

THE POSTCOLONIAL EXPERIENCE :

IMPLICATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

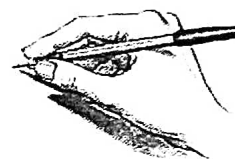
Editors

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Implications and Possibilities



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EDITORS' NOTE

The lexicon of Postcolonial Studies is intricate yet fascinating. Its significance in our world continues to be questioned on previous grounds of being somewhat depoliticised, and furthering a rarefied approach to culture and literature, and on newer grounds of being unable to account for the complexities of globalisation. To use Chakravorty's words –the best of Postcolonialism is autocritical" and –the worst of postcolonialism, according to some, is its over emphasis on the "South Asian model." not to do that mistake. The Postcolonial Experience: Implications and Possibilities definitely rest on the South Asian model as far as its historical and theoretical part is concerned but we have, in this book, tried to bring in together the postcolonial experience from and of every possible corner—from Caribbean to South Korea and from France to North East India.

Working on this book has been an enriching experience and we thank each and every contributor for their efforts. We hope that this book will help readers to think about the intellectual, political and theoretical possibilities of Postcolonial Studies.

**Dr. Madhulina Choudhury
Ms. Rimjim Boruah**

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CHAPTER-6

Problematizing the Politics of Migration: A Postcolonial Reading of Hwang Sok- yong's *Princess Bari*

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Introduction

It can hardly be denied that the turn of the twenty first century has been one of movement of populations across borders, both national and international. Whereas globalisation is a crucial factor causing people to leave their homelands and migrate to new locations in search of work opportunities and better living conditions, political and social instability in many countries also determine people's choice to relocate themselves away from their ancestral lands. It may be remembered that albeit movements of people across borders have been in practice since time immemorial, trans-border migrations in recent years are notable for their global scope, their connection with domestic and international politics and their far-ranging economic and social consequences (Castles and Miller 1). This global phenomenon of the present century has been deftly represented by the renowned Korean author Hwang Sok-yong in his novel *Princess Bari* (2007). Sok-yong's

canvas spreads across several international borders to bring into focus the grim realities surrounding the lives of refugees and migrants in the recent times. Thus, *Princess Bari* makes us ponder upon an inescapable reality of the post-colonial world where migration has become a means for survival for many who are living amidst a rapidly changing socio-political matrix.

Plot of *Princess Bari*:

Princess Bari centres on the life and struggles of the female protagonist Bari, a North Korean girl, who is separated from her family at a young age and embarks on a physical and spiritual journey across international borders in her quest for survival. The last among seven girls, Bari from her early childhood has been endowed with a special gift of shamanistic power that enables her to communicate with spirits and animals. She is deeply influenced by her grandmother, herself a shaman, whose spirit continues to guide Bari after she dies. The incorporation of the supernatural elements into the historiographical plot makes the novel a work of magic realism. During the North Korean economic crisis of the 1990s and the ensuing famine, Bari's family migrates to the Chinese side of the border. Having lost all her family members and her pet dog which she considers as her brother, Bari finds herself at the mercy of her Chinese acquaintances who find jobs for her and by the time she is into her teens she is already an expert masseuse. But following a tragic turn of events her message parlour faces a huge debt. To escape the situation she illegally leaves China and arrives in London. Bari rediscovers herself in London as she comes to live in a multicultural, multi-ethnic society. She marries Ali, a Pakistani-origin cab driver settled in London. But the September 11 Attacks cast shadows of unrest over the Muslim community in Europe and America and its impacts were also felt in Bari's family. While searching for his

brother who had gone to Afghanistan to fight the US forces. Ali is stuck in the war-zone only to return after almost three years. The ending scene of the novel suggests a grim picture of the post-9/11 London as Bari and her husband are seen in shock and horror, struggling amidst the destruction caused by an explosion.

Politics of Migration:

It is imperative to appreciate that migrations are caused mainly by two factors: push factors which induce people to move out of their present location, and pull factors which induce people to move into a new location (Rubenstein). These factors can further be divided into three kinds: economic, cultural and environmental (Rubenstein). The novel depicts different ethnic groups migrating to other countries due to unfavourable circumstances in their own homelands. Through the novel, one comes to learn of the significant happenings in a country at a particular point of history. Bari's family had to migrate to China because of famine in North Korea in the 1990s. The contemporary situation of North Korea can be understood from the words of Bari's grandmother who cautions her granddaughters: "The Republic can't look after every single one of its subjects anymore. Why do you think they're calling it the 'Arduous March'?" (50-51). She also tells them: "Don't mention to anyone that we have food to eat. They say half of the houses in the village down the way are empty" (51). The grandmother here makes reference to the devastating famine of the 1990s in North Korea in which 2.25 to 2.35 million people reportedly died ("How Did the North Korean Famine Happen?"). At that time, with the collapse of the USSR and the resultant isolation of North Korea in the communist-world, the country was no longer getting external aid like before. As food production lessened, the North Korean government stopped providing rations to the citizens that caused a

widespread famine, forcing as many as several hundred thousand North Koreans to cross the borders to countries like China in a desperate search for food (Blackmore). This period of famine was known as the "Arduous March" which shaped Bari's fortune similar to thousands of other children of her age. Notably, during the food crisis throughout the country, the government was more concerned about ensuring enough food for Pyongyang and the military and so it cut rations for farmers in the countryside forcing them to hide their grains to avoid starvation (Weissmann). Bari's grandmother emphasises that farmers have lost faith on the government and therefore they have to find their own means to survive. The easiest means is of course migration to the neighbouring China, as it is suggested in these lines: "With the start of autumn, starving people descended upon the banks of the Tumen River in droves. Those who had relatives in China crossed over in search of food and money; survivors who'd lost loved ones surged across the border along with workers from factories that had shut down, vowing to bring back money and save their families" (58-59).

The novel records that even though the Chinese citizens across the border have treated the Korean refugees with sympathy by helping them with food and even cooking fresh rice for them (Sok-yong 59) these illegal migrants, in quite an ungrateful way, often cause problems for the host country. Thus, the narrator describes: "Stories of starving North Koreans wandering across the border in search of food were by no means uncommon in villages near the river, but, one day, rumours spread that a family had been murdered in Nanping...this was the first instance of a Chinese family being killed" (70). This shows that far from being a helpless, powerless bunch of people scrounging for food and safety, refugees are at times a challenge to any country's law and order.

The novel suggests that not only to China, but a good number of North Koreans also illegally fled to South Korea during the Arduous March. Interestingly, although such defections are considered as an act of treason by the North Korean government, the South Korean government on the contrary affirms that South Korea consists of the entire Korean Peninsula and, as such, North Koreans are in fact citizens of South Korea (Tanaka). As per the South Korean Ministry of Unification, between 1990 and 2006 as many as 8,661 North Koreans migrated to South Korea in the hope of a better future (Tanaka). This is evidenced from the case of Bari's uncle, as told by Uncle Salamander, a friend of Bari's father: —Seems he [Bari's uncle]... fled to the South. Apparently there was a commotion in Shenyang. A group of refugees stormed the embassy." (58). Undoubtedly, fleeing to the economically flourishing South seems an easy and tempting option for a half-fed North Korean during the famine. But here it may be remembered that for North Koreans considering a new life in South Korea, there are two competing narratives: either South Korea is the land of milk and honey, or it is the place of capitalist exploitation and class-based inequality (Song). The choice apparently made by Bari's uncle in the novel conforms to the first narrative of South Korea as being a land of opportunities for a poor North Korean. But the novel interestingly remains silent on the fate of those Koreans who migrated to the South. The readers are never told what happens to Bari's uncle after he migrates to the South.

Globalisation of Migration:

The novel brings into focus an important reality of the late-twentieth century, what can be termed as the globalisation of migration: a situation whereby not only more and more countries experience migratory movements at the same time, but most immigration countries have

entrants originating from different counties and from a broad spectrum of social, economic and cultural backgrounds (Castles and Miller 1). Thus, we see Bari migrating first to China and then to London in a quick succession. The specific part of South London depicted in the novel comprises migrants and refugees from many countries who left their homelands under completely different circumstances. Thus, Bari and Xiang, being unable to pay a huge amount of debt that they owed to a powerful man in China, are compelled to leave the country; they are smuggled out of the country by the —snakeheads" the Chinese gang of smugglers after receiving a certain amount of down payment (120). It is said that —Anyone who didn't have enough [money] could have their family back home write a promissory note for the balance, and any money made abroad could be sent back to the family to pay down the total debt" (120). In London while Xiang is forced into prostitution, Bari is made to work in a restaurant near China Town where the head chef is Uncle Lou, a man from Hong Kong who illegally —stowed away in a ship" (145) twenty years ago and reached London. The nail salon at the locality called Elephant and Castle where Bari worked was owned by Uncle Tan, originally a Vietnamese man, who was in East Germany —when the wall came down," who then crossed the border into the Netherlands and lived in Amsterdam for many years (148-49).

It appears that in a society where different migrant communities reside hybridity becomes a part of life. Bari witnesses this hybrid society at Elephant and Castle: —as I walked around Elephant and Castle, I saw all kinds and colours of people. I saw yellow faces, brown faces, black faces, and occasionally a few white faces — but they weren't British; they blended in well enough, but were actually construction workers from Poland and the Czech Republic. Everyone else was a person of colour, like us" (148). The description given here suggests the

heterogeneous background of migrants to London at the turn of the twentieth century. This trend is in accordance with recent reports published in 2018 which reveal that more than a quarter of all the construction workers doing jobs in London have migrated from The European Union, mostly from Poland and other East European states (Ford).

The heterogeneity of the migrant community in London is further exemplified by Luna, a Bangladeshi woman who worked with Bari at the salon and shared room with her at Lambeth, the Thai family on the third floor of their building, the Nigerian couple and the Bulgarian couple who lived across from them, the Chinese cook and the Filipino Janitor who were room-mates in the adjacent flat, the Srilankan family living in the nearby flat on the left, the Polish family on the second floor of that flat, grandfather Abdul from Pakistan who lived in the flat to the left of the Polish family and the landlord, Mr Azad, who was an Indian man (150-52). It may be assumed that they all left their homelands and settled in London for better living conditions.

Challenges faced by Migrants:

It is not untrue that for any migrant adapting oneself to the new socio-cultural setting of the host country remains one of the most basic challenges. This is especially so when the migrant crosses the border illegally. Bari's case in the novel is a similar one. After she comes to live in China, she gets the job of masseuse in a massage studio, but there are certain challenges associated with her job, as she says:

I was well aware that most North Koreans in my position weren't paid for their work — they were grateful if they got so much as room and board. The police were not yet actively hunting down defectors, but they did show up if complaints were made. Regardless of the type of work they did, North Koreans earned no more than a third of

what a documented Chinese resident might earn; but I was lucky, and earned half, and that was for doing mostly small errands as an apprentice. (102)

Bari here reveals the insecurities and the discrimination faced by a North Korean migrant worker in China. But the novel also shows how for the sake of survival many North Koreans choose the wrong path that can earn them easy money. This is reflected in uncle Salamander's words of advice to Bari who is still a helpless migrant illegally working in a foreign country:

...No matter where you go in the world, it's always the same. The electric lights go on, money comes in, and kindness vanishes. All the young guys from the North that I used to trade with have become pimps.

Uncle Salamander took another shot of soju and leaned his head back.

—They make a living by selling girls like you... (112)

While Uncle Salamander indicates the perilous condition of North-Korean migrants in China at the turn of the twentieth century, his words clearly resonate with facts even to this day. A recent report published by a London-based non-profit Korea Future Initiative (KFI) claims that 60% of North Korean refugees in China are trafficked into the sex trade out of which 50% are forced into prostitution, 30% into marriage, and 15% into cybersex, in a trade which generates \$105 million annually for Chinese traffickers. (Gunia)

The novel shows that in London the immigrants face even a greater hurdle in establishing themselves. Thus, Uncle Lou who is originally from Hong Kong narrates how it took him —eleven years just to get a residence card" (145). At times, the police undertake operations to arrest the illegal residents who do not have visa or work permit.

So, Uncle Tan cautions Bari who is working at his salon to be alert because "a joint squad of local police and UK Border Agency officers had arrived in several vans" and "searched door to door and took away a dozen illegal immigrants" (183). These illegal immigrants include the Nigerian man who is Bari's neighbour who worked at a gas station. Since he does not have a work permit, "he was paying a hundred pounds a week to borrow someone else's" (186) which enabled him to earn money at the same rate with the legal workers (186). That the problem of immigrants is quite pervasive in London is highlighted by Ali who is a cab driver: "The minicab company I work for is also crawling with illegal immigrants. Some of them don't even have driver's licences" (192). The overall situation indicates that in order to survive in a foreign land which often pose a big challenge to the law of the host country.

Migration and Imperialism:

It is seen that Sok-yong's novel reveals a close connection of migration with the history of colonialism and imperialism. There is an obvious suggestion that migrations taking place around the world are more often than not rooted in the after-effects of imperialism. The fact that Bari's family first left North Korea for China was necessitated by the actions of a heartless regime that turned its back upon the poor farmers in the countryside. As the Republic can no longer be the protector of the poor farmers' lives in times of famine, Bari's grandmother loses faith on the government and says that the "The only thing in this world you can rely on is your own family" (51). At a certain level, Bari's journey to London in the ship is reminiscent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade that brought thousands of blacks to the New World. Bari is smuggled to London just like an African slave—without her consent and

under inhuman conditions. While Bari's physical experience resembles that of a slave uprooted from her homeland and implanted in a new setting her shamanistic power enables her to visualise past events linked to colonisation. This becomes evident during one of her sessions at Lady Emily's, a South African emigrant living in London. A shaman herself, Lady Emily gives a mysterious drink to Bari and she starts seeing things in a dream: "I saw hundreds, maybe thousands, of African men working in a mine. And I saw a lot of people die, too" (175); she continues: "That would've been a gold mine" (175). Bari here visualises a moment from the South African history of colonialism when exploiting cheap black labour was the easiest way for the white colonialists to enhance their capitals. In fact, during the apartheid the economy of South Africa was powered by the gold mining industry which made use of an army of cheap black labour, with minimal attention paid to the workers' safety, to become the world's No. 1 producer of gold (Njini).

It is interesting that while white colonialism in the form of apartheid in South Africa resulted in the dehumanisation of blacks, the end of the colonial regime in 1994 resulted in the migration of the insecure whites to safer, white-dominated locations. In this respect the primary destination for these people has been the UK where nearly half of all the South African émigrés in the world are currently residing (Halvorsrud). Apparently, Lady Emily also is among these migrants. But it is suggested that the memories of colonial days cannot be easily erased; even after leaving South Africa, Lady Emily is still hunted by the crimes committed by her ancestors. Bari in her dream sees that Lady Emily's ancestors are being tortured in a place similar to hell by some black shadows:

The shadows pull the two white men back down as they scream and shout.

Let me go!

Get us out of here!

Suddenly the crack vanishes, and the earth closes up.
(174)

The black shadows seem to represent the souls of the black people who were victimised in the material world, who in the spiritual world take their revenge on their white masters. Thus, Bari becomes the medium through which the colonial history voices itself.

In contrast to the colonial periods, migrations in the present times are often a conscious decision caused by a desire to live in a better place, where they can reorganise themselves physically and mentally.

Bari thinks: "There were still so many people dying in every corner of the world, and people crossing endless borders in search of food, just so they could live without the constant threat of death" (209). But this view seems ironic in the case of Ali's brother, Usman, who travels to Pakistan and from there to Afghanistan not to live peacefully but, in an implicit way, to embrace death itself for the sake of his fellow Muslims. It is implied that his decision is induced by a great desire to assist Muslims in Afghanistan from the American aggression following 9/11, as Grandfather Abdul observes: "The United States and Britain have declared war on Afghanistan, which means that calls for support and solidarity have been going out to young Muslim men in other countries" (220-21). Grandfather Abdul suggests the possibility of a global migration to the war-torn Afghanistan in the wake of the rise of Muslim nationalism. This idea clearly resonates with the concept of transnationalism as a site of political engagement as well as a type of consciousness (Vertovec 4) that unite people across international borders.

Conclusion:

It can be said that in a life shaped by multiple migrations, Bari not only becomes enriched by different experiences but undergoes cultural transformations as well: she embraces Islam and becomes a permanent resident of England. But her Korean heritage remains an essential part of her identity amidst the encroaching hybridity. Her grandmother's memories keep her attached to her origins. It is she from whom Bari comes to learn about the Korean folktale of princess Bari who travels the entire world in search of the life-giving water: "So they tell her, if you go to where the sun sets over there in the western sky, all the way to the ends of the Earth, you'll find the life-giving water. While Bari journeys through the ailing country, across the ocean and over the mountains, she is helped by gods and spirits" (81). One notices a similarity between the two Baris—both live the life of a migrant. Through the struggle of Bari, the protagonist of the novel, the folktale assumes a universal and contemporary significance. The grandmother's words finally confirm this in a beautiful way: "When she returns and sprays the life-giving water on her parents, they recover and the whole world gets better again. Ever since then, Old Grandmother Bari has lived inside of us. She's inside me and inside you, too" (82). Thus, the journey of princess Bari like that of the protagonist assumes a symbolic significance. The readers drive home the idea that migration or movement is a universal human experience that we all have to go through as a part of our survival and the betterment of our lives.

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