

The Usage of ‘Eobi’ and ‘Specter’ in Bandi’s “City of Specters”

The significance of the short story “City of Specters” lies precisely in the context in which it was written. The author, identified by the pseudonym ‘Bandi’ (meaning firefly), is a once prominent North Korean writer who witnessed the shortcomings of the Communist dictatorship, thus resolving to undertake the perilous mission of sharing his inside perspective of North Korean society with the outside world. His original manuscripts endured the dangers of crossing the North Korean border and were published in several languages across the globe, at last serving the author’s intended purpose. Bandi’s writings offer a distinct depth and weight to understanding the daily lives of North Koreans.

While it is crucial to note that the original manuscripts written in Korean consist of words and phrases used only within North Korea, and therefore the English translations may insufficiently reproduce the author’s intended nuance, Bandi’s “City of Specters” nevertheless successfully pinpoints fear as the force that induces unconditional obedience from the citizens of North Korea. This ludicrous yet plausible account consists of an elite family’s deportation to the countryside at the verdict of failing to properly educate their two-year-old son on Communist ideologies. The story portrays the immense impact of ideology that is rooted and demanded in North Koreans. In particular, the author consistently employs the legendary beast ‘Eobi’ and the daunting ‘specter’ as metaphors of the authoritative power in place, delineating its role in the lives of fear-driven North Korean citizens. However, this dual usage evokes a pending question of the extent to which the two concepts contrast.

‘Eobi,’ the name of a “fearsome creature who stuffs disobedient children into his sack and tosses them down the well” maintains a symbol of authority, dictatorship, and power through the entire course of the story. (Bandi, 2017) The author draws a direct correlation between Eobi and the figures of Karl Marx and Kim Il Sung, when the protagonist Han Gyeong Hee points to Marx’s portrait and whispers “Eobi” to her baby son. This metaphor is expanded by Gyeong

Hee's dream of the beast looming over the city. Ultimately, Gyeong Hee comes to recognize and fear the Eobi in reality, which extends beyond merely the ideological fathers inside the portraits to the North Korean government itself. The author's specific choice of the word 'Eobi' generates feelings of anxiety, terror, and helplessness, allowing insight into North Koreans' perception of the authorities. Moreover, this fear constructs a force that grants absolute control over the entire city. Essentially, the author effectively illustrates the North Korean regime as a fearsome, all-powerful entity that does not tolerate any form of noncompliance.

Alternatively, the term 'specter' is used within the story to expose a similar yet subtly varying implication on the North Korean government. When Gyeong Hee notices the spectral presence of Karl Marx's portrait, 'specter' not only explicitly refers to the figure inside the portrait, but also assumes the lingering spirit of Communism that permeates North Korean society. Furthermore, the protagonist's imaginary account of the "two red specters" bellowing, "When you're given an order you follow it, without exception... Don't you know to whom this city belongs?" emphasizes the unyielding grip of Communist ideology executed by the authoritarian government. (Bandi, 2017) Contrary to the former, the word 'specter' suggests a relatively passive yet foundational role of ideology in North Korean society.

The author incorporates the terms 'Eobi' and 'specter' to represent the immeasurably powerful status of the North Korean regime with respect to its citizens. However, the question remains about the degree to which these two vocabularies differ in their application. 'Eobi' apparently indicates an active force of fear that brings about the extraordinary coordination and movement of Pyongyang citizens under the Party's commands. Contrarily, the word 'specter' suggests a notion of the underlying Communist spirit that penetrates the ordinary lives of North Koreans. Despite the varying nuances of the two representations, the author does not provide a clear distinction between the two concepts, causing difficulty in identifying where the two conform and diverge. Discussion on how these two aspects interplay and coexist within North

Korea would enrich the understanding of this obscure city of specters.