

MARLENA OLEKSIUK
Wrocław University

North and South Korean Issues in 20th-Century Literature

Abstract

Korean literature has its roots in the past. First of all, it is related to Confucian ideology and, secondly, it is connected to the division of Korea into North and South. The result is that writers are also divided in this way. The history of both countries is marked by turbulent changes, which have shaped their national psyche. The Japanese occupation and the Korean War, which tore the nation apart, surely bore a great influence on its literature. Moreover, the democratic uprisings of the 1980s also had a vast influence on modern Korean writers. This article will introduce the most important modern Korean writers whose works reflect the turbulence of the 20th-century.

Keywords: modern, literature, North Korean, ideology, war, psyche

Introduction

Modern Korean literature is becoming a major player on the world literary scene. Not only history but also trends related to contact with Americans in the South had an impact on national writing. Because Korea began to trade with America, western culture arrived in the country. Nowadays North Korean literature is very different from literature in the South. Writers and poets who live in North Korea are under tight control from the state, and so their texts glorify their country. Those writers who fled the country mention violence, dictatorship, torture, starvation and other sufferings they experienced while living in North Korea.

The main body

Among the North Korean writings are works such as: *A Tale of Music* (음악의 이야기) by Kwang Kwi-Mi published in *Joseon Munhak* (조선 문학) in 2003, North Korea's official magazine and describes the period following the Korean War. The story is about two young Korean brothers who live in Japan. The family's poverty forced them to return to their homeland of North Korea. Their dire financial situation means that they have to work in a quarry. One of the brothers decides to devote his life to the state in the

belief that everything good in his life happens thanks to the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung. The story focuses on North Korean nationalism and the influence of *juche*¹ on the North Korean nation. An analysis of Korean literature requires some review of the nation's politics. The political leadership is infused with the values of communism. It is worth mentioning that at that time, after the Korean War, many Koreans lived in Japan, where as foreigners they met many hardships. During this period North Korea started a reconstruction process, for which it needed manpower.

In 1958 some of the young Koreans living in Japan wrote to Kim Il-Sung for permission to return to their homeland. Between 1958 and 1967, 88,000 people left Japan for North Korea. The story's focus on North Korean nationalism is representative of the mood of the nation under Kim Il-Sung, who assumed control of Korea upon its creation in 1948 and continued as the leader of North Korea following the Korean War. (Kang 2012: 2)

The Aquariums of Pyongyang by Kang Chol-hwan (강철환) and Pierre Rigoulot. Kang Chol-hwan is the first survivor of the North Korean concentration camp to escape the *hermit kingdom* and tell his story to the world. He was imprisoned in Yodok² concentration camp for 10 years. First he fled the country and lived in China, then he moved to South Korea. 'The Aquariums of Pyongyang' is about life in Yodok concentration camp in North Korea. At the beginning the author together with Pierre Rigoulot describes Kang's new life in South Korea; this is followed by a brief description of the history of both North and South Korea after the Korean War in 1953. The story then develops the topic of Kang's family fortune. Before their emigration to North Korea Kang's family were living in Japan and then they moved to North Korea at the behest of Kang's communist grandmother. When Kang was nine years old, his grandfather was imprisoned because of suspected activity against the country. Because the policy at the time was to imprison all the criminal's family members, the whole of Kang's family had to spend ten years in Yodok concentration camp. During that time they suffered from starvation, diseases, torture, forced labour and witnessed many atrocities, such as public executions. In the book Kang mentions that in the camp he met Pak Seung-zin, a member of the North Korean football squad, in the 1966 FIFA World Cup. Kang claims that Pak and other members were imprisoned after returning from the tour. Later, in the documentary movie 'The Game of Their Lives' in which Pak was interviewed, he denied that there had been any retribution. In any event, Kang's family was released from the camp after Kang's grandfather's death. At the end of the book the author describes in detail his escape to China and attempts to seek asylum before coming to South Korea.

Originally the book was published in French in 2000, then translated into English in 2001 and finally translated into Korean. The book is deemed to be testimony to the hardships and atrocities experienced by the thousands of people still detained in the gulags in North Korea today. Scholars claim that the book is part historical document, part horror story, part memoir, part political tract; it is certainly a story about a young man's personal suffering, to which he finally gives eye-witness proof. In the book there are also many interesting descriptions of people's instincts:

1 *Juche* is the official ideology of North Korea, described by the government as "Kim Il-sung's original, brilliant and revolutionary contribution to national and international thought". It postulates that "man is the master of his destiny", that the Korean masses are to act as the "masters of the revolution and construction" and that by becoming self-reliant and strong, a nation can achieve true socialism.

2 *Yodok* concentration camp, officially named: *Kwan-li-so* (penal labor colony).

People who are hungry don't have the heart to think about others. Sometimes they can't even care for their own family. Hunger quashes man's will to help his fellow man. I've seen fathers steal food from their own children's lunchboxes. As they scarf down the corn they have only one overpowering desire: to placate, if even for just one moment, that feeling of insufferable need. I once believed man was different from other animals, but Yodok showed me that reality doesn't support this opinion. In the camp, there was no difference between man and beast, except maybe that a very hungry human was capable of stealing food from its little ones while an animal, perhaps, was not. (Kang 2005: 115)

This is Paradise!: My North Korean Childhood by Kang Hyok is an autobiography about life in North Korea, a country locked away from the rest of the world. The plot focuses on the communist school and daily life of a society held under rigid rules. Kang tells of school friends, who drop out one by one, because they are too weak to attend school. He mentions starvation, public executions, labour camps and the effort to survive everyday life in North Korea. Yet this appears normal, because in comparison to the rest of the world, it is paradise! The author describes access to worldwide information:

In our house, as in all the others, there was a loudspeaker that delivered broadcasts from the capital, Pyongyang. They told you the news, always devoted to the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il, alternated with songs composed in his honour or to the glory of his father. We also had a radio that received these broadcasts, which was fixed by the authorities to that single station. A radio imported from abroad had to be taken to a security office where it was switched to the official station so that we wouldn't hear any other programmes. We were fortunate as we also had a TV. As we were close to the Chinese border, we were able to pick up the Beijing channels. That was forbidden, so we did it at night, with the curtains drawn. Chinese television gave us an incredible view of the world. There were cars everywhere, rich people who ate all the time, lovely homes piled with household appliances. That said, we were suspicious of these pictures, because North Korean television also produced pseudo-documentaries that showed us as prosperous and happy, which we certainly weren't. (Kang 2017: 58)

North Korean propaganda is fed by the country's government. Kang's childhood and his courageous escape from the country to South Korea through China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand is a remarkable story of *paradise*. The Kang's family lived in Onsong, only twelve kilometres from Chinese border, so they made the decision to flee the country across the Tumen River, still frozen in some places at that time of year: "I swam without looking back, I fought my way between the blocks of ice, my body freezing, my heart beating a hundred times a second" Rowland (2011).

Being in South Korea means to Kang that he is lucky, but there are also some difficulties. Because of his accent and stunted body he is identified as coming from the North. He also suffers from the common paradox found among refugees. His happiness at staying in a free country where he has a full stomach is mixed with nostalgia for the nightmare landscape and friends who stayed in North Korea. The other paradox is that he is treated in different ways; sometimes South Koreans treat him sympathetically, sometimes he is a target for mockery. He said that it is not easy to live with such experiences in life.

In the book there are many photos and drawings by Kang himself, depicting scenes of daily life in his hometown Onsong, including public executions, emaciated corpses lying on the street and many other horrific stories.

Kim Suki is a Korean American writer, born in Seoul, who emigrated to the United States. She had worked as an English teacher at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, after which she wrote several meaningful books about North Korea including: *Translating Poverty and Pain*, *The Good Student in*

North Korea, The Dear Leader's Heinous Act, Great Leadership, Tales Told Out of School in Pyongyang Cause Stir, A visit to North Korea, Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite.

The most touching novel among them is *Tales Told Out of School in Pyongyang Cause Stir*. Her memoir may have provoked even more anger in North Korea than she might have thought. She broke the promise not to write anything about her experiences in the country. The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology is fenced and heavily guarded. Kim secretly took notes when she was teaching at University. It is unclear if the institution has suffered any repercussions as a result of the book.

Ms. Kim said she would furtively scribble memorable quotes and anecdotes, destroy any paper notes after transcribing them secretly onto her laptop, then copy the transcriptions to thumb drives and erase them from the laptop. She wore the thumb drives around her neck like pieces of jewelry, she said, or stashed them in the garbage can in her residence on campus. (Kang 2009)

All her books on North Korea offer a vast amount of information about the lives of North Korean people, which are kept secret from the whole world. In spite of Kim Suki's being observed by North Korean authorities, she gained a great deal of information from the country. In the book *Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite* the author describes a chilling scene involving students marching in two straight lines, singing praises to Kim Jong-Il and North Korea: *Without you, there is no motherland. Without you, there is no us.*

She also discusses how the dictator influences every aspect of North Koreans' lives, writing that at the University there are portraits of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jeong-Il on every single wall. All her letters to the family were read by censors; she also could not trust her colleagues at work. Kim Suki discovered that her students could lie perfectly, while at the same time 'they offer Suki tantalizing glimpses of their private selves—their boyish enthusiasm, their eagerness to please, the flashes of curiosity that have not yet been extinguished'. The author wonders how to hint at the existence of a world beyond their own in such exotic activities as travelling, surfing on the Internet, or even about electoral democracy and other ideas forbidden in the country, where there is a risk of torture and execution as punishment for disloyalty. The book is extremely interesting in its descriptions of people's lives in a country which is the most unknown in the world, and where people are slaves in and to their own nation.

In addition, it is worth mentioning a book by Barbara Demick, an American journalist. *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea* is a book consisting of interviews with refugees from Chongjin in North Korea. Demick interviewed more than 100 defectors and writes in detail about their everyday lives in North Korea, including hardships such as lack of electricity, which is common in the country, chronic starvation and so on. The author also presents the absurdity of life in North Korea through anecdotes detailing the struggle with starvation: "[a]long with rice and corn, soybeans have been banned from the market with the absurd explanation that they might be taken into China and resold to the enemy in South Korea" (Demick 2010: 287).

Characters in the book are described in detail; the main figures are Mrs. Song – a pro-regime housewife, Oak-hee – Mrs. Song's rebellious daughter, Mi-ran – daughter of a kaolin miner, Jun-sang – a student, Dr. Kim – a doctor with relatives in China. Dr. Kim is particularly interesting, because she experiences 'a stark revelation'. Moreover, the doctor considers herself as an ardent loyalist to North Korean socialism. On the other hand, as a doctor she is conscious that her patients suffer from chronic starvation, that in the hospital there is lack of modern or even basic medicine, that there is bribery and corruption. She also feels that the country needs her, as her skills are in demand and she is of a higher

social class than other people. “Her hospital became so strapped that it remained unheated, bandages were fashioned from cut-up bedding” (Demick 2010: 287).

The title of the book comes from the children’s theme song of the 1970s North Korean film *We Have Nothing to Envy in the World* (세상에 부림 없으라). Barbara Demick’s book was awarded the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction by the BBC, and it was also a non-fiction finalist for the National Book Awards in 2010.

Further books on the topic of North Korea highlight themes such as starvation, street executions, torture, a lack of electricity and access to the global Internet or TV, and admiration for the nation’s Great Leader. The other world is shown in books on South Korea, where the influence of American culture and fast industrialisation caused by the economic boom are prominent. South Korea is now one of the richest countries in the world. It is obvious that a comparison between North and South is impossible. The literary themes are also different, as there are varying factors which influence the lives of people in South Korea.

Kyung-Sook Shin’s (신경숙) novel *Please look after mom* has been translated and published in 22 countries around the world. The writer is the first South Korean woman to win the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012 for this novel, which concerns a mother’s disappearance and her family’s search for her. All her relatives realise her importance after she disappears. In the first chapter they seem to confess all their sins and faults to the missing mother. Four characters make up the story: the mother, her husband who lost his wife during a journey in Seoul, and their son and daughter. The daughter realises how distant she was from her mother in their daily life; they lived together but were like strangers. The author writes in the book that: “[e]ither a mother and daughter know each other very well or they are strangers” (Shin 2011: 25).

The son suffers in realising how much his mother had done for him. She had dedicated her life to the family while they did not notice her in theirs. The story is very modern in demonstrating the fast pace of our lives and our ability to forget about our family members. Nowadays, people tend to focus on their careers while neglecting the rest of their lives. Koreans now have the longest work week. Today they are behind the Japanese in suffering from work-and-stress-related ailments and families often do not see each other despite living in the same house. And yet according to Confucian philosophy the mother’s role is paramount. It is she who dedicates her life to the family, her husband and children. Her responsibility is to take care of her children and their education, to support her husband and manage the household. She is nearly invisible to members of her family. The Confucian model of the family assign roles to the members: the husband is head of the family and he has to provide for them financially, so is able – and even obliged – to develop his career. Many Korean husbands do not take part in family time after the child is born. Koreans say that it is a time only for women: the wife and mother-in-law. Children have many duties and are in education from a very early age. After kindergarten or school they have additional activities as sport, playing the piano or learning languages and other subjects. The mother and wife is a secondary family member. She is the person who stands in the shadow of the family, but she plays an important role doing everything else in their lives. The aim of novel is possibly to demonstrate what can happen when a mother disappears and how important she is. In her absence the rest of the family members unite and get to know each other. Kyung-Sook Shin has been honoured with the Manhae Literature Prize, the Dong-in Literature Prize and the Yi-Sang Literary Prize as well as France’s Prix de l’Inaperçu. The book brought her great fame.³

3 Shin (2012): *The 1st Korean to Win Man Asian Literary Prize*. The Chosunilbo, english.chosun.com [date of access: 23.11.2017].

Oh Jeonghui (오영희) is the most outstanding modern author in South Korea. Her works have been translated into English, French, Russian and Japanese. This talented writer seems to know more about the female psyche than other writers. The heroines of her stories are usually women in their thirties and forties who are limited to the roles of housewives and who feel the emptiness and pointlessness of their lives. Each of these characters live in a cycle of daily routine and unfulfilled dreams. The limitations in their lives cause a sense of apathy and inability to express their feelings outside of a futile gesture of rebellion. The problems that Oh Jeonghui explores are complex, provocative and inspire reflection; they also do not always correspond to the mentality of Koreans. Her works are more about typical Korean wives who feel abandoned in their luxurious lives in which they are only spouses of wealthy men (Korean Culture and Arts Foundation 1996: 364).

Another author, Kim Youngha (김영하), born in 1968, represents the 21st century young generation of Koreans. In 1996 he won the literary prize Munhakdongne for his debut novel *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, and in 1999 his story *Your Tree* was awarded the Modern Literature Prize. In 2004 he won three major prizes: the Dongina literary prize for his novel *Black Flower*, the literary prize of Hwang Sunweon (황순원) for *Treasure Ship* and the Insanga Literary Prize (이산가) for *Brother has Returned*. Kim Youngha's works are devoid of national characteristics and take into account the reactions of the foreign reader while showing life in general in all its ironies. For this reason his works appeal not only to a Korean but also a foreign readership; a collection of his short stories has just been published in Poland:

Kim Young-ha is often judged as a writer skilled in rendering 1990's urban sensibilities. Featuring a professional suicide assistant as a protagonist, *I Have a Right to Destroy Myself* pioneers a new realm in the genre of fantasy literature; stories contained in *Summoning* and *What Happened to the Man Caught in the Elevator Door?* tackle computer games, plastic art, cult movies, hostage situations, homosexuality, and other subject matters not commonly explored in Korean literature, which are becoming a part of modern reality. Kim's stories utilize unfamiliar or even strange settings to explore the by-product of modern capitalism and urban culture, such as alienation and inability to communicate, extreme narcissism and its limitations. (Montgomery 2016)

The absolute bestseller of the last year is a book by the Korean author Lee Hyun-Kyung (이현경) *Klara and Hauni* (클라라와 하우니). A fairy tale entitled Klara and Hauni is maintained in the Korean aesthetic, introducing the youngest readers to the oneiric mood and a hazy dream-fantasy. This beautifully illustrated story is about the friendship between two children from two different cultures-the West and the East. The first is represented by Klara and the other by Hauni. The author maintains that through their friendship the children overcome the thousands of miles between Asia and Europe. Young readers can see in Hauni a Korean girl; Klara is Polish and from a seaside town. The story begins with the startling discovery that it may be only a dream of a small Asian girl. Hauni looks at a pitcher full of treasure suddenly sees in it the face of Klara. The girls very quickly overcome the barriers of distance between their lives in two different time zones. The power of imagination gives life to the dreams of exploring the unknown countries and strengthens the girls' curiosity in the world. At some point, Klara invites Hauni to search for shells together. This is a book about the enormous power of dreams and the value of interpersonal relationships. Complementing the text are subtle presentations of butterflies, dragonflies and stars. Delicate copyright illustrations perfectly capture the extraordinary climate of sleep in the friendship of Klara and Hauni. Or maybe it was not a dream? Two little girls. Completely different or similar? For sure they have different

eyes, different hair, meet in the book at different times of day, live in a different cultures and on separate continents, but their sensitivity and dreams are similar. Hauni is a Korean who sees in a glass pitcher as in the magic ball Klara, a European. Together they dive for a beautiful conch shell – a symbol of unity, friendship, community. Hauni's dream comes true – thanks to Klara she meets the underwater world. By meeting with Klara she thinks about children from other continents with whom she could make friends. Klara and Hauni is a story about travel to two different worlds on the part of children from two different countries and cultures (Lee 2010).

It is absolutely worth to mention about Park Wan-suh (박완서, 1931–2011) a South Korean writer. She noticed one of the most important problem in Korean society, having a male descendant. *The Dreaming Incubator* is her work about a woman forced to undergo a series of abortions until she can deliver a male child. She focused on the problems among Korean society, problems of Korean family, many of her works concerning women in patriarchal society. Park also was writing about a trauma of Korean war and its aftermath. Many of these stories reflect her own experiences. *The Naked Tree, Mother's Garden, Mother's Stake* I all these works are linked by the problem of families being torn apart by war. She has won many literary Korean awards.

There is also another writer, who addresses the issue of the family separation after Korean war, Hwang Sok-yong (황석영) born in 1943 in Manchukuo during the period of Japanese rule. When discussing the division of Korea, Hwang felt homeless. Because of that he wrote about home symbolic or real, because he claimed that home is not simply a place where you were born, but community and the feeling of solidarity. His main works are known all over the world, there are titles such as: *Mr. Han's Chronicle, On the Road to Sampo, Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of Age, The Old Garden, The Shadow of Arms*. Hwang served in the Republic of Korea Marine Corps in Vietnam, he was imprisoned in North Korea for violating the 'National Security Law', he was living in South Korea, Germany and in the US. He got many awards: Manhae Literary Award Grand Prize (2004), Korea Culture and Arts Foundation 'This Year's' Art Prize (2004), Mark of Respect (2008), Prix Emile-Guiment (2018).

Nora Okja Keller is a Korean-American writer born in Seoul who lives in America. Her two novels, *Comfort Women* and *Fox Girl*, look at the culture of 'comfort women' who were forced by Japanese into sex work during World War II. The plot of *Fox Girl* focuses on multigenerational trauma resulting from Korean women's experiences as sex slaves, euphemistically called comfort women, for Japanese and American troops during World War II. Women were regularly degraded and humiliated, developing a reputation for 'doing the things nobody else would do'. Reading this novel sometimes brings on a sensation of physical discomfort, but it is precisely that uncomfortable feeling that makes it a book worth reading. Considering that it took until the 1990s for either the Korean or Japanese governments to begin to acknowledge what had happened to comfort women during the war, Keller's books appear to be downright revolutionary. Korea's gynocentric literature is a particularly interesting field to watch these days:

Korean society is changing all the time, becoming more globalized. The role of women is a particularly interesting one, I think—the way a Western reader might read a Korean book and think they have it lucky, but also get to wondering whether we're really as free as we might like to think, or at least whether we're using those freedoms as much as we might. (Marcus 2005)

Her book *Comfort women* won the American Book Award in 1998 and the Elliot Cades Award in 1999. Keller also won the Pushcart Prize for a story *Mother-Tongue* in 1995 and the Hawaii Award of Literature in 2003 (Hong 2010).

Conclusion

South Korea is becoming a major player on the world's literary scene. During the London Book Fair in 2015 Deborah Smith, a London-based translator of Korean literature, said that 'Western audiences love strong, memorable, active main characters, whereas Korean literature has tended to find an aesthetic value, and a social truthfulness, in quietness, ordinariness, [and] passivity'. It is clear that South Korean literature is very different than that of the North. Writers from South Korea highlight the problems of globalisation and travel; they even write abroad. The plots in these books are very modern. Rarely do they focus on the past as, for instance, in the situation of the comfort women. Some of them, like many Koreans, are interested in North Korean life, so they aim to investigate all their sources of information. It seems that people are more interested in novels about North Korea. This is connected to natural human curiosity, because the world does not know much about this country. North Korea is like a secret land, whereas South Korea is so open to the world and is considered Americanised. For some time now South Korea has awarded prizes to writers from the North. In the magazine *Words Without Borders* we find an excerpt from the 2002 novel *Hwangjini* by Hong Seok-Jung (홍석중), who won the Manhae Literary Award (만해문학상) in 2005. This was the first time a writer from North Korea was awarded a prize in the South. *Hwangjini* is a historical story set in the 16th century. To sum up, South and North Korea will always be divided not only nationally and politically, but also in every aspect of their lives and also in literature. Whatever happens in the future cannot change the history of these nations.

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