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The Image of the Wall

*I lost my house, so go to a cocoon. This is my house nobody can disturb.
However, although I have a new house, now I lose myself to go back.*
from The Wall, Abe Cobo

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Germany has sent one thousand memorial sculptures symbolizing the wall to troubled areas of the world. In addition, the German government will gather up the sculptures again, and destroy them during anniversary celebrations at Brandenburg Gate. It means we still have a lot of walls that need to fall.

Recently, the number of migrant laborers from other countries and North Korean defectors has increased rapidly in South Korea. The number of Northern arrivals each year has increased up to 10,000 from 5,000 between 2006 and 2008. Generally, such refugees escape from their land not for reasons of ideology, but of livelihood. While the older refugees mainly intend to remain in the South, the young refugees desire to seek other destinations.

Recently, the British government sent Korea an official document to request the fingerprints of five hundred North Korean defectors who entered Britain. The young and smart refugees who had crossed the border of several Asian countries finally managed to immigrate to Britain via the South. Why do they leave for Britain with a knapsack? They say, 'It's very hard to live in South. We want to learn English.' They work hard there to remove the label of "refugee." They would rather work odd jobs in England than live under discrimination in the South Korea.

Meanwhile, there has been a gradual increase in literary works regarding the communication problems with Northern arrivals and the process of settling down in the South. In my novel Rina, I describe a refugee woman's growth and border crossing from a general perspective rather than focus on the differences between North and South. I prefer to respect her decision to keep moving rather than be unconditionally welcoming. As a result, the protagonist of my novel also decides to go to another country instead of choosing to stay in South Korea.

Five years ago, in Seoul, I first met some teenagers enrolled in a North Korean Refugee School. They had arrived in the South with their parents, and were preparing for their university entrance exams. I spoke to one girl specifically, who was short and shy. I asked her several questions. 'How many countries did you travel through to arrive here? What happened on the journey? Do you want to go back to your hometown again? Do you miss your friends there?'

However, she did not answer at all. Therefore, I asked a different question, 'Do you like Korean people?' Soon, she criticized me and complained loudly, 'You can't imagine how hard it was to get here! How dare do you deal with me like this? What a corrupt capitalism!' I answered, 'I know you're in a bad situation. So am I.'

The young North Korean arrivals quickly get accustomed to capitalism. Often, they have strong material desires. Many of them drop out of university and find a part time job. They do not speak in a Northern dialect because they are worried about discrimination, and are very fashionable. People cannot judge whether a woman is from the North from her appearance. Often a North Korean woman will try to hide her refugee origins from her boyfriend, worried that if he discovers that she was a refugee, he will leave her. A broken heart gives her more serious pain than the suffering caused by crossing the border. Finally, she wipes her tears away, and asks me, 'Do you know a good cheap plastic surgeon?'

Korea still has "the wall" which blocks unification. This applies not only politically, but also across dichotomies of consciousness, thought, aesthetics and wealth. Koreans are so accustomed to living in this situation that we often cannot recognize this wall.

To be honest, I would not necessarily support the reunification of North and South, and once the old generation passes away, not many people will support reunification. However, I would like to deconstruct "the wall" in my fiction, and open new aesthetics of the novel.

A mature society is tolerant of cultural diversity. When I met the teenagers from the North for the first time, I was skeptical whether South Korean society would have the capacity to accept them and the influx of different cultures they would bring. That is one of the most important issues Korean literature is facing, and will face, to help us to destroy our own "wall."