

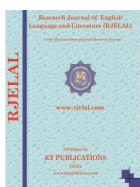


TRAUMA OF REFUSED IDENTITY IN NORTH KOREA AS PORTRAYED IN “RECORD OF A DEFECTION” IN *THE ACCUSATION: FORBIDDEN STORIES FROM INSIDE NORTH KOREA* BY BANDI

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Abstract

Identity is the most fundamental right of a citizen. Its refusal leads to a chaotic emotional state and sparks the need for a journey towards its search. However, when it comes to the case of North Korea, a country which has doubly marginalized its citizens from the rest of the world, the trauma of identity crisis is comparatively higher. This paper studies the trauma caused by such a refused identity in North Korea through the story *Record of a Defection* from *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from inside North Korea*, a collection of seven stories written by Bandi, an author who is still inside the country.

Keywords: The Accusation, Bandi, North Korea, dissident writing, identity crisis, refused identity

One of the most inhuman of acts is to deny a person his identity. It strips a person of his belongingness from society and refuses the acknowledgement his presence. A strive towards such a refused identity goes in vain. It is also one among the primary causes of deflections from a state.

Such acts are seen in abundance in states that are under a totalitarian rule. Of all the cases of dictatorship and authoritarian rule the world history has seen, it is altogether different in North Korea. In most cases, whatever one comes to know of North Korea is through the testimonies of refugees, undercover activists and from the biographies and fiction by deflected authors. With only a single political party that governs the nation, as is known through these works, the nation restricts its citizens from the fundamental bliss of human life. Majority of these published works are from authors alive or dead, but deflected, and it is rare to have a work

written by a living author from inside North Korea. One of such works is *The Accusation: Forbidden Tales from inside North Korea* by Bandi, published in 2017. It was originally written in Korean before being translated by Deborah Smith. Bandi's identity is completely forged to keep him safe.

The Accusation: Forbidden Tales from inside North Korea is a collection of seven short stories based on the lives of people in North Korea. Each story paints a powerful image of how it is to live inside the country that has self-marginalised itself and its citizens. Record of a Defection, the first story, shows the plight of a family that is refused a social identity for three generations for committing an anti-Party crime, which eventually makes them flee the country. With multiple diary entries spanning two years, the story shows how the anti-Party citizens are humiliated and ignored, despite their consistent efforts to gain an identity.

It is understood through this short story that the country is divided into two streams: Party and anti-Party, and the lives of the citizens vary as per the stream that they fit into. Once a person commits a revolutionary act or any activity that does not adhere to the party rules, they are doomed to be "hostile elements(s)" (27). The criminal is "arrested, hauled off to a place whose location we would never know" (6). The person is also stripped off their identity. The trauma caused by such an identity that is refused is analysed through four characters: Lee Il-cheol; his unnamed father; Myung-ok (his wife); and Min-hyuk (his nephew).

The story begins with Il-cheol narrating to Sanghi, his friend, the incidents that had led him to deflect the state along with his family. As the story develops, it is known that Il-cheol's father was

"... a prosperous farmer under the Japanese colonizers, [who] harboured resentment towards the Party's agricultural collectivization policy, and deliberately sabotaged the project to grow rice in greenhouses... Punished as an anti-Party anti-revolutionary element" (27).

Post his father's arrest, Il-cheol, his mother and his elder brother are "forcefully migrated" (7) to an unknown place near the borders of the country. Moreover, his father's crime stains Il-cheol and his brother as "Class 149; hostile element; anti-Party, anti-revolutionary" (27). It then continues to haunt Il-cheol's nephew, Min-Hyuk.

In spite of belonging to an anti-Party family, Il-cheol gets married to Myung-ok who hails from a family that "boats a spotless record, without even so much as a distant relation whose loyalty to the Party might be questionable". This becomes the cause for Il-cheol to say that his union with Myung-ok is similar to the union of "a white heron and a black crow" (4). Though he is a skilled workman who is in-charge of technology innovation department of an industry, he is insulted and least attended to, because of his father's crime. This is known when Myung-ok recounts,

"That young man- whose formal education had stopped at middle school, yet unflagging program of self-study had left him with greater intelligence and skill than any college graduate; who, like the legendary creature with the head of a dragon and the body of a horse had outstripped everyone else in both brains and brawn how could anything of importance be discussed without him?" (17).

Despite this, he is also not included in any formal meetings or social gatherings. Adding on to this outward marginalization, he is also stuck with an inferior complex that makes him think that his wife uses contraceptive pills to avoid a pregnancy with him.

The situation is more graver in the case of his nephew, Min-hyuk. In spite of an excellent academic record, he is not recognized in his school since he is a member of a anti-Party family. This is known when Moon Yeong-hee recalls,

"I received a proposal from their homeroom teacher to give your nephew the post of class president. His grades were already at the top, and his compartment was first-class. But when I went to get the proposal ratified by the Party Secretary, I got 'Comrade don't you know that this child's father was deported to Wonsan?' and well, that was that. The Boy Scouts are the first level in the Part hierarchy, we simply can't use the same criteria as we did when the children were younger" (20).

In another instance, Min-hyuk is ostracised by the children of his age which shows that the segregation is deep embedded even in the minds of the children.

"We've just come from school. Min-hyuk crossed the stone bridge first, and some kid said, 'That brat crossed the bridge first, who does he think he is?'" (23),

says Jeong-ho, Min-hyuk's friend, when Min-hyuk raced a child belonging to the Party family. Myung-ok laments their state as,

"His father and uncle might have a hard lot in live, but that as nothing compared with this. A blameless child with his whole life already

mapped out, forced to follow his parent's footsteps, step by stumbling step, along that same route of blood and tears" (28).

Though these two characters represent the suppression and refusal of recognition, it is Myung-ok who explicitly expresses the trauma of being refused an identity. Belonging to a family that has relations with the Party at the lower levels, she realizes the humility than an anti-Party family goes through, only after her marriage. From the very beginning, the story revolves around Myung-ok and her diary entries: of her encounters and all the vain attempts that she did to get her husband into the Party. She has even gone to the extent of taking pills to avoid a pregnancy, wishing that her child shouldn't undergo the torments that her family faces. She says,

"In this country, a mother has only one wish when she brings children into the world: that their passage through life will be blessed. But if she knew for a fact that what lay in wait was an endless path of thorns? She'd need the cruelty of a hardened criminal to condemn a child to that." (29)

She even initially tries through her friend Moon Yeong-hee by asking her to sneak out Il-cheol's file through Yeong-hee's husband's office. But, upon reading the record, she understands that her family is doomed for generations. She even tries to make another chance that knocks her door: through the local Party Secretary who claims to help her husband. But only later does she understand that his offer to help is a foil to the Secretary's erotic intentions. With all the attempts going vain, she is left with nothing to help to her family or lessen her husband's humiliation and hollowness.

All these cause the Lees to defect the country with their hidden dugout canoe near the coast. In spite of knowing that their decision to flee could be fatal, they believe that

"to slide into oblivion would genuinely be better than continuing to love as we have been, persecuted and tormented."

Il-cheol trusts that their "canoe on the vast blue will mark this land as a barren desert, a place where life withers and dies." (34).

The search for identity is an endless hunt. By deciding to defect and seek refuge elsewhere, the family is only trying to end their suffering and find solace and identity elsewhere. The story portrays very touchingly the emotions and trauma of a completely faceless family that is innocent and guilty of a crime that it never committed. Their journey may or may not have been successful, but *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from inside North Korea*, as a whole, not only successfully brings out the trauma of living in North Korea under very gay conditions but also shows the necessity of an individual and a social identity.

Works Cited:

Bandi. *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from inside North Korea*. Serpent's Tail. 2017. Print.