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**“With a Pure Indignation”: Fiction, Fictionalisation and the Subtle Resistance of *The Accusation***

Dipanwita Sen

PhD Scholar, Department of English, St. Xavier’s College (Autonomous), Kolkata

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**Abstract:** The oppressive Kim regime of North Korea seeks to control all possible aspects of citizens’ lives. All thought and action must occur along lines sanctioned by the ruling Workers’ Party. The production of art and literature is strictly monitored and must serve to elevate the ruling family and denounce the country’s enemies. Any deviation intentional or accidental is punished by exile to tortuous labour camps or by execution. North Korean criticism of the Kims has come mainly from defectors to the South, who have been derided and even threatened by the North Korean government. This paper seeks to study resistance as embodied in *The Accusation*, a collection of fictional short stories, by a writer who still resides within North Korea and uses the pseudonym Bandi, meaning ‘firefly’. The stories offer intimate glimpses into the lives of ordinary North Koreans who find themselves disillusioned with their apparently benevolent government and, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to resist the tyranny of the state and assert their agency as individuals. The paper also looks into the fictionalised nature of North Korean society and the mental turmoil that arises when reality lived and reality propagandised collide.

**Keywords:** Bandi, fiction, Kim, North Korea, resistance

### Introduction

“But North Korea is not an undeveloped country”, writes Barbara Demick in Chapter 1 of her book *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*. “It is a country that has fallen off the face of the developed world.” (Demick, “Holding Hands in the Dark”) To the outsider, North Korea appears to be a primitive prison – frozen in time and destined, perhaps, to be ruled forever by tyrants. The impression is, no doubt, well-founded to a large extent, but Demick, as quoted above, challenges the widely prevalent but erroneous notion of North Korea being eternally backward; the country had, at least until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, displayed technological and economic progress, at one point surpassing its impoverished, America-backed Southern counterpart. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, China’s refusal to keep bankrolling the North Korean economy (which found itself increasingly renegeing on debts), a strict separation from the supposedly capitalist and imperialist West, isolationist and tyrannical domestic policies, strict crackdowns on the dissemination of information and an inability to keep up with the social, economic and scientific progress made by the rest of the world put a stop to North Korea’s technological, infrastructural and industrial development –a fact that the North Korean government would do its best to keep from its citizens through propagandising and punishing. The key to understanding Bandi’s *The Accusation* lies in understanding the country’s twin system of propaganda and punishment.

North Korea, born following the division of the Korean Peninsula after the Korean War of 1950, is ruled with an iron fist by the Kim family. Information – except that which is controlled and circulated by the state – is allowed neither in nor out of the country’s borders. Foreign media content and literature is accessible only to a few elite citizens, including the workers at North Korea’s Propaganda and Agitation Department (PAD).



The department is allowed to peruse South Korean and American news and literature (an act that would get the ordinary North Korean sentenced to hard labour in a prison camp), keep themselves abreast of current events and release heavily edited and manipulated versions to convince their citizens of their country's position as a veritable paradise on earth. Crimes and disasters natural or man-made in enemy countries are amplified in North Korean news, especially such long-standing enemies as Japan, South Korea and the United States who, so North Koreans are made to believe, would like nothing better than to launch a military attack on their beloved country. This phenomenon has been observed both by North Korean experts like Barbara Demick, a 2001 correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* who reported extensively on both Koreas, and by dissidents like Jang Jin-sun, who worked with the propaganda department and was intimately acquainted with the North Korean system of brainwashing even prior to his defection. Paranoia regarding foreign military attacks is bred into North Korean citizens from when they are very young: classrooms walls sport posters of cartoonishly evil American soldiers terrorizing North Koreans and enslaving South Koreans; 'Yankee bastard' is a term of abuse and young pupils are taught mathematics through problem-solving exercises featuring the number of children an American soldier might kill. (Demick, "The Accordion and the Blackboard")

Propaganda is the Kim regime's most effective oppressive arm. It tells the citizens what to think, when to think and when and how to act. Defectors, who have hitherto had their whole lives (and deaths) planned and executed by the state, often find themselves at sea when confronted with the freedom of choice in South Korea and the necessity to think and decide for themselves. Most of our information about the isolated and strictly-sealed state comes from the North Korean citizens who manage to escape the country, usually travelling through China to South Korea. They speak, write and sometimes draw of unspeakable atrocities in prison camps: of prisoners dead and dying from hard labour, starvation, illness and torture; of dead bodies left to the mercy of rodents and natural elements; of women suffering sexual violence, forced abortions and infanticide. The enduring image - unchanged from when Kim-Il-Sung, the country's first ruler, took up the reins of government - is of a people parroting propaganda and bowing obsequiously to the reigning Kim even as they are starved and executed.

Kim Jong-Il once noted that he "rule through music and literature" (Jang, Ch. 1). Writers are, in essence, mouthpieces of the Workers' Party of Korea, the ruling party. "...every single writer in North Korea produces works according to a chain of command that begins with the Writers' Union Central Committee of the Party's Propaganda and Agitation Department," notes Jang Jin-sung, a former poet with the United Front Department of the Workers' Party. "Anyone who composes a work that has not been assigned to the writer through this chain of command is by definition guilty of treason. All written works in North Korea must be initiated in response to a specific request from the Workers' Party. Once the writer has handed in his piece, it must then be legally approved before being accepted as a new work. Those writers who produce distinguished works under these standards are of course rewarded." (Jang, Ch. 1)

It is obvious, then, that the literature produced in North Korea (in addition to the works authored by the Kims) express reverence for the 'Great Leader' or the 'Dear Leader' and the Socialist system and hatred for its supposed enemies. It is equally obvious that any deviation, which includes intentional or accidental dissemination of the South Korean material confidentially loaned to these writers, brings forth punitive hard labour or even execution. Jang Jin-sung's own defection was prompted by a similar occurrence: disillusioned and disgusted with his own government after his exposure to accounts of South Korean life and economy and to the famine that he saw sweeping the country outside the privileged bubble of Pyongyang, Jang had loaned a book from South Korea to a like-minded friend, Hwang Young-min, who misplaced it. Knowing that if found out - which they would eventually be - they would be arrested for treason, the two friends decided to defect. Jang managed to escape, but Young-min was apprehended in China. He killed himself on the way back to



North Korea, preferring death by his own hand to the punishment awaiting him (and in all likelihood his family) at the hands of the state.

### ***The Accusation in the Context of North Korean Fiction and Fictionalisation***

In 2013, South Korean human rights activist Do Hee-yun found himself in possession of a 750-page manuscript. He had been apprised of its existence by a female North Korean defector he had helped rescue and at her request had sent a letter to Bandi, her relative, through his Chinese friend. The friend had brought back the manuscript, which contained seven short stories written between 1989 and 1995. Do took the initiative to get the stories published as “an earnest entreaty to shine a spotlight on North Korea’s oppressive regime” (Sumi, “Bandi and Surviving North Korea: A Review of *The Accusation*”). The book garnered little attention when it was published in South Korea in 2014, which Do attributes to the “over-democratization” (Rao, “A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins”) of South Koreans – a kind of “somnambulant indifference” (Rao, “A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins”) to the humanitarian crisis plaguing their brothers and sisters in the North. Bandi’s book generated international interest only with a French translation in 2016 and an English translation by Deborah Smith in 2017, published under the title *The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea*.

*The Accusation* has sometimes been called the first work of fiction from North Korea. It is an idea worth examining, both in the context of fiction as a literary genre and the degree to which fact and fiction are distinct (or indistinct) in North Korea. To state that North Korean authors have produced no works of fiction – no poems, no novels, no short stories – would be an untruth, though works of any importance must have been approved of by the state and any and all works are monitored for traces of dissent or insubordination. Han Sorya’s *Jackals* (1951) comes to mind in this context. Bandi’s own literary career began with works he had published in North Korean literary magazines. But fiction is literature created from imagination and experience by the creative mind, much like life thought and speech are products in North Korea created by the state or, to be more accurate, the propagandising arm of the state. North Korea’s veneration of the Kims depends on the fictionalising of the history of the Korean war, painting Kim Il-Sung as a superhuman warrior-general who singlehandedly ended the Japanese occupation of the country and drove the bloodthirsty ‘Yankees’ (flanked by their supposed puppets, the South Koreans) away from North Korean borders (defectors report being shocked when they first learn that their country had not, in fact, won the Korean War; that it had ended, essentially, in a stalemate, and that Kim Il-Sung had been the aggressor instead of the ‘puppet’ South Korean government). North Korea has no religion, but the depiction of the Kim dynasty in North Korean media and literature bears striking similarities to the rise of epic heroes and divine figures: Kim Jong-Il, for example, is said to have been born in his father’s military camp at Mount Paektu, the peak divinely regarded by both halves of the Korean peninsula, and his birth was heralded by the appearance of a rainbow in the sky. The legend is an indisputable part of official North Korean history and also blatantly untrue – Jong-Il was born in Russia, and he wasn’t even called Kim Jong-Il to begin with. He’d been given the Russian name Yura. Yet the birthdays of Il-Sung and Jong-Il, father and son, are state holidays, and children are expected to bow and thank the Great Leader and the Dear Leader respectively for the chocolates and sweets that they receive as gifts. Any deviance in practice or thought from these established practices or beliefs is immediately punished by exile to labour camps or by execution.

Paul Fischer, author of *A Kim Jong-Il Production*, describes North Korea as “one vast stage production” with Jong-Il (in Fischer’s book, at least) as “the writer, director and producer of the nation” (Fischer, Ch. 22). The only way to survive and perhaps be reasonably happy is to adhere to one’s role, parrot off the expected lines and never question what the Workers’ Party proclaimed to be the reality. The comprehensive and all-pervasive North Korean propaganda also accounts for many defectors’ “complicated relationship with fact”



(Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins"); a polite euphemism for heavily fictionalised or embellished accounts. Notwithstanding successful defections, former residents of the regime have had to lead "a life of deception" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins") because, quite simply, their lives and their family's depended on it, and this is sometimes reflected in their accounts of North Korea. Shin Dong-yuk, the young protagonist of *Escape from Camp 14* (a reference to North Korea's prison camp number 14 where he was allegedly born and raised) confessed in 2015 that many of his claims about his life in North Korea had been false. Yeonmi Park, arguably the best-known North Korean defector, came under fire for claiming in her book *In Order to Live* that she'd known of North Korean citizens executed for watching South Korean content, which many defectors flagged as false. It must be noted, however, that while Park's claim (and many others in her book) might be disputed, it cannot be denounced as absolutely untrue, at least not under Kim Jong-Un: speaking on the condition of anonymity, residents in North Korea have described the increasingly stringent crackdown on the consumption of South Korean content and have reported at least two executions as a result of the same.

Analysts and thinkers familiar with the sway the North Korean government holds over its citizens have questioned whether it is possible for a resident actually living within the country and the system to see through the lies the common man is constantly fed. Barbara Demick is of the opinion that *The Accusation* is written by a defector. Others who are familiar with Korean literature feel differently. Lydia Lim, student at Princeton University and the granddaughter of defectors, has studied the language and the metaphors used in the book and the idiosyncratic word choices that are the result of a "linguistic rift" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins") between North and South Korea. She has also spoken to North Korean defectors familiar with the locations – often obscure – that Bandi describes in his stories. She has found no cause to doubt that *The Accusation* has indeed been written by a disillusioned North Korean writer working for the state.

It would be, perhaps, more accurate to describe the book as the first work of dissident fiction authored by a writer still living in North Korea – an occurrence that makes the book's message all the more powerful. Do, who has had sporadic communication with Bandi, said in 2017 that his agents been in touch with the North Korean writer some months ago and that Bandi was safe and "was aware of the book's publication in the outside world" (Choe Sang-Hun, "A Dissident Book Smuggled from North Korea finds a Global Audience"). Profits from the book, according to Do, would go towards supporting not only Bandi's family in North Korea but also defectors who live and write in the South.

### **Oppression and Resistance in *The Accusation***

Jong-Il had been an advocate of the *chongjaron* or 'seed theory' of expression in literature and film, wherein each story contains a central idea (the 'seed') and the events or characters depicted would aim to lend credence to that idea. The 'seed' is the central idea – usually political in nature (but not subversive in any form or manner to the Kim family) to guarantee the film's success – and unites such elements of the work as the protagonist, the conflict depicted, the events and the resolution. Jong-Il expounds on the idea in his book *On the Art of the Cinema* (1973). His intention, of course, had been to use media (his personal favourite being film) as a vessel for pro-Party propaganda and to celebrate the benevolence of the ruling family. The seven short stories in *The Accusation*, taken together, do in principle adhere to the seed theory in that the idea that is planted in the first story comes to fruition in the final one with the stories in between gradually elaborating on it and exploring it from different perspectives; only, Bandi's intention is not to venerate the Worker's Party and its leaders but to condemn them.



The stories in *The Accusation* explore North Korean oppression from the point of view of ordinary citizens of different *songbun* or class that is determined by one's individual and familial history of loyalty to the Party – from a “witless mine worker” (Bandi, “So Near, Yet so Far”) to an educated woman with a background of impeccable familial loyalty to the Party, so much so that she is the “white crane” compared to her wavering-class “black crow” husband (Bandi, “Record of a Defection”). There is a spectrum across the stories of realisation of the oppressive system they live under: Lee Il-Cheol's wife, hitherto privileged by her family background to be unaware of the fate of those below her in *songbun*, is shocked and disillusioned when she finds her husband's beloved nephew, a child, has been stripped of his rank of class president simply because the entire family belongs to “Class 149” and is regarded as comprising “hostile element” (Bandi, “Record of a Defection”); the passengers stuck in the waiting room in “Pandemonium”, labouring in crowd and heat for hours for a train that never seems to come, wonder “*What bastard's Class One event takes this long? What bastard's Class One event kills people like this?*” (Bandi, “Pandemonium”), implying they are aware that the supposedly considerate and benevolent Kim Il-Sung is responsible for their suffering. Bandi, however, does not hold the Kims alone responsible for the suffering of his countrymen. He condemns the very political system that had made the rise of the Kim family and their consolidation on power possible. One of the poems that had accompanied the manuscript of *The Accusation* reads thus:

That old man of Europe with his bristling beard  
Claimed that capitalism is a pitch-black realm  
While communism is a world of light.  
I, Bandi, of this so-called world of light,  
Fated to shine only in a world of darkness,  
Denounce in front of the whole world  
That light which is truly fathomless darkness,  
Black as a moonless night at the year's end. (Bandi, “In Place of a Preface”)

Bandi's denunciation of Communism in the poem is not the mere result of his disagreement with or dislike of a certain political ideology; it is the result of his disillusionment with a political system that had been touted as egalitarian (as opposed to the supposedly inhumane and debauched capitalism of South Korea and the United States) and had later shown itself to be anything but. This sentiment would later be echoed by many of the South Korean and Japanese citizens who had immigrated to North Korea lured by promises of a just and progressive workers' paradise and had instead found themselves trapped in a country where the hapless citizens worked simply to enrich the ruling family and their cronies. Bandi's bitter criticism of Communist ideology is echoed in the final story of the book wherein the aggrieved and maddened scientist Ko Inshik locates in the “Redbrick house” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”) – the Municipal party office – the likeness of the poisonous red mushroom that had sickened him and his men and killed a fellow worker: “*Pull out that red mushroom, that poisonous mushroom. Uproot it from this land, from this world, forever!*” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”). The destruction of the red mushroom is also his only appeal in court, torn, as the journalist Yunmo realizes, from the depths of his “snow-white conscience” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”), though the rest of the attendees find it incomprehensible and discuss how the accused “must have gone soft in the head.” (Bandi, “The Red Mushroom”).



It is worth noting that the conflicts faced by the characters in the stories because of the discrepancy between reality as propagated by the state and the characters' lived reality manifest in things so mundane or so inconsequential that they would not be worth a second thought in any country that is not North Korea. Han Gyeong-hee's young son in "City of Spectres" is terrified by the portraits of Karl Marx and Kim Il-Sung opposite their building in Pyongyang. Gyong-hee uses double curtains, blue in colour, to hide the portraits from the child. Her failure to use the translucent white under-curtains the Party has provided them with draws the ire of her husband as well as of the local Party secretary. Gyong-hee is hardly a fervent opponent of Kim Il-Sung or Karl Marx – she is simply an exasperated mother trying to soothe her sick child (and, by extension, suppress any conjecture that the child was frightened by the portraits because his parents were irreverent to the men in them). Her efforts bear no fruit, nor do her explanations about the curtains and her child's ailing health. Her family's loyalty to the Party is disregarded and she is exiled to the countryside with her family for "Neglecting to educate their son in the proper revolutionary principles, with a negative effect on the National Day ceremony" and "making coarse remarks about the portrait of Karl Marx, the father of communism, and comparing the portrait of our Great Leader to a manhole cover." (Bandi, "City of Spectres"). It is extremely ironic that Gyong-hee's efforts to pour oil on troubled waters and downplay her son's childish fears end up accelerating the outcome she had hoped to avoid – punitive exile. But Gyong-hee had not insulted the Great Leader any more than her child had deliberately insulted Marx; her reference to the manhole cover in no way reflected her views of her country's relationship but was simply a North Korean saying: "The child who fears turtles will flinch at a manhole cover" (Bandi, "City of Spectres"). Her attempt to explain childish behaviour had been misconstrued – deliberately or otherwise – as political irreverence.

It is also worth noting that rigid and repressive regimes like North Korea's thrive on, among other things, completely stripping the common people of agency; the degree of the individual's allegiance to the regime is, paradoxically, the degree to which agency may be restored, though as a privilege and certainly not absolutely (reporting one's neighbours and even family members to party officials for purported unpatriotic behaviour is one of the many ways of demonstrating allegiance). It stands to reason, therefore, that the creatures and the objects that stand for resistance (though the characters would probably be hard-pressed to describe them as such) are commonplace themselves and that, at the same time, they are, for those that wield them, the means – often the only means – of asserting their agency and their rights as individuals in the face of state ideology that demands the dissolution of the individual in favour of the collective.

In "Record of a Defection", for example, the narrator and his wife, in spite of their class differences, are happily married, yet the husband discovers his wife's contraceptive pills. He flies into a rage thinking she does not want a baby with him because it would be an inter-class "mongrel" (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"), then finds out it is because she refuses to bring a child into a society that punishes the children (and grandchildren) for the sins of the father: "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." (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"). Their family's poor *songbun* and the prospect of Il-Cheong's acceptance into the party also render the woman vulnerable to the sexual advances of the local Party secretary, for to refuse him would be to hamper her husband's career prospects. It is the contraceptive pills and the story that spills out with their discovery that prompts Il-Cheong to try to defect with his family from the "barren desert" that is their country, "a place where life withers and dies" (Bandi, "Record of a Defection"). The freeing of his pet larks from their cage – the second time, by physically breaking the cage into two – is the only act that the timid and passive Myeong-chol performs in complete senses and under his own agency in "So Near, Yet so Far". Myeong-Chol is unable to protest when he is refused a travel permit to see his dying mother; his decision to travel without a permit is taken in a fit of drunken desperation and he falls to pieces as soon as he is caught travelling without a permit



- a crime in North Korea that warrants punishment by hard labour. The birds, a gift from Myeong-chol's village, represent his own imprisonment (hence his feeling of kinship with them and his efforts to set them free), but his ownership of the birds and his complete control over their lives also mirrors the state's ownership over his person and its right to deny him (in the interests of the state, of course) an urgent visit to family: "That's right, what am I but a caged animal, for whom the shortest distance might as well be a thousand ri? A pitiful, domesticated creature!" (Bandi, "So Near, Yet so Far"). In setting the birds free, Myeong-Chol chooses, albeit unconsciously, to feed his own desire for freedom and to deviate from the treatment he, a mine worker, received from the Party officials, his superiors: "There's no 'why.' I needed to break the cage, so I did, that's all." (Bandi, "So Near, Yet so Far").

"Life of a Swift Steed", "Pandemonium" and "On Stage" capture the devolution of the North Korean state as a whole, culminating in the parallel between the parasitic red mushroom and the Communist-run country in "The Red Mushroom". If the elm tree in "Life of a Swift Steed" is emblematic of the Communist utopia that the simple, hardworking and idealistic Seol Yong-su envisioned - "...pure white rice with meat every day, and silk clothes, and a house with a tiled roof!" (Bandi, "Life of a Swift Steed"), then the story of pandemonium, "the abode of the demons" (Bandi, "Pandemonium"), where the old demon king used laughter to "conceal his evil mistreatment" (Bandi, "Pandemonium") of his slaves is the story of a country where people must mask their fear and discontent of their ruler behind smile and prayer. "On Stage" explores the performative nature of North Korean life where one must, quite literally, act to save one's life (which is what the Hong Yeong-pyo, the stern father and the loyal Part member of the story, realises as he watches a banished man's wife weep unabashedly for the dead Kim Il-Sung). The degeneration of North Korea is marked by the disillusionment of her loyal citizens and a slow and increasingly horrifying awakening about inescapable, deceptive and repetitive quagmire that passes for life in North Korea: Seol Yong-su is found dead with his chopped old elm that had ceased to flower; Mrs. Oh comes to the realization that the story of pandemonium she plans to narrate to her granddaughter is "that old tale, which was not really old at all" (Bandi, "Pandemonium"), and Yeong-pyo presses his gun to his temple, reeling from the accuracy of his wayward son's comparison of their life to playacting and from the insinuation that he, too, with his impeccable Party credentials, had been one of the actors.

Bandi recounts in *The Accusation* not "outright rebellion" but about survival in the face of the "slow onset of despair" (Rao, "A Collection of North Korean Short Stories and the Mystery of their Origins"), not only because of the nature of the society and the life they describe but also because the characters lack the hindsight and the sense of freedom that defectors come to possess in the South or even, to a much lesser degree, in China. What matters to him is they be read and understood. In an untitled poem that accompanied the manuscript, he writes:

Though they be dry as a desert

And rough as a grassland

Shabby as an invalid

And primitive as stone tools

Reader!

I beg you to read my words. (Bandi, untitled poem)



## Conclusion

Bandi's stories and the defectors' accounts show that North Koreans are not as completely taken in by propaganda as their government would like them to be. In recent years, especially, there has been an increasing influx of South Korean media into the North thanks to the Chinese traders who smuggle things in and out of North Korea as well as North Korea's own flourishing black market. More and more North Koreans have begun waking up to the reality of their leaders and to the preposterous lies they have been fed about their supposed enemies, especially the South. There are, of course, no apparent manifestations of the growing discontent, particularly in the younger generation, for any signs of dissent are still ruthlessly crushed, but the question remains: what next?

Kim Jong-Il was succeeded after his passing by his third son, Kim Jong-Un. The younger Kim had spent many of his formative years going to school and playing basketball under a pseudonym in Switzerland. He had been exposed to Western capitalism and Western democracy and some had wondered, both inside North Korea and outside it, whether the young man would consider some version of *perestroika* and *glasnost* for his starved, impoverished and sanctions-riddled country, beginning, perhaps, with negotiating a freeze or – miraculously – an end to North Korea's controversial nuclear weapons programme. Their hopes have been mostly unfounded.

Following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, Jong-Un marked his ascension to power by eliminating any potential political rivals, including his uncle. He is also said to be behind the assassination in 2017 of his older half-brother Kim Jong-Nam. Jong-Nam, once a favourite of their father's, had long fallen from grace, but he still had extensive contacts within the country and was allegedly working for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Jong-Nam died in Kuala-Lumpur airport when two girls sprayed him with what turned out to be lethal nerve agent. The girls, budding actresses, claimed they had had no knowledge of a murder and were simply recruited by a North Korean man for starring in a comic film. They'd been under the impression that their stunt at the airport was simply a part of shooting the film.

Jong-Un's human rights record, like his predecessors', is less than stellar. There are no traces in the way he runs his country of the Western education and Western exposure to democratic and free market values that had inspired cautious optimism in political analysts. He has enforced stricter penalties (including executions) for getting caught with or consuming South Korean content, wearing denims and similar manifestations of imperialist decadence. He has also taken harsher measures to guard against defections by, in part, reinforcing existing fences and border walls, increasing military presence near the border with China (the most common route taken by defectors) and permitting border guards to shoot dead any citizen suspected of trying to cross over. The Chinese government's policy is to arrest and hand over any North Korean found to have illegally entered the country, which has been made easier in recent years because of sophisticated surveillance systems like facial recognition and digitized, impossible-to-fake identity cards. "It has become physically impossible to cross the North Korean border into China", (Nakagawa, "North Korea Reinforces Border with China, Tightens Control to Prevent Defections that could threaten Kim Jong Un's Rule") said defector Seo Jae Pyong in 2023. In August that year, he'd been contacted by a starving North Korean resident who begged Seo to help him escape. Seo had had to tell the man that "There is no way to help this time" (Nakagawa, "North Korea Reinforces Border with China, Tightens Control to Prevent Defections that could threaten Kim Jong Un's Rule"). North and South Korea do share a border, but it is the site of the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) and is one of the most heavily fortified places in the world.

While the terrible days of the Arduous March (the North Korean name for the famine that swept across the country in the 1990s following the death of Kim Il-Sung) have passed, North Korea's citizens still suffer



from a chronic shortage of food. The country is unable to produce sufficient food for its citizens and sanctions do not permit much import of food. Residents told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2023 that they are “stuck and waiting to die” (Mackenzie, “North Korea: We are stuck and waiting to die”). The food and fuel Pyongyang imports from China, one of North Korea’s few allies, finds its way not to the common people but into the pockets of the elites of the city, as does the humanitarian aid supplied by the international community (particularly the United Nations and the United States) in the form of rice, formula, diapers and powdered milk.

Government officials in such countries as Iran and Russia who have been accused of violating human rights often find themselves under heavy sanctions. The question that arises then must also inevitably arise now: what sustains the Kim regime? The Kim family and their stooges help themselves to the lion’s share of the little their ruined economy manages to produce, it is true, but the Kim regime is also propped up by China and Russia – extremely ironic considering the Kim family’s references to Japan and South Korea at every conceivable opportunity as American puppets. China, especially, has vested interests in ensuring the stability of North Korea’s current government: a China-backed North Korea may be used to counter America’s military presence in Japan and South Korea; also, any kind of political upheaval in North Korea would initiate a mass exodus of North Korean refugees – a problem China emphatically does not wish to deal with. China and the erstwhile Soviet Union are also the only countries to have signed military treaties with the North and, as of writing, thousands of Jong-Un’s countrymen are dying as part of Vladimir Putin’s forces in Russia’s war with Ukraine.

Kim Jong-Il established his own private criminal enterprise that would soon become a source of resources and revenue for the Kim family. The outfit was responsible for kidnapping women from Western and Middle-Eastern countries as well as from South Korea and Japan during Jong-Il’s reign, both for the leader’s private benefit and the benefit of North Korean government enterprises. Paul Fischer, in his book *A Kim Jong-Il Production: The Extraordinary Story of a Kidnapped Filmmaker, His Star Actress, and A Young Dictator’s Rise to Power*, describes how South Korean star Choi Eun-hee found herself tricked and abducted by Kim Jong-Il’s henchmen. During her years as Jong-Il’s captive, albeit in a gilded cage of luxury almost unheard-of by North Korean standards, Choi would meet fellow abductees, including French and Jordanian women. An investigation by TIME magazine found that Jong-Il’s nefarious activities stretched across Asia to Russia, Europe and the United States. Harvard University researcher, Sheena Chestnut, notes that the activities of the enterprise are controlled by Bureau 39, which comprises the dictator’s top financial advisors and closest deputies – findings that have been corroborated by multiple intelligence agencies working in East Asia. The outfit is also responsible, currently, for securing funds for the regime through cyberattacks, kidnappings, assassinations and forgery – counterfeit American dollar bills produced in North Korea so closely resemble the original that they have been nicknamed ‘megadollars’. The outfit’s responsibilities also extend to persecuting and, if necessary, eliminating critics of the Kim family inside and outside North Korea. Do Hee-yun has found himself targeted by cyberattacks since the publication of *The Accusation*. He is still in possession of Bandi’s manuscript and is very cautious as to who he shows it to. He does not allow photography for fear of the North Korean regime identifying Bandi through his handwriting.

There seems little prospect of the ordinary North Korean’s life changing for the better until the Kim dynasty is vanquished and a proper democratically-elected government of enlightened and progressive citizens is established, which may then work towards economic and infrastructural development within the country, international alliances and the removal of economic sanctions. But regime change prompted from without rarely works, and the prospect (as of now) of regime change from within North Korea seems extremely remote. The thought is not, perhaps, very encouraging, but one can only hope that Bandi’s will not be the only light that shines through the darkness of the Northern half of the Korean peninsula.



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**Author Bio: Dipanwita Sen** is currently pursuing a Ph. D from St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, under Dr. Argha Banerjee. She was previously an Assistant Professor of English at Bharatiya Engineering Science and Technology Innovation University, Gorantla, Andhra Pradesh and has held a teaching position in the Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Burdwan. Her research interests are primarily postcolonial and non-fictional, but she also takes an interest in international politics.