

## **Review: *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea***

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In 1976, North Korean author Sŏk Yun-gi wrote a novel called *Konanŭi haenggun* (Arduous March), which dramatized the incredible feat of Kim Il Sung and his guerrilla army marching over a hundred miles through an unrelenting blizzard with no food, rest, or shelter to prepare for their battle against the Japanese colonialists in the winter of 1938. In the face of defeat, the soldiers persisted through their fatigue, hunger, and pain because of their hope in Kim Il Sung. The legend of the 1938 Arduous March remains one of the most impactful discursive strategies that glorified national solidarity and individual loyalty to the state. In the mid-1990s, nearly sixty years after the legend, the term ‘Arduous March’ resurfaced in public discourse to remind the people of their undying loyalty to the state despite the sufferings of famine. Sandra Fahy’s *Marching Through Suffering* uses testimonies of former North Koreans to understand how the people coped and made sense of their lives during the nation’s most devastating economic and political disaster.

The compelling aspect of *Marching Through Suffering* is not so much the factual accounts of the famine—the number of deaths, the regions most affected by the famine, the state’s inability to rectify the problem, or the assistance from the international community—but rather the production of discourses that North Koreans learned, adopted, and utilized in their daily interaction with each other throughout the experience. Fahy rightly points out that the government could have averted the famine had the appropriate infrastructure and preventive systems been established. She also adds that the famine was not an event, so much as a gradual process of economic and social debilitation that dated back to the late 1980s. Fahy’s interview with North Korean defectors “shifts the focus from North Koreans as inactive objects of suffering to active agents making sense and negotiating the difficulties of their lives” (3).

Among the impending signs of the famine were the increasing shortages of the Public Distribution System (PDS), which allocated a certain amount of food to each family. Calling it the ‘Busy Years,’ Fahy opens her narrative with the confusion and coping strategies among the North Koreans as they were forced to wait in patience until the next shipment of rations arrived. The subtle tone that reverberates among the interviewees’ account of that period is one of an

unsettling panic. Rather than telling a chronological story of how these North Koreans' situations progressed from good to terrible, Fahy immediately throws her readers into a state of confusion and panic. Perhaps she arranged the opening chapter, with its erratic accounts, to convey the unnerving atmosphere the North Koreans experienced during the early stages of the famine. Some took action to stave off their hunger; some felt utterly helpless; and some shared their food with others. Amid the growing chaos, Fahy says, "The busy years were about getting through things together, survival of the nation and, with that, the survival of the society" (50).

The most fascinating aspect and, undoubtedly, the strength of *Marching Through Suffering* is Chapter 3, which examines the construction, codification, and humor contained in the spoken language during the famine years. Fahy says, "[I]t was clear to people that a disconnection was present between discourse and reality, but a socially developed ambiguous discourse operated and enabled people to communicate despite contradiction" (84). Fahy analyzes the official discourse that North Koreans learned to speak through education, self-criticism sessions, and media. She discovers that the word 'famine' was not used in everyday speech among the North Koreans. Rather, the government used 'Arduous March' or other official phrases to deflect the people's attention away from the institutional problems within the political system. The former North Koreans whom Fahy interviewed were familiar with the word 'famine' but did not associate it with the reality that they had faced. This is because the government insisted in state propaganda that a socialist country does not experience famine. The government blamed the economic problem on foreign intervention and required the people to endure the hardship without questioning the regime.

As the North Koreans were trying to make sense of the social catastrophe, they discovered themselves caught in a web of acquiring the proper and improper ways of speaking. Fahy says, "New ways of communicating were achieved through misspeaking [...] Indirect speech provided the chance to more accurately address lived experience" (86-87). For example, people were not permitted to say that someone had died of hunger. Instead, it was publicly acceptable to say that someone had died of an illness or other health complications. Fahy calls this the 'smart' language that the North Koreans learned through witnessing or hearing about the negative consequences for those who spoke without filters. Euphemisms and humor manifested in everyday discourse to offset the pressures of having to speak 'smartly'. From calling the black markets a 'department store' to satirizing the activities of the secret police, Fahy identifies how the North Koreans adopted new ways of speaking and coping with the haunting reality. Alternative set of terminologies and circumlocutive usage of words became the social norm for one's protection, safety, and preservation.

For those who are remotely familiar with North Korea's famine crisis or have come across stories by defectors, *Marching Through Suffering* does not reveal anything new about the oppressive state violence against the people and the hardships of defecting. Chapters one, two, four, and five map out the deteriorating social, political, and economic landscape and the accounts of the survivors who navigated through these difficult times. Although each account is, of itself, emotional and devastating, these personal stories also closely resonate with the larger category of a growing genre: the defector tales. Incorporating weeds or other unconventional items into one's diet, receiving corporal punishment from the police for wanting to survive, and witnessing the increasing number of dead bodies in the streets have become tropes in the horror stories that defectors, for so many years, have been telling people outside North Korea. Such accounts in *Marching Through Suffering* lose the affective purpose and instead add another coat of paint to a preexisting image of North Korea, which had already been classified as a rogue nation under the Bush administration. My intention is not to minimize individual survivors' horrible experiences during the famine years. Rather, it is to point out that the way in which each survivor's experience has been depicted in this book (as in many other defector accounts) does more to accentuate the abject political system than to give a human face to its subjects. If Fahy's intention was to unveil the discursive space that the North Koreans had created for themselves during the famine years and thus project a more humane image of them, then the book falls short in its delivery. The main body and the thrust of *Marching Through Suffering* continue to make each interviewee's account an object of spectacle, reinforcing the stock images outsiders have of North Korea. Rather than providing full transcripts of the interviews or, at the very least, a narrative of the life of each interviewee, Fahy selects segments from the interviews that perpetuate the demonization of the irrational regime.

In her concluding chapter, Fahy contemplates the position of the interviewer, the role of the interviewee, and the language that has been exchanged between the two. Fahy astutely observes the subjects' conceptualization of pain, suffering, and life through the use of language: the words that were uttered, the words that were not uttered, the intonation and cadence of the words, and the socio-political contexts from which those words derived. She understands that her subjects will not necessarily reveal everything about North Korea simply because they now reside comfortably in Seoul or Tokyo. She admits, "It would be foolish for the researcher to seek unobstructed articulation or hope that the interviewee will speak 'the truth' of her experience so that it can be captured and analyzed" (177). Indeed, it would be far-reaching for the interviewer to expect the secrets of the mysterious nation to be revealed by her interviewees. On the one hand, she does attempt to unpack the language of her subjects and construct a narrative that is "complex and nuanced," a narrative

that negates the existing discourse of a country full of brainwashed people. On the other hand, the way in which Fahy selectively packaged her interviews reiterates the preconceived ideas of North Korea and obscures the more human experiences these interviewees lived and used as coping mechanisms—stories of the everyday, of forms of entertainment, friendship, family, and love. *Marching Through Suffering* would have been impactful and more insightful had Fahy elaborated on such discursive spaces and thus indicated a more truly agentic day-to-day exercise of power and resistance.