

## The Korean War, Memory, and Nostalgia

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**Won-Chung Kim,**

**"The Korean War, Memory, and Nostalgia"**

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**Abstract:** In his article "The Korean War, Memory, and Nostalgia" Won-Chung Kim investigates how the imagination of (im)migration still governs the consciousness of the Korean people by examining Wonil Kim's 1979 *도요새에 관한 명상* (*Dreaming of the Snipe / Meditation on a Snipe*) and Hui-jin Kang's 2011 *유령* (*The Ghost*). Because of the war as many as ten million Koreans were displaced and separated from their families and they struggle with war trauma. Won-Chung Kim's analysis of the two texts suggests the interconnectedness of life writing and the trauma of war. Further, as the recent surge of the North Korean defectors shows, the (im)migration of the Korean War diaspora and inter-Korean (im)migration is still an ongoing process. These (im)migrants' life writing demonstrates that memory works in an opposite way for each group providing a lifeline through which the war diaspora sustains life while hindering the defectors in relocating themselves to the South successfully.

## Won-Chung KIM

### The Korean War, Memory, and Nostalgia"

As the most prominent divided country remaining in the world, Korea has been and continues to be a focal point in global politics. It was the battlefield of political ideologies during the Cold War era and still remains one of the most volatile regions that threatens not only peace in East Asia, but also that of the entire world. Although the Korean War ended in 1953 with an agreement of ceasefire, both South and North Korea are still fighting to exert power over the other. For South Korea, the weapon of choice is economic power while North Korea stands ready with military power — including alleged nuclear weapons — and rampant propaganda. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divides the two countries remains the most heavily militarized zone in the world and stands as a sign of the ongoing confrontation between the two Koreas so that in this sense Koreans on both sides of the border continue to live in the shadow of a war for more than half a century.

The Korean War and the DMZ are not simply imaginary things or fragments of distant historical memory, as it is not the least bit of an exaggeration to say that every household has been affected by the War in one way or another. The War made history because of its monumental and devastating impact in Korea, and the DMZ, as a wall dividing South and North Korea, is not merely an imaginary line, but stands as an overwhelming and concrete reminder of the War. Physically and all too tangibly, the DMZ exists as a strip of land 2 km wide and 260 km long, cutting across the midriff of the Korean peninsula. During the War, almost one million soldiers from both Koreas, as well as some United Nations troops and some Chinese soldiers, were killed, and another million civilians also lost their lives, and, in addition, one-fifth of Korea's entire population was either wounded or suffered the loss of family members. Although life writing typically deals with one individual's own life story, because of the uniquely problematic history of Korea over the past seventy years, the life writing about any one Korean individual's experience easily overlaps with those of other Koreans. The loss and agony of this forced separation and migration is so pervasive among Koreans that it is not just marked by individuals' personal experiences, but has become a collective experience of Koreans as a whole. In "Beyond History and Memory: New Perspective in Memory Studies," Marek Tamm draws on Aleida Assmann's three dimensions of memory — neuronal, social and cultural — and argues that the neuronal belongs to the domain of individual memory, while the social and cultural are part of collective memory (461-62). According to Assmann's definition, the experience of war is not any particular individual's neuronal memory, but a social and cultural one from which no Korean is free. Therefore, life writing about the Korean War and its aftermath are destined to be plural experiences, which presents an ample space for writers to intervene and reconstitute (im)migrants' lives with their imagination. These kind of written works — including biographies, autobiographies, testimonies, fictional accounts — are so prevalent in Korea that they are often subcategorized as *분단문학* ("division literature") with division referring to the partition of the South and North Korea.

Owing to memory studies the notion of life writing expanded recently to include literary texts and the perspective of literature as "a medium of cultural memory" (Tamm 462). For example, Hubert Zapf suggests that literary texts should be considered as a legitimate component of life writing because they "can bring together a broad spectrum of different experiences, domains, and perspectives of life that are kept apart in other modes of writing" (20) and Simon C. Estok argues that fictional works should be included in the discussion of life writing. Through an analysis of Korean War diaspora through Wonil Kim's (김원일 1942-) 1979 *도요새에 관한 명상* (Meditation on a Snipe) (unless indicated otherwise, all quotations are from the translation by Brendan MacHale; note that I use a new title, *Meditation on a Snipe*, because MacHale's translation of the title of the novel as *Dreaming of the Snipe* is inaccurate) and perspectives of North Korean defectors in Hui-jin Kang's (강희진 1964-) 2011 *유령* (The Ghost), I argue that life writing and fiction are inextricably mixed within the context of the Korean War and that the vivid and lingering memories of migration continue to govern the consciousness of Koreans. One of the most painful, traumatic experiences Kim undergoes occurs when his father defects to the North during the war resulting in the separation of his family members since that time. When Kim published *Meditation on a Snipe* in the midst of the Cold War political confrontation between the South and North Korea, writing about his father's defection was the last thing Kim could reference, even in fictional work. Consequently, he portrays instead the life story of a fictional father who was forced to live a sojourner's life in the South — a literary portrayal of a reversed, mirrored image of his own father living in the North. It was only after more than sixty years passed since the war that Kim was finally able to write *아들의 아버지* (2011) (The Father of a Son), a semi-autobiographical novel about his father's and his own life. Through the father's (whose name is not mentioned in the novel) physical and mental states, Kim demonstrates how the division of the Korean peninsula resulted in the destruction of Korean people's lives. The novel unfolds the life story of a family comprised of a father, mother, and two sons.

In *Meditation on a Snipe*, as a North Korean refugee and injured Korean war veteran, the father is devastated by the reality that he can never return to his hometown. His physical and mental anguish is manifested externally through physical disabilities: a crippled leg and stutter which serve as a metaphor for the painful and immobilizing division of the country: "to put it mildly, he was the timid, cringing type, a man of few words and much fear. He attributed that to the War. He lamented that nothing short of unification would be able to fill the big hole that had opened up in him the time he lost his home" (156). Just as the country is cut half, the father's lifeline has been cut, leaving him to lead the life of a war victim. The father's forced dislocation results in his loss of place and forced relo-

cation into a foreign space and in this new space he is unable to continue upholding his own identity. Before the Korean War disabled him physically and psychologically, the father was an intelligent and promising young man who attended college in Japan and Seoul National University. On a visit to his family in his hometown Tongcheon located just across the demarcation line to the North, he is drafted into the North Korean army against his will. But when he later falls into the hands of United Nations forces, he volunteers to join the South Korean army willingly. Ironically, the war drives the same individual to fight on behalf of both sides and leads him to live a "crippling" life not only in physical sense, but also in a mental sense. In this sense, the father's loss is comparable to what Anna De Fina defines as "the total loss of control over one's movement," who, investigating the experience of Mexican immigrants crossing borders argues that their displacement results in "the lack of agency and loss of control" (379). The fact that the father remains nameless and is referred only as "father" throughout the novel bears witness to his dwindled existence as a nameless, ghost-like individual in South Korea, which is not much different from the lives of North Korea defectors living in the South sixty years after the ceasefire. Lamenting that all his dreams of returning home have turned to ashes, the father says that he feels "like the new chick that wants to get back into its shell again" (186), a comparison which is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it denotes the sheer impossibility for him to return home. Second, it tells us of his yearning for freedom and mobility, even though he has become "a pinioned bird reduced to pecking at time" (192). His love of birds, or more precisely his identification with birds, therefore, stems from the fact that the birds — with their freedom to fly wherever they want — represent a glimmering hope for his hometown.

Yearning for home and an ensuing escape from the real world around him characterize the life of people living in the diaspora in the South. The father's remark that "there could be only one place called home" (192) clearly shows how his life in the South was destined to become a life of exile. But the more serious problem is that he, having "a personality without any attachment," has become an exhausted person who has no enthusiasm for anything, including his own survival. Being uprooted from his home, where he could keep his own personal and cultural identity, he fears meeting others. In this life of "calm desperation," to use H.D. Thoreau's phrase in *Walden*, only birds enter into his life: "There was not a shadow of doubt that I loved the marsh and the birds like the son who was flesh of my flesh ... Finding the flocks of snipe — birds that I had seen at home before the War—at the ford that autumn, was akin to meeting my long lost parents, sisters, brothers, and my former fiancée. 'You've flown here via Tongchon above the border?' I would shout. The ensuing silence would evoke a sudden deep yearning, and a fragrant memory would wreak unbearable inner havoc" (193). Here, birds are a medium to soothing the father's nostalgia and serve as a symbol for the reunification of two Koreas, as well as freedom from all oppression. The only solace he can find comes from a supernatural empathy and dialogue with the birds. The father's painful life of diaspora shares many typical characteristics of nostalgia, and, in fact, the primary meaning of the Korean word 향수 (translated into "yearning" in the above quotation) is nostalgia. While according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, nostalgia is defined as an "acute feeling for familiar surroundings," if we look into its etymology, nostalgia (*nostos*: a homecoming or homeward journey and *algos*: denoting types of pain) goes beyond a mere longing for home; it is associated with pain, as we can infer from the fact that Johannes Hofer, a medical doctor, coined the word to describe "a potentially fatal mental and physical malaise associated with homesickness" (Lilley <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7766/alluvium.v2.3.03>>). Scott Slovic reinterprets nostalgia by defining it as "an excessive tendency to look toward the past, to wish painfully for something or some place or some relationship that no longer exists" (11). The father's nostalgia can thus be characterized as a severe case of nostalgia for the land, but the problem is that the land he longs for is closed off for political and ideological reasons and in any case, after so many years away from it, his home in Tongchon for which he longs so earnestly no longer exists except in his own imagination.

Another way to look at nostalgia is through the examination of space and place, a concept that Yi-Fu Tuan explicates in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. This framework serves as a useful way to analyze the lives of Korean War migrants as experienced by the father in Meditation on a Snipe. Tuan argues that "space and place are basic components of the lived world ... place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to the one and long for the other" (3). Space and place are not necessarily different places; the same place can be either place or space according to how one experiences the given space. Because of the war, more than ten million Koreans are dislocated from their homes and put them in the state of an "eternal wait," to use Suki Kim's words in *Without You, There Is No Us* (40), a memoir of her experience in Pyongyang as an English teacher. For them, separation from family members and nostalgia for home is an existential condition. It cannot be denied that nostalgia has some negative connotations, such as sentimental or escapist — marking withdrawal from full response to existing society. But nostalgia, both as a defense system and a strategy of survival, is the migrants' last remaining lifeline that allows them to go on living in their new, alien space (on this, see, e.g., Boym; Ritivoi).

Beyond a defense system and a survival strategy on a personal level, nostalgia has important social and political implications. In *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Fredric Jameson notes the power of nostalgia as an agent of revolution: "there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other" (82). After sixty years of the ceasefire agreement, the memory of both the devastation of the Korean War and the harmonious lives people led in their hometowns before the War are becoming obsolete. But the more serious problem is that with this faded memory, Koreans' desire for reunification is also weakening especially among younger generations. Although the father's memory of his hometown in Tongchon is faded, like the crumpled and discolored photo of his lost North Korean fiancée in his wallet, only this memory marked by a big hole can invigorate his mind. This big hole is an apt metaphor

for the life of Korean War diaspora reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's characterization of modern men living a death in life as "hollow men" and "stuffed men" (81). Like stuffed animals, they may look normal outwardly, but their insides are hollow. This big hole, which nothing short of the reunification of the two Koreas can fill, is a symbol for the trauma of Korean War migrants. Given this situation, nostalgia that continually brings up what was lost into people's consciousness can be a powerful driving force for a unified Korea, as we can see in the father's unyielding will to remain hopeful against all negative circumstances.

Although the number of Korean War migrants is decreasing rapidly, the count of North Korean defectors living in South Korea is gradually increasing. According to government statistics, about 27,000 North Korean defectors are newly settled in the South, who arrived in South Korea by crossing national boundaries at the risk of their own lives and travelling thousands of miles across foreign countries. However, the process of adapting to South Korean society often proves more difficult than the territorial crossing into the South. Although both the Korean War migrants and North Korean defectors are living as immigrants in South Korea, there are some important similarities and differences between the two groups. While the former have been forced to live as migrants in the South regardless of their will because of the War, the latter have chosen South Korea by their own will. Therefore, the nostalgia for home characterizes the Korean War (im)migrants' life as we can see in the life of the father in *Meditation on a Snipe*. On the contrary, the defectors cannot return home, because they are considered in North Korea to have betrayed their own country and will be persecuted should they return. They have to adapt to the norms of South Korea to successfully survive there and in this difficult task their memory of North Korea works as a hindrance rather than a help. The memory of the lost home thereby works in opposite ways for those living in the diaspora and those who are (im)migrants in the South.

As Kim depicts the life of Korean War migrants in *Meditation on a Snipe*, Hui-jin Kang portrays the miserable life of North Korean defectors living in South Korea in his 2001 *유령* (*The Ghost*). Because most of the testimonies and life writings of defectors tend to deal with their life in the North and how they have escaped, comparatively little is known about their lives in the South as 새터민 (a new coinage to refer North Korean defectors living in the South, literally meaning "new place residents"). Although Kang himself is not a defector and the work is, therefore, not a testimony or autobiography, it depicts North Korean defectors' lives better than any other published work to date. In this sense, *The Ghost* deserves special attention as an important work of life writing about North Korean defectors. The perspectives that Kang, a former newspaper reporter, brings through extensive research and investigation of North Korean defectors living in the South adds to the genuineness of the defectors' life stories. Because one individual defector's life writing overlaps so much with other defectors' stories for North Korean defectors to the South, life writing pertaining to them constitute one collective story of a group that has undergone the same or fairly similar experiences.

Identity confusion and crisis is the most conspicuous feature of the North Korean defectors living in the South. First, North Korean defectors usually cross the national border at the risk of their lives, but they soon find that the crossing itself is not the end of their long journey to the "paradise" for which they had hoped. Because they are unable to cross the heavily militarized demarcation line in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), they usually cross the Amnok River or Yalu River into China and it takes a few months or even years of meandering through several bordering countries until they can finally settle in South Korea. The protagonist of the novel, Ju-Cheol, like so many other refugees, reaches Korea via China where his friend Harim with whom he had undertaken the dangerous journey starves to death. To the disappointment of North Korean defectors, the South Korea to which they have arrived after going through much hardship is not what they have dreamed of. As they have left North Korea, they are no longer North Koreans; yet neither do they settle wholly as South Koreans, although they call South Korea their "native country" (286). In spite of the fact that they are of the same race and speak the same language as South Koreans, they find that these commonalities do not guarantee them to become South Koreans. Second, when they cross national boundaries, defectors experience de-territorialization, "the loss of the 'natural' relation of culture to geographical and social territories," to use Nestor Garcia Canclini's words (Canclini qtd. in Heise 52). Once outside their home country, they fall into the status of illegal aliens whose lives are dependent on the mercy of others. And in this abject situation it is hardly possible for them to keep their old identity and former social status. Notably, upon arriving in South Korea, the protagonist of the novel takes on the name of his friend Harim, who starved to death in China. By taking on a false name, he cannot help but live a "faked" life hereafter. But there is another important reason Ju-Cheol takes on an alias: because most defectors have family members still living in North Korea, they are afraid their family members may be persecuted should their identity be revealed. For this reason, former actor Ju-Cheol refrains from appearing on television, even though that is the only way he could make a decent living instead of living as an extra on the production set. His words that "To the North Korean defector, his or her original name means nothing. I didn't know who was I until now, and not certain of it even now" (312) nod to how severely North Korean defectors experience identity confusion.

North Korean defectors cross two boundaries, the national boundary and a cultural boundary, and between these two the latter proves to be more difficult to cross. Geographical boundaries can be crossed in a moment's daring, but one cannot be sure whether one can clear the cultural boundary even with a lifetime's endeavor. As Yoonkyung Kim argues, North Korean defectors are driven to confirm their own otherness in the process of de-territorialization (escaping North Korea) and re-territorialization to South Korea (139). Ju-Cheol laments that moving from "the most comfortable country to live where the labor intensity is almost zero to the country where even UN admits the labor intensity is highest" is not easy at all" (168). While completing work ordered by the communist government was enough when they were in the North, the defectors must now compete with South Kore-

ans to make a living. In the novel, another North Korean defector, Inhee, says that "North Korea didn't educate individuals so that they could display their talent. Group interests always went first" (260) and this points to the core challenges defectors face: the habits of life and mentality they have acquired in the North pose obstacles to their adaptation to South Korean society. Being thrown into a merciless and cold capitalist society, North Korean defectors are asked to change themselves rapidly to survive in the South. Stuart Hall's remark that "diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall qtd. in Egan 121) explains their dire situation. For defectors, the task of changing themselves continuously is excruciating because it is nothing less than negating their old selves. Surrounded by indifferent South Koreans who show little sympathy, they live in dismal poverty on the fringes of South Korean society. In the midst of their struggle to adjust to life in South Korea, the world of virtual reality emerges as an alternative to the real world for many North Korean defectors. Ironically, North Korean defectors find the paradise they dreamt of when they escaped North Korea not in the real world of South Korea, but in the virtual world of internet games. Playing video games allows Ju-Cheol to forget the wretched state of his life in South Korea, where he says he is forced to live as a "contemptible fool": "The defectors become not just 'game maniacs,' but, more accurately, the game-disabled. The internet or games were like the instruction of the Great General in command to us, who live a wretched, very wretched life. Though it is just a mid-summer night's dream ... at least we feel happy at the moment. We could forget the fact that we are the contemptible fools, even though it was at the moment only. Our native country South Chosun, or South Korea, where we arrived going through hardships, allowed us the heaven on earth. At last we found Paradise" (285-86). Their obsession with cyberspace stems from their failure in real life and desire for vicarious satisfaction. Because they have deserted their home and country, even nostalgia is too expensive a luxury for them to enjoy.

The fact that this indulgence in computer games applies mostly to men and not to women is due in part to the fact that women defectors are often able to find jobs such as working at a restaurant as a kitchen helper or waitressing at a bar more easily than men and can thereby assimilate more smoothly into South Korean society. Ju-Cheol's confession that in cyberspace "I feel as if I am lying under the bedcovers in a warm room. In fact, it is not like under the bedcovers, but like in a mother's womb. In it I am a tiny living organism curling like insects" (51) testifies to how far his sense of self-esteem has dwindled in the South. The comparison of him immersed in computer games as an insect (note, he is not saying an infant) curling inside mother's warm womb is pathetic, but at the same time accurate. Ju-Cheol's regressive desire to return to his origin is similar to the father's dream of "getting back to the shell again" in *Meditation on a Snipe*: both are fated to fail and leave them in deep, incurable despair. To Ju-Cheol, South Korea is no more a paradise than is North Korea. From North Korean defectors' point of view, capitalist South Korea in which merciless competition reigns is no less the place for them to live than North Korea where they have to worry about how to find dinner. The internet realm becomes defectors' only paradise, where they can find happiness and need not face discrimination. Losing the place in the North where they can keep their social and cultural wholeness, they are transplanted into the alien space of South Korea and then find themselves settling into a virtual space, although ironically, however real it may look, this virtual space does not exist in the world. Further, if the space of virtual reality is one alternative for defectors' misery in real life, nostalgia for their home in North Korea is another option, although they are not much different from each other in that both are imaginary worlds. The home or community they long for is not the real one they can find in North Korea but an imagined community of the past: "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" and therefore "a romance with one's own fantasy (Boym xiii). In Kang's novel, a North Korean defector writes a suicide note in which he says that he is taking his life because he misses his home so much, which nods to how nostalgia can be fatal to defectors especially when the possibility of returning home is blocked. Defectors have to erase their memory of North Korea to survive in South Korea, just as they have to delete their memory of the real world to survive in the world of virtual reality. To use Julia Creet's words, they are "expelled from the land of memory itself" (6). In this sense, the life of diaspora is nothing but a continuous negation of even one's own memory and by extension one's identity.

As with other (im)migrants around the world, North Korean defectors are also forced to lead a life in an alien place, setting their feet on the border line. Their life, caught between two starkly different nations, is so hard and painful that they have to renounce their original identities and continually assume strange, temporary identities. Ju-Cheol's declaration that "Kusanagi is not my avatar. It's me" (25) shows how far his original identity has disintegrated into cyberspace. This disorientation between the real world and cyberspace illustrates the extent of pain he suffers: his confusion about his own identity between Ju-Cheol (his original name) or Harim (his adopted name in South Korea) in the real world is not much different. Ju-Cheol's identity confusion is so excruciating that he is forced to bend his own memory, which is revealed when he confesses that "memory does not necessarily mean the past. Memory can be created anew by imagination. Now to me, no definite memory or intact past exists any longer" (217). Ju-Cheol's words echoes Creet's argument that "memory is always migrating" (10). For North Korean defectors, forgetting even becomes a tactic for survival in the South, because memory is "a disease that the past torments the present and future" (136).

In conclusion, although more than half a century passed since the ceasefire agreement, the sense of division of the Korean peninsula continues to govern both Koreas across all aspects of society. Ideological confrontation between conservative and radical parties still follows Cold War political rhetoric and the reunion of parted family members during the Korean War remains a social and political issue. In this sense, the Korean War is not yet a finished war. Although the Korean War diaspora and North Korean defectors are living in South Korea together, their attitude toward North Korea is markedly different. Nostalgia is the most prominent characteristic of the former and their memory plays a major

role as they endure the life of a sojourner. But the life of North Korean defectors is heavily burdened with identity confusion and their memory works adversely in relocating to and settling in South Korea. The very title of Kang's novel, *The Ghost* attests that defectors' lives are not much different from that of a ghost. Life writing of both the Korean War diaspora and North Korean defectors witness too painfully and too powerfully on how deeply the "ghost" of the Korean War still controls Korean peoples' lives with the wired fence of the DMZ serving as a symbol for their wretchedness. Seongmin Kim, a North Korean defector to the South and poet, expresses their suffering vividly: "Like a tree suddenly snapped / and life whose half is gone, / the intangible pain of division / cries bitterly, holding the sky ... // With the sorrow of irrevocable division of country / we are fated to cry, even today" (Kim qtd. in Ryu 459; my translation). Although it is unclear how long it will take for the pain and memories of these (im)migrants to bring down the wired fence of the DMZ, their life writing indicates a yearning for the day to return home and live a real life against all odds among both Korean War diaspora and North Korean defectors.

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