Korean Literature in a Situation of Division: with an emphasis on Hwang Soon-Won's Novels

Pak, Jae-sup
Inje University

朴, 載變
仁済大学:九州大学

https://doi.org/10.15017/16038
Korean Literature in a Situation of Division
: with an emphasis on Hwang Soon-Won's Novels

Pak Jae-sup (Inje University)

1. Divided Korea and its Literature

After the W.W. II, the conflict between the two superpower nations resulted in the Korean War, thus the Cold war ideology began. It was a war in which Koreans fighting Koreans-a mass fratricide. After the truce, the war has not been resolved, and the split continues until today.

The effect and its influence the war has on Korean literature are tremendous. Disaster, poverty, death and wound, starvation, abhorrence, instability, the destruction of values, the life condition and circumstance are often seen in novels but to date, division is one of the main themes of tragic novels.

Among them, some of Hwang's works are worth noting because they arouse our attention by critically pointing out the division reality. The reasons are that his pieces deal with the war-created division themes. They are viewed from diverse aspects, thus reveal war's destructiveness, its meaninglessness, and its aftermath. Hwang's works indirectly present methods for the nation to draw up plans to overcome the division.

2. Hwang Soon-Won and Division Literature

Hwang, who was an eminent author, began as a short story writer and wrote novels. Hwang devoted 50 years of his life to the world of modern Korean literature. Since literature has the artistic metaphor to human life, through his works, Hwang continually wrote human's conditions of life, its stories, values, etc. His short stories possess artistic idiosyncrasy and at the same time they portray the flow of history that contains the division and the war.

1) The war's irrationality and its Domino Effect

The war between the brothers prompted the author to depict the human wretchedness, the threat of the irrational death and the problems of drastic poverty. The worse the destruction of the battle renders, the worse the intrinsic and extrinsic order of life becomes.

Disintegration of personality caused by the war's irrationality, psychological frigidity, and pressure from poverty are well portrayed in Acrobat. This novel shows how homeless refugees get around the chaotic state of the times. A house is the center of all kinds of life and the place to rest. Thus, the juxtapositioning of owning a house and not owning one leads to a double aspect of life: violence of the rich and sorrow of the poor. In this novel, the refuge life in Taegu and Pusan is well described through personality disintegration due to not having a house, an uprooted life, and irregularity of life in the order of the twisted world. This is what the author terms 'sad acrobatics.'

The life of the homeless before the inhuman violence of the landlord is just like acrobatics performed on the tightrope. The author tries to watch the impoverishment of the reality and the devastated life of the homeless from a critical point of view.

And then he suddenly recalled the word 'acrobat.' Right, I'm doing acrobatics with Jin-A on my shoulders. Then, she is also doing acrobatics, and Sun-A did butterfly acrobatics. Nam-A did bicycle acrobatics only for a few military scrips. This is miserable acrobatics. (...) In this sense, they are young Pierrots of Hwang's acrobatics, and I am the captain. Now, our stage is the bank of a streamlet in Boomin-dong. ¹

¹ Hwang, Complete Works, Vol. 2, p. 271
Acrobatics' performed by Hwang's acrobats depicts the life in the chaotic post-Korean War society, where the basic and normal kind of life could not be guaranteed. Another literary work which shows a limping structure between violent absurdities caused by the war and their traumatic experiences is *Sound*.

In this novel, a farmer, Deok-Ku, who used to be diligent, frugal, and innocent, turns into a cruel, idle sluggard after his military service. His change for the worse reflects his distorted personality resulting from the war. Witnessing lives devastated meaninglessly and dead bodies lying in battlefields, he sees himself in an eye of a dead body which is dragged out with its neck tied. We see a picture of someone who is barely surviving. The only eye of Deok-Ku, bloodshot from drinking, stands for an innocent world destroyed and lost by the war. In sum, Deok-Ku in this novel loses his innocent, diligent characteristics through his traumatic experience of the war and falls into a bottomless pit.

Through this novel, whose basic plot is to show how an innocent life is damaged, the author tries to describe the distorted characteristics of a historical event, the war, and the suffering people went through.

In other novels, *Life, Time allotted to you and me*, is shown the author's strong opposition to the violence of a war which ignores human dignity. Two characters in *Life, Mr. Kang* and 'Boy' are innocent farmers, who get dragged to the battlefield. Mr. Kang leaves his family; Boy leaves his blind mother. These two characters have also fallen victim to the war violence. They are sacrificing themselves for nothing against their wishes. 'Mr. Kang' is crying out to let the absurd effects of the war known.

Mr. Kang thinks Boy will die, and that he will die, too. However, there was something crying out in these thoughts. We should not die like this. It was like crying out for something. Mr. Kang's lower jaw with a rough beard chatters.

An extreme situation, where human beings are overridden meaninglessly, is also portrayed through First Lieutenant Hyun's dream in *Time allotted to you and me*.

In his dream, the sun is burning in the middle of the yellowish sky, and a giant ant kills other yellowish ants one by one around an ant hole. His dream reflects a deceptive fabrication of depriving humans of their life values, which results from the war.

Mr. Kang's last screaming--'Help me!' In *Life*--and a miserable scene where three losers in *Time allotted to you and me*--Captain Joo, First Lieutenant Hyun, and Sergeant Kim--are walking through the fear of death without any hope and destination vividly calls our attention to the fact that a war destroys human lives and drives people to extreme, desperate situations.

2) Pain of separation

Separation is a state where members of a community who are supposed to live together get separated by ill will, cannot see each other, and do not know whether they are alive or where they live. Especially, separation is closely related to division and a war. Thus, if a new literary genre called 'separation literature' is possible, it can be defined as a combination of the separation caused by a massive horizontal change among community members and the missing.

Hwang's two representative works--*A Stationer* and *Human Graffiti*--belong to this category.

Two characters of *A Stationer*--Old Man and Middle-aged Woman--lost their harmonious lives and hold different types of grudges. 'Old Man' studied painting and calligraphy for about 20 years, but does not have any other abilities. He abandons his original life style as time changes and travels around the country, dealing in brushes and ink with a bundle on his back. 'Middle-aged Woman' is waiting for the return of her son who got conscripted and did not return home even after the liberation, and is taking care of her son's wedding items which she prepared. Their most basic dreams got destroyed by external forces, and they carry on their lives with grudges.

'Old Man' stays at the woman's place in a remote village and understands what she has been waiting for. A pair of socks he got from her as a gift was a token of warm-heartedness he has experienced for the first time in his 60-year-long life. 'Old Man' also wished her dream would come true, and drew a picture of ume blossoms. When he left, he hoped to draw her a really good picture of them someday. A few years later, he can draw what he has wanted for a lifetime at a village headman's house, and visits her village.

---

with the picture, only to find it destroyed by the War. After that, 'Old Man' did not visit the headman's house and was found dead one day. His bundle contained a good picture of ume blossoms, a pair of socks, and his will asking to be buried with his socks on.

Both 'Old Man' who had to wander all his life and 'Woman' who was waiting for her son until her death have experienced a war and lost their harmonious life with the rest of the world, are going through a life full of agony.

In Human Grafting are introduced stories of orphans—Chadol, Joon-Han Nam, Paik-Seok Kim, and Jang-Ku—and Jong-Ho who tries to establish them as men of character. Their orphanage is described in detail in this novel, and so are the pains of the orphans who got separated from their families in the midst of the liberation and the War.

In this novel, Prof. Jung's love for them is impressive, but it couldn't benefit all the orphans since even his helping hand was individualistic in some sense. What a group of people have to go through in a reality of division is well represented in this story.

3) Possibility of Overcoming division

The author's humanism got into shape in Crane to such a level that defies explanation by any other author. Two egos of the author—as an artist and as a poet equipped with a sense of history who has witnessed his era—are well integrated in this novel. On the other hand, our country's psychological wounds caused by being divided into the left and right wings are healed with humanism and are depicted with poetic sympathy. Sung-Sam, who is escorting his old friend, Duk-Jae, former vice president of the Farmers' League, gets out of the town, passes an uphill road, gets to an open field, sees a flock of cranes, and releases him. At this point, the story develops into a stage where they talk about having gone hunting together to get cranes frequently, and the author concludes his novel as follows.

Sung-Sam is jerking his head a little away from Duk-Jae. "Why are you standing the re like a fool? Get the cranes." Then Duk-Jae began to crawl among the weeds as if he realized something. At the same time, a few cranes were flying slowly in the autumn sky.  

As shown above, the author tries to heal the tragic realities of division by recovering the past experiences before the community fell apart, which also reflects humanism. More specifically, in its development, this novel tactfully recovers its characters' unified lives when they were young, through simple but valuable aspects of their boyhood lives in their hometown, such as a village old man's cries, chestnut trees, a young girl, crane hunting, etc., and heal the suffering caused by the division. However, this kind of story oversimplifies the division or the Korean War, a big historical tragic event, and treats it lyrically.

Accordingly, it fails to examine the historical event descriptively and closely. Furthermore, this technique introduces fairy tales or memories from the boyhood into the story and tends to ignore the flow of history. Nevertheless, when healing the wounds from the division in a real sense is an important topic of novels, the idea of uniting historical experiences of the national community can't be surpassed. From this viewpoint, it is considered very important that almost all of the Hwang's characters are based on manners and customs. In other words, their suffering and grief can be easily and desirably overcome when they are based on the homogeneous culture.

Hwang's All Glories begins with an author who visits a drinking bar when he is stuck with writing, and then comes a man who says hello to him. The story develops centering round this man. He got imprisoned by an informant during the Korean War, and when he was released, his wife had already died. Later, he mistakes his fellow teacher for the informant, and has him killed by being an informant himself after the liberation. After that, his colleague's family suffering from poverty comes to school, saying that he has not come back home yet since he left around the January 4th Military Retreat. When they leave, he sees that her son looks just like her husband from behind. He feels the pangs of conscience from this incident, which becomes worse since he is not sure whether the informant was his colleague or not. Then, he quits his job because of a guilty conscience, finds his colleague's family to tell the truth, comes back to Seoul, and supports them to atone for his sin. In his expiatory life, he falls in love with his colleague's wife. In this story, Hwang shows how the traumatic experiences caused by the Korean War can be

---

3 Hwang, Complete Works, Vol. 3, p.70
healed through humanity. The author portrays snowy streets and lyrically forms a character who turns a brutal sense of revenge into love, the technique of which also stems from humanism.

3. Conclusion

The meaning of society is twofold for the people who live in it. First, it is a place for realizing oneself, and second, it is an antagonistic reality against human beings. In most of the Hwang's novels dealing with the division of the country, society means a one-way antagonistic reality. Therefore, life in that kind of society cannot help being irregular and unpredictable. Characters and their reality are placed in a completely antagonistic relationship, the former being stripped of human privilege continuously in front of one-sided violence of the latter.

The aspects of an antagonistic relationship with the world deprive human beings of chances to realize themselves and of love which a human relationship is based on. Furthermore, they even disregard the most basic dignity of human lives.

The original value of a decent life degenerates and gets distorted in a situation of a war and division. Under the gravity of this kind of reality, life never fails to get damaged. Hwang tries to suggest a phase of damaged life through the war and division situation, and denies the problematic and unpredictable reality. This paradoxically shows that the source of a decent life originates from human dignity and its basis, love.