced the term Korean Wave itself around the early 2000s since Korean dramas were popular in China. [2]. Then since the middle 2000s, Korean Pop Music, called K-Pop has developed and become one of the aspects that spread Korean culture and lifestyle. These phenomena of the Korean Wave were supported by the spirit of nationalism in Korea. In Korea, nationalism is not considered a constraint, but rather a motivation. Koreans view globalization as an instrument with a nationalist agenda. The urge did not want to lose against Western culture and this eventually strengthened K-Pop development in Korea, even worldwide [3], [4].

One of the most popular K-pop musicians not only in Korea but also in the global world, is BTS. All members of BTS actively participate in music production, such as writing

lyrics and producing music. In their self-written lyrics, BTS has not hesitated to be different and talked about topics that were avoided by most K-Pop idols such as mental health issues and expressing their criticisms towards the music industry in Korea. Research on K-Pop has gradually become popular and succeeded in improving K-Pop's reputation in society. However, most of the research related to K-Pop focused on fans and the success of K-Pop as a phenomenon, for example, research to examine the impact of K-Pop in Romania [5]. Meanwhile, research that discusses K-pop music as a text has not been popular because of the stereotype attached to K-pop as a visual image product.

This research will analyze the lyrics of "tokyo" by the leader of BTS, RM, released in 2018, and identify the mental health issues in the song. This research will use the theory of semiotics by Michael Riffaterre. As stated by Riffaterre, the poem expresses concepts and things indirectly. There are three ways to express that indirectness: displacing, distorting, and creating meaning. In his theory, Riffaterre suggests two ways of reading which are consecutively conducted: heuristic reading and hermeneutic reading. Heuristic reading is held by investigating codes in the poems based on the signs in the empiric worlds and the dissonance between that language code in text and reality.

On the other hand, hermeneutic reading is dialectical reading from "part" to "whole". Then, it returns to "part" based on the convention of literature to find the potential of symbolic meaning. After the process of heuristic and hermeneutic reading, the following process is to identify the matrix and hypogram. Matrix and hypogram are indirectly stated in the poem [6].

2 Methods

This research will be using the qualitative method approach and analyze the song "tokyo" by RM, which was released in 2018. "tokyo" was chosen because of the indirect meaning of the lyrics and RM's point of view as a Korean in seeing a city in Japan, namely Tokyo then writing the lyrics in English has been a special point in this song. The collecting method for this research is a literature study with the following steps: listening to the track and reading the lyrics in the actual language, namely English, taking notes of the lyrics, and collecting secondary literature related to this research. The secondary literature used in this research includes books, journal articles, and articles from the internet. This research will be analyzed by using both structural and dialectical method. Firstly, the structural method is used to identify the dissonance between the text in the song and the reality. Moreover, the dialectical method was conducted from "part" of the song to the song as a "whole" based on the convention of literature to identify the matrix and hypogram of the song [6].

3 Result and Discussion

The song “tokyo” by RM was released in 2018 on the online streaming site Soundcloud as the first song in a mixtape *mono*. From the title itself “tokyo”, listeners may imagine that this track would describe the biggest city in Japan, Tokyo. Lyric (1) *Wake up in Tokyo* describes the reality and shows that someone in this lyric has woken up in Tokyo. Overall, this track describes someone who has many thoughts in his mind. Firstly, he feels unsure about his own identity. This can be seen in the lyric (2) *Feel like a torn soul/torso/tourist so*, which has unclear articulation whether he says *torn soul*, *torso*, or *tourist so*. In the middle of his awakening, he suddenly imagines death, a reality that every living thing will face someday through lyric (8) *And ash is the thing that someday we all should be*. After some time, he comes back to think about tomorrow, something that will surely come through lyric (9) *When tomorrow comes* and (10) *How different it's gonna be?*. At the end of the track, it is suddenly revealed that he has awakened at night instead of the morning, and he could not sleep anymore. This can be seen in lyric (12) *I can't sleep*. Another reality that can be seen at the end of the track is that he is not a Japanese, but rather a foreigner, because the reason he could not sleep anymore is he feels homesick which was shown in lyric (13) *Homesick, babe*.

However, some other lyrics make the above descriptions about reality not per the empiric world, such as lyric (3) *I see Pinocchio wearing a poncho*. This lyric is unsuitable with reality because in Tokyo there is no way a Pinocchio would appear wearing a poncho. Lyric (5) *Do I miss myself? Do I miss your face?* also describes discrepancy with reality. If someone is considered fit physically, there is no way someone can miss himself as he is always with himself. The last inconsistency can be seen through lyric (11) *Why do love and hate sound just the same to me?* because someone cannot love and hate others at the same specific time.

Through the heuristic reading above, the inconsistency between the text in the song and the reality is noticeable. The next step is hermeneutic reading according to the convention of literature. All of those inconsistencies explained above found their way out in lyric (14) *But I just wanna stay right next to you*. The person in the lyrics could not sleep because he felt homesick and longed for someone or something that he loved. The longingness was quite strong and is once again stated in the lyric (16) *I just wanna stay right next to you*. However, listeners may realize that the song “tokyo” does not specifically mention a person and gender the songwriter is yearning for. Therefore, it may become possible that longing and homesickness are not especially labeled to a person, but rather another thing.

Even though this track has a background in Tokyo, it does not actually describe Tokyo. Firstly, this is visible in the title. The official title of the track, “tokyo” is not written in

capital letters. Therefore, it shows that Tokyo mentioned in this song was not the denotative meaning of the city of Tokyo. Then, the songwriter, who is a Korean, wrote the lyrics about Tokyo, a city in Japan, neither in his native language, Korean, nor in Japanese, but rather in English, which was his second language. This is acceptable because in psychotherapy, a bilingual may switch the language to his less-proficient language during conversation to create a distance from the topic he is speaking of [7]. Besides, in the intro at 00:08 there is a sound of the train that shows busy vibes in Tokyo and the next sound at 00:10, there is a sound of wind chime. According to Asian Feng Shui, the sound of a wind chime can delay the movement of negative energy and lessen its effect [8]. The sound of a wind chime should have calmed the songwriter's heart. However, Tokyo is still a strange place and does not feel like home for him. Lyric (2) *Feel like a torn soul/torso/tourist* to show that feeling. As Riffaterre stated in his theory of semiotics, distorting meaning is shown through vague or multi-interpretative wording; however, all of those vague wordings in the lyric (2) end with similar meaning, namely someone's indefinite identity and alienation. The songwriter does not belong in his current place, Tokyo, as if he is an outsider or tourist. That feeling of detachment is related to depression. Someone who has depression symptoms tends to isolate himself from others and feel lonely. [9].

Besides, the feeling of detachment also makes him lifeless like a torn soul. Also, that feeling automatically makes him incomplete, merely a torso. The torso is an important part of the human body which includes the chest, abdomen, pelvis, and back. Most of the human's internal organs and backbone are in the torso [10]. The torso is one of the most crucial body parts, so it goes without saying that humans will not function well without a good torso. However, the torso cannot stand alone. Along with the head and other body parts, the torso has a crucial role in maintaining body metabolism so humans can survive. Human body parts that merely contain the torso would be limited in their activity and it can be said that they lose the essence of a human. The situation of incomplete body function can be related to the feeling of depression. Someone who has depression tends to feel like losing happiness so that they cannot function well in their daily life [11]. Therefore, it can be said that during his stay outside his hometown in Korea, although it is in Tokyo which was not far from Korea, the songwriter felt detached and yearned to come back to his hometown, as stated in the lyric (15) *If I could choose my dream* and (16) *I just wanna stay right next to you*.

The hermeneutic reading explained above makes some statements that are unsuitable with reality become possible. For example, lyric (3) *I see Pinocchio wearing a poncho* and (4) *That's me some time ago* refer to the children's story Pinocchio, a wooden puppet whose nose has gotten longer since he started lying after being caged in a bird cage [12]. The songwriter associates himself with Pinocchio because he also feels like being caged in his mind. RM as the songwriter has succeeded in reaching his dream to

be a musician. However, during the process, he may feel confined to various things such as routine and popularity. Popularity has consequences. As a result, he cannot decide on several notions by himself. He also cannot express his genuine feelings, so he has to live in falsehood to fulfill the public expectation. Besides, lyric (5) *Do I miss myself? Do I miss your face?* may also be possible. The songwriter is not specifically longing for someone, but rather missing himself from the past who could always be honest to himself. Lastly, lyric (11) *Why do love and hate sound just the same to me?* eventually might also be possible. Here, love and hate do not refer to the other person but rather to his job as a musician. RM as the songwriter and also the leader of BTS, as a matter of course, loves his job. However, he may also feel a little hate because of the consequences of his popularity.

The explanations above finally refer to a matrix that at the same time can be a hypogram for the song “tokyo”, namely a concept about yearning for a warm hometown and one’s true self. Tokyo is written as 東京 in Japanese Kanji and read as 동경 (Dong-kyeong) in Korean Hangul. The word “Dong-kyeong” has a homonym which means “yearning”. Therefore, “tokyo” in the title and the first lyric in this track is a wordplay, a metaphor for the feeling of longingness. RM as the songwriter associates the city of Tokyo with longingness for a home where he is welcomed as a true person without any judgment. He somehow felt lonely and hopeless because of this yearning.

These feelings of loneliness are reciprocal with the phenomenon “The Tokyo Desert of Loneliness” in Japan [13]. Tokyo is an enormous city with a lively and vibrant life. On the contrary, Tokyo is filled with lonely people. Loneliness has become a serious problem in Japan, as according to a survey of 20,000 people in Japan, 40% of them feel lonely. In Japan, it is not rare to hear news about people who die alone (*kodokushi*) without anybody knowing [14].

4 Conclusion

“tokyo” by BTS’s RM is not a song about the city of Tokyo in Japan but rather describes the process of a human to be an adult. This process has never been easy because it often follows with feelings that may influence a person’s mental health such as sadness, loneliness, and alienation. Those feelings may then cause anxiety or depression, either mild or severe. The feeling of homesickness and yearning for home has motivated RM to write the song. “tokyo” is one of RM’s ways to rest for a while from his busy life to contemplate and embrace all of his feelings, to find his true self finally.

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