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Narrative Cycles at Crossroads: BTS and Emergence of Conceptual Storytelling in Contemporary World Literature

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Abstract:

Recent debates in world literature progressively foreground the process of meaning-making situated in the circulation and mobility of stories, in which texts acquire meaning through their movement across languages, interpretive communities, and media forms. Thereupon, scholars like David Damrosch and Franco Moretti have reimagined world literature as no longer a fixed canon, but an entity exceedingly attentive to form, mode of transmission, and scale. Within this framework, the questions of narrative continuity and seriality are crucial for understanding contemporary storytelling practices that move beyond print. Building on narrative theory postulated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Frank Kermode, in addition to studies of lyric sequence and episodic forms, the present research aims to examine 'concept albums' as narrative cycles and modes of contemporary long-form storytelling. They are regarded as macrotexts, in which coherence arises from thematic sequencing, evolving narrative voice, and temporal progression. To demonstrate this, the research focuses on the album corpus of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS), a South Korean music group, whose body of work circulates transnationally and transculturally and is recognised for the members' active participation in songwriting and production. Their album corpus is read as a sequence of compositions in which the narrative arc unfolds across consecutive releases. Within this formal framework, the research also accounts for the role of literary and philosophical intertextuality in BTS's recorded output through the lens of Intertextual Theory (Kristeva; Genette), presenting such encounters as narrative textures instead of direct adaptations. Thus, by locating contemporary song-based narrative cycles within the prevailing dialogues in world literature and narrative studies, this research seeks to reconsider the conventional boundaries of literary forms and to highlight contemporary storytelling modes unfolding at the crossroads of music, world literature, narrative forms, and global circulation.

Keywords: World Literature, Narrative Cycles, Concept Albums, Intertextuality.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, debates around world literature depict a subtle shift from strict canons to the circulation and movement of narratives, where texts gain meaning through their mobility across languages, interpretive communities, and forms of media, rarely achieving a definitive end. Thereupon, scholars like Franco Moretti and David Damrosch have attempted a reconstitution of world literature as no longer a fixed canon, but as a dynamic system that is exceedingly attentive to form, mode of transmission, and scale (Moretti 2000; Damrosch 2003). In this context, meaning is created not just within individual literary texts. It emerges through their translation, transnational circulation, and reinterpretation, that is, through movement across cultural contexts.

Alongside these shifts, contemporary storytelling practices continue to expand beyond print media. They span across multiple media platforms and timeframes, prompting a re-examination of what long-form storytelling constitutes. While literary scholarship has traditionally favoured forms such as the epic, lyric poem, and the novel, modern narrative structures, especially from digital and musical media, remain fairly understudied within the frameworks of world literature (Moretti 2000).

Musical texts, within scholarly discourse, are still often examined as individual compositions rather than as components of an extended narrative structure, overlooking how music albums, and concept albums in particular, design cumulative coherence across sequences of songs and releases. Consequently, despite their narrative potential, the questions of narrative continuity and seriality, evolving voice, and temporal progression in album-based storytelling remain understudied in narratological and global literary studies.

This study contends that concept albums, similar to episodic narratives and lyric sequences in classic literature, lend themselves to being read as narrative cycles. That is, they can be treated as forms of contemporary long-form storytelling, where meaning is not derived

solely within the confines of individual tracks but develops cumulatively across sequences. Building on Kermode's understanding of narrative time and Bakhtin's ideas of dialogism, we undertake a qualitative narratological approach to study 'concept albums' as macro-texts that develop thematic coherence and narrative arcs across consecutive releases. The focus is on exploring the patterns of continuity, development, and change that only become clear when albums are considered in relation to each other. (Kermode 1967; Bakhtin 1981).

To illustrate this, we focus on the album corpus of Bangtan Sonyeondan (BTS), a South Korean music group, whose discography circulates transnationally, transculturally, and resonates across global youth cultures. We consider their musical corpus collectively as an evolving macro-text that sustains conceptual narrative continuity. Scholars have noted that BTS's albums strongly depict narrative progression: "Mapped across their catalog, the beats of [BTS's] underdog story manifest as a triumphant bildungsroman, unfolding from an idiosyncratic debut to providing their much-heralded artistic chops as songwriters, composers, and producers" (Ahn et al.3). Therein, we contend that BTS's albums represent a form of long-form conceptual storytelling that evolves across consecutive releases, highlighting the members' distinct narrative phases anchored on crisis and becoming, interiorisation and self-recognition, followed by identity integration and relational selfhood, and ultimately the phase of collective reflection.

Why BTS?

In *Bangtan Remixed: A Critical BTS Reader,* Ahn et al. claim, "Since their 2013 debut, BTS has become the most popular music act on the planet, with a passionate and unprecedented fandom" (3). Scholars further describe BTS as a "transnational actor whose influence spreads across cultures and media networks" (Rizkyata et al. 13). This extensive global circulation of their musical corpus, with over 105.1 million units sold till date (Vieira), allows us to locate them within the nexus of world literature and gives significance to album-based storytelling.

Moreover, across successive releases, BTS has produced a sustained oeuvre which scholars describe as “a classic, coming-of-age narrative that runs through their body of work” (Ahn et al.14) marked by identifiable phases of narrative development mentioned earlier. These phases can be identified by examining thematic focuses, tonal changes and an evolving narrative voice across the album arc. The study, however, does not segregate these phases into separate categories but as chapters of an ongoing narrative that evolves as it actively participates in ongoing global exchanges.

The next section lays out the theoretical framework for the study of BTS’s album corpus as conceptual narrative cycles.

2. Theoretical Framework

Recent studies of narrative form identify that narrative meaning often stems across cycles, sequences and extended forms rather than being limited to an isolated autonomous text (Greene 1991; Bakhtin 1981; Moretti 2000 and others). This cumulative construction of coherence and meaning is also demonstrated in classic literary traditions such as the lyric sequence. As Roland Greene points out, in a lyric sequence, “each poem gains meaning from its relation to the others” (12). Such relational understanding of narratives provides a strong scaffolding for the study of contemporary storytelling practices across time and media.

The term ‘narrative cycle’, within the framework of this study, may be defined as a narrative form where meaning-making emerges across multiple units that are interconnected seamlessly. In this form, it is through temporal mobility, variations, and repetition that coherence is generated. This cyclic narrative style leads to the derivation of what can be perceived as long-form storytelling wherein the readers are encouraged to follow the evolving arc across time and successive texts.

Bakhtin’s Dialogism and Narrative Voice

The concept of dialogism and temporality by Mikhail Bakhtin offers a key perspective for studying long-form narratives. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* he describes the novel form as being marked by "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" (6). That is, the emergence of meaning is contextual and occurs on account of multiple voices interacting with each other rather than being situated within singular, isolated expressions. Furthermore, according to him, "the word in language is half someone else's" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 293). By this, he implies that there exists a clear and inherent relationship between temporal, social, cultural, and historical conditions and the shaping of a narrative discourse.

When this perspective is extended to music album-based storytelling, it promotes a comprehensive understanding of the evolving narrative arc wherein the narrative voice is dynamic and the change in perspective, tone, and emotional register can be clearly identified across subsequent releases.

Kermode's Narrative Temporality

The understanding of coherence in long-form narratives is further scaffolded by Frank Kermode's description of 'narrative temporality'. In his seminal work, *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode proposes that humans are "bound to live in the middest" (7), implying that 'incompleteness' and uncertainty are the characteristic features of the entire human experience. Within this conceptual context, he suggests that narratives are generally unable to provide a clear sense of closure. He refers to them as "concord-fictions" and postulates that these narratives tend to employ recurring patterns of crisis and expectations to make this uncertainty seem intelligible and offer an interpretive order that unfolds temporally (35).

When this framework is applied to album cycles, it offers a significant insight into how emotional crisis and thematic development occurs and meaning tends to accumulate across sequential releases.

Concept Albums and World Literature

When located within the contemporary debates in world literature, these narratological concerns become even more significant. For instance, in *What is World Literature?,* David Damrosch defines world literature as "not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading" (21). By this, he postulates that when a text moves beyond the context of its origin and through the process of translations, reception, and reinterpretation acquires new meanings, it effectively becomes a part of the global canon. Therefore, world literature, according to him, is defined not by the origin of the texts but by their movement across time, language, and culture.

Franco Moretti takes this perspective further by focusing on 'larger formal systems' and 'global patterns' rather than individual isolated texts. He urges for literary approaches that move beyond close literary reading to those which would be attentive to the structure and scale of literary forms and how they evolve across global networks. As in "Conjectures on World Literature," he argues that "world literature is not an object, it's a problem", similar to the idea of a collective riddle or puzzle to be solved in an ongoing effort (Moretti 55). Thus, his emphasis on scale and systemic analysis encourages the mapping of the evolution of narrative structures across cultural networks and offers insight into the study of serial musical storytelling as a system that operates transnationally.

Intertextuality

The concept of intertextuality further scaffolds this framework. Julia Kristeva famously describes a particular text as "a mosaic of quotations" ("Word, Dialogue and Novel" 66). By this, she emphasizes that meaning is produced not through isolated originality but images as a result of the relationship among texts. Gérard Genette, in his seminal work *Palimpsests,* develops this idea further by defining 'trans-textuality' as "all that sets the text in a relationship,

whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1). In contemporary musical storytelling, such intertextual engagements tend to function as 'conceptual resonances. They effectively shape the emotional tone, deepen the thematic interpretation and offer ethical reflections rather than being direct adaptations. With reference to BTS, some scholars describe their artistic output as "a mode of intertextuality laced with self-reference, homage, appropriation, and critique" wherein motifs and themes are consciously recontextualized and reframed across successive releases (Ahn et al. 6).

Together, these frameworks inform the present study's treatment of BTS's concept albums as narrative cycles, that is, as legitimate sites of long-form storytelling characterised by evolving voice, temporal progression, cumulative meaning, and intertextual resonance. Furthermore, by situating these narratives within the framework of world literature studies, they also offer the conceptual grounding for how contemporary musical narratives operate across mediums through global circuits of circulation and reception.

The next section offers an analysis of the narrative phases that structure these album cycles.

3. Narrative Phases in the BTS Album Corpus: Long-form Storytelling

When studied as a long-form narrative cycle, BTS's musical corpus can be understood as gradually developing through four broad narrative phases outlined earlier: crisis and becoming, interiorisation and self-recognition, identity integration and relational selfhood, and collective reflection. These phases can be perceived across four major eras of BTS's discography: The School era, The Youth era, The Love Yourself & Map of the Soul era, and the BE era. These album cycles do not stand in isolation, but evolve from one another intentionally to develop a narrative which acquires multiple layers of meaning with each release. Thus, they

function within a larger storytelling structure wherein members and songwriters aim to convey their honest and relatable experiences as they face growing pains.

Phase I: The School Era: Crisis and Becoming

The School era (2013-2014) comprising the *2 Kool for Skool*, *Skool Luv Affair*, *O! RUL82*?, *Dark and Wild* albums, broadly correspond to the phase of crisis and becoming. This era of their music embodies the concept of 'a defiant teenager'. The main thematic concerns are resisting social bias and oppression. In their debut song, "No More Dream", they urge young teens like themselves to defy society's rigid ideas and expectations of success by following their dreams, however small they may seem. The lyrics rail angrily against the expectations of working themselves to the bone just to get into a good college and get a government job: "Adults and parents forcefully instill dreams that are molded/ No. 1 dream job… a government employee?/ […] Rebel against this hell-like society, give your dream a special pardon" (lines 34-35,38). They also chafe against the Korean entertainment industry boxing them as 'mere idols' and dismissing their identity as 'true' rappers and hip-hop artists.

This era is characterised by an angry, angsty and emotionally volatile tone and projects the arrogance and blustering confidence of youth. They cockily express a desire to prove the naysayers wrong and succeed in their chosen path. The narrative voice in these albums is reactive to and blatantly confronts external pressures, authority and expectations; it is intense and urgent, further amplified by the heavy hip hop beats which were the signature of this era. Such thematic confrontation alludes to Kermode's idea that narratives tend to be born in moments of crisis and mould the trajectory of its interpretation as the story unfolds.

Phase II: The Youth Era: Interiorisation and Self-Recognition

While the earlier era establishes the narrative crisis within the narrative cycle, The Youth era (2015-2017) with the albums *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life Pt 1 and Pt 2*,

Young Forever, *Wings*, and *You Never Walk Alone*, depicts the movement from youthful emotional vulnerability towards interiorisation and self-recognition. The original Korean title for *The Most Beautiful Moment in Life* album duology is '화양연화' (Hwa Yang Yeon Hwa) symbolising the fleeting and transient nature of youth. The albums thematically explore the anxieties often associated with the impermanence of youth, a desperate desire to hold on to a moment that feels too good to be true, a search for identity as newly emerged adults into a larger and more confusing world outside the rigid structures of school, an uncertainty about the future, which evolves into a more hopeful and determined leap towards this future. The lyrics of "Intro: The Most Beautiful Moment in Life" convey these anxieties: "What I throw towards the rim/ are countless thoughts and worries about life/ Though I pretend that I know the world, my body is still not mature" (lines 6-8).

While the tone of the School era albums is remarkably angry and cocky, the Youth era albums shift to a more pensive tone, as the members grow from hormonal teens to anxious and uncertain young adults. The narrative voice also turns inward as the crisis has turned internal, making it more reflective and confessional. This shift in narrative voice from external crisis to inward reflection demonstrates Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic evolution of identity (293). This shift is further underscored by the sound evolving from the heavy hip hop beats to gentler, softer ballads and nostalgic pop-R&B, highlighting the introspective themes of the lyrics.

Phase III: The Love Yourself & Map of the Soul Era: Identity Integration and Relational Selfhood

This era (2017-2019) extends the introspective movement initiated in the earlier phase into a more stable understanding of the self which is relational to their identity as 'idols', others, society and the world at large. This identity integration occurs gradually through reworking their experiences of love, loss, responsibility and self-acceptance.

This album cycle, comprising *Love Yourself: Her, Tear,* and *Answer, Map of the Soul (MOTS): Persona,* and *7,* represents the members evolving into young men and their experiences with the phases of love. The album cycle evolves from the excitement of love, to heartbreak, to self-love, to philosophising their existence and identity as humans and artists. This development highlights how meaning accumulates across album sequences rather than in an isolated text by revisiting and reinterpreting thematic concerns introduced in the earlier albums.

The era turns more thematically introspective. While the youth era was marked by anxieties and uncertainties, this one is surer and firmer, giving the sense that the members have grown into their identities. The song "Intro: Persona" embodies this reckoning with their evolving identities and the persona they show the world:

> The 'me' who I remember and who people know
> The 'me' who I created by myself to speak my mind
> Yeah, I might have been deceiving myself, I might have been lying
> But, I'm not ashamed of it, this is the map of my soul (lines 45-48).

This questioning of the self also reflects the philosophical concerns that seep through the entire album. Thereby, it reflects Bakhtin's notion of identity formation wherein, the 'self' emerges through 'dialogue' with multiple voices, experiences, and social contexts (1981).

The *MOTS: Persona* album borrows its title from Jung's concepts of 'persona' and 'shadow', effectively illustrating the intertextual dynamics that help deepen the thematic resonance and explores the themes of a compromise between one's true inner self and the mask one projects to the world. In the conclusion to this cycle, *MOTS: 7*, the lyrics reflect an acceptance and embracing of one's whole and true self – the 'id' and the 'shadow' together. The song "Black Swan" from this album depicts the artist's struggle with the fear of losing their passion for their art. In the visual art film accompanying this song symbolically showcases the

principal dancer confronting this shadow of ‘creative paralysis’. Towards the end of the film, the dancer overcomes the shadow, which transforms into wings as they ascend, representing the artist’s reconciliation with their identity and fear of losing artistic passion. Thus, it becomes a motif that reinforces the psychological conflict explored in the lyrics.

This understanding of BTS’s identity is constructed relationally to society rather than in isolation. The narrative voice characterizing this era is reflective, yet more stable compared to the Youth era and shows strong ethical awareness. Thus, within the larger narrative arc, this phase offers a semblance of equilibrium wherein, the earlier crisis, though not completely resolved, gets incorporated into an understanding of the ‘self’ that is reflective and ethically aware.

Phase IV: BE Era: Pandemic Disruptions and Collective Reflection

The most recent era is the BE era (2020 - 2021), comprising a studio album *BE* and 3 singles - “Dynamite”, “Butter”, and “Permission to Dance”. This era extends the narrative arc into the phase of collective reflection. Here, the narrative voice shifts from individual self-understanding to that of shared human experience and solidarity.

The existence of this era disrupts the conceptualisation of the linear narrative cycle of their albums while also reinforcing it as it reacts in real time to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption aids in underscoring the nature of narrative cycles as open-ended systems that effectively respond to changing social, cultural, and political contexts. Furthermore, it highlights the pulse of BTS’s narrative storytelling- authentic representation of the evolving self and identity through the universal language of music. It is marked by a desire to offer and share comfort during a time filled with turmoil, fear and uncertainty urging the narrative voice to shift towards collective empathy, reassurance and solidarity, while locating

their personal experiences within the larger global framework. The lyrics of the title track "Life Goes On" embody this feeling of offering comfort:

> With "annyeong"[1] that I always say to start and finish the day,
> let's thread today and tomorrow together again
> Although everything is paused, don't hide in the dark
> because the light will shine again (lines 39-42)

The other songs in this album alternate between bright, fun songs of hope like "Dynamite" and "Butter", and emotional melancholic ones like "Blue and Grey", lamenting the loss of connection and loneliness felt during the pandemic. The song "Fly to My Room" expresses the feeling of being trapped during the lockdown: "I want to leave, any way / There's no way / This room is all I have" (lines 15-17). This responsiveness to contemporary events illustrates how their musical narrative circulates across global cultural frameworks, addressing shared experiences that resonate even transnationally and transculturally. Thus, within the larger narrative arc, the BE era showcases the moment wherein the 'self' from the earlier phases stabilizes and transforms personal narratives into collective reflection.

4. Intertextual Resonance and Narrative Continuity

Self-referential Structures and Narrative Continuity

While the narrative phases explored in the previous section organise BTS's musical corpus, these phases are also closely interlinked through recurring motifs, self-referential elements, and thematic continuity within the corpus. As the members themselves grow and evolve through the various stages of life, their album's themes and concepts evolve alongside them in a 'künstlerromanesque'[2] progression.

While these themes are meant to be an authentic reflection of BTS's own emerging selves, the conceptual structuring of these album cycles is not incidental or haphazard; there is a clear intentionality and deliberateness to their organisation. This is exemplified by 'The BTS

Universe'– a multimedia collection of books, letters, concept videos, concept art that consciously weave these music texts together into a seamless storytelling framework.

Within this broader narrative structure, the phases remain interlinked through recurring motifs such as fire, sea, masks, mirrors, youth, and journey etc., self-referential elements like their earlier songs, visuals, music videos, and lyrics, and thematic continuities which carry themselves across each subsequent era. This conscious self-referencing further reinforces narrative continuity, while also highlighting the evolution of self-identity and creating a rich tapestry of self-sustaining layers of meaning which is revisited, reinterpreted and transformed across successive releases.

Intertextuality and Cultural Resonance

These rich layers of meaning which are a result of internal narrative continuity are further enriched by the albums' dialogue with global literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions. These dialogues venture beyond mere adaptations into a larger field of cultural resonance with global artistic and intellectual discourses. A notable example of this is observed in the music video (MV) for "Blood Sweat & Tears" (2016), which depicts a transition from adolescence to adulthood as a literal plunge into the delights and lures of art and passion while visually referencing luminaries of Western culture such as Michelangelo, Hermann Hesse, Paul Klee, and Bruegel. It employs these visuals as motifs to depict the tensions between temptation, desire, and self-discovery.

In "Am I Wrong" (2016) BTS samples Keb' Mo's 1994 song by the same name reiterating the dialogue questioning and criticizing political apathy, contextualising the lyrics to reference problems in South Korean society and the world at large. Similarly, in the albums *MOTS Persona* and *MOTS 7* they centre the theme of the album around Carl Jung's concepts of 'shadow' and 'persona' to explore questions of showing the world one's true self or presenting

a mask or shadow. Another striking instance is “Magic Shop” (2018), a song referencing Dr. James R. Doty’s memoir *Into the Magic Shop*, which explores using mindfulness and compassion to transform fear into positivity. In this context, the lyrics of the song symbolize ‘the magic shop’ as a refuge created by BTS for their fans, offering healing and mutual support.

Such intertextual and cultural resonance lends more interpretive depth allowing each interpretation to become more meaningful within global cultural networks, effectively highlighting Kristeva’s notions of intertextual nature of texts wherein meaning emerges through interaction with other cultural forms. This transnational movement of BTS’s music also serves as a feature of contemporary world literature. Furthermore, these references are also actively interpolated by their global fans, the ARMY, a diverse interpretive community from around the world. Thus, BTS’s oeuvre becomes a site of negotiation between the artists, the text, and the listeners, where personal emotional experiences are prioritised over fixed interpretations, juxtaposing it with Damrosch’s idea of interpretation and reinterpretation as a feature of contemporary world literature.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that BTS’s album corpus can be read as contemporary conceptual storytelling that operates through serial, multimodal, and globally circulating forms, mapping an evolving narrative arc across successive releases where meaning emerges cumulatively through seriality, cultural resonance, and dialogue. In this sense, BTS’s discography functions not as a collection of closed texts but as chapters in an ongoing story, as BTS themselves sing in “Yet To Come”, “A new chapter / Every moment is my new best” (lines 38-39). In conclusion, this research provides an avenue for literary scholarship to reconsider the conventional literary boundaries and explore how contemporary storytelling expands literary possibilities at the crossroads of music, popular culture, and literature.

Notes

1. The word ‘anneyong’ in Korean is used to say both ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’.
2. ‘Künstlerroman’ is a sub category of bildungsroman which translates to an artist's novel, used to describe the journey of an artist to growth and maturity.

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