

The Ghostly Presence of the Korean Orphan

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Recibido: 15/11/2008

Aprobado: 20/12/2008

Resumen:

El artículo analiza la literatura coreana-americana, señalando que ni el modelo postcolonial ni el modelo multicultural son suficientes para entender las sombras fantasmagóricas que aparecen en sus textos. En particular, el artículo examina la figura del huérfano y muestra que la perspectiva de la diáspora permite un análisis que no atiende exclusivamente al pasado ni al presente sino a la complicada relación de ambos.

Palabras clave: postcolonial, diásporas, han, huérfano, Corea.

Abstract:

This article looks at Korean American literature, noting how neither the postcolonial model nor the multicultural model is sufficient to describe the ghostly shadows that emerge in the text. In particular, the article examines the figure of the orphan and shows how a diasporic perspective allows for a reading of neither the present nor the past but the complicated dance between the two.

Keywords: postcolonial, diaspora, han, orphan, Korea.

In Spain as in many other former colonial powers there is a common phenomenon: the return of the colonial subject to the metropole. Of course, this return is not individual but metonymic, a subtle yet insistent presence that resounds throughout Spanish life. It invokes both an economic presence –exhibited in the small shops specializing in Latin-American food and in the *locutorios* where immigrants maintain contact with their families back home– and an ideological response –revealed in the posters around the city announcing “en España, los españoles primero” and in the government’s response through campaigns such as “hola, soy rumano”.

Of course this influx of immigrants originates not just from countries once ruled by the Spanish crown but from other colonial powers as well: North Africa, once dominated by France; and Romania and Bulgaria, once controlled by the former Soviet Union. The situation is thus quite complicated: colonial subjects moving from one metropole to another, and although the matrix of power has not really changed –the people and governments in power continue to maintain control over those without power– the question remains whether a postcolonial model is sufficient to describe the current (post)colonial situation.

Of course, postcolonial discourse has been problematic since its inception. Ella Shohat, one of the earliest critics, asks, “When exactly, then, does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?”¹ It is difficult and in fact often impossible to distinguish between a country’s colonial and postcolonial periods not only because the infrastructure erected under the colonial power – such as hospitals, schools, and roads– continues years later, long after the colonial power has fled, but also because the local government which follows is often composed of figures who defended and supported the colonial power, resulting in a government with new faces and old ideas. The term postcolonial, she argues, has become a universalizing category, flattening out differences between various postcolonial geographies and leaving no space in which to articulate the neo-colonial traces in the present regime or the racial and nationalist tensions within the nation. Most importantly, the falseness of the term risks linguistically reinstating the centrality of the colonial narrative: like other theoretical models, postcolonial discourse often inverts rather than interrogates the oppressed/oppressor binary.

¹ Shohat, Ella, “Notes on the ‘Post-colonial,’” *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia, New York, Arnold, 1996, p. 325.

However, after more than twenty years of fruitful discussion among postcolonial critics, the same doubts remain, and recently a roundtable discussion tackled “the potential exhaustion of postcolonialism as a paradigm... and the absence of new paradigms for tackling fresh and continuing imperialisms”². These recent critics are more than willing to “celebrate the end of postcolonial theory,” arguing that the field “throws limited light on the world we now face”³, especially in America’s current post-9/11 state, but in the end, these critics are not able to offer a new theory or a new discourse to replace postcolonialism; rather they continue to call for a persistent critique of knowledge and of discourses in the academy, and a continued push to make better connections between postcolonialism and other forms of imperialism.

The problem is that the postcolonial model is quite limited in its ability to describe not only colonial and postcolonial countries but also the movement of people between and among their borders. In this century, especially, people emigrate from their countries of origin not simply for ideological or political reasons, which is to throw off colonial vestments and the mentality of being a colonial subject, but for other more fundamental reasons: work, family, love. And while they do not move because of the postcolonial state per se, they are nonetheless haunted by ghosts from the past: those of their country of birth and those of their country of arrival, both of which are bound together in the colonial machine.

As an example of these postcolonial specters, allow me to make a comparison between two texts that reference the Korean War, one which was written by a Korean author and the other by a Korean-American writer. Although the two writers come from different backgrounds, the symbols they employ indicate a shared past, which is not the result of living in the same culture or country but of living with the same ghosts.

In Korean popular discourse, the division of the peninsula into two separate nations after the Korean War is often symbolized as two brothers⁴ who, in the shadow of their parents’ death, are tragically separated across an artificially imposed national line. This metaphor is captured not only in blockbusters such as *TaeGukGi: The Brotherhood of War* (2004) but also in novels such as Yi Mun-yol’s *An Appointment with My Brother* (1994). In this novella, a South Korean businessman travels to the border of China and North Korea to meet his father, a North Korean intellectual who returned to the North after the war. Too much time has elapsed, however, and the South Korean businessman sadly learns that his father had passed away the previous year, and his contact, a Korean-Chinese tour guide, arranges a meeting with his half brother instead. As the two brothers meet for the first time,

2 Yaeger, Patricia, “Editor’s Column: The End of Postcolonial Theory? A Roundtable with Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Gaurav Desai, Mamdou Diouf, Simon Gikandi, Susie Tharu, and Jennifer Wenzel,” *PMLA* 122: 3, May 2007, p. 633.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 636.

4 This liberal perspective can also be seen in the writing of Korean Americans, as in Chungmoo Choi who speaks of South Korean schoolchildren’s depiction of their “Northern brothers”. See Choi, Chungmoo, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 464. Elaine Kim also notes the “[h]atred between the brothers of North and South”. See Kim, Elaine H., “Poised on the In-between: A Korean American’s Reflections on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*,” *Writing Self Writing Nation*, Berkeley, Third Woman Press, 1994, p. 12.

the personal, familial questions they ask quickly turn national⁵, as the narrator finds himself in the position of a “delegate in a South-North conference”⁶. Each brother struggles to defend his own political system, right or wrong.

After getting more comfortable over lunch and a bottle of *soju*, the two brothers take a taxi to a spot along the Tumen River to offer a memorial service for their father. The two men bow on their knees, and when they return to standing, both of their faces glisten with tears. This emotional scene of realizing their shared brotherhood, however, is not free of political resonances. Without a mat to spread on the grass, the brothers spread out a newspaper on which to place the fruits and nuts for the offering. The simple choice of liquor and chestnuts then takes on a fierce regionalism as the brothers debate the crass materialism of the south against the spartan autonomy of the north. While the encounter leaves the two brothers with the realization of their mutual envy, the shared mannerisms they discover also unite them with the memory of their dead father.

A similar meeting takes place in Korean American Helie Lee’s non-fictional account, *In the Absence of Sun* (2002). Lee was not born or raised in Korea, but she manipulates the symbols of brotherhood in a similar way. In Lee’s narrative, a Korean American brother-in-law and his daughter travel to the Yalu River, the main river along the border of China and North Korea into which the Tumen River empties, with the goal of uniting the grandmother (Halmoni) with her eldest son (Lee Yong Woon) who was left behind in North Korea during the chaos of the Korean War. While Helie Lee’s family tree prevents her from directly using the allegory of two brothers orphaned by their parents, the metaphor still lingers in the narrative. Halmoni’s failing health forces her to return to California, and the first reunion across the span of the river takes place between two brothers-in-law and their daughters.

Like Yi’s *An Appointment with My Brother*, this reunion across the water as well as the second reunion at a safe house in Shenyang, China, are replete with the antagonistic discourses of western materialism (captured in both South Korean and American forms) and North Korean *juche*, or self-reliance. In the second reunion, as Halmoni and her son express their grief-inflected happiness through a Christian hymn, Yong Woon’s daughter Ae Ran, a daughter born of the communist regime, laughs nervously at the Christian/Western display of emotions: “My father is a bad person. He could never be a true communist because he hid the hymns in his heart all those years. He should have been purged. He should have been killed by the firing squad”⁷. Like the imagined brother in Yi Mun-yol’s account who realizes the paralyzing grip of North Korean ideology and yet cannot free himself of it, here Ae Ran’s “should have” functions both as an outside commentary on the communist system and as a condemnation of her father’s spiritual rebellion. Ae Ran’s dedication to the Great Leader provides a stark contrast to the American feminist voice of Helie Lee, who cannot stop American English from pouring out of her mouth. While the parent (Halmoni) is still alive and this reunion is not carried out in the memory of a dead

⁵ Typically, the relationship between the north and the south is represented by two brothers, and the “most frequently used metaphor for the south-north relations is that between elder brother (the south) and younger brother (the north), a metaphor that can easily be characterized as patronizing. The elder brother must save the younger brother, who is astray in a world stunted by communism”. Grinker, Roy Richard, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1998, p. 117. This relationship (younger brother/capitalism and older brother/communism) is also the case in Yi’s novella.

⁶ Yi, Mun-yol, *An Appointment with My Brother* (orig.1994), trans. Suh Ji-moon, Seoul, Jimoondang Publishing Company, 2002, p. 56.

⁷ Lee, Helie, *In the Absence of Sun: A Korean American Woman’s Promise to Reunite Three Lost Generations of Her Family*, New York, Harmony Books, 2002, p. 243.

parent, as with the memorial service in Yi's novella, Halmoni's status as parental figure is undermined by her failing health, which engenders the trope of two brothers (and their daughters) separated across the 38th parallel. The account ends triumphantly, with the brother and sister finally reuniting with Halmoni in Seoul, but the haggard expressions on the faces of the North Korean defectors point to other family members left behind, beginning the cycle of abandonment once again.

While Lee was not born or raised in Korea, there is a sense throughout the narrative of having to speak these early wrongs, of declaring publicly the sins of the past, so that they might never be repeated again. Lee, however, is not alone in her conviction. Many Korean American writers as well as critics of Korean American literature narrate the Japanese colonization of Korea, the liberation of Korea at the hands of the Americans, and the current status of Korea under American neocolonial rule as a precursor to understanding Korean American politics. The theme persistent throughout Korean American literature is that the (American) present cannot be understood without first examining the (Korean) past. This double vision is characteristic not only of *han*, a Korean concept quite similar to Freud's melancholia, but also of diaspora.

While the postcolonial model is not sufficient to describe postcolonial countries, or the postcolonial subjects that move across their borders, a diasporic perspective allows us to consider the repressive structures of a previously colonized society without restricting subjectivity to the colonial binary. Since diaspora is nostalgic in its view backwards –there is always the thought of returning home though this return will never be realized– movement is neither forward nor backward, but caught in between. Thus in its movement across space and time, diaspora moves subjectivity beyond a simple East/West or North/South binary without losing sight of how these configurations participate in the disciplining of subjectivity. Diaspora allows us to examine how colonial identity lingers beyond a postcolonial paradigm, travels (though not unchanged) across generations and oceans, and is then renegotiated by new disciplining structures which are, at the same time, implicated within colonial identity.

When a diasporic perspective is applied to Korean American literature, what rises to the surface is the figure of the orphan, a figure that is facing forward and yet always looking back. The figure of the orphan, of course, is not restricted to Korean American literature, but the frequency with which it appears and the layers of meaning bound in its deployment distinguish the Korean orphan from his literary counterparts. Besides the nearly 200,000 actual orphans that have been exported since the Korean War, the image of the orphan resounds throughout Korea, a country which often refers to itself as “a dissected body, a fractured mind or a separated couple of family”⁸, and whose mentality of victimization is captured neatly in the recent title, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture*. And while Korean American writers also use the figure of the orphan to signal their own isolation and distance from American hegemony, it is impossible to ignore these *Korean* feelings of loss and abandonment which are bound up in the figure of the orphan.

8 Hübinette, Tobias, *Comforting an Orphaned Nation: Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture*, Seoul, Jimoondang, 2006, p. 159.

Chang-rae Lee in *A Gesture Life* offers a perfect example of the orphan, a figure trapped not only in his own loneliness but also between postcolonial geographies. If Lee's first book *Native Speaker* deals with the racism that the Korean American encounters in the US, a world which remains white in spite of its affected multiculturalism, then *A Gesture Life* deals with much deeper roots: the Korean subject at the feet of the Japanese.

Although the main character narrates the story from his middle-class home in the US, Hata (or Doc Hata, as he is called by his neighbors) reluctantly admits that he was born in Korea and after a few years was sent to Japan to live as an orphan with a Japanese family. He also relates his experience during World War II when he served as an army medic in Southeast Asia, attending not only Japanese soldiers but also the comfort women who serviced them (primarily Korean women who were kidnapped or sold into sexual slavery). Throughout the narrative, he tries to distance himself from this shadowy past, but he finds himself haunted, trapped within the contagion of his name.

As the narrative unveils, Hata's adopted parents were among a long line of apothecaries who, in earlier times, had ventured into villages stricken by disease. These villages would announce the presence of disease, "to warn of a contagion within,"⁹ by hanging a black flag, or *kurohata*. Although Doc Hata changes his name from Kurohata to Hata when he immigrates to the United States, the black flag of contagion continues to follow him, infecting whoever gets close to him, and for Hata this inability to escape the past is not just a metaphor but a heavy burden weighing heavily upon his heart.

The materiality of this burden can be seen in his description of his outdoor swimming pool painted battleship gray like the stones around its perimeter. As he dives into the pool and glides underwater, his body seems to vanish into the black darkness of the water. From a perspective high above, Hata sees himself as a man, a "secret swimmer who, if he could choose, might always go silent and unseen"¹⁰, a wish which echoes his desire to transcend both his position as a racialized minority and his guilty conscious over the past. While the darkness of the pool initially forms a disguise that envelops his body, soon he fears that the disguise has been stripped, and Hata is sure that his "heart has stopped, skipped in its time"¹¹. In this scene, the emotional fear of being caught swimming in a neighbor's pool, of having his true self exposed, manifests itself physically with Hata sputtering for air as water filters into his chest.

This scene with the swimming pool is not the only time his heart stops but is rather a symptom that recurs throughout the narrative, signifying the burden of the past that Hata carries. Like other characters in Korean American fiction, the pain that Hata feels is indicative of *han*, which signifies "the collapsed pain of the heart due to psychosomatic, interpersonal, social, political, economic, and cultural oppression and repression"¹². This emotional and psychological burden turned inward creates physical pain for Hata, stopping his heart and "producing bodily pain and sickness"¹³.

9 Lee, Chang-rae, *A Gesture Life*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1999, p. 224.

10 Ibid., p. 24.

11 Ibid., p. 22.

12 Park, Andrew Sung, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Doctrine of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1993, pp. 16-17.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

In spite of these moments of pain, which do not move the narrative but rather interrupt it, *A Gesture Life* is above all about the search for home. The story that Hata narrates is not one of trauma but rather redemption, in which he denies ever having suffered at the hands of the Japanese or, least of all, the Americans. And although this denial is characteristic of novels written by first-generation Americans, at the same time ghostly memories continually rise to the surface, interrupting the larger narrative of home and creating doubt in the story that Hata relates. That is, while Hata admits no singular, personal trauma haunting his past, the trauma of cultural memory, the memory of Koreans marginalized under Japanese imperial rule, intersects his life in powerful ways. It is this oppression of Japanese majority rule, and Hata's simultaneous repression of that very rule, that comes to haunt the narrative both emotionally and physically.

At this point we have to admit that neither a multicultural perspective nor a postcolonial model is sufficient to understand the ghostly presences found in Korean American literature. As Chang-rae Lee has commented elsewhere, the function of the writer is to unpack the celebratory images of the past and to "capture the cultural memory that has been erased"¹⁴, and while this does not mean celebrating the past at the expense of the present, it does mean thoughtfully taking into account the ghosts of the past. As Stuart Hall has explained,

It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something*—not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories—and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break.' It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth¹⁵.

Although Asian American critics have historically shunned any literary model that examines an Asian past, calling instead for a sustained critique of American hegemony, in Korean American literature it is impossible to ignore the past when the figure of the orphan resounds so loudly as a real and material presence. The figure of the Korean orphan, like Doc Hata, carries history in a very physical way, the materiality of which begs the reader not to discard the past. Take, for example, two other orphans who battle the ghosts of their parents' past: Suzy Park in *The Interpreter*, whose fever peaks just as her parents' murder is solved, or Hyun Jin in *Fox Girl*, whose dark birthmark signals the sins of her parents. Neither one of these American narratives can be understood without also examining the Korean narrative which is intertwined with the main character's American life.

Of course, in calling for a literary model that seriously considers the past, it is important that the past not overshadow the present. In *Ten Thousand Sorrows*, when Elizabeth Kim cries "Omma, Omma, Omma," these cries for her birth mother signal not only the loss of Korea, her country of birth, but also the difficulty of entering American society. We have to remember not only how the past has influenced the present but also how the present constantly changes our reconstruction of the past.

¹⁴ Lee, Chang-rae, lecture, Kyobo Life Building, Seoul, Korea, 20 May 2003.

¹⁵ Hall, Stuart, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 395.

