
Critique of the Oppressive Realities of the North Korean-style Socialist Regime: On Bandi's *The Accusation*

The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea. By Bandi. Translated by Deborah Smith. New York: Grove Press, 2017. 288 pages. ISBN: 9780802126207.

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Debunking the Internal Contradictions of the North Korean Regime

Bandi's *The Accusation* (2017) is a collection of seven short stories that sharply criticize the internal contradictions of the North Korean regime. "Bandi" is the pen name of a writer who is known to be a North Korean native born in 1950 and still living in his homeland as a member of the Central Committee of the Joseon Writers' League. However, to date the author's real identity has not been confirmed due to the regime's reclusive nature. Nonetheless, reading the book's "In Place of Acknowledgements," which appears at the end of the work, one senses that the *fiction* is in actuality a confessional record of the author's own experiences:

Fifty years in this northern land / Living as a machine that speaks / Living
as a human under a yoke //

Without talent / With a pure indignation / Written not with pen and ink /

But with bones drenched with blood and tears / Is this writing of mine //

Though they be dry as a desert / And rough as a grassland / Shabby as

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an invalid / And primitive as stone tools / Reader! / I beg you to read my words // (p. 247)

In the above excerpt, the author entreats the reader to peruse the book, indicating that he wrote the text “with bones” soaked in blood and tears of “indignation” living in the northern land for fifty years as a “machine that speaks” and a “human under a yoke.” This painful life under the regime has incited such a righteous fury as to compel the author to compose this manuscript, even if rough and primitive, from a sense of duty as a recorder.

The Accusation contains seven short stories written over a seven-year period from 1989 to 1995. It is a well-known fact that since national liberation (1945), North Korean literature has taken the course of banishing bourgeois literature and stressing the literature of anti-Japanese struggle and revolution. In this, it has come to place Juche literature at the core, with its emphasis on *seed theory* and *speed battle*, and also pursued a “Leader representation literature” and “Party literature.” Specifically, a dominant feature of Juche realist literature is its accentuation of Party-, people-, and class-mindedness with themes of socialist reality and its manifestation of the correct instructions of the Great Leader and the Party for the purpose of cultivating the Communist personality.

But Bandi’s *fiction* departs from the usual direction of North Korean literature and openly denounces its archetypal theses, the error-free Great Leader, and delineates the fallacies of the Party. The seven stories can be grouped under three themes: satire on the reality of Kim Il-sung idolization; critiques of the tyrannical practices of the Workers’ Party; and expositions of oppression and falsehood in everyday life. Examining these stories from the perspective of the *Other*, external to North Korean society, one detects the potential presence of a new literature that breaks from the rigid framework of North Korean literature. Considering the regime’s censorship of its writers’ manuscripts, the author would most likely have been unable to have them published in the North without running the risk of being stigmatized as an antisocialist. Literature has a long-standing history of broadening its horizons by challenging various taboos, in the East and West alike. The transgressive

writing the author dares courageously to engage in here is of immense value because it demonstrates the intrinsic essence of what literature is supposed to do, in this case hammering out the contradictions of the North Korean-style socialist regime that stresses the trinity of Leader-Party-People.

Satire on the Reality of Kim Il-sung Idolization

The first group of stories in *The Accusation* criticizes North Korea as a dictatorial state that adheres to the idolization of Kim Il-sung and represses its people's freedoms in everyday life. "City of Specters" (April 1993) satirizes the reality of a family that suffers a forced relocation after their child identifies portraits of Marx and Kim Il-sung as Eobi (an imaginary monster which strikes fear in children). The day before National Day celebrations, Han Gyeong-hee, a 36-year-old seafood store manager in Pyongyang, is asked by a nursery nanny if Gyeong-hee's 3-year-old son keeps crying because the mother told him the story of the Eobi (a creature known in Korean folktales for putting unruly children into a leather mesh bag and throwing them into a well). Indeed, the mother confesses, when the boy had sobbed the previous Saturday, she'd made him look at the portrait of Marx and told him, "Eobi," upon which he stopped crying. Later, the child had fits of trauma from the portrait and came to identify even the picture of Kim Il-sung, the "Dignity of the Nation," as the Eobi. Eventually, Gyeong-hee is handed down a verdict that she committed a very serious wrong to the Party's program to establish the monolithic ideological system by "making course remarks about the portrait of Karl Marx, the founder of Communism, and comparing the Great Leader to a manhole cover" (p. 57). The story ends with her and her family's forced relocation outside the capital. Using the medium of the child's traumatization by the portraits, the story satirically depicts how the idolization of the Great Leader causes people to internalize fear and anxiety in their minds.

"Pandemonium" (December 1995) satirically depicts the reality of North Korea's idol-worshipping society based on an episode where movement on both car roads and railroads is brought to a standstill due to a "Class One

event,” i.e., an occasion of “sacred inviolability” (p. 126) in which Kim Il-sung passes by. The protagonist, an elderly woman named Mrs. Oh, finds that her 4-day-old story of expressing gratitude to the Great Leader when she happened to find herself riding in a car with his entourage, is still being aired on radio and television. Different versions of the same story are reproduced over and over via the media, wherein people convey their gratefulness to the Great Leader and the regime and rejoice in loving embraces and pleasant outings and laughter of happiness resonates everywhere. Behind the distorted glorification, however, the “truths of injuries” inflicted on people in the chaos are obliterated: her granddaughter had her leg broken and her husband suffered a lower back injury. Also related is the incident of a newlywed pregnant woman at the train station having a miscarriage. This piece satirizes the double-sided reality of North Korea, in which distorted facts concerning the Great Leader are circulated like truths and people live an overturned life estranged from reality. Thereby, it condemns North Korea’s *reality in pandemonium*, wherein actual roars of suffering vanish and only the fabricated laughter of happiness is heard.

Critique of the “Mass Production of Antirevolutionary Elements” by the Workers’ Party

The second theme found in *The Accusation* is the denouncing of the Workers’ Party production of a mass of antirevolutionary elements. Parodying “Record of an Escape” (1925) by Choi Seo-hae, a representative writer of New Wave literature, Bandi’s “Record of a Defection” (December 1989) recounts in epistolary form its main character Il-cheol’s story of defection from the North and condemns the persistent guilt-by-association system. After his father was purged as an anti-Party antirevolutionary element for having destroyed rice seedlings prior to paddy planting, Il-cheol and his family are forced to leave their home and move to the country’s northern border near the Yalu River. The story also tells of several other episodes of repression they have experienced, including his wife’s diary entries recounting her sexual

harassment by a local Party secretary, which she had to endure for two years in the hopes of attaining her husband's admission into the Party. One of the entries says that a clandestine probing into Il-cheol's resident registration file revealed that his family is Class 149, meaning he is the subject of constant surveillance. The number 149 refers to his family's relocation according to Government Resolution 149, thus confirming that he belongs to a group of people designated by the Party as traitors to be forcibly relocated. The harsh branding of the hostile element becomes his family's scarlet letter. In the end, exposing North Korea as a place where he cannot live a life rooted in earnestness and diligence, he decides to defect from the land of deceit, falsehood, tyranny, and humiliation that offered not a ray of hope. Showing that the guilt-by-association system, a remnant of the outdated caste system, still exists in North Korea, the story serves to decry the oppressive reality of the North Korean-style socialist system in which surveillance and punishment occur on a daily basis.

In "The Red Mushroom" (July 1993), the Party is rebuked as a deviant organization that commits tyranny in the name of equality. Drawing an analogy between the redbrick building that houses the municipal Party committee of "N Town" and the poisonous red mushroom, the story censures the Party's wrongful guidance. Toward the end, Ko Inshik, a chief technician at a bean paste factory, is disgraced for falsifying his family history and designated as one who should be *revolutionized*. He is tried in an open court and indicted as an antirevolutionary element who has caused people enormous hardship in securing basic foodstuff. In the process, Ko is depicted as a resistant protagonist who recognizes that the Party is identical to the poisonous mushroom and makes desperate efforts to uproot the bureaucratized Party that is riddled with tyranny, conciliation, deception, and oppression. In short, analogizing the Party with the poisonous mushroom, it criticizes the practices of the Workers' Party that produce antirevolutionary elements in mass.

Exposé on the Repressive Reality and Falsity of Everyday Life

The third theme found in the stories of *The Accusation* is the revelation of the repressive reality and falsehood of everyday life within the North Korean socialist system. “Life of a Swift Steed” (December 1993) is a satire on the prevalent poverty in North Korea, using the story of an old man who is revered as a hardworking communist hero but who is compelled by circumstance to cut down the elm tree, which used to mean everything to him in his life, in order to get some firewood. Seol Yong-su, 56, is a member of the early cadre who joined the Communist Party immediately after national liberation. He is an aged war veteran reputed for his heroic feats as a matchless wagon driver during the war. Now working at a factory, he is acknowledged as a persevering innovator devoted to building socialism. All his sheer efforts have earned him as many as thirteen medals during his life, including the First Order of National Merit. When railway workers try to fell an elm tree to install a telephone line for a military patrol, an elm that is so dear to Yong-su, like his “other self,” he protests ferociously, brandishing an axe in front of them. Because it is to him a tree of memories, which he planted in 1948 in commemoration of his admission to the Party. As his wife whines about the shabby life they are having and is distressed one bitter cold day over the lack of firewood, Yong-su cuts down the useless elm himself to warm the house and dies from a heart attack. In short, this work exposes the widespread extreme poverty in the North through one man’s destitute life behind the hollow title of “hardworking hero.”

In “So Near, Yet So Far” (February 1993), Myeong-chol is anxious to visit his sick mother in his hometown Solmoe. When he is unable to obtain a travel permit due to a Class One event scheduled there—something that appeared in *Pandemonium* as well—he ventures out on his journey anyway, only to be detained for labor discipline. Sneaking on to a train without a permit, he makes it as far as his hometown station and manages to reach near his mother’s house. But he is caught by a checkpoint sentry and taken away to work in a labor discipline camp for twenty-two days. Upon returning from the ordeal, he receives a telegram reading, “MOTHER DECEASED.”

Enduring the discipline at the work camp like “an ox, muzzled and bridled” (p. 118) he feels like a bird in a cage. Once back home, Myeong-chol smashes open a birdcage in his house and lets the skylark fly away, as he himself yearns to fly off in search of freedom. But having to return to his home and there receive the telegram of his mother’s passing, all he and his wife can do is tremble in anger. Depicting North Korea as a country where even an ordinary family reunion cannot be had without the state’s permission, “So Near, Yet So Far” criticizes the routinized control and repression in the ordinary lives of the people, who are helpless as their freedom of movement is restrained.

“On Stage” (January 1995), for which the so-called “Arduous March” after Kim Il-sung’s death (July 1994) serves as the backdrop, condemns the omnipresent repression and control in the North based on the story of people living hypocritical lives, like actors on a stage. While memorial music for the deceased Leader is played continuously over loudspeakers, Hong Yeong-pyo, a security inspector for the Union of Enterprises, hears that his son Kyeong-hun has been flirting with a girl during the mourning period for the Great Leader. When he confronts Kyeong-hun about this, the son retorts that a genuine life is only possible in a free world, whereas acting is ubiquitous where repression and control is rampant. A furious Yeong-pyo blurts out, “You’re a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary!” and points his gun at him. Kyeong-hun protests, saying his father can kill him but can “never kill my wish to live a life fit for a human being!” (p. 175). Later, having an awakening of stage truth (meaning that an actor feels as though the role he plays on stage is real life), Yeong-pyo puts an end to his life of fifty-eight years of training for stage truth, living like a good actor, by committing suicide with his rifle. “On Stage” presents as theatrical satire the reality of North Korean society, where freedom and desire is reined in, revealing how the people’s desire to pursue a sincere life are frustrated in the actual world, as they find themselves caught in the continuum of a fake life, like stage acting.

A Testimonial Accusation: The Fallacies of the Regime

Bandi's *The Accusation* reminds us of short stories inclined toward critical realism that appeared during the 1920s in the early period of Korea's modern literary history. Explicitly disclosing the author's intent to satirize and condemn contradictions in the reality of North Korean society, its short and concise narrative abounds in vivid analogies, allusions, connotations, and foreshadowing. Bandi's fiction allows us to confirm the fact that North Korean literature can possess transgressive texts that dare to go beyond the prohibitions imposed by the regime. *The Accusation* attests to the possibility of the presence in North Korea of a critical realism that castigates the regime, as well as of *bourgeoisie literature*, which is shunned in official North Korean literature.

Bandi's works satirically capture the repressive reality under the North Korean regime, in which the Great Leader and the Party come before all else. The underside of daily life in the socialist North is disclosed in all its raw nature (the labeling of anti-Party anti-revolutionary factionist elements, Government Resolution 149, targeting those for falsifying family history, forced relocation, people's trial courts [kangaroo courts], the Class One event, and the labor discipline camp), rendering the solid composition of its narrative facade. Also, the narrative analogies employed by Bandi show that the author's literary training has reached a high level (the redbrick house and the poisonous mushroom, the specter Eobi, the hidden side of the Class One event, the Swift Steed hero's suicide, a skylark flying out of the birdcage, an actor's life of fifty-eight years of training for stage truth, etc.). The official North Korean fictional narrative tends to develop along a linear structure, around the theme of a misunderstanding and its resolution, and emphasizes the role played by the Great Leader and the Party as the problem-solvers. But Bandi's fiction, as a sort of *testimonial literature*, reveals the absurdities of the regime and demonstrates the power to smash from within the myth of ideological rigidity present in conventional North Korean fiction. For this it deserves our full attention.