



STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: A STUDY OF BARBARA DEMICK'S *NOTHING TO ENVY*

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ABSTRACT

Nothing to Envy by Barbara Demick provides a captivating and emotional examination of the lives of average North Koreans residing under the repressive government. Demick's research and personal interviews provide a detailed depiction of individuals who challenge the commonly held assumptions about North Korea. She uncovers their hardships, ambitions, and ability to persevere in the face of difficulties. *Nothing to Envy* illuminates the human experience in one of the world's most secretive countries, from defectors who take great risks for freedom to loyal inhabitants who navigate the intricacies of daily life. Her account not only sheds light on the difficult situation of North Koreans but also serves as a compelling testament to the essence of the human spirit in oppression.

Keywords: Defectors, Survival, Starvation, Scarcity and Envy

Introduction

Barbara Demick is an American journalist and, experienced overseas correspondent and writer. For 15 years, she held the position of bureau head in New York, Beijing, and Seoul while working at 'The Los Angeles Times'. Before this, she provided coverage from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Washington, and Wall Street for 'The Philadelphia Inquirer'. She is a renowned author who has received awards for her three books: *Eat the Buddha: Life and Death in a Tibetan Town*, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, and *Logavina Street: Life and Death in a Sarajevo Neighbourhood*. Contemporary writers who explore similar themes are Evan Osnos, Barbara Kingsolver, Katherine Boo, Blaine Harden, etc.

Discussion

Demick combines historical background and first-hand accounts from North Korean defectors and interprets to vividly depict the experiences of six refugees who managed to flee from North Korea during the late 1990s and early 2000s. She explores the manipulation of North Korean citizens' thoughts, perceptions, and behaviours through propaganda and misinformation. As Delury said, Demick's book "fills a gap in understanding" about North Korea

(Finley). She also examines the impact of surveillance and distrust on the development of intimate relationships among friends, lovers, and family members. Additionally, she examines how scarcity, starvation, and deprivation drive ordinary individuals to engage in extraordinary actions for the sake of survival. "Struggle and survival may sound like inseparable siblings that are intertwined with each other" (Bevara).

"Demick interviewed more than 100 defectors and chose to focus on Chongjin because it is likely to be more representative than the capital Pyongyang" (Demick). *Nothing to Envy* extensively showcases several situations where interviewees recount engaging in or enduring abhorrent actions as a means of survival, thus demonstrating how unimaginable circumstances can provoke awful behaviours. Michael Rank writes, "The overwhelming impression one gains from Barbara Demick's book is of a country mired in poverty and repression – but also of resilience and a will to survive" (Dong).

Kim Hyuck, an individual interviewed by Demick, was recognised during his childhood as one of the numerous Kochi, also known as wandering swallows. This term referred to children who, during the peak of the famine in the



mid-1990s, resorted to begging, trading, and stealing food from the streets. This was due to the inability of their families or the state orphanages where they resided to continue providing for them. At the age of 10, Hyuck engaged in his initial act of theft from an unknown individual. Although he faced legal consequences and was apprehended, he resumed his illicit activities upon release. He proceeded to take produce from orchards, pilfer snacks from individuals at train stations, and even resorted to hunting animals for sustenance. He recounts a disturbing event where he and a companion submerged a dog in water until it died, after which they proceeded to remove its skin and cook it on a grill. While dog meat is a customary element of the Korean diet, Demick highlights that he expressed remorse about the cruel methods employed to capture and slaughter the animals.

Despite joining a street gang consisting of other kochebi for safety, Hyuck vividly remembers going to bed each night, consumed by anxiety that another child might steal from him. At the same time, he slept—or worse, that a cannibal would appear, abduct him, and consume him. In 1997, Hyuck commenced the act of unlawfully traversing the Tumen River into China, engaging in the exchange of merchandise over the border,

subjecting himself to the perils of apprehension, torment, and potentially fatal consequences. In about 1998, Hyuck was apprehended and confined to a labour camp, where he witnessed the agonising deaths of men due to starvation during their grueling daily work shifts for a period exceeding 20 months. Demick underscores the fact that even young children are subjected to despair, brutality, and apprehension within the North Korean system as she recounts Kim Hyuck's narrative. The pursuit of food consumes the entirety of the kochebis' existence, as their bodies are distorted by malnourishment, and their development is hindered by terror. Actions that are considered unthinkable become commonplace at a very early stage of life. By including Hyuck's account, Demick illustrates how extreme hunger and limited resources drive individuals to their limits and desensitise them to the gravity of seeing or perpetrating atrocities against other sentient beings.

Demick employs the narrative of Mrs. Song, a diligent factory worker who displayed unwavering loyalty to the dictatorship, as an exemplification of how shortage and famine frequently compel individuals to confront intolerable dilemmas. According to Demick's account in 1995, Mrs. Song was compelled to

liquidate all of her and her husband Chang-bo's assets to generate sufficient funds to purchase food from the illegal market. The factory ceased operations, and Mrs. Song's remuneration in the form of ration vouchers was discontinued. Following the sale of their expensive possessions, Mrs Song and her husband were compelled to engage in an illicit transaction to sell their flat for a mere \$3,000, subsequently relocating to a little shack. Chang-bo passed very shortly when Mrs. Song was gathering wild plants and tree barks in the hills to use in her soup. Soon after, Mrs. Song's son, Nam-oak, developed pneumonia during a frigid winter. Mrs. Song hurried to the hospital to acquire medication for her kid. A physician issued her a prescription for penicillin, which she subsequently sold for 50 won to purchase maize. Nam-oak perished many months later, suffering the same fate as Chang-bo - in solitude and malnourished, as Mrs. Song desperately searched for sustenance. Despite Mrs. Song's relentless efforts to secure her family's existence, she tragically loses them one by one, despite making agonising choices in an attempt to protect them. Demick vividly portrays Mrs. Song's profound desperation as she strives to secure meagre sustenance for her family. Notably, the author highlights the

agonizing dilemmas she faces, such as deciding between procuring food or essential medication and between staying by the side of her ailing loved ones and leaving them behind in the pursuit of nourishment. Through this poignant narrative, Demick illustrates how scarcity and famine can compel individuals to confront the unbearable choice between two equally dreadful and unattainable alternatives.

Demick demonstrates that, at times, choosing to ignore the misery caused by famine and poverty to survive can be perceived as a significant act of wrongdoing. Kim Ji-eun, a physician who provided medical care to malnourished children during the peak of the famine, witnessed the tragic demise of numerous young patients in her presence, feeling unable to save them. Mi-ran, employed as an educator, observed a significant decline in the number of pupils enrolled in her kindergarten class, going from 50 to 15 in little over three years. By recounting their experiences, Demick illustrates how both of these women are still tormented by the apathy they displayed during the worst period of the famine, unaware that such apathy was a coping mechanism they had developed. According to Demick, these women view the act of learning to stop caring and suppressing the instinct to share



food as equally malevolent as actually depriving someone of food. Demick, on the other hand, presents these occurrences with empathy, indicating that the women's determination to stay alive was instinctive and inevitable—yet also a demonstration of the extraordinary and inconceivable measures that a starving individual will do to endure another day.

Upon arrival in South Korea, all defectors from North Korea are promptly taken to Hanawon, a secluded campus that serves as a trade-school-turned-halfway-house. “Hanawon has been described as part halfway house, part trade school, and part re-education center. Established in 1999, Hanawon is a South Korean government resettlement facility that all North Korean defectors must “graduate” from before entering into society. Hanawon is funded by Korea's Ministry of Unification” (Hanawon). Here, for several months after their escape, North Koreans are educated about the reality of the world, modern technology, and the fundamental aspects of South Korean society. While the programme at Hanawon aims to assist survivors in adjusting and assimilating into their new lives, it is important to recognise that the re-education programme is unable to eliminate the emotional and psychological effects that North Koreans carry with them as they cross the border.

Demick highlights Mrs. Song's emotional reaction during a restaurant meal. As waiters served multiple bowls of hot food, Mrs. Song was deeply moved and almost started crying. This reminded her of her husband Chang-bo's last words before he died of starvation, which was a desire to dine at a high-quality restaurant and enjoy a fine bottle of wine. Mrs. Song, as reported by Demick, was unable to derive pleasure from modern luxuries, such as dining out, due to the remorse she experienced over her husband's inability to partake in them with her. The survivor's guilt experienced by Mrs. Song is evident and profound despite her extensive knowledge of her powerlessness in North Korea to challenge the abuses she witnessed or to protect her family from the devastating effects of starvation.

Demick utilises Dr. Kim's narrative to illustrate how feelings of survivor's guilt and the capacity to address past traumas frequently materialise as a denial. In the context of these defectors, this denial takes the form of an improbable hope that they will eventually be able to go back to a transformed and accessible North Korea. Dr. Kim, who became a victim of a pyramid scheme soon after defecting and discovered that her medical degree was of no value in South Korea, adhered to North Korean clothing customs for a prolonged

period. She even asserted that had she been aware of the realities of life in South Korea earlier, she would not have left her home country. Demick later discloses that, despite Dr. Kim's initial defection, they had another interview several years later. Dr. Kim had abandoned her previous North Korean style, which she considered tasteless. However, she still nurtured aspirations of introducing South Korean concepts of elder care that she had acquired during her medical studies once the country was reunified. This exemplifies that despite Dr. Kim's progress in her new life, she still harboured a longing for reunification and return to her homeland. She still wanted to believe that her country was the best place in the world. To quote:

Dr. Kim couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a bowl of pure white rice. What was a bowl of rice doing there, just sitting out on the ground? She figured it out just before she heard the dog's bark. Up until that moment, a part of her had hoped that China would be just as poor as North Korea. She still wanted to believe that her country was the best place in the world. The beliefs she had cherished for a lifetime would be vindicated. But now she couldn't deny what was

staring her plainly in the face: dogs in China ate better than doctors in North Korea (Demick 220).

This was driven by her feelings of guilt for not being able to utilise her newfound abilities to assist her people, a goal she had always aspired to achieve as an idealistic young physician in North Korea.

During the past two decades, an escalating number of North Koreans have shifted their perception of unlawful escape into China, Mongolia, or South Korea from an inconceivable impossible to a feasible, if extremely perilous, actuality. Barbara Demick is now conducting interviews with five defectors who have settled in Seoul, the vibrant city of South Korea. The purpose of these interviews is to gather firsthand accounts of everyday life in North Korea. Demick sheds light on the pervasive feelings of fear, uncertainty, and instability that accompany these exiles as they strive to establish new lives in foreign lands. In the epilogue, it is stated that,

I have found that, over time, the North Korean defectors I know in South Korea become more reticent. They worry about spies within the defector community who might try to blackmail them. They fear that speaking on the human rights circuit or giving interviews to



journalists will result in retaliation. One can leave but never completely escape the terror that is North Korea (Demick 321).

Conclusion

Through her interviews with the defectors, Demick identifies a recurring theme in all five accounts: the lives of these individuals beyond North Korea are characterised by the lingering recollections of the dreadful experiences they witnessed and participated in while residing in their native land, along with the accompanying remorse they now experience for having fled and abandoned their families and previous existence. Demick argues that the experiences of malnourishment, dictatorship, propaganda, and isolation from the outside world, together with the burden of guilt for surviving, continue to shape the lives of North Korean defectors even after they have escaped their country.

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