

Subdued Voices, Stifled Dreams: Hope to Hopelessness in a Dystopian World in Bandi's *Accusation: Forbidden Stories from inside North Korea*

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Abstract

This paper will explore through fictional yet true and representative short stories the dystopian situation of North Korean people under the hereditary dictators. Published as *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from inside North Korea* (2017) under the pseudonym Bandi, the writer recounts the lived experiences of characters who are enmeshed in the claustrophobic ambience of the oppressive political world. It is the first work of its kind by a writer "who still lives and works under that system" (Seong-dong 175).

Keywords : Autocracy; Dictator; Dystopia; Utopia

In a hyper-nationalistic state, even a slight deviation is viewed as a serious threat to the party ethics which has been shown through self-imposed abortion of a wife due to state threat, compulsory presence at state festivals despite being bed-ridden, humiliation of even staunch cadres, forced exile from city to village, false implication in cooked-up tales etc. A state where writers are under strict censorship and their works are scrutinized before being published, a place where the state mourning for the so called Great Leader implies forced shedding of false tears, a land which negates the sweat and blood even of honest workers, the situation really reeks of perpetual fear and persecution under the totalitarian regime. The paper explores the bleak and dismal lives of North Korean people caught in a dystopian web controlled by the Kim dictators by distorting Marxist ideals. Jim Frederick writes about the Great Leader thus:

He fashioned himself the Great Leader: textbooks and state-controlled media invested him with almost magical powers, and towns and cities are littered with innumerable heroic murals and statues. Interaction and free exchange with the outside world was severely limited in favor of state-controlled propaganda, every citizen to this day must wear

a red enamelled pin of Kim's face, and his birthplace is both a pilgrimage and shrine. (xxiv)

Jonathan Vars in his article "Six Elements of Dystopian Fiction" writes that dystopian novels make the readers aware of "the potential dangers of a totalitarian government, even when presented in somewhat fantastic scenarios. Dystopian fiction presents an altered world with altered rules, rules which eventually become repellent and adversarial to the protagonist" (Vars N.pag). Flouting with the rules, tampering with and bending them to suit the dictatorial designs becomes a norm with such a government. The world is presented as ideal and perfect in the beginning but eventually too much hard stance makes lives miserable as "In essence, dystopia can be thought of as a "false utopia", a society that initially seems perfect, but turns out to be thoroughly corrupt. For this reason, it is necessary to present the pseudo utopia for what it is" (Vars N.pag.).

The first short story "Record of a Defection" unearths the dilemma of Lee Il-cheol on finding a packet of medicine in his wardrobe which his wife used as contraceptives secretly. It occurs as a "blemish on her otherwise flawless reputation" (4). For him it turns out to be shocking as he suspects her extra marital affair with another man and rues "A white heron and a black crow – what good can come of a match like that?" (4) His wife Nam Myung-ok was childless and would thus shower all her motherly feelings on her nephew who lived adjacent to their apartment. However, what troubles the most is why such an emotional woman would take contraceptives when she loved other kids so dearly.

Lee Il-cheol takes a dig on the hard core principles of North Korean Socialist System of Cooperative Farming which forced his father to part with his own land, gained through "his own sweat and blood" (5). His father is hauled off into exile for dropping just a crate of rice seedlings and branded as an "anti-Party antirevolutionary member" (5) and his wife and children are also ordered to move to another barren part of North Korea near the Chinese border surviving on roots and fruits. It is here that his mother dies quite young as all her hopes too, died.

Another incident that the narrator comes across is the steam that would rise above his apartment and seeing which he becomes suspicious. As Lee Il-cheol hurriedly rushes home on the pretext of taking measurement tape, he finds "an insipid mess of dog food" (9) boiling on the stove, resulting in steam. It dissipates all his doubts concerning his wife as he had thought that the second round of cooking in his house was perhaps for her lover. However, on another occasion, as he gets late home at midnight, his wife

delays in opening the door and when he enters, he catches a shadow of someone quietly descending the stairs. He wanted to catch her in a compromising situation but fails. However, she pleads innocent, not knowing when someone entered and tried to force her. The moment he notices her dishevelled hair and missing button, as evidence of her struggle to escape, his anger subsides. She hands him a diary with dated entries which opens his eyes to her unfathomed pain.

Spread over a period of two years, the first of these entries depicts the local Party secretary who would come to her apartment on the pretext of helping her husband in joining the Party. Though she does not like his unwanted intrusion in her apartment, and also behaves coldly, she fears that “things will go badly for my husband” (15). However, she is ready to bear all this if “her husband was allowed to join the Party . . .” (15). Jennifer Wright in her article “Why North Korea is Hell for Women?” quotes a woman victim saying, “In North Korea, a woman’s dream cannot be fulfilled without being raped or without selling her body” (3). Another shock awaits her when she is asked to get lunch for her husband in the technology innovation department. Looking at the desks there, she recalls how innovative and intelligent her husband was in the school, indicated by epithets like “great talent” and “inventor.” When his father was branded a traitor, he had to leave his studies at eight and do all private reading on his own. Now the same man is not allowed to be a part of the meetings in that company as the stigma of the son of a traitor does not leave him.

Not only this but the result of this percolates down to her nephew who is stripped of the position of class president despite having the best grades as that position is reserved for the sons of so called dedicated Party members. Moreover, when she eventually gets a copy of her husband’s family as registered in the office records through her friend, she feels distressed to learn the information about her father-in-law incisively categorized as “Class 149” and “hostile element” who “harboured resentment toward the Party’s agricultural collectivization policy, and deliberately sabotaged the project to grow rice in greenhouses” (27). Class 149 implied that the family would not only be deported but also persecuted and slandered for generations. It is this trauma that travels along and spoils the career of her husband and nephew. She already feels the burden on her nephew: “A blameless child with his whole life already mapped out, forced to follow in his parents’ footsteps, step by stumbling step, along that same route of blood and tears” (28). It is after learning all this that she resolves to terminate her pregnancy. She suppresses her maternal instinct, and rather turns into a hard criminal just to avoid the “the endless path of thorns” that would have bled her son to death. Such dark, disturbing entries in the diary make

her husband curse himself for having doubted his wife and thus resolves to escape the tyranny of a hardcore political system of the country.

The story, thus, shows how the lives of ordinary people were governed under the Kim dictators and how a young wife deliberately takes birth-control pills and eats dog food just to not bring her child in a world where life would be like hell for him. Her nephew's dismal chances of survival against the Party odds and hence the suppression of talent in childhood itself makes her take this tough yet unavoidable decision. It is an unparalleled incident where a mother does so out of political fear. It is the political labelling of somebody as a traitor that weighs heavily on the future of not only Minhyuk but also for her own son if born. Blaine Harden also writes about Shin who escaped from a North Korean labour camp thus:

Because his blood was tainted by the perceived crimes of his father's brothers, he lived below the law. For him, nothing was possible. His state-prescribed career trajectory was hard labour and an early death from disease brought on by chronic hunger – all without a charge or a trial or an appeal, and all in secrecy. (Harden 2)

This story which is dated 12 December 1989 sums up the ordeals of people under Kim Il-sung, the first leader of Korea from 1948-1994.

The other story "City of Spectres" also exposes the fate of people under Kim Il-sung. Woven around the gruesome life of Gyeong-hee, a thirty-six-year old woman and manager of a marine products shop, it shows the pitiless atmosphere people have to face to mark the National Day celebrations. The pain of having to carry her sick child through Kim Il-sung Square where these rehearsal are in full swing, forces Gyeong-hee to take another path to her apartment at the fifth story. Her husband, a supervisor in the propaganda department had already warned her about any lapse on the part of any citizen about the event and how even the post-event review would severely punish anyone who had "demonstrated less than revolutionary fervour" (38). Charles Armstrong in his article "One-Family Rule: North Korea's Hereditary Authoritarianism" writes about how fear is induced in people:

In order to survive, the regime requires some support, or at least acquiescence, of a significant part of the general population. Broadly speaking, support or acquiescence is gained in three ways: through the instruments of surveillance and punishment, through information control and indoctrination, and through evocations of patriotism and national legitimacy. The police state nature of North

Korea is well-known, and even the mildest expression of criticism toward the regime—and anything less than a worshipful attitude toward the Kims—incur harsh punishment, up to and including lengthy sentences in one of North Korea’s notorious prison camps. (3)

Metaphorically two portraits of Marx and Kim Il-sung outside her apartment would scare her child as he would mistake them for Eobi. During rehearsals of one of those rallies, she is forced to strap her ill child on her back as she “couldn’t very well absent herself from the rally” (40). Such harsh dictates then prove too disastrous for her as she is frowned upon and scoffed at for having brought “a bawling child to such an important rally” (41). Moreover, even doctors had to be at the rally so there was no hope of any immediate treatment. Since the child was also fearful of all this, “in his eyes the portrait of Kim Il-sung had worn the countenance of the menacing Eobi” (42). So she draws her curtains on the windows to obstruct the view of the child. This, however, irks the local Party secretary, a woman above forty, who views it as a defiance of official dictates and as a “secret code to communicate with spies” (44). All the residents in the city are forced to have only nylon curtains to make it look clean but her child’s fear of such statues of Marx and Il-sung makes her pull the curtains off which is seen as against the Party ethics by the local secretary.

Such accusations completely disquiet Gyeong-hee as she had been a dedicated communist since her childhood. She recalls how even as a school child she had received a red armband which was awarded to only those whose character and integrity with respect to the Party ethics was unquestionable. Moreover, her father was a martyr of the Korean War which meant that “her standing was sufficiently secure to not be threatened by the minor slipups that were inevitable now and then” (46). Even her husband was a dedicated revolutionary but there were ‘congenital problems’ with the child who would be scared of the portraits of Marx and the Great Leader. So when she explains all this to the local Party secretary, the latter views it as an insult to the Great Leader and the great revolutionary who threatens her that review after the ceremony would “weed out any deviance from the party ideology” (47). Eventually things turn awry for her as her husband also views this neglect of drawing curtains too seriously since the information percolates down to the information department. “The public space of the state infiltrates into the people’s private sphere, with secret police constantly inspecting this sphere” (Lim 4). Surprisingly, it is blamed about the child that “our physical constitution is not all we inherit—that our mind-set comes from our parents too” (50).

Eventually on the previous night of the National Day celebrations, clouds play hide-and-seek and then there is heavy rain. Still when the celebrations are announced, hundreds and thousands of people throng the venue, making Gyeong-hee wonder as to what might have caused this. "The city comes alive on two occasions. When a grand demonstration or march has been ordered by Kim Jong Il, tens or hundreds of thousands of Pyongyangites are drafted to participate, often practicing for weeks or months to prepare for the event" (Oh and Hassig 127). Another visitor to North Korea, Mike Chinoy observes that "Pyongyang seemed like a giant set for George Orwell's famous novel *1984*" (qtd. in Oh and Hassig 127). The fear instilled in people's minds forces them to come out to the venue braving rain or all other odds which is explicated in the post-ceremony review. The most severe punishment was banishment and "the banished were not even permitted to pack their own belongings" (56). To further execute the orders strictly, officials were sent to assure the removal of the victims to the countryside. Similar punishment is meted out to Gyeong-hee and her family for not educating their son according to the Party ideology and "making coarse remarks about the portrait of Karl Marx and the Great Leader" (57). For this family and to many others, Pyongyang turns out to be a city of spectres where Gyeong-hee compares Marx and the Great Leader to spectres which haunt them throughout.

This story brings to fore the bitter truth that even staunch Party cadres are not spared in North Korea even if they have some genuine problems to cope with. The illness and the weak constitution of her son Park Myeong-shik force the mother to pull off the curtains so that he might not be afraid of the portraits of Marx and the Great Leader assuming them to be eboi. More, the compulsion of people to lead a heckled life under these dictators is shown through their appearance in heavy rain on the National Day celebrations. Such ruthless pursuit of even strong Party members speaks volumes about the suffering of common people in North Korea where people were/are forced to meekly submit to distorted Marxist ideals. While in the former story the family flees to save their child from a dismal future, in this even staunch activists are not spared and hence, sent into exile.

The third story "Life of a Swift Steed" further exposes the insensitivity of army towards the fighters of the liberation war of Korea. Chae Gwang, the military police chief of communications, inquires agitatedly from Jeon yeong-II about Seol Yong-su, also known as Irya Madya. Yeong-II informs about the commitment of Yong-sun to the Party for a long time for which he has won many medals, even the Second Order of Merit. Moreover, since Yong-su and Yeong-II's father fought together in the liberation war, a deep bond had resulted between them, eventually passing onto Yong-su and Yeong-II.

The Chief wanted to chop the elm in Yong-su's courtyard through which military police telephone would pass. It is what old Yong-su never wanted to happen and had even threatened the police officers with his axe when they tried to cut the tree. The Chief turns wild and frenzied over such defiance of his orders by an old man and thus inquires about Yong-su's devotion to the Party ideology. Even when Yeong-Il pleads that "old Yong-su planted that tree himself back in 1948 to commemorate his joining the Party", (67) the Chief goes more berserk. Yeong-Il recalls how his own father had planted the same tree in their courtyard to mark the same. One episode from his childhood turns him tearful as he thinks of his uncle's one conviction when he had just planted the tree: "I have to work hard with my cart, and you with your alphabet – because we are establishing a new, democratic North Korea" (69). Ironically, though he contributed his bit, the land of his dreams doused all his fire of enthusiasm. He further tries to stuff sense in the Chief's mind concerning an article which appeared in *Chosun Literature*, praising Yong-su for whom the elm was like a banner and had even named it 'Swift Steed' looking towards a "shining future" (71). However, the Chief dismisses Yong-su's past commitments as hollow for hindering his work in the present.

It seems to be a really hard task for Yeong-Il to placate not only the Chief but also to ignore his uncle's deep-seated anger. Once proud man, who had devoted his whole life to one thing or another, now finds himself in dire poverty and utter need of help. So when he visits his uncle's house to save him from the Chief, the old man wraps himself in "worn old blanket", taking proud of "a jacket weighed down with dazzling medals" (73). Forty years out of his uncle's fifty-six were spent in various capacities: battle, construction, carrying sacks of cements and so on, fetching him such medals as the First Order of National Merit, the Labour Metal, the Award of Merit. All this perseverance and hard work had won him also the epithet of "Communism's Swift Steed" (76). All these things turn it really unpalatable for Yeong-Il to believe that such a man could muster up courage to axe the elm-choppers. His sweat and blood-earned medals don't fetch give him any respite the way he is treated now by the Chief.

Moreover, the reason for Yong-su's agitated state of mind was also that his wife was bickering for firewood for a few days whereas he kept himself busy only in the factory work. Since the factory required more and more wood for the boiler, every worker was pressed hard to bring adequate wood so that the boiler might not explode. Being committed, he thought more of the factory than home and used his cart only for supplying wood for the factory else he would have been branded a traitor. When his wife had asked him for using cart for fetching wood from the far forest where she had chopped a tree, he could not agree to do personal things before the

professional and when his wife compared his medals to just metal, he lost his composure and thus had shouted on the military goons who had just arrived in the nick of the time for daring cut the elm. For Yeong-Il this knowledge is more than enough and takes leave of his uncle. However, he never knew that the Chief would play such a ghastly trick over such a dedicated Party worker. Next day the news of his uncle's death freezes him and more than that the elm tree is also found split from the trunk in two and the same wood is spotted burning in the hearth. The autopsy report reveals the death as occurring from "heart-attack" (79). The unknown writer exposes the ruthless pursuit of such dedicated Party workers whose medals do not prove more than just iron pieces as they neither bring honour nor placate hunger of the old man. Rather than being rewarded, the old man is shattered to pieces as he dies of heart attack the moment his elm tree, which embodied his very life and soul, is hacked like an animal, as if the whole anger is spewed not on the tree but on the old man himself. The cutting of the elm tree is also symbolic of the death of the dreams of Yong-su and the shattering of the dreams of a democratic North Korea. "Dystopia is generally described as a bad place, or even more simply, a utopia gone wrong. Additionally, the dystopian world is inevitably linked to a totalitarian state apparatus, depriving its inhabitants of freedom by exercising strict control over all aspects of their lives" (Pataki 426)

"So Near, Yet So Far" is also a riveting tale about the unbending North Korean laws concerning 'Regulations of Travel', 'Travel Permits' and the plight of common people facing the sting of the same. Myeong-chol represents the predicaments of many such people whose applications to visit their kith and kin in dire situations are time and again turned down. As the only son of his widowed mother, Myeong-chol is overcome by a strong urge to nurse her to health when she takes seriously ill. However, he is denied permission thrice. First, it is his company's line manager who denies permission and now when he directly approaches Department Two, he is again ruthlessly dismissed as his village was going to hold a Class One event where the Great Leader himself had to address.

Myeong-chol's dreams of pursuing higher education in a university had already been snapped when he was forcibly recruited in the army. After the military service as well, he had planned to go back to his village and help his mother who had overworked herself to bad health to raise him and his sister. However, even after serving in the army he was forced to work in the Geomdeok mines. All his efforts – be it bribing the local Party secretary or repairing the floor of another – to secure a safe passage to his village remain futile as he is not allowed to visit his village. He gives vent to his pent-up emotions "Was Solmoe, the village he'd grown up in, some foreign city like

Tokyo or Istanbul? How could his own village, in his own country, his own land, be so remote, so utterly unreachable?" (98) Even crying was not allowed as it could have been misconstrued as an act of rebellion and "it was the law of the land to smile even when you were racked with pain" (99).

Eventually when he comes across his friend Yeong-ho that evening, the latter takes him to his home to placate his worries. Yeong-ho's brother had a travel permit but was not allowed to visit as the permit allowed only two peoples' visit but the other one could not come. So he asks Yeong-ho to pretend himself to be another person and accompany him to the station. The influence of liquor and the burning zeal of seeing his mother make him take this risk of using that bogus identity. Though he escapes a few rounds of inspections and nearly reaches his destination, he is spotted by the officials and taken hostage and eventually forced onto a truck "like pigs being sent to the slaughterhouse" (115). No mercy is shown even to the old woman whose grandson had taken ill and the hunchbacked man who wanted to console the aggrieved family of his son-in-law.

The urge to see his dying mother makes him suffer the ordeals for twenty-two days. Her wife trembles at the prospect of bruises and welts he might have suffered all this time and his weak, emaciated frame and lice-infested undergarments make it all too evident to miss. He now breaks open the cage and frees two birds which had been given to his wife by her brother as a wedding gift as he knew Kim Myeong-chol's love for his village. Further, he had often found respite in the sight and the tone of the birds. However, his act of setting these birds free is metaphorically his own urge to be free of the oppressive heat of injustice under North Korean dictatorial regime. He refers to the birds as the "pitiful domesticated creatures" (118) and calls himself also "a caged animal" in dire need of freedom. His breaking free of the cage is his overriding sense of seeking humane treatment in the so called socialist system singing high of the Great Leader. Finally, it is this Class One event which takes a heavy toll on his life as the telegram informs about the death of his mother. Such oppression of the citizens speaks volumes about the terror unleashed by titular governments across the globe. For the breach of Travel Regulations, he is punished to undergo labour discipline from 2 July 1992 to 24 July 1992. Bruce Cumings also speaks about the issue of travel in North Korea and the facade of so called Paradise on earth:

Of all the slogans the traveller sees in North Korea, maybe the most poignant is the one that hangs above the main square (and can be seen in many other places): "We have nothing to envy in the world." It simultaneously fits the regime's propaganda about its paradise and leads us to ask how would any North Korean citizen know if there

might be something to envy in the rest of the world. They can't even travel from the countryside to Pyongyang without a permit and only the most reliable ones can travel abroad.
(6)

Harden speaks about the kind of labour camps to which now Kim Myeongchol is condemned, "North Korea's labour camps have now existed for twice as long as the Soviet Gulag and about twelve miles longer than the Nazi concentration camps" (Harden 6).

"Pandemonium" is also another scathing critique of such Class One events in North Korea which cause utter discomfort for common people who remain stranded on bus stops or railway stations for hours without any adequate supply of food items. It is about a little five-year-old girl Yeong-sun whose ankle is dislodged in the overcrowded railway station as it is locked for thirty-two hours since the terminal is vacated for the Class One event involving the Great Leader. These long hours prove a great ordeal for the grandparents of Yeong-sun as they are not left with enough provisions on the railway station. The instinct to survive prods Mrs. Oh chun-hwa to go by road to reach her brother's home for some food. However, she finds even the road deserted as both road and rails are cleared for the journey of the Great Leader. Finally as the Great Leader passes through the same road, he asks Mrs. Oh to come along in his car. The media clicks numerous snaps of the old lady with the Great Leader who is projected as kind and humane. Even her interviews are broadcast and published wherein she highly praises the Great Leader as a kind and benign force. However, she knows what mayhem is created in the lives of the people by the same leader by imposing a strict rule over them as she mutters to herself: "How could it seem any other way, with her own bragging about her own good fortune where two people she loved had spent those selfsame hours in a hellish situation, a pandemonium, which might well have been their end?" (145) She brings to light not only the question of broken leg of her granddaughter and the dislodged pelvis bone of her husband but also the miscarriage of a pregnant woman on the railway station.

However, another ironical part of all this pain is that one had to bear it all with a smile. As crying or complaining was completely disapproved, all had to pretend laughter. The writer speaks how on the packed railway stations, there would always be informers or spies of the government who would cry in pain but would report the behaviour to the authorities. The writer calls the spies as "cats" "who would be around the station just now, even inside the waiting room, scattered among the mice like the seeds in a squash" (126). The common people herded in the waiting room like animals are compared with "mice" whose fate will be the same as that of a mouse

before a cat. It is for this reason that people had to be really cautious of even giving out vent to their anger as all had to feign smile. It was also a country where you had to rote "I respectfully pray for the long life of our Great Leader, the Father of Us All" (138). The pain of the people is further brought to light through a story about Pandemonium. In this story an old demon would ill treat his thousands of slaves in a garden with huge walls encircling it. However, only the sound of merry laughter would go out as the devil played magic on them and no one was ever able to see what happened inside due to huge fence. Mrs. Oh then takes a sarcastic dig on the suffering of common people in North Korea by equating the den/garden and devil to North Korea and the Great Leader Kim Il-sung respectively:

Where in the world might you find such a garden, such a den of evil magic, where cries of pain and sadness were wrenched from the mouths of its people and distorted into laughter? (148)

The meek submission of people to the autocratic system of North Korea results from countless episodes of oppression committed before their eyes to suppress any counter-revolutionary feelings. Their feigned smiles are in fact masques to hide their anger which otherwise would cost them their life. "Stage Truth" is another gripping tale about the forced submission of people to shed tears on the death of the Great Leader. Apart from it, the yarn also exposes how each tree was stripped of flowers to pay homage to the Great Leader. "Kim Il Sung's death in 1994 transformed North Korea into a hysterical place with the nation's people expressing uncontrollable sorrow" (Lim 105). The writer terms it as the stage truth where people would actually cry for their private miseries. Set during the death and consequent mourning of the Great Leader, the story condemns the long-lasting mourning ceremony wherein people had to bring flowers to the altars of the Leader raised at every public space throughout North Korea. Hong Yeong-peo is scathingly taken to task by the Director of the secret services, Bowibu for his son Hong Kyeong-hun's holding the hands of a factory girl Kim Suk-i and drinking liquor. For Yeong-peo it comes as a shock as he had served as an employee of the Union of Enterprises for more than three decades and did not want his honour to be sullied by his son's affair with the daughter of an employee who had been languishing on a farm as a political prisoner.

Adamant to teach his son a lesson, he confronts him violently. Even on previous occasion, he had feigned a letter to snap his son's relation with the elder daughter of the political prisoner. The letter incorporated an order of the exile of the entire family of Kim Suk-i to a remote labour camp. Thereafter, everything had become normal. But now on being snubbed by the Director,

Yeong-peo goes after his son to find out the truth. His son had also been a devoted supporter and his father's accusation bewilders him. For Kyeong-hun the cooked up story of the bottle of liquor and holding the hands of the girl prove too much. For him holding the hands of the girl was done to save her from falling down the mountain as they were "walking over the edge of a cliff" (172) plucking flowers. He defends himself that he did not have liquor in that bottle but methyl spirit "to ward off the snakes" (174). However, such defence measures of Kyeong-hun are perceived as reactionary sentiments and are distorted as seditious. Kyeong-hun becomes a fierce critic of such harsh system and is full of sympathy for Kim Suk-i, "She has so many talents, yet she'll never be given the chance to shine. And after all, what was her father's great crime? Only to say that Kim Jong-il had taken a second wife, which everyone knows is true?", he also tells his father, "... even if you fill this body with bullets, you'll never kill my wish to live a life fit for a human being" (175).

Kyeong-hun tries to awaken the dormant spirit of his father to sense the reality in the form of countless episodes of oppression on common people whose lives become completely regimented and controlled under the dictator. Finally, he speaks about the power of acting or stage truth and what actually lay behind all this as real life was unbearable:

A sincere, genuine life is possible only for those who have freedom. Where emotions are suppressed and actions monitored, acting only becomes ubiquitous, and so convincing that we even trick ourselves. Look at all these people, sobbing over a death that happened three months ago, starving because they have not been able to draw their rations all the while. What about the mother of the child bitten by a snake while he was out gathering flowers for Kim Il-sung's altar? Perhaps she finds her private grief useful for shedding public tears. (175)

In the black-out, as he goes out to flash the lights of vehicles on the altar of the Great Leader, he finds a swarm of mourners rushing to the altar where wailing was not allowed to stop even in the midnight. He is taken aback by setting his eyes on the mother of Kim Sun-i. What would have prompted her to come at this altar was nothing else but giving vent to her private grief, acting to mourn her own loss as she could not have otherwise wept for her husband. It was this fear of authority which had turned these people, even the wronged ones, to be public demonstrators of grief for an otherwise cruel leader. It dawns on Yeong-peo as a bitter realization and somewhere he senses that all his years as a committed cadre of the Party were nothing but his acting to hide the other side of his unconscious anger. Left with no hope,

he finds shelter in suicide. He no longer could have gone pretending loyalty to an abusing authority. He would not have been spared for leaving the Party and deviating from its ideology. His suicide has to be seen in a heroic light as it is an act of resistance against a too crushing and all-pervading power system. "Actually it is a poor beleaguered country run by an unpleasant regime that has served its people ill" (Ford and Kwon xv).

All these stories thus focus on the basic concern of human freedom from all bonds. It poses a very pertinent question of our times: Does liberation from the colonial rule (as Korea was under the Japanese rule) succeed in the full freedom of people. After going through these nerve-breaking tales, the answer seems to be negative. A place where even the fate of hard Party liners is sealed in uncertainty between life and death, what about common people for whom the only way to survive is to capitulate fully. Countless stories of persecution in North Korea make it one of the most dreaded places on the globe to inhabit. Democracy and socialism just remain hollow statements for the people who have to live under perpetual fear and threat under the all powerful dictators.

The role of a totalitarian leader is vital in a totalitarian society. Unlike other political forms, the totalitarian regime employs political power fully concentrated in the hands of a single leader. All sub-systems of a totalitarian society, including the political party, the secret police, concentration camps, and mass media, become 'transmission belts' and exist for the realization of the 'will of the Leader' (Lim 4).

This dystopian society feeds but only on forced and blind sense of patriotism extracted from people by the fear and subordination.

These stories serve as a powerful "reminder of the importance of personal freedom and the value of the individual" (Vars N.pag.). These stories thus bring forth vivid images of exploitation and tyranny where human rights are always compromised under an all-subsuming government. Furthermore, each story is told in a flashback and each protagonist has something horrific or other to reveal. The towering figure of an oppressive government casts a gloomy shadow on common people, wreaking havoc in their lives. Fear, panic, and oppression but forced smile remains the keywords to sum up the fate of the characters and each one meets one punishment or another in the form of exile or life-in-death. However, each character tries to resist in her/his own way. While the unfortunate mother in "Record of a Defection" registers her protest by undertaking the termination of her foetus, Yeong-pio commits suicide as he can no longer support a regime that feeds on

peoples' lives. Open defiance of authority remains largely out of the question and only modes of resistance remain either to escape as does the family in "Record of a Defection" or suicide as is done by Yeong-pio. The rest have to live watching their hopes and aspirations deluged under fanatic dictator/s.

To conclude I would bring in Charles Robert Jenkins's experiences in North Korea as he shares them with Jim Frederick in *The Reluctant Communist: My Desertion, Court-Martial, and Forty-Year Imprisonment in North Korea*:

Perhaps millions of North Koreans have already starved to death since famines began hitting the country in the mid-1990s, and a huge percentage of the country's citizens still live with the constant torture of not having enough food to eat or clean water to drink. In addition, many hundreds of thousands, if not more, have been worked to death and are still being worked to death in the nation's prisons and gulags. (121).

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