

The Girl With Seven Names Study Guide

The Girl With Seven Names by Lee, Hyeonseo

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Summary

In February 2013, Hyeonseo Lee tells her story on stage in the United States. As a North Korean defector, she has a complicated relationship with her home country. She hopes her story will help enlighten the world about the realities in North Korea and encourage activism.

The prologue flashes back to Hyeonseo's childhood when her family home burned to the ground. Her father ran back into the burning building to save the family's portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-Il. Despite this sign of loyalty, Hyeonseo's father is already under government surveillance.

Chapter One starts with the story of how Hyeonseo's parents met, her mother's arranged marriage to another man, and Hyeonseo's birth. Readers learn that Hyeonseo's biological father is her mother's first husband, whom she quickly divorced after giving birth. Hyeonseo's parents are finally allowed to marry and Hyeonseo remembers a happy childhood and family life. Hyeonseo's immediate and extended family enjoys high status and positions of privilege in North Korean society. Living in a border city called Hyesan, they have access to illicit trade and business opportunities which bring them additional wealth and opportunity.

Ideological indoctrination is omnipresent in Hyeonseo's childhood and teenage years. At first, she buys into and believes in North Korean propaganda. Her family's wealth and privilege protect her from many of the harsh realities of average North Korean life. However, she is not shielded from witnessing public executions and life-ending famine. Hyeonseo's childhood is kept busy with school, mandatory government run programs, and compulsory participation in the National Socialist Youth League.

Around the age of twelve, Hyeonseo learns the truth about her parentage. She struggles with her newly challenged sense of identity and her relationship with her father suffers. When Hyeonseo is fourteen, her father is captured and imprisoned by the government. He dies in hospital shortly thereafter.

As a teenager, Hyeonseo begins to express herself and her identity through individualistic fashion choices that get her in trouble at school. She begins to become disillusioned with aspects of North Korean society and takes an interest in the outside world through illicit music and television programs. Eventually, she decides she wants to see something of the world and plans a trip across the border into China.

In December 1997, at seventeen years old, Hyeonseo crosses the river between Hyesan and China with the help of a friend who is a border guard. She plans to visit family in Shenyang, China for a few days before coming home.

Hyeonseo quickly gets swept up in the pleasures of life in Shenyang and her four-day visit extends for weeks. Suspicion as to her whereabouts grows in North Korea and suddenly, her mother phones, telling her not to come home. A sudden reappearance of



Hyeonseo will further rumors that she has been spending time illegally in China and the potential punishments may be severe. Hyeonseo has no choice but to stay in China as an illegal immigrant.

Hyeonseo's family in Shenyang introduce her to a young man named Guen-soo and marriage between the two is planned. Guen-soo and his family promise to provide for Hyeonseo and conceal her identity but she cannot go through with the match. She strikes out on her own and finds a waitressing job to support herself. While living and working in Shenyang, Hyeonseo is found by police and brought in for questioning on suspicion of being a North Korean defector. Through a combination of intelligence and luck, she is able to convince them she is Chinese.

Nearly four years after defecting, Hyeonseo tries to get in touch with her family. She is able to reunite briefly with her brother on the Chinese border, but the broker she hired to help find her family sends his thugs after her to demand exorbitant payment. Unable to pay, Hyeonseo is kept prisoner by these men for several days until she calls her uncle in Shenyang for a loan.

After so many negative experiences. Hyeonseo decides to leave Shenyang and move to Shanghai. There she finds a way to buy a Chinese ID so she can get better employment and pass as a legal citizen. She sends a cellphone to her family in North Korea so she can speak to them regularly. Feeling like a permanent outsider in China, Hyeonseo begins to contemplate a move to South Korea. She believes she will feel more at home in her sister country and knows she will be granted legal citizenship there. In the meantime, she meets a South Korean man named Kim and they begin dating. Their growing relationship furthers Hyeonseo's desire to emigrate.

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Hyeonseo knows she can claim asylum if she can get to the airport in Seoul. She uses her Chinese ID to get a passport and books a trip with a transfer in Seoul. Upon landing in South Korea, instead of transferring planes, she finds an immigration officer and reveals her identity.

After claiming asylum, Hyeonseo goes through a long immigration and questioning process where she must prove she is truly North Korean. After a week of questioning she is granted South Korean citizenship. Hyeonseo is then sent to Hanawon where all North Korean immigrants to South Korea are given a crash course on how to survive in the capitalist world.



After two months in Hanawon, Hyeonseo moves to Seoul where she is reunited with Kim. However, she quickly realizes that her lack of education and family background put her at a disadvantage in North Korean society. She struggles to fit in in her new home and feels Kim's family will never accept her. To further her prospects, she decides to enroll in university.

Hyeonseo then spends a great deal of time convincing her family to emigrate to South Korea as well. She finally succeeds in convincing her mother. Her brother, Min-ho, is determined to stay in North Korea with his fiancée but agrees to help their mother cross the border.

Hyeonseo and her family arrange a plan and meet on the bank of the same river where Hyeonseo defected many years before. Their happy reunion is tainted when they learn that Min-ho and his mother was seen crossing the border. Neither can ever return and Min-ho must now get to South Korea as well.

Hyeonseo's mother and Min-ho borrow ID cards from Chinese friends and family to make the dangerous journey across China. On a long bus trip, they have several near misses where their true identities are almost discovered at checkpoints. After finally making it across China, the family now learns they must get to South Korea via Laos. Hyeonseo has no choice but to leave her family to complete this part of the journey alone.

After reaching Laos safely, Min-ho and his mother are picked up and arrested by police. Hyeonseo travels to Laos to find them but is faced with numerous bureaucratic roadblocks. Immigration officials demand Hyeonseo pay a huge fine to get her family out of prison. Without enough money, Hyeonseo is at a loss until a chance encounter saves the day. In a coffee house, Hyeonseo meets an Australian traveller named Dick Stolp who is concerned about the plight of North Korean people and offers to pay the fines without question. Hyeonseo's family is finally released and they begin their own immigration process.

Hyeonseo goes back to Seoul, expecting her family to follow within a few days. However, they are sent to another Laos prison where they join the queue of North Koreans being processed for exit before being sent to the South Korean embassy. After a long wait, Hyeonseo's family finally makes it to South Korea. Around the same time, Hyeonseo realizes that she and Kim have no real future together and they end their relationship.

Hyeonseo's mother and brother struggle to adjust to life in South Korea. They even contemplate returning to the North but Hyeonseo convinces them to stay. Eventually, Hyeonseo begins speaking publicly about her story and joins activists groups to support Korean reunification. It is through one of these groups that she meets her future husband, an American expat named Brian.

At the end of the book, Hyeonseo is happily married and has gained exposure as a North Korean activist. Her family is adjusting to their new lives and they even take a trip to America together, which is something they never thought they would do.



Introduction & Prologue

Summary

Hyeonseo Lee introduces herself to readers and explains that her current name is not the one she was born with, but the one she eventually chose for herself. It means "sunshine" and "good fortune." In February 2013, Hyeonseo Lee tells her story in English for the first time in front of a crowded auditorium. She is nervous and hears her voice tremble as she begins to speak about her childhood in North Korea. Despite her shocking story, Hyeonseo still loves her country and misses it very much. She compares leaving North Korea to leaving another universe and recognizes that life in the free world can be very challenging for those born there. She knows she cannot return to North Korea, but also does not feel she fits into South Korean society. She cannot shed her North Korean identity and longs for her country "to become good" (xiii). She hopes that sharing her story in this book will "allow a glimpse of the world [she] escaped" and will help support other North Korean defectors who struggle to adjust. She also hopes "that the world will begin, finally, to listen to them, and to act" (xiii).

In the prologue, Hyeonseo shares a story from her childhood when their family home catches fire in the middle of the night. Her father had been given a large can of aviation fuel as a bribe and her mother accidentally spilled it onto the coals they use for heating. After the family escapes the blaze, Hyeonseo's father runs back into the house. Instead of rescuing their possessions or their savings, he emerges, coughing and blackened, with two portraits. This gesture is seen as an act of heroism, but what the family does not know is that Hyeonseo's father is already under surveillance.

Analysis

Hyeonseo's choice of name is significant because it says a great deal about her personality and her hopes for her life. Choosing a name which means, in part, "good fortune" indicates her belief in the power of fate and her hope that she will be blessed by it. Choosing a name with the positive connotations of sun and warmth also indicates that she has positive hopes for the new life she will live under that identity. Hyeonseo's choice of name indicates that she sees herself and her future as positive, full of light and good luck.

In the Introduction, Hyeonseo identifies this book as a coming-of-age story. But it is not just the story of a young girl growing to adulthood. It is, more significantly, the story of a child's slow awakening to the realities of a political system she never before thought to question. As Hyeonseo ages, she also grows into awareness surrounding issues of identity, patriotism, human rights, and freedom. Her coming of age brings unexpected questions into her life as she grapples with the meaning of these themes and their role in her life.



The themes of identity and patriotism are introduced early on as Hyeonseo outlines them clearly. She is upfront about her complicated relationship with her home country and identifies as a patriot. However, as a defector, she also wants to "shed her North Korean identity" but finds she can never truly fit into the outside world (xiii). To reconcile her complicated relationships with both North and South Korea, Hyeonseo settles on self-identifying as simply "Korean." However, even that identity is problematic for her because a single, unified Korea does not exist.

The prologue offers readers an initial glimpse into North Korean life through a single scene. The importance of the portraits is emphasized to introduce the overwhelming power of the North Korean dictatorship. The prologue serves as foreshadowing to indicate that serious trouble will soon find Hyeonseo's family. This foreshadowing will remain in the minds of readers throughout the upcoming chapters as they read about the happy and prosperous times in Hyeonseo's childhood, reminding them that danger is never far off in North Korea.

Vocabulary

kerosene, byword, decanting,



Part One: Chapters 1-3

Summary

In the summer of 1977, Hyeonseo's father meets her mother on a train journey. Hyeonseo's father is a military officer stationed in the capital and her mother lives with her family in Hyesan. They court for a years, traveling to see each other, before he asks her to marry him. Although both families have high social status and are considered loyal citizens in the North Korean caste system, the match is opposed by Hyeonseo's grandmother who is "unimpressed with [her] father's prospects and his career in the air force" (7). Instead, Hyeonseo's mother is forced into an arranged marriage with another man. Hyeonseo is conceived during the honeymoon and born in January 1980. Her birth name is Kim Ji-hae.

Hyeonseo's mother leaves her husband not long after the baby is born and a divorce quickly follows. Hyeonseo's grandmother tries to put her up for adoption so her mother can make another match, but her mother refuses and her grandmother concedes defeat. Hyeonseo's mother is reunited with her first love and they plan to marry. The man Hyeonseo grew up with as her father accepts her as his own without question. However, his parents are reluctant to accept another man's baby into the family and they demand that her name be changed to "symbolize [her] joining a new family" (10) Hyeonseo's new name is Park Min-young. At the time she is too young to be aware of any of this, and does not learn the truth about her parentage for many years.

Hyeonseo spends the first years of her life in Hyesan, surrounded by extended family. Hyesan is close to the Chinese border which makes it a lucrative and "thriving hub of trade and smuggling" (11). Here the influence of the government is less strong "because almost everyone [wants] a share of the riches" (12). Citizens of Hyesan are more business-minded and are often better off than the rest of the population.

Hyeonseo's earliest memory is when she is almost run over by a train while playing by herself on the tracks. A woman who witnesses the incident says that her survival is a good omen, and that Hyeonseo will have a long life. She will remember this in the future in times of danger.

Family is very important to Hyeonseo's mother who is one of eight siblings. She is a strict parent and a born entrepreneur who is able to take advantage of trade opportunities in the city. She has an eye for fashion and values a tidy and orderly home. Despite the family's strong ties to Hyesan, just before Hyeonseo starts kindergarten her father is promoted and the family is transferred to Anju, a city near the west coast.

In 1984, the family arrives in industrial Anju. Hyeonseo's father's job gives the family a position of privilege and access to goods most other citizens do not have. Their new home is on a military base. Like every North Korean family, portraits of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung and his son, the Dear Leader Kim Jong-il are given a position of prominence



in the home. There are strict requirements for how the portraits must be hung and cleaned and once a month officials come to inspect each family's portraits. Failing to clean your portraits or allowing them to get damaged results in punishment.

As a child, Hyeonseo instinctively senses the danger of falling on the wrong side of the Party. The community is full of people on the lookout for anyone who violates the country's social laws but Hyeonseo's mother is good at dealing with people and bribes them with confidence born of her own natural tact and her established social status. In North Korea, wearing a necklace, jeans, or foreign perfume are all examples of "moral degeneracy and capitalist decadence" (19). Hyeonseo's mother is once stopped for wearing trousers in public instead of a skirt, but she quietly pays the fine and bribes the volunteer vigilantes to keep the offence off the records. Everyone in North Korea wears a public mask to protect themselves in a society where they are likely to be criticized and denounced. At age six, Hyeonseo starts kindergarten in Anju "which [marks] a subtle change" (20). In her own words, she now belongs "to the state" (20).

Analysis

When describing her family's high status in communist society, Hyeonseo emphasizes the importance of her grandmother's Party membership cards. Her grandmother hid these cards from American troops during the Korean War and it was this symbol of loyalty to the communist party that guaranteed the family's high status for generations to come. These Party cards are symbolic of the family's status as well as their ideological indoctrination. If it weren't for her family's status, Hyeonseo would have had a very different childhood and would likely have had different feelings about North Korean society.

When writing about her parents, Hyeonseo describes love "like water finding its way to the sea" (8). With this metaphor, she sets up love, and her parents relationship, as inevitable. It is a force as strong as the tides of nature that cannot be stopped or impeded by human efforts. This metaphor emphasizes the importance of love and family connection while also introducing the idea of fortune. Love, like fortune, is not able to be controlled or manipulated and humans are at the mercy of both.

Hyeonseo writes about the identity of Hyesan people in Korean folklore, thus tying her own identity and personality traits to her birthplace. In this folklore, people from Hyesan are "tenacious and stubborn. They are survivors" (8). Hyeonseo recognizes these traits in herself and her family members. This demonstrates how she constructs her identity partly through family similarities, but also through a sense of patriotism and connection to her birthplace. Even though she will later question her identity, the traits she draws from her patriotic attachment to her birthplace never waver.

On page nine, Hyeonseo foreshadows the premature death of one of her parents. According to her grandmother's superstitions, a couple that love each other too much will "condense all the affection that should last a lifetime into too short a period, and one of them [will] die young" (9). From a literary perspective, this foreshadows an untimely



and tragic loss in Hyeonseo's future. From a thematic angle, readers see how love is tied to the mercy of Fortune. No matter how strong the power of love may be, it is ultimately as dependant on the whims of chance as everything and everyone else.

On page ten, Hyeonseo gets her first name change and her struggles with identity begin. Her birth name is changed to reflect the severing from her biological father and her new identity as the child of her mother's second husband, the man she will always think of as her father. Even though she is merely a baby and is too young to be aware of this change, it will later become symbolic of the fact that her identity has been in constant shift, practically since birth. This first name change at such a young age demonstrates Hyeonseo's deeply ingrained feelings of displacement and is the start of a lifelong struggle to assert a strong sense of self.

The fact that Hyeonseo survives a near death experience on the train tracks cements her identity as a survivor. It is a good omen but also foreshadows the fact that she will have continued struggles to survive in her future. Despite the challenges, the reader knows that she is a character who will prevail. The incident on the train tracks also illustrates that survival is as much dependent on luck and good fortune as it is on skill and intelligence.

The portraits of the Kim rulers is symbolic of their omnipresence in the lives of all North Koreans. The portraits are a physical reminder of the dictatorship's power and pervasiveness in North Korean society. The fact that all children grow up under their gaze demonstrates that ideological indoctrination is insidious and pervasive. Children cannot escape it because it is present in the home and incorporated into the very fabric of every day life. The importance of taking care of the portraits is also indicative of the power the government has over ordinary citizens. Hyeonseo does not question these power dynamics because they are such a normal part of her life from such a young age. In this way, the presence of the portraits in the household ensures the continued, unquestioned power of the Kim regime.

Vocabulary

uncouth, caste, insidious, partisans, ardent, gulag, larch, wrest, exhorting, appendectomy, cadres, precariously, innocuous, myriad, degeneracy, zeal, circumventing



Part One: Chapters 4-6

Summary

Ideological indoctrination begins on Hyeonseo's first day of kindergarten. The stories of their births and victories in battle portray them as godly heroes. Hyeonseo is "too young not to believe every word" (22). The children are told about the suffering of South Korean children and the sadistic cruelty of American soldiers. Hyeonseo's mother teaches her to praise the Great Leader because not to do so would alert the attention of informers. North Korean society maintains a system of surveillance and rewards those who inform on anyone who demonstrates political disloyalty.

When Hyeonseo is seven, she stumbles upon the aftermath of a public execution. A male factory worker has been hanged off the railing of a bridge. Over the next few days there are a number of hangings in the city. The accused are not given trials, "the charges [are] simply read out and the victim is executed on the spot" (28). Hyeonseo's mother is haunted by the hangings and is deeply relieved when Hyeonseo's father announces that the family will be relocated to North Korea's second-largest city, Hamhung. Around the same time, Hyeonseo's little brother, Min-ho is born.

In Hamhung, Hyeonseo is kept busy with school and mandatory government-run programs which "ensure that no one could ever deviate into a selfish, individualistic, or private life" (33). At school, Hyeonseo is introduced to "life purification time" which continues throughout a person's life. In these sessions, everyone is required to accuse someone or confess their own violation. Adults and children alike make pacts with their friends to take turns accusing each other of mild made-up misdeeds in order to maintain friendships and avoid severe accusations or punishments.

When Hyeonseo is nine, she enters the Young Pioneer Corps, North Korea's communist youth movement. Participation is mandatory, but requires that children pass a test before initiation. Hyeonseo does well and is rewarded by being selected for the first induction ceremony of the year on Kim Jong-Il's birthday. Hyeonseo's mother buys her a special pair of red shoes for the occasion. These are particularly special because they are different from the black state-issue shoes all children wear and had to be purchased with foreign currency. In retrospect, Hyeonseo is surprised that this example of individualism did not attract negative attention and repercussions.

In 1990, when Hyeonseo is ten years old, the family moves back to Hyesan. On the train journey, it turns out that their travel permit has expired. Thanks to the kindness of a ticket inspector and the other passengers, the family is able to hide on the train and continue on their journey. Hyeonseo notes how rare it is to experience kindness from strangers in a country which makes "accusers and informers of us all" (38).



Analysis

Hyeonseo's kindergarten is full of murals intended to further the children's ideological indoctrination. These paintings demonstrate how art is used in North Korean society to further the government's political agenda. It also shows how North Korean propaganda is woven into the fabric of every day life in such a way that it remains unquestioned. Not only do the school paintings promote North Korean patriotism, they also shape how North Korean children view Americans, South Koreans, and the Japanese.

Throughout Hyeonseo's early education, strong parallels are drawn which paint the Kim leaders as gods. Hyeonseo furthers this comparison with her language choices as a writer. Instead of writing about the birth of Kim Jong-Il, she specifically uses the word "nativity" which alludes to the birth of Jesus Christ (21). North Korean stories also talk about a star appearing in the sky on the day of Kim Jong-Il's birth and the birthdays of the Kim leaders are national holidays. This highlights the similarities between the Kim family rulers and the birth of Jesus once again, as Christmas is also a national holiday in the Western world. North Korean children even look forward to gifts on these holidays "in the way that children in the West think of Santa Claus" (22). In this way, readers see the similarities and differences between North Korea and their own societies. The Kim leaders are painted as gods, which helps Western readers understand the significance of their role in North Korean society. It also shows how many societies have a larger-than-life figure they look up to and turn to for support and guidance.

Hyeonseo's red shoes are the first example of her expressing her individualism and personal identity through fashion. Readers see how Hyeonseo's mother encouraged "a distinct individualism" through small acts of personal distinction such as red shoes (36). These red shoes demonstrate Hyeonseo's individuality while still supporting a certain level of communist compliance through the color choice. Red is the universal symbolic color of the communist movement. At the same time as these shoes demonstrate Hyeonseo's early love of individualistic fashion, they also illustrate her family's privilege. Expensive luxuries such as these are an example of how Hyeonseo is shielded from some of the realities of North Korean life. While the rest of her peers have no choice but to wear the state-issued shoes, Hyeonseo's family has enough wealth and status to allow her these small displays of personal identity.

The ceremony which inducts Hyeonseo to the Young Pioneer Corps is a rite of passage which marks a child's formal indoctrination into the communist movement. While other countries mark rites of passage through religious ceremonies such as Bar Mitzvahs and Confirmations, in North Korea it is marked through political allegiance. Again, one sees how the political system and Kim regime stand in place of religious traditions more common in the West.

The incident on the train journey in 1990 is the first example of Hyeonseo benefitting from the kindness of strangers. It is such an unusual occurrence in North Korea, where citizens are pitted against each other and encouraged to inform on one another, that it stands out in her memory. This scene is important because it highlights the nature of



North Korean society. It also illustrates how political indoctrination informs human behavior. This scene foreshadows Hyeonseo's later experiences in which the kindness of strangers helps save her.

Vocabulary

indoctrination, tremulous, acute, rife, copse, fetid, spate, adjourn, squalid,



Part One: Chapters 7-9

Summary

Hyesan is now booming with illicit trade coming over the border from China. Hyeonseo's mother makes contacts across the border and begins a business of importing and selling goods at a profit. About two years after moving back to Hyesan, she takes her daughter to a fortune teller even though they are outlawed along with all other forms of religion. The fortune teller says that Hyeonseo is clever, has a future connected with music, and "will eat foreign rice" (42). Hyeonseo's mother interprets this to mean that her daughter will live overseas and then sighs, realizing that she has wasted her money since no ordinary North Korean is allowed to travel abroad or emigrate.

A few months later, while visiting her grandmother, Hyeonseo learns the truth about her parentage. Her grandmother tells her the whole story and shows her pictures from her mother's first marriage. Hyeonseo never mentions this knowledge to her parents or anyone else, but it changes the way she sees her father and brother. In North Korea, "bloodlines are everything" and the pain of discovering the truth causes Hyeonseo to withdraw from the father she loves (47).

In September 1992, Hyeonseo begins secondary school. She is now tired of "drab North Korean clothes" and wants to look different (48). In school, she begins to learn Chinese calligraphy among other subjects. Although she does not see the point of calligraphy, her father is strict about her learning it because he believes it's important to be able to communicate with people who speak other languages. Hyeonseo writes that she will later be grateful because her knowledge of Chinese calligraphy will one day save her life.

Indoctrination continues throughout secondary school with the most important lessons centering of the lives of the Kim family. Propaganda seeps into every subject. Students are taught to hate and fear Americans and to mistrust the Chinese who, although they are allies in communism, are jealous of North Korea. In the first semester of school, training for mass games begins. The displays at these elaborate events require training, organization, and discipline which is meant to ensure that the students grow into good communists. The students practice endlessly in preparation for the mass games which mark the most sacred days in the calendar. Hyeonseo participates in a parade march, a mass choir, and the card section "which was made up of thousands of children executing an immaculately drilled display of different colored cards flipped and held up to form a sequence of giant images" (51).

At the start of her second year in secondary school, Hyeonseo's father leaves the air force for a new job at a trading company controlled by the military. His position requires him to travel to China and he is given a passport. This gives the family an even higher mark of high social status. Two months later, their house catches on fire. Everything is



destroyed except for the clothes they wore to escape and the portraits Hyeonseo's father snatched from the wall.

Analysis

This chapter heavily introduces the theme of fortune in a literal way when Hyeonseo visit a fortune teller for the first time. The accuracy of the fortune teller's predictions foreshadows Hyeonseo's future even though the character herself does not know it at the time. Here, readers see how a belief in the powers of fortune and the hand of fate has been instilled in Hyeonseo from a young age. Even though North Korea is a secular country, the people still find ways to explain life's mysteries. For Hyeonseo, a belief in the guiding hand of fortune is part of her fundamental approach to life. Because religion is outlawed in North Korea, worship of the Kim family once again steps in to fill this role. Political allegiance is the only acceptable form of loyalty in North Korean society.

When Hyeonseo learns the truth about her parentage, the first real phase of her identity crisis begins. To her, identity is linked to bloodlines and inheritance. Without an understanding of her genealogy, Hyeonseo loses a sense of who she is. There is nothing to ground her in her identity without a connection to biology. Here, readers see the connection between identity and family. Hyeonseo has already illustrated that she draws some of her own personality traits from her mother and her birthplace but, with a changing connection to family, her identity changes too.

In Chapter 8, Min-ho draws a picture of his family. In the sun shining above them he draws the face of Kim Il-sung. This childhood picture is symbolic of the insidiousness of North Korean propaganda. Even small children inherently associate their leader with the warmth, omnipresence, and giving-spirit of the sun itself. With ideological indoctrination succeeding at such a young age, the reader can begin to understand why and how the Kim dynasty has managed to remain in power for so many years. This drawing is also an example of how patriotism expresses itself through art and even the most innocent of pastimes. Patriotism and loyalty to the Kims is unquestioned and ever-present.

In Chapter 9, the red scarf Hyeonseo had been given at her Youth Pioneer Corps induction ceremony has "become an irritation to [her]" (48). This is one of the first examples of Hyeonseo's mounting disillusionment with her country. It is also one of the first examples of her waning patriotism. Again, she is expressing her need for personal identity and individualism through her fashion choices. She does not want to wear the commonplace scarf because she wants to "look different" from her peers (48). What used to be a symbol of Hyeonseo's passage from child to loyal communist citizen is now a symbol of her inability to express individual identity.

The mass games are symbolic of communist values. They illustrate and encourage the regimentation, discipline, order, and uniformity that makes one a "good communist" (48). While these games are intended to promote patriotism, Hyeonseo dislikes them and associates them with the terror of making a mistake. This is an example of how patriotic indoctrination backfires and fills Hyeonseo with dread rather than with pride.

Vocabulary

propitious, crags, dubious, lurid, arduous

Part One: Chapters 10-12

Summary

A few months before the house fire Hyeonseo and her friends buy illegal cassette tapes of South Korean pop music. Hyeonseo plays the music quietly and in secret after hearing that a local woman was sentenced to a prison camp "for partying to South Korean pop" (54). This music gives Hyeonseo a vague awareness of the world outside North Korea. The tapes are soon destroyed in the house fire, which Hyeonseo now considers a stroke of luck since their discovery could have been fatal. After the fire, the family moves to a house directly facing the bank of the Yalu River which borders China. Hyeonseo is now as close to the outside world as physically possible.

At this time, the family gets a television. Although all North Korean content is provided by the government, the television is also able to pick up Chinese TV stations from across the border which expand Hyeonseo's horizons. Anyone who lives near the border is monitored more closely by the government in case they "succumbed to the poison of capitalism and traded smuggled goods, watched pernicious foreign television programmes, and even defected" (59). After returning from a business trip to China, Hyeonseo's father gives her a beautiful doll. Hyeonseo now recognizes that her father sensed the distance that had grown between them and was trying to bridge the gap. However, that doll turns out to be the last thing he is ever able to give her.

In January 1994, Hyeonseo is about to turn fourteen. She has long been "pushing [her] luck with [her] appearance" by not wearing the school uniform (61). The teachers have been turning a blind eye because they know they can count on her mother for cash donations to the school. On her birthday, Hyeonseo wears a pink Chinese coat and a new pair of tall, fashionable boots. A new teacher takes umbrage with this and chastises her for never being in uniform. Hyeonseo talks back and the teacher slaps her across the face. At the same time, Hyeonseo's father confesses to her mother that he thinks he is being watched.

At fourteen, Hyeonseo is now an obligatory member of the Socialist Youth League and has to undergo military training. She hates this and is beginning to feel generally disillusioned. She is no longer in love with the organized communist life and collective activities. In the spring, she makes the mandatory pilgrimage to the battle sites of the revolution and the birthplace of Kim Jong-il. A few days after this trip Hyeonseo comes home from school to find that her father is not back from his latest business trip in China. After several days with no news, the family finally learns that he was arrested as he crossed the border back into North Korea.



Analysis

Hyeonseo is initially introduced to the outside world through music. When art has previously appeared in her story, it has been through paintings, portraits, or drawings that promote the North Korean agenda. For the first time, readers see art enter Hyeonseo's life without a patriotic agenda. Nevertheless, it has a strong impression on her and piques her interest in the world at large. Art and media continue to influence Hyeonseo's disillusionment with her country through her access to foreign television programs. Again, her family's affluence and status make this awareness of the outside world possible. Without decent finances they would not be able to have a television and their proximity to the border makes it possible for Hyeonseo to watch foreign programs. Here one can see how fortune plays a role in planting the seeds for Hyeonseo's eventual defection. Perhaps if she did not have access to so much of the outside world through the chance of being born into a privileged family, she might not have been tempted to leave home.

The family's chance move close to the Yalu River is also significant in making Hyeonseo's later defection possible. The river is more easily traversed than other North Korean borders and Hyesan's booming illicit trade industry means that people are often crossing into China secretly for their business dealings. Potential profit from these dealings also makes border guards more likely to turn a blind eye when they see a smuggler crossing the river temporarily. All these factors make it possible for Hyeonseo to dream of one day exploring China for herself. Without the chance positioning of their home next to the river, these possibilities may not have entered her mind.

The doll that Hyeonseo's father gives her is a symbol of their damaged relationship. It indicates how far they have grown apart, since Hyeonseo is now slightly too old for dolls, but the expensive gift also demonstrates how much her father wants to mend the rift between them. It shows that, for him, her biological identity has no bearing on the strength of their relationship or the degree of his love for her. Readers briefly begin to hope that their relationship will be repaired, but Hyeonseo quickly foreshadows his death by writing that "it was the last thing he ever gave [her]" (60). This sentence also harkens back to Hyeonseo's grandmother's earlier premonition that one of her parents would die young. Again, the inevitable hand of fortune is playing a part in all their lives.

Hyeonseo's relationship with identity and fashion reaches a pinnacle when she wears very individualistic pair of boots and brightly colored coat to school. For the first time, her family's high status and financial privilege cannot cushion her from the realities of North Korean expectations and standards. Her rebelliousness against her teacher and the school dress codes is symbolic of how strong her disillusionment and desire for personal expression have become.

Vocabulary

illicit, pernicious, subterfuge, disinterred, forays



Part One: Chapters 13-15

Summary

Many days go by with no news of Hyeonseo's father. Two weeks after his disappearance, Hyeonseo's father is released to the Hyesan hospital but the investigation into him is ongoing. He is accused of bribery and abuse of position but "a more likely reason [for the investigation] was that he had fallen out of political favor" (67). He spends six weeks in the hospital, suffering from depression, before passing away.

Hyeonseo immediately regrets the resentment she nurtured toward him and realizes how much he must have loved her to accept her as his daughter. She also realizes how much she loved him in return. The family receives another shock when they learn that their father's death was ruled a suicide. Suicide is taboo in Korea because the regime regards it as a form of defection. Any children left behind by a suicidal parent fall to the lowest tier of the caste system. To prevent this, Hyeonseo's mother bribes the hospital authorities to change the cause of death to a heart attack.

Later that year, on July 8 1994, it is announced that the Great Leader Kim Il-sung has died. It had never before occurred to Hyeonseo that this godlike man might die. A door opens in her mind as she realizes his humanity. The entire country is plunged into mourning. Schools, mills, factories, shops, and markets all close and every citizen participates in daily mass events to demonstrate their grief. Hyeonseo feels sad, but does not cry like everyone else around her. She knows that if she does not cry she will be in trouble so she fakes her tears. No one sees through her performance. Some adults in the city are accused of faking their grief and are killed at public executions, one of which Hyeonseo witnesses.

Hyeonseo turns fifteen and, like all of her friends, she is completely ignorant and misinformed about sex and reproduction. When she menstruates for the first time, Hyeonseo is shocked, embarrassed, and panicked. Like her friends, she handles it in secret. One day, a friend takes Hyeonseo to see something she had found at a public toilet near their school. Next to the toilet is a tiny dead baby inside a plastic bag. Hyeonseo is shocked to her core.

That year, Hyeonseo dates her first boyfriend. He is four years older than she is and she describes him as a hoodlum. He deals in low-level crime, has money, and wears sophisticated clothes. Hyeonseo feels proud to go out with him since so many other girls want him. Like other couples their age, they do not kiss and only hold hands very discreetly.

That summer the country is mobilized to prepare for impending nuclear attacks the government says will be launched by the United States and South Korea. The Socialist Youth League to which Hyeonseo belongs is put to work digging tunnels for air-raid



shelters. One day, after many exhausting hours of digging, Hyeonseo goes to a friend's house. Hungry, she suggests they have a snack and does not understand why her friend doesn't offer her anything. She is resentful since she always gives this friend snacks at her house. The friend shows her a pot of cornstalks boiling on the stove and Hyeonseo doesn't understand why her friend's mother would cook such a thing instead of rice.

Analysis

North Korean relationships to depression and suicide in particular are significant because, instead of being seen as an illness, it is seen as a form of protest. Mandatory patriotism is so emphatically required that even the private and personal issues of mental health are seen as an act of political rebellion. Readers see how national loyalty is demanded at all costs. The punishments for disloyalty are severe, whether they be public execution or the ruining of a family after a suicide. Political protest in North Korean is nearly impossible, particularly without resulting in execution. As such, suicide itself becomes a significant form of protest in the eyes of the government as they believe it is indicative of dissatisfaction with what the country has provided.

Hyeonseo's father's death causes her to begin to believe rumours that their house by the river is cursed. Belief in superstition and curses changes how Hyeonseo views the events of her life. She no longer sees her home in the same way and her relationship to it changes. A damaged relationship with home may also contribute to Hyeonseo's desire to leave it, even temporarily. Hyeonseo has no control over the power of superstitions, particularly when her father's death appears to confirm them.

The death of Kim Il-sung is a significant turning point in Hyeonseo's life because it opens her mind to the possibility that this man is merely human. His death begins to undo some of the ideology she has been taught which has always compared him to a god. With proof of his mortality, Hyeonseo can no longer believe in this man in the same way and some of the life lessons she has been taught begin to fall apart. Additionally, her lack of grief demonstrates that she is not emotionally invested in this aspect of North Korean patriotism. Readers begin to see the cracks in her loyalty growing deeper as her disillusionment grows. The betrayal of her father by the government and his subsequent depression and death also likely contribute to her anger toward the country. Kim Il-sung's death symbolizes the death of Hyeonseo's blind faith in North Korean propaganda.

The dead baby Hyeonseo finds in the public toilet is indicative of how a lack of sex education is damaging to future generations of North Koreans. A lack of education in general will later play a significant role in Hyeonseo's life as she struggles to fit into the world at large. However, for the moment it is regarding issues surrounding sex and reproduction that this lack of information impacts most significantly. The dead baby is a gruesome and visceral example of how ignorance can lead to tragedy and death.



The relationship between Hyeonseo and her first boyfriend as well as the teenagers' lack of understanding about sex highlights some key cultural differences between them and western readers. However, readers also see similarities between Hyeonseo and average Western teenage girls. Although she suffers from a lack of education, Hyeonseo still demonstrates a common teenage love for sophisticated older boys. These similarities and differences help readers relate to the main character while still emphasizing the uniqueness and problematic nature of her upbringing.

The cornstalks boiling on the stove are another example of how Hyeonseo's privilege has shielded her from famine and poverty. Soon, her growing awareness of the famine affecting much of the country will begin to show her that North Korea may not be as prosperous as she has been led to believe. The cornstalks demonstrate that, as she gets older, Hyeonseo can no longer remain sheltered by her privilege.

Vocabulary

gratuitous, surreptitiously, spate, perfunctory, epitome, warren



Part One: Chapters 16-18

Summary

Hyeonseo's mother comes home with a letter one of her work colleagues received from a sister. The woman and her family are starving to death and do not expect to be alive by the time the letter is delivered. Hyeonseo does not understand why, in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, people are starving. She suddenly realizes why her friend did not have snacks to offer at her house and is mortified to learn the country is in the midst of a famine.

Across the country, people are dying of hunger. Everything from food to fertilizer is in short supply and the factories shut down. The government blames the situation on American-backed UN sanctions coupled with crop failures and freak flooding. It is not until years later that Hyeonseo learns the famine is actually the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fact that the new Russian government has stopped subsidizing North Korea with fuel and food.

In the spring of 1996, Hyeonseo realizes how bad the situation is while on a train journey to visit her aunt in Hamhung. She witnesses the breakdown of order as soldiers become thieves and starving people roam the countryside listlessly. As people fall dead in the streets, the surviving population begins to unlearn their indoctrinated ideology and turn to trade. During the famine, many people are too embarrassed or proud to admit they are starving. Min-ho's accordion teacher refuses food every time he comes to the house for a lesson but dies of starvation after a few weeks.

In 1997, Hyeonseo is nearing her high school graduation. That winter, a friend asks Hyeonseo if she would like to slip across the river into China. This friend has done it before and Hyeonseo is excited by the idea. She wants to know how Chinese people live and if it is anything like what she sees on her clandestine TV shows. When she sees that the Chinese people across the river look well fed, this realization begins to dislodge her core belief that North Korea is the best country in the world.

Hyeonseo knows that if she wants to go to China she must go before she turns eighteen. At eighteen she will be a legal adult and the consequences if she is caught leaving the country will be a much more serious. She believes this is her only chance to see something of the outside world.

The border guard in charge of patrolling the river outside Hyeonseo's house has long been infatuated with her and she knows she can trust him to help her cross the frozen river. Hyeonseo's friend has already gone across on her own, so Hyeonseo plans a solo journey. She decides to visit her father's relatives in Shenyang, China for a few days. She decides to ask one of her mother's trading partners across the border, Mr. Ahn, for help when she reaches China.



After dinner in December 1997, Hyeonseo leaves home. She wears a new pair of fashionable shoes her mother bought for her, believing they will help her blend in in China. She meets her border-guard friend and promises him she'll be back in a couple of hours. Without looking back, Hyeonseo crosses the ice into China, believing she will only be away for a few days.

Analysis

The letter Hyeonseo's mother brings home continues Hyeonseo's education about the realities of life for the average North Korean. Seeing rampant famine throughout her country dislodges her belief in the government as well as some of her patriotism. For the first time, she questions why people are allowed to suffer in a country as great and North Korea and wonders if perhaps it is not as wonderful as she had been led to believe. Her disillusionment is allowed to fester and grow as the famine highlights the suffering of the North Korean people.

As the country struggles to feed itself, children are "regularly seen scavenging in the dirt for gains, peel or gristle" (81). This is ironic because it is "how [they've] been told the children in South Korea lived" (81). This reversal demonstrates how North Korea has become just like its worst, and imagined, image of a free, capitalist society. The propaganda they have spread about life in South Korea is coming true right in their own backyards. The irony is not lost on the reader although one wonders if it is at all clear to the North Korean government itself.

Hunger is what finally causes the population to unlearn decades of political indoctrination and patriotism. Hunger is a unifying human need which puts everyone on an equal playing field and causes them to revert to capitalist trade. Here, readers see how capitalism prevails, even illegally, when a situation becomes mortally dire. The collective values of communism cannot be upheld when individual lives are at stake. Readers may reflect on how capitalism promotes individual survival in the most difficult of circumstances. Even decades of communist ideology are abandoned in favor of capitalist trade when survival is at stake.

Although Hyeonseo's family has always appeared to be loyal communists, their business-mindedness has meant they have been involved in illicit trade already for years. While their high status in society comes from generations of political loyalty and patriotism, a significant portion of their prosperity comes from Hyeonseo's mother's illicit business dealings. Here one sees how even a loyal communist family reverts to capitalism in order to secure an advantageous position in society. From an early age, Hyeonseo knows that engaging in illicit trade businesses of her own may be the only way to keep her own family well supported. As such, readers see that capitalist ideology is already a part of Hyeonseo's life, even if she does not recognize it as such.

Min-ho's accordion teacher is a universal symbol for the proud and embarrassed starving population. He is just one example of a person who refuses the offer of food in order to save face and who suffers the ultimate consequence. Although readers are only



told this one man's story, the author intends him to represent masses of North Korean people who suffer and die due to pride and embarrassment in the face of famine.

The chance location of Hyeonseo's home on the river becomes crucially important in this section and is extremely significant in prompting her defection. The symbol of Changbai, the Chinese city across the river, makes Hyeonseo wonder about the outside world enough to contemplate visiting it. Because she has the opportunity to see well-fed Chinese people for herself, she is incapable of believing blindly in all North Korean propaganda. The apparent prosperity of the citizens of Changbai makes it impossible for her to believe that North Korea, in the midst of famine, is still the most successful country in the world. Without this visual representation of another society, Hyeonseo's disillusionment may not have grown to such an extreme. Her proximity to the border and friendship with the guards also makes it physically possible for her to contemplate a trip to China in the first place.

Vocabulary

graft, vagrant, denuded, arduous, mollify, dubiously



Part Two: Chapters 19-21

Summary

Across the border, Hyeonseo knocks on the door of Mr. and Mrs. Ahn. They are shocked to see her but agree to take her on the eight-hour journey to Shenyang to visit her relatives. Hyeonseo gets her first view of North Korea from the outside, across the river, and watches Hyesan disappear as a taxi carries her and Mr. Ahn to Shenyang.

Hyeonseo experience culture-shock from the huge portions of food in China and the dazzling individualism and prosperity in Shenyang. Her aunt and uncle are astonished to see her, but welcome her into their prosperous home with open arms. After learning that Hyeonseo's father died after being arrested, her uncle launches into a tirade against the country. He dispels much of the propaganda Hyeonseo was taught in school. She refuses to believe him, but at the same time, some of what he says rings true.

Before taking her out for her first night in Shenyang, Hyeonseo's aunt and uncle suggest she use a pseudonym. Any North Koreans found in China are sent back to their homeland where they face severe punishment. Thus, she is given the third name of her life: Chae Mi-ran. They concoct the story that she is visiting from a Korean region of city where many people may not speak Mandarin very well. Hyeonseo is amazed by the magical city where she is overwhelmed with choice and freedom. She even sings her favorite South Korean pop song in public at a karaoke bar. She feels as though she has "come from a world of black and white into one of Technicolor" (109).

After four or five days, her aunt asks if she can stay longer and Hyeonseo does not hesitate to extend her visit. Before she knows it, a month has gone by. She turns eighteen and knows she can no longer delay her return to North Korea. Just days before her planned return, she is surprised by a phone call from her mother. "Don't come back" her mother says, "We're in trouble" (110).

Hyeonseo learns that the government knows she has not been at home. Even though her mother told inspectors that she is visiting an aunt in Hamhung, rumors spread that she is actually in China. Hyeonseo's border-guard friend tells her mother where she has gone and Hyeonseo's mother knows she must take action. She reports her daughter as missing to the police. She tells Hyeonseo not to come home because a sudden reappearance will support the rumor that she has been in China. Hyeonseo's mother tells her not to contact the family and that they will be moving to another neighborhood where people will accept the story of a missing daughter.

Now that she is to stay indefinitely in China, Hyeonseo learns Mandarin. Luckily her skill in Chinese calligraphy helps. While staying in China at first seems like a wonderful vacation, it is not long before she begins to feel homesick and uncomfortable about trespassing on her aunt and uncle's hospitality. Although she now knows that North



Korea is not the greatest country on earth, she is lonely, depressed, and wishes to go home. Hyeonseo's aunt tries to bring her out of her depression by introducing her to a young man named Guen-soo.

Analysis

As Hyeonseo watches her home disappear from the taxi window, lyrics from childhood songs fill her internal monologue. These lyrics are about the soldiers who keep the North Korean people safe, but they will soon adopt a new meaning in Hyeonseo's life. She does not know that, from now on, these soldiers will be her enemies, not her protectors. As a defector, she will no longer have the same relationship to her home country and the lyrics from her childhood songs. Instead of keeping her safe, North Korean soldiers will punish her for defecting should she ever be found out.

As she travels further and further away from home, Hyeonseo's internal monologue turns into a self-criticism session. Self-criticism is emphasized and encouraged by the North Korean government in order to ensure citizens remain loyal communists. This habit of self-criticism is deeply ingrained in Hyeonseo's personality and will continue to influence her sense of self-worth throughout her life. For now, they serve to instill "pangs of guilt, selfishness and stupidity" when Hyeonseo reflects upon her decision to leave home (104). She assuages some of these negative feelings by assuring herself that she will return home soon. This builds a sense of dramatic irony as readers know Hyeonseo will never return to North Korea.

When Hyeonseo's uncle begins to tell her the truth about the Kim dynasty and North Korean history she compares it to being told "the earth was flat" (108). This metaphor illustrates the depth of Hyeonseo's belief in North Korean propaganda. The fundamental shape of her world is different due to the inaccurate history she has been taught as well as the many flaws, omissions, and lies in her formal education. This is an example of how the power of revisionist history can shape the entire world view and perspective of a population. This is the first major test of Hyeonseo's patriotic loyalty.

In this section, Hyeonseo adopts her third name, symbolizing the shedding of her North Korean identity and her new position as a defector. From this moment on, she will have to hide her true identity for many years to come. Since she still expects to return home in a few days, the significance of this moment is lost on her at the time. However, the necessity of a pseudonym is a strong indicator of how difficult life is for North Korean defectors in China. One's identity as a defector inherently makes it impossible for one to live honestly, as one's true self.

When Hyeonseo visits Shenyang for the first time, she compares the city to a television program, writing: "I'd come from a world of black and white into one of Technicolor" (109). This choice of metaphor harkens back to Hyeonseo's first introduction to Chinese life through the illicit television programs she used to watch in Hyesan. Shenyang is like her favorite television shows come to life and she is able to step into that alternate universe.



At her aunt and uncle's apartment, Hyeonseo is able to sing South Korean pop songs on their karaoke machine as loud as she likes since, in this country, "there was no secret music" (110). The ability to indulge openly in her choice of music and television programs is "pure freedom" (110). To teenage Hyeonseo, freedom is first felt through art and entertainment.

Hyeonseo's depression and homesickness when she realizes she can never return to North Korea is the beginning of her complicated relationship with her home country. Although she is now aware of the depth of the governments lies and propaganda, she still feels a strong connection to the place she calls home and wishes to return. Even though Hyeonseo no longer feels positively about her country's government, she is still patriotic in her own way.

Vocabulary

emaciated, agog, fallacies, suffused



Part Two: Chapters 22-24

Summary

Guen-soo and Hyeonseo begin dating but, despite his kindness, she does not feel much for him. He knows she is North Korean and she keeps dating him because it distracts her from her homesickness. Hyeonseo meets Guen-soo's family and his mother soon begins to talk of marriage. Hyeonseo feels she is being swept up in other people's plans. After nearly two years in China, at the end of 1999, she examines her options. Although she wants to travel and have a career, she tries to convince herself that the marriage is the right choice. It will give her a Chinese ID and a comfortable life as opposed to the life of an illegal immigrant on the run.

Guen-soo's family arranges a fake Chinese ID for her. He shows it to her but says she won't get to keep it until after the wedding. The name they have chosen for her is Jang Soon-hyang. Hyeonseo hopes that when she gets her ID she will be able to visit her family. However, her future in-laws and her husband say this will be impossible. It is the thought of never being able to see her family again that makes Hyeonseo decide to stop the wedding.

In the summer of 2000, just weeks before the wedding, Hyeonseo packs a bag and leaves her uncle's apartment without telling anyone. She takes the chip out of her cellphone and drops it in a trash can.

Hyeonseo heads to an informal job market she is aware of and is immediately offered a job in a hair salon at the edge of the city. Hyeonseo is shocked to discover, on her arrival at the salon, that it is full of men. She is taken to a basement room and told to massage a man along with another girl. The staff dorm is the filthiest room she has ever seen and she tells her co-worker she will not be taking the job. The other girl tells her "this is not the kind of place you can just leave" (126). Hyeonseo lies to her new boss by saying she wants to go back into the city to fetch her things before starting work. Hyeonseo runs through the streets, narrowly avoids being caught by the salon owner, and finds a taxi to take her back downtown.

Hyeonseo goes to Koreatown in Shenyang and finds a job in a restaurant. She is surprised and relieved that the pay is decent, meals are provided, and her employer does not ask for her ID. Hyeonseo falls into a routine in her new life. Her Mandarin improves, she makes friends, and she is saving money. She lives under the name Jang Soon-hyang, from the fake Chinese ID she never got. After about six months, she calls her aunt and uncle, consumed with guilt for how she left them. She apologizes and later also calls Guen-soo's family to apologize to them as well. She feels terrible for abandoning and insulting all these people.



Analysis

As Guen-soo's family begins to plan his wedding to Hyeonseo, his mother visits a fortune teller. Here, readers see how the role of fortune and fate in Hyeonseo's life has followed her out of North Korea and into China. The fortune teller predicts a propitious wedding date but, in this case, Hyeonseo does not feel comfortable leaving her future in fortune's hands. This is an example of how Hyeonseo takes her fortune into her own hands when she feels her life slipping out of her control. The fortune teller's role in setting her wedding date is part of what causes Hyeonseo to really examine whether or not she can go through with this marriage. Her biggest problem with the whole thing is that it is all being driven by outside forces without any choice or personal agency of her own.

The name Jang Soon-hyang which Guen-soo's family chooses for Hyeonseo is symbolic of her next impending identity shift. In this case, she will shed her identity as an independent young woman to become a wife and future mother. The meaning of this new name is "the person who respects elders, and makes a good wife by following her husband and listening really well to him" (120). This meaning is symbolic of the person Guen-soo and his family want her to become. However, it is not in line with Hyeonseo's sense of personal identity. This challenge to her sense of self serves to deepen her already strong misgivings about the upcoming wedding.

When Hyeonseo realizes she will be prevented from seeing or contacting her family, she describes her future mother-in-law's smile "like a sudden crack in ice" (121). This imagery and language choice recalls the image of the frozen river Hyeonseo crossed to get to China in the first place. The metaphorical river, which was once a smooth path to adventure and freedom, has shattered dangerously and is threatening to drown Hyeonseo in her new life. The image of ice represents change in Hyeonseo's story, but in this case the ice is dangerous and the crack is a warning.

Getting rid of her cellphone chip is symbolic of how deeply Hyeonseo wants to sever ties. She is striving out on her own without the support of her aunt and uncle to fall back on. This is indicative of Hyeonseo's stubbornness but also illustrates her confidence in her survival skills and self-reliance.

In the scene at the salon, Hyeonseo highlights the smell of male sweat present throughout the space. This is the second time that the author emphasizes that smell in a particular scene and the repetition makes it a significant image. In the first case, the young Hyeonseo smelled the stench of male sweat while witnessing her first public execution. When the same smell is recalled at the salon, readers are reminded of that earlier scene and the smell becomes a symbol for danger.

After striking out on her own, Hyeonseo subverts the meaning of the name Jang Soon-hyang by adopting it as her new identity in her independent life. She describes her new identity as "a new bud" (131). This image alludes to Hyeonseo's rebirth as the independent, stubborn, and self-sufficient woman she is. She has been able to take



control of her life for the first time in years, and changes the symbolism of her new name to better reflect her identity.

Vocabulary

taro, filial, glib, pragmatic, precarious, repatriation, cyclamen



Part Two: Chapters 25-27

Summary

In January 2001, two documentary filmmakers from South Korea come to Hyeonseo's restaurant. They say they will pay the expenses for a North Korean trying to reach the South. Hyeonseo realizes for the first time that it is possible for North Koreans to seek asylum in the South. Up until then, she believed the countries to be mortal enemies. Instead, she learns that "South Korea considered all North Koreans to be South Korean citizens" (144). Hyeonseo considers telling them her secret but she is cautious and misses her chance.

Feeling that she has missed an opportunity due to her extreme caution, she confesses her identity to some of her friends and makes a point to get to know other North Korean girls hiding in Shenyang. Not long after, police come to find Hyeonseo at work and escort her to the station for interrogation.

In the car on the way to the police station, Hyeonseo prays to her father for help. During the interrogation she remembers everything she was told about Geun-soo's childhood to concoct a fake history for herself in China. When they ask for her ID, she pretends she has forgotten it at home and gives the officers the number she had memorized off the ID Geun-soo had shown her. She is asked to do a written test in Chinese. Chinese characters "take years to master" and her calligraphy skill convinces the police that she is not North Korean.

Hyeonseo knows it is too dangerous for her to stay in Shenyang much longer and begins to plan her next move. One day, she is hit in the back of the head outside her front door. The blow causes her to black out but she recovers. Hyeonseo believes the attacker was sent by whoever informed the police about her. Likely they suffered consequences for making a "false" report and sought revenge.

Once on the mend, Hyeonseo begins to date a police officer. She thinks that having a policeman ally "could be useful" (143). However, when he seems to take pleasure in "rounding up North Koreans" she knows she has to end the relationship. As the fourth year anniversary of her defection approaches, she decides to find a way to contact her mother and brother. She makes plans to travel to Mr. Ahn's house on the border. Since his phone has been out of service for years, she also concocts a second plan. She hires a broker with experience getting people out of North Korea to find her family.

Analysis

The appearance of the documentary filmmakers is significant in continuing Hyeonseo's re-education about history, politics, and the relationship between the two Koreas. The possibility of emigrating to her sister country is introduced for the first time and Hyeonseo is forced to re-examine her perspective on South Korea. Questions of



patriotism are raised as South Koreans consider North Koreans to be their fellow citizens. To the South, the citizens of the two countries are united by a shared identity.

Hyeonseo's precarious position in China illustrates how difficult it is for North Korean defectors to survive in the outside world due to the attitudes of neighboring countries. Although she has escaped North Korea, Hyeonseo is still at the mercy of potential informers as she sees defectors turn on each other in exchange for immunity. The attitudes which cause citizens to turn on each other in North Korea continue to permeate their lives and philosophies even after they've left the country. Hyeonseo feels burdened by her suspicious nature and inherent mistrust of strangers. The burden of these qualities is particularly highlighted when she feels she misses an opportunity to emigrate and become a legal citizen in South Korea.

However, Hyeonseo will come to regret throwing off her cautiousness as it results in her capture by police. The fact that they revealed her identity and someone informed on her will cause her to become even more cautious and guarded in the future. This incident perpetuates her mistrust of people and makes her later encounter with Dick Stolp all the more significant.

Hyeonseo's father's insistence that she learn Chinese calligraphy is what saves her during her interrogation. In this section, readers see how Hyeonseo is saved through a combination of skill and faith. Although she is not religious, she prays to her father and her ancestors. This reflects her belief in the powers of fortune and spirits to help her in her times of need. Ultimately, it is her own skill at calligraphy that saves her, but she would not have that skill without her father's influence. As such, she feels his spirit reaching out from the past to rescue her.

Vocabulary

ferreting, dredged, bureaucracy, jilted



Part Two: Chapters 28-30

Summary

Hyeonseo arrives at Mr. and Mrs. Ahn's house on the border. Mrs. Ahn promises to get one of the smugglers they know to search for her family and Hyeonseo returns to Shenyang. A few weeks later, her brother Min-ho phones her from Mr. Ahn's house. As she prepares to travel back to the border to see him, the broker she also hired calls to tell her he found her family as well.

At Mr. Ahn's house, Hyeonseo and Min-ho are reunited. However, their visit is cut short when a gang, hired by the broker, arrives at the door. They take Hyeonseo to an unfurnished apartment and insist she pay them the equivalent of \$8,500 for their services. She does not have anywhere close to that amount of money and the gang threatens to take her back to North Korea if she does not pay.

Hyeonseo is kept prisoner in that apartment for four days while the gang holds out for their fee. Finally, Hyeonseo calls her uncle in Shenyang to ask for a loan. He sends her the money at once, even though they haven't spoken since she left his apartment. The money clears after two days and Hyeonseo is set free. The stress of this ordeal makes Hyeonseo anxious, paranoid, and stressed. She wants to get out of Shenyang. In January 2002, she packs up all her belongings and buys a one way ticket to Shanghai.

Hyeonseo takes the train to Shanghai with an acquaintance who is also moving there and they agree to share an apartment. When police board the train for an ID check, Hyeonseo hides in the bathroom for almost an hour to evade discovery. Arriving in the metropolis of Shanghai makes Hyeonseo feel that she can reinvent herself. She feels that she has seized one of life's chances. Hyeonseo decides to change her name again because she has told too many people in Shenyang that she is North Korean and wants to bury that identity. She now goes by Chae In-hee and tells her roommate she has changed her name for good luck.

To get out of waitressing and to take advantage of Shanghai's opportunities, Hyeonseo knows she needs a legitimate ID card. She begins making discreet inquiries without sharing her real reason for wanting a new ID. Eventually, she finds an acquaintance who arranges for her to buy a real ID card from a Korean-Chinese family. The parents are selling their mentally ill daughter's ID card in order to pay for her care. Hyeonseo spends all her savings to buy the card. Her new name, according to the ID, is Park Sun-ja.

Analysis

The thugs who imprison and blackmail Hyeonseo in this section are real-life examples of how people use the terror of North Korea's dictatorship to benefit themselves. These thugs represent the entire population which is made "complicit in a brutal system" (150).



The Kim regime maintains power exactly in this manner, by perpetuating cycles of oppression and turning ordinary citizens into informants. In Hyeonseo's words, the Kims maintain leadership and power partly through a system in which "ordinary people are made persecutors, denouncers, thieves" (150). By making ordinary citizens complicit in the system, the system becomes a self-sustaining machine fed by the people themselves. When she is held by the broker's thugs, Hyeonseo witnesses and experiences the results of this multi-layered oppression for herself first-hand.

After her ordeal, Hyeonseo develops "such painful mouth ulcers that [she finds] it hard to eat or drink" (154). These ulcers are a physical manifestation of the stress and anxiety she feels after the trauma of being imprisoned. They represent the pain and mental torture she feels in a literal, medical way. When the time comes for Hyeonseo to leave Shenyang, she consults a fortune teller "for good luck" (154). This is the first time Hyeonseo records visiting a fortune teller herself and not at the behest of another person. This demonstrates how Hyeonseo falls back on her superstitions and her belief in fortune when faced with difficulties. When deciding to make a significant change in her life, steps must be taken to bend fortune in her favor. Hyeonseo's independence and ability to face the unknown is supported by her belief in good fortune.

Hyeonseo's move to Shanghai gives her another opportunity for a new identity. Once again, one sees how the character's sense of self is shaped by the place where she lives. While Hyesan gave her a sense of practicality and business-mindedness, Shanghai allows "those with nerve, ambition and talent" to flourish. In keeping with the ethos of the city, Hyeonseo's own personal ambition begins to emerge more strongly after her move. This is when she decides to do whatever she has to to get an ID card and get out of waitressing in favor of a more profitable career path.

Hyeonseo's move to Shanghai also gives her the opportunity to shed her Shenyang identity which is already clouded with suspicion from her past interrogation. Unlike in the past, Hyeonseo plans to guard her new identity more closely. After so many name changes, a shifting sense of identity is now a part of Hyeonseo's sense of self. Continuous name changes reinforce the sense of Hyeonseo's displacement and lack of home. When she finally gets her legitimate ID card, this new identity allows her to feel more secure and settled than ever before. While personal identity may come from one's sense of self, Hyeonseo finds that one's identity in the eyes of the government is equally as important should one want to have a degree of freedom and security within society.

Vocabulary

complicit, amphetamines, ominously, expatriates, atolls, torpor,



Part Two: Chapters 31-33

Summary

Hyeonseo gets a job as an interpreter for a South Korean tech company. She begins to relax and enjoy life a little more. She feels financially secure even though she is still repaying the debt to her uncle. She misses her family acutely and sometimes wonders what life would be like had she stayed in North Korea. She makes friends with many Korean-Chinese people and South Koreans but no one knows her true identity. Despite her successes, she wishes she has a North Korean friend to relate to who will understand her. As if by luck, she meets a fellow North Korean woman named Ok-hee and they become great friends.

Not long after meeting Ok-hee, Hyeonseo gets a surprise phone call from her brother. Min-ho asks her to send some money and a cellphone as people on the border cities are starting to use the Chinese cell networks illegally. Hyeonseo sends her brother the phone and is able to talk to her family regularly for the first time since she left home. She learns that her mother has been under scrutiny since her departure. Her mother admits that she has "started to have negative thoughts about the Party and the system" but she badly wants Hyeonseo to come home (169). She believes she can bribe the right people to allow Hyeonseo to return safely, particularly since she was not an adult when she left. Hyeonseo is tempted to go home but deep down she knows it is too dangerous.

In spring 2004, Hyeonseo and Ok-hee see a news report about North Korean defectors seeking asylum at the South Korean embassy in Beijing. For the first time, Hyeonseo realizes that there are thousands of defectors from her country trying to reach South Korea every year. The more she thinks about it, the more she wants to live in South Korea. She believes she will always be a foreigner in China and feels she will be more at home among other Koreans. As she begins to pack up her life in Shanghai, Hyeonseo is consumed with guilt, knowing that her mother would be dead set against her going to South Korea. She starts to spiral downward and, when a routine test indicates she has high blood sugar, she sinks into depression. Convinced she is going to die alone, with no trace of her true identity, her thoughts turn suicidal. After a month, Ok-hee convinces her to get another blood test. The results come back normal and she is given the all-clear.

Analysis

Hyeonseo's new job introduces her more directly to the South Korean community. This highlights some of the differences between her home country and the South. It also begins to change how Hyeonseo herself perceives South Korea. Having been brought up to consider that country as her mortal enemy, it now feels surreal for her to be working alongside and socializing with South Koreans. Instead of feeling like she is at



war with these people, Hyeonseo finds commonality with them through their shared language and culture. This is how Hyeonseo's North Korean patriotism begins to be supplanted by a more overarching Korean patriotism. Eventually, she even forgets her true identity at times. She is so used to wearing the mask of her new name and invented history that it becomes her reality. She also feels so connected to her Korean-Chinese and South Korean friends that she feels she is one of them. To Hyeonseo, her identity and patriotism is drawn from being Korean in general rather than from a specific country.

After so many years living and working within a capitalist economy, Hyeonseo's relationship to money changes. She develops a previously unheard of emotional attachment to it as it represents hours of her hard work. This is a key difference between herself and the rest of the North Korean population who have no way to relate to or fully understand how foreign economies work. This shift in Hyeonseo's mentality represents a serious break from the values and ideologies of her upbringing and home country. It also makes it difficult for her to relate to her family back in North Korea. While she wants to help provide for them and sends them money, they have no way to understand her financial struggles living in a capitalist society.

When Hyeonseo speaks to her mother on the phone for the first time in years, her mother recalls the fashionable shoes Hyeonseo wore the night she left home forever. Again, unique fashion choices are used to represent an independent spirit and curiosity about the outside world. Across a time period of many years, the image of Hyeonseo's shoes return to emphasize her individualism.

Vocabulary

besotted, insouciance, complacent, fathom, conciliatory, balked, adamant, despondency



Part Two: Chapters 34-36

Summary

As part of her preparations to leave Shanghai, Hyeonseo sends money and belongings to her family in North Korea. Min-ho had arranged to receive the packages with his border-guard friends, but a ranking army officer intercepted them. He and their mother were arrested under suspicion that they were receiving goods from a South Korean spy. After a phone call with Hyeonseo and confessions from her mother, the army believes that Hyeonseo acted privately to send gifts to her family and not as a South Korean intelligent agent. The army commanders agree to release Hyeonseo's family if they agree to say nothing about the ordeal.

This twist of bad fortune makes Hyeonseo and Ok-hee reconsider their plan to get to South Korea as it now seems too risky. The two women stay in Shanghai for the time being.

In October 2006, Hyeonseo meets a man named Kim and they begin a long-term serious relationship. He is South Korean, lives in Seoul, and is from an affluent family. Hyeonseo begins to feel certain this is the man she wants to marry. This renews her resolve to move to South Korea. Hyeonseo begins researching how to get to Seoul to claim asylum without raising suspicion. Hyeonseo decides to apply for a Chinese passport with her legitimate ID card and book a trip to Thailand with a layover in Seoul. Her plan is to claim refugee status upon arrival in the South Korean airport. Ok-hee cannot apply for a Chinese passport because her ID card is fake so she plans her own separate journey.

Hyeonseo finally confesses her true identity to Kim and he supports her decision to get to South Korea. She books her plane ticket for January 2008. Hyeonseo's next worry is that her travel itinerary will look suspicious when she checks in at the airport in Shanghai. Her travel route defies all logic since South Korea is not on the way to Thailand. At the airport in Shanghai, she tells the immigration officer that she is meeting her boyfriend in Seoul and they are traveling together to Thailand. The official buys her story and she boards the plane to South Korea.

Analysis

In order to send money and goods to her family, Hyeonseo travelled to Changbai. There she got her first glimpse of North Korea and Hyesan in years. She writes that the city, shrouded in darkness, is "the void, the nothing" (34). This description and word choice symbolizes Hyeonseo's new relationship with Hyesan. While the city used to be associated with her happy childhood and extended family, she now sees it as a place of emptiness. The description of the city as a void is symbolic of its lack of potential and opportunity. Additionally, the large empty void of Hyesan as the potential to swallow



people up and keep them confined within the rigid darkness of North Korean life. The emptiness drives home the lifelessness of the city in comparison to Shanghai or Shenyang and prompts Hyeonseo to write that it is "as lifeless as ash" (177).

As Hyeonseo tries to plan her journey to Seoul, she stumbles across a placemat at a restaurant featuring the illustration of a map. This chance appearance of the map is what gives her the idea to disguise her trip to Seoul as a holiday in Thailand. The map itself comes into her life through good fortune and helps her see the world in a new way. Instead of raising suspicion by applying for a South Korean visa or booking a one-way ticket, Hyeonseo comes up with a decent plan through the perfect combination of intelligence and fortune.

Hyeonseo makes her final decision to put her plan for South Korean asylum into motion in December 2007. This timeline is significant because it echoes the day she left home in December 1997. The coincidental nature of these parallel months makes the reader wonder if fortune may be playing a hand in Hyeonseo's plan. Her departure from North Korea was blessed with good luck in that she was not discovered or captured. Perhaps her journey to South Korea will be similarly blessed by its propitious timing.

Vocabulary

dilapidated, presentiment, mellifluously, obstinate, allay, detritus, stalagmites



Part Three: Chapters 37-39

Summary

After landing in Seoul, Hyeonseo finds a small office with immigration officials at work. She enters and declares: "I'm from North Korea. I would like asylum" (198). The officials welcome her to Korea and congratulate her for making it there. She is surprised that her declaration has caused no surprise or fanfare.

The officials are surprised when they scan her passport and visa and discover that they are real. They suspect her of being Chinese and of faking North Korean identity to gain South Korean citizenship. For the first time in years, she uses her North Korean name, Park Min-young. Hyeonseo agrees to submit to an investigation under threat of deportation back to China. After hours of questioning, she is transported to the National Intelligence Service building for an even more in-depth investigation.

Hyeonseo spends her first night in Seoul "in a general detention room shared with about thirty North Korean women" (202). Many of the women are brutal and aggressive, hardened by their difficult journeys. Like the immigration officials, they believe she is Chinese. Hyeonseo adopts a brusque manner and says little to avoid being bothered. After two weeks in this detention room, Hyeonseo is taken to a solitary cell for her final interrogation with a special investigator.

Hyeonseo is questioned in solitary for a week before the investigator tells her that he believes she is North Korean. The investigator says he can usually tell when a person is lying. He also tells her that she is "in the one per cent that [he's] seen in fourteen years" because she arrived in South Korea easily on a short direct flight without having to pay a broker.

The next morning, Hyeonseo boards a bus to Hanawon where North Koreans are given a two-month crash course in how to live in a capitalist society. There she phones her boyfriend, friends, and family. She learns Ok-hee is settled in Seoul already and that Min-ho has a serious girlfriend named Yoon-ji. At Hanawon, Hyeonseo attends classes on democracy, civilian rights, history, law, and the media. Hyeonseo knows she will soon have the freedom to shape her own life, but the uncertainty of the future makes her nervous.

To avoid the creation of a North Korean ghetto, the government disperses defectors across South Korea. Hyeonseo desperately hopes to live in Seoul, but only ten people out of hundreds are selected to live there by lottery. Hyeonseo can hardly believe her luck when she is chosen as one of those ten.



Analysis

Hyeonseo's reclamation and use of her North Korean name is symbolic of a reconnection with her identity. For the first time in many years, she can be truly honest about who she is and where she comes from. The freedom to use her given name once again is the first example of the real freedom she will soon experience as a South Korean citizen. Although living in China freed her from the North Korean regime, her status as an illegal immigrant always limited her freedoms in certain ways. For example, she was denied the freedom of living under her true identity and was forced to wear the mask of an assumed name and invented personal history. In this way, readers see that real freedom can only come with the ability to live as one's true self and honor one's identity.

The theme of freedom is introduced more strongly in this section as Hyeonseo contemplates the meaning of true freedom. Since her freedoms have always been limited in some way, the concept is both unfamiliar and intimidating. This may be a new concept for many Western readers who take their own personal freedoms for granted. Through Hyeonseo's story, one sees how freedoms are limited, not just by dictatorships such as the Kim dynasty, but by neighboring countries whose policies force immigrants and refugees into marginalized positions in society. The existence of a place like Hanawon illustrates how deeply challenging the question of freedom truly is for North Korean defectors. The fact that such a place must exist to support them in their transition to a free society demonstrates how pervasive and damaging the Kim regime really is. Not only does the North Korean government limit the freedoms of its citizens within their own borders, it also instills ideologies and world views that make it extremely difficult for them to adjust to freedom even after leaving the country.

Hanawon is also symbolic of the potential unification of the two Koreas. It is where citizens are already bringing the two worlds together as they transition from life in the North to life in the South. Hyeonseo describes it as "a kind of halfway house between universes" (208). Although the two Koreas are currently completely divided, Hanawon exists in the space between the two. It is one of the few places where the two worlds collide, demonstrating the possibility to bring them together on a larger scale.

As Hyeonseo travels to Hanawon, she notes the trees "budding with bright green leaf" and the rising sun (208). The literary choice to focus on the landscape in this may be symbolic of Hyeonseo's rebirth into a new life. Like the budding trees and the rising sun, she is emerging from a period of darkness and uncertainty into a new life of possibilities and freedoms.

Vocabulary

asylum, superseded, spiel, coruscated, monolithic, latrine. caustic, invective. anaemic, vetting



Part Three: Chapters 40-42

Summary

On her first night in her new apartment, Hyeonseo is frightened and unsettled by the reality of freedom. She spends the night at Ok-hee's and the next day she and Kim are reunited. With his help, her adjustment to life in Seoul goes more smoothly than for most other defectors. However, higher education is extremely valued in South Korean society and is an important marker of social status. Because of the lack of equivalent education in their home country, North Koreans often end up in low-paying jobs and are looked down upon in South Korea. For this reason, Hyeonseo worries that she will have to continue to hide her identity to be accepted in her new country.

Hyeonseo soon realizes that her lack of family background, higher education, and high status career will make it difficult for Kim's family to accept her. In the summer of 2008, the Beijing Summer Olympics spark an identity crises in her. She wants to cheer for North Korea and feels she doesn't fit in with South Korean society. She wants to belong but feels "there is no county [she can] say is [hers]" (217). Back in Hyesan, life for Hyeonseo's family is getting worse and famine has returned. Hyeonseo begins to suggest that her mother come to Seoul.

Hyeonseo soon decides it is time for another new name. She is afraid North Korean spies among her fellow defectors will make trouble for her family back in Hyesan and wants a new name with a special meaning. She visits a special kind of fortune-teller, a professional name giver, and selects Hyeonseo from a choice of five names. In 2009, Hyeonseo applies to university and begins studying English to give herself an added credential.

Hyeonseo continues to try and convince her mother and brother to join her in South Korea. When a well-known and high profile North Korean Party cadre defects, Hyeonseo's mother finally decides to do so as well. Min-ho refuses to go as he is now engaged to Yoon-ji and has a good business smuggling motorbikes over the border from China. However, Min-ho does agree to use his border-guard connections to help get their mother into China. Hyeonseo is mistrustful of brokers so she decides to meet her mother on the Chinese side of the riverbank and guide her through China herself. She decides to use a broker only when absolutely necessary: for the final part of the journey out of China to South Korea.

Hyeonseo goes to Shenyang and borrows her aunt's ID card for her mother to use while travelling across China. In Changbai, the Chinese town on the riverbank opposite Hyesan, Hyeonseo books a hotel room and confirms the plan with Min-ho. They are to meet in a derelict house on the Chinese side of the river the following evening between 7 and 8pm. They plan to have a family visit for a few days before Min-ho returns to North Korea. At the appointed time and place, Hyeonseo waits for hours. Finally her phone rings. It is Min-ho. "We have a problem," he says (227).



Analysis

When Hyeonseo finally arrives to her new apartment, the sound of the metal door closing behind her resonates throughout the home. The heavy clang of this door echoes the sounds of prison doors, suggesting that Hyeonseo feels trapped and paralyzed by her new freedom. The sound of the door closing highlights the fact that Hyeonseo is alone but, for the first time, she is not in hiding. In this case, the sound of a closed door does not mean she is being detained, imprisoned, or concealed. Instead, it means she is finally, truly free. The sharp contrast between these two ideas illustrates how complicated the issue of freedom is for Hyeonseo at this time. It reinforces the idea that one cannot simply embrace freedom wholeheartedly if it is an entirely new concept and way of living.

While Hyeonseo has long looked forward to living in South Korea because she anticipates a kinship among fellow Koreans, she now discovers how different the two countries have become. The divergence in culture and values is so great that Hyeonseo feels citizens of the two countries are "no longer the same people" (213). This furthers Hyeonseo's identity crises as she finds it harder to fit in in South Korea than expected. While she had hoped to feel at home in the South, she has now discovered that the difference between the two Koreas makes it difficult for her to fit in. Her status as a defector also makes it difficult for her to identify with her home country. As such, she feels she does not belong in either place. This confuses her sense of identity and her sense of patriotism at the same time.

The importance of education in South Korean society is used as a strong example of the difference between the two Koreas. In the North, bloodlines and historic family loyalty are determiners of status and these elements are all out of an individual's control in many ways. Education is a leveling factor in the South but it also "brings with it oppressions of its own" (214). This is a prime example of how freedom and the capitalist value of upward mobility can also contribute to unhappiness in its own way. Failure in the educational sphere leaves one at "the bottom of the pile" and extreme competitiveness in school "can be torture" (214).

The Olympic games which are a symbol of both international unity and national pride spark a crises of identity and patriotism in Hyeonseo. It is this event that really drives home Hyeonseo's conflicting feelings about her birthplace as well as her lack of connection with her new home. She is proud to see North Korea winning gold medals but she cannot cheer for them in public because they are now "the enemy" (216). The Olympics cause Hyeonseo to realize that it takes more than South Korean citizenship and a shared Korean ethnicity to build a sense of identity and patriotism toward her new country.

Hyeonseo's decision to consult a fortune teller when seeking a new name demonstrates her belief in the connection between fortune and identity. She believes identity, as defined through the meaning of one's name, can bring good fortune into your life. This is why she takes care to hire a professional to help her find a propitious new name. She



chooses a name with an "overwhelmingly positive force" and resolves that this will be the last time she changes it. As such, her name illustrates both her hopes for her future, her commitment to remain in her new life, and her new identity as a South Korean citizen.

As Hyeonseo waits for her family on the border and looks over the river at Hyesan, she describes it as "lifeless, a city dug from rock, or an intricate cemetery" (226). This choice of language and metaphor demonstrates Hyeonseo's negative associations with her home. Although she still struggles to find her identity and place in the world, and while she still feels patriotic toward North Korea, she feels "no nostalgia for it" (226). While she once longed to go home, Hyeonseo no longer feels that same connection to her birthplace. This demonstrates how far she has come on her journey and the severing of many of her emotional ties to home.

Vocabulary

conglomerates, menial, overt, despondency, colludes, rheumatic, stipend, derelict, keening



Part Three: Chapters 43-45

Summary

Min-ho explains that they were prevented from crossing the border by additional security along the river. He says they will try to cross again just before dawn. Early the next morning, Hyeonseo's family makes it across the river and they are reunited. Quickly, they retreat to the privacy of Hyeonseo's hotel room where they can finally relax and reconnect. After lunch, Yoon-ji calls and tells Min-ho that someone reported seeing him cross the river with a woman. If Min-ho returns alone, he will be charged with human trafficking. Their mother also cannot return without facing punishment for trying to defect. Min-ho has no choice but to stay in China and also attempt to seek asylum in South Korea.

Hyeonseo soon realizes she has to borrow a Chinese ID for Min-ho as well and convinces one of his smuggling contacts in Changbai to lend them his. The next day, the family begins the first leg of their journey to Shenyang. Less than five minutes into their trip, soldiers board the coach. Hyeonseo is worried because her brother does not look at all Chinese and the picture on the ID card is obviously not him. To distract the soldier, Hyeonseo takes a picture of him. The soldier becomes consumed with getting her to delete the picture and leaves the coach before noticing Min-ho at the back.

Somewhere near Beijing, the bus is stopped again. This time, the policeman is asking each passenger a series of questions, looking for illegals who cannot speak Mandarin. When he reaches her family, Hyeonseo tells the policeman she is traveling as an aid to two deaf-mutes. Even though the other passengers have heard the family speaking to each other throughout the journey, not a single person denounces them and the policeman believes their story.

Finally, the family arrives on the edge of China where they meet the broker who will help them leave the country. Now that she is unexpectedly travelling with her brother, she must convince the broker to accept the extra payment for transporting a second person after she gets back to Seoul and can access additional funds. She gives him her South Korean ID as collateral and he agrees.

Unexpectedly, the broker announces that they will be getting to South Korea via Laos instead of Vietnam. Hyeonseo is nervous about this change of plan, but the broker informs her that Vietnam recently caught a group of North Korean defectors and sent them back to China. The broker also insists that it is too dangerous for Hyeonseo to accompany them. She will be a liability and if she is caught with them she will be arrested as a broker helping illegals. Knowing she will be no help to her family if she is arrested, Hyeonseo reluctantly agrees to leave their fate in the hands of fortune and the broker.



The family says their goodbyes and at 5 AM Min-ho calls to tell her they have reached Laos safely. Relieved, Hyeonseo mails back their borrowed Chinese IDs and prepares to leave China. On the way, she gets a phone call from the broker. Her family members have been picked up by police.

Analysis

On the family's bus journey through China, Hyeonseo is blessed by good fortune many times. The fact that they are able to make it across the entire country without being asked for their IDs is a stroke of luck. However, this luck only works in combination with Hyeonseo's intelligence and quick thinking. The ruses she comes up with succeed in distracting officials and keep her family safe. And yet, these ruses would not have worked without the kindness of strangers and a little good luck. The fact that no other bus passengers denounce Hyeonseo's family is significant. This illustrates that they are entering a new world in which strangers are inclined to help each other and where denouncing an innocent person is unthinkable. This is in sharp contrast to North Korean ideology and values which promote accusations and betrayal of one's neighbors.

In her dealings with the broker, Hyeonseo highlights the importance of hierarchy in Korean society. A fundamentally hierarchical culture influences how people treat one another and how they expect to be treated by new acquaintances. The balance of power is thrown off when Hyeonseo meets the broker because he does not adhere to polite hierarchical conventions. Even though Hyeonseo is paying for his services and her family is used to their high status position in society, leaving North Korea has changed these dynamics in their lives. Instead of being high class North Korean citizens, they are now fugitives on the run and the broker treats them as such. This is a first taste of how North Korean defectors are treated in the outside world. Instead of being offered care and consideration as political refugees, they are treated as low status criminals. This demonstrates how the human rights of North Koreans are denied across the world, not just in their home country. The broker's disdainful treatment of Hyeonseo's family is a microcosmic example of how many neighboring countries view North Korean refugees.

As she watches her family leave with the broker, Hyeonseo references the role of fortune in her life more directly. In this instance, she literally writes that "now it was all in Fortune's hands" (248). Although she has always believed in fortune, until now Hyeonseo has always played a role in twisting fate in her favor. She has used the combination of intelligence, skill, and good luck to get where she is. This is the first time where she will be fully giving up any control over the situation. Because she is powerless to help her family on the final leg of their journey, she must rely fully on fate. This is a significant moment for a person raised in a relatively secular manner. To describe this moment, Hyeonseo writes "the dice were rolling again" (248). The use of the word "again" demonstrates that she recognizes the roll chance has played in her life up until this point, even though it has been previously combined with her own skills.

Vocabulary

evasive, calamity, beseeching, trepidation, berths, perilous, karst



Part Three: Chapters 46-48

Summary

The broker explains to Hyeonseo that her family was stopped at a checkpoint in Laos and he did not have enough money from her to pay for their release. He suspects they are imprisoned in a town called Luang Namtha. Hyeonseo decides to travel there. In line at immigration she spots several Western tourists and "one white man no one could miss" (251). He is a lone traveller in his early fifties with sandy-colored hair. When Hyeonseo gets off the bus in Luang Namtha the sandy-haired man gets off as well. Hyeonseo searches for her family at the immigration office and the prison and finally learns there are two North Koreans in custody.

Hyeonseo spends a week establishing relationships with the officials, flattering them, and bribing them to speed up the process of seeing her family. Finally, the immigration office chief agrees to take her to the prison where her family is being held. Hyeonseo meets her mother in the women's section of the prison, but is not allowed to see Min-ho on the men's side.

Over the following days, Hyeonseo visits the prison with gifts and bribes for the superintendent. He tells her that her family will be released if they pay a fine for entering Laos illegally. The cost is \$700USD per person but Hyeonseo does not have anywhere near that amount of money and her Laos tourist visa is about to expire. She goes to sit in a coffee shop to think but every possible road leads to a dead end. Suddenly, a man speaks to her in English. She looks up to see the familiar sandy-haired man.

The sandy-haired man is curious to talk to Hyeonseo because they have both spent a long time in a town where most people only stop for a day or two. Hyeonseo tells him she is a South Korean volunteer trying to help imprisoned North Korean defectors facing a huge fine. The man offers to help Hyeonseo and pay the fines, not just for her family but for three other North Koreans imprisoned with them as well. He goes across the street to an ATM, puts hundreds of dollars into Hyeonseo's hand, and promises to withdraw the rest tomorrow. Hyeonseo struggles "to comprehend what [has] just happened and express gratitude at the same time" (260). The man explains that he had met two North Korean women on his travels in Thailand as was very moved by their stories. He introduces himself as Dick Stolp from Australia. Hyeonseo asks why he is helping her and he responds: "I'm not helping you [...] I'm helping the North Korean people" (261).

The next day, Dick withdraws the rest of the money for the fines on the way to the prison with Hyeonseo. This experience overturns Hyeonseo's "most basic assumptions about human nature" (262). Dick's kindness changes her life and shows her a glimpse of another world where "strangers helped strangers for no other reason than it is good to do so" (262). To get her family safely across Laos' many checkpoints after their



release, she wants to hire an immigration officer to escort them. When she realizes she does not have enough money for that either, Dick steps in and pays once again.

Hyeonseo's family and the three other North Koreans are finally released from prison and Dick leaves for Thailand. Before going, he gives Hyeonseo the money for her flight home. The group's police escort gets them safely to Vientiane, but instead of taking them to the South Korean embassy, they are taken to another immigration office. Hyeonseo is separated from the group and brought to a room where the chief of the immigration office accuses her of being a criminal.

Analysis

As Hyeonseo waits at customs to get into Laos, she notices a group of Western backpackers. As a writer, she takes care to highlight the differences between these travelers and herself. In doing so, she also highlights the privilege and freedom of movement that many Western readers have as well and may take for granted. Hyeonseo emphasizes the privilege of living in a world "governed by laws, human rights and welcoming tourist boards" (251). Again, the discriminatory treatment of North Korean refugees at the hands of foreign governments is highlighted. Initially after observing these Westerners, Hyeonseo believes they are oblivious to the world she inhabits, "of secret police, assumed IDs and low-life brokers" (251). This demonstrates her own prejudice toward Westerners and her ingrained belief that the world at large does not care about North Korea or the sufferings of its people. However, what the character does not know is that these beliefs and prejudices will soon be challenged by her first real encounter with a Westerner. The fact that Hyeonseo notices the sandy-haired lone traveler and takes care to characterize him separately from the generalized group of other Westerners indicates that he will play a role later in the story. Through careful characterization of a nameless individual, the author foreshadows his later development as a key figure in her story.

The arrival of Dick Stolp is a significant turning point in both the story and in Hyeonseo's perspective on the world. His fortuitous arrival right when he is needed most is reminiscent of the *deus ex machina* archetype present in fiction. In fiction, *deus ex machina* signifies the unexpected intervention of a new character or event which serves to solve a seemingly impossible problem. However, because *The Girl With Seven Names* is nonfiction, Dick Stolp's arrival is not merely a convenience plot point developed by the writer to wrap up the story. Instead, his chance arrival and generous spirit are indicative of the role of fate and fortune in Hyeonseo's life. This serendipitous event not only emphasizes Hyeonseo's good luck, it also teaches her an important lesson about human nature.

Previously, readers have seen how abuse of power perpetuates injustice and human rights violations in North Korea. Now, for the first time, Hyeonseo is seeing how generosity and kindness perpetuates freedom, happiness, and goodness. She also learns an important lesson about how the Western world views North Korea. A burgeoning understanding of the fact that the outside world cares about the plight of her



people helps to plant the seeds for her future activism both in South Korea and the West. Believing that the world cares about her country is an essential step in motivating Hyeonseo toward activism because it helps her see that her efforts to improve the lives of North Koreans will not be in vain or met with dismissiveness.

Vocabulary

torpor, foibles, ferrous, apathy, exorbitant



Part Three: Chapters 49-51

Summary

Hyeonseo is accused of helping North Koreans enter Laos illegally and threatened with imprisonment. Hyeonseo is adamant that she has done nothing wrong and the officer lets her go under the condition that she return the next day for further questioning. The next morning, she returns to Laos immigration where officials insist she pay a fine of \$1300. She shows them her wallet and explains that she only has the \$800 Dick had given her for her flight home. The immigration official takes all her money and gives her twenty-four hours to leave the country. She is promised that the North Koreans she was with will all be taken to the South Korean embassy and will be able to leave for Seoul within a few days.

Alone and penniless, Hyeonseo wonders how to get home. Suddenly, her phone rings. It is Dick who offers immediately to send more money but Hyeonseo declines, feeling that he has already given her so much. Instead, she swallows her pride and asks Kim for another loan which she insists she will repay.

Safely back in Seoul, Hyeonseo calls the South Korean embassy in Vientiane for confirmation that her family is on their way to Seoul but she is repeatedly unable to get through. After four weeks with no news she gets a phone call from Min-ho. He is in Phonthong Prison.

Min-ho is surprisingly cheerful. He tells Hyeonseo that this is a normal part of the long process before being sent to the South Korean embassy. Apparently, a lot of North Koreans pass through this prison on their way there. Hyeonseo now knows that she was not told the truth about how long it would take her family to get out of Laos. Hyeonseo's mother and Min-ho spend another two months in Phonthong Prison before they are finally handed over to the South Korean embassy. They spend another three months there, "where they joined the queue of North Koreans being slowly processed for exit by the Lao government" (275). Finally, more than six months after returning from Laos, Hyeonseo gets a call from the National Intelligence Service in Seoul. Her mother and brother have finally arrived.

Hyeonseo's family is also sent to Hanawon in order to acclimatize to South Korean culture. A week before they join Hyeonseo in Seoul she decides to break up with Kim. She feels she is beginning a new chapter and realizes that they do not have a future without the approval of his family. Finally, in August 2010, Hyeonseo's mother and brother join her in Seoul as free South Korean citizens. They are immediately overwhelmed by the realities of life in a modern, urban, capitalist metropolis.



Analysis

In Vientiane, Hyeonseo is surprised to find the embassies of North and South Korea directly across the street from each other. This placement highlights the absurdity of the division between the two countries for her. The placement of these embassies is symbolic of both the great distance and extreme closeness between the two countries. Even in the microcosmic scale of their two embassies in Laos, these countries are in direct opposition to each other, and yet cannot be separated. The street dividing them is both a small gap and a large void. While the sister countries live as neighbors, they can never be united across the divide of that street. The absurdity of the division between the two countries is highlighted when Hyeonseo remarks that other countries divided by opposing economic philosophies such as East and West Germany have long since been reunited. With her family literally being shuffled from one bureaucratic office to another, they are quite literally caught in a no man's land between the two nations.

Hyeonseo's reluctance to borrow money from Kim and instance that she will repay the debt is indicative of the inequality in their relationship. His high status in South Korean society and financial security creates a power imbalance between them that leaves Hyeonseo feeling inferior. This imbalance in their relationship serves to highlight the lower status position Hyeonseo already feels she has been relegated to as a North Korean defector in Seoul. Hyeonseo's discomfort around this aspect of her relationship foreshadows the reality that she and Kim may not have a solid future.

Hyeonseo's decision to end her relationship with Kim indicates her belief that a person's future is closely connected to their past and their families. Kim and Hyeonseo are both strongly connected to those aspects of themselves but they are so different in those ways that they cannot hope to have a future together. Hyeonseo recognizes that her past is an important part of her identity that cannot be shed. Unfortunately, because her past cannot be readily accepted by Kim's family, they see no alternative but to end their relationship. In this way, readers see how family and personal history play a significant role in shaping, not just one's identity, but also one's future.

Vocabulary

rile, contrite, imperturbable



Part Three: Chapters 52-Epilogue

Summary

In September 2010, Hyeonseo is accepted by the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies but her mother and brother struggle to adjust to their new lives. Her mother misses her siblings and cannot find any meaning or future potential in the South. She says she wants to go home despite the consequences. She is "prepared to die [and wants] to die at home" (282).

Hyeonseo begins to plan her mother's return journey. Her mother is confident she can bribe the right people to avoid punishment upon her return. At the same time, Min-ho decides to apply for university to further his potential in the South. Suddenly, their mother decides not to go back to the North since she will miss her children too much. Hyeonseo feels responsible for condemning her mother to live with the loss of her siblings and feelings of regret for the rest of her life.

In the spring of 2011, just when Hyeonseo starts to think that her family is beginning to adjust, Min-ho reconnects with his fiancée Yoon-ji. He begins to make plans to help her defect and goes to meet her on the river in Changbai. By the time he gets there she has changed her mind. He calls Hyeonseo and tells her he is going back to North Korea instead, believing he knows the right people to evade punishment. After a long talk, Hyeonseo is able to convince him to stay in South Korea with their mother and start a new life.

Through an organization called People for Successful Corean Reunification (PSCORE), Hyeonseo meets and starts dating an American named Brian. Brian is "the first to show [her] a free intelligence, with a humorous, skeptical mind that [takes] nothing as given" (287). This prompts her to open her own unexamined thoughts and she realizes that the "wider world cares about the suffering in North Korea, and is well informed about it" (287). This gives Hyeonseo the courage to confront prejudice in South Korea against defectors and to stop hiding her identity for fear of being seen as low-status.

Hyeonseo initially makes excuses not to introduce Brian to her family since she knows they will be prejudiced against Americans after years of North Korean propaganda. When they finally meet over dinner, it is an excruciating meal but Hyeonseo knows that "some convictions would not change overnight" (288). Slowly, Hyeonseo begins "speaking out in defences of defectors, and about the human rights abuses in North Korea" (289).

In 2013, Hyeonseo is flown to California to give a talk at a TED conference. Later that year, she is invited to testify before the United Nations commission of Enquiry on Human Rights in North Korea. Hyeonseo hopes the suffering in her home country will end and that one day the two Koreas will be unified once more. She believes "we can't sit on our hands while we wait for the miracle of a new, unified Korea" (290). Slowly,



Hyeonseo's family begins to accept Brian and, not long after, Brian asks Hyeonseo to marry him.

In the epilogue, readers learn that Hyeonseo lost touch with Dick Stolp shortly after leaving Laos. However, thanks to the publicity generated by her TED talk, they are able to find each other in an emotional reunion. Readers also learn that, by the time of the epilogue, Min-ho is in university and has become great friends with Brian. Hyeonseo's mother still misses the family she left behind, but she is beginning to adjust. The family even travels together to the United States to celebrate Hyeonseo and Brian's wedding.

Analysis

After convincing Min-ho not to return to North Korea, Hyeonseo feels "like a pilot who'd narrowly averted a plane crash" (285). This metaphor casts Hyeonseo as the leader of her family and also makes her responsible for their continued survival. She feels she has driven them to defection and is now responsible for their current unhappiness. As the trailblazer who spearheaded the family's defection, Hyeonseo is now responsible for ensuring their continued success in the outside world. The pilot metaphor emphasizes the potential risks and dangers Hyeonseo must navigate to keep her family on even keel.

Hyeonseo's final decision not to hide her identity any longer represents the end of a lifelong search for the self. Through her humanitarian work and activism, Hyeonseo finds, not only a purpose, but a sense of ownership over her personal history and how it contributes to her sense of self. The freedom and privilege to live openly and the choice to no longer hide her identity is in itself an activist choice. Hyeonseo is choosing to eschew South Korean prejudice against "lower-status" North Koreans in favor of living openly as her true self. Hyeonseo's emerging interest in activism and human rights helps her claim her identity as both a South Korean citizen and a North Korean defector. Opening her unexamined thoughts allows her to view her own life in a new way, including her sense of identity and her role in the reunification of Korea.

When Hyeonseo begins speaking out on behalf of North Koreans, she appears on a television show in which all defectors being interviewed are "given new clothes in vibrant colors to dispel public perceptions of North Koreans as shabby and pitiful" (288). Clothing returns as a symbol for capitalist individualism and prosperity. Vibrant clothing is used to change how North Koreans are perceived in the eyes of the world, just as Hyeonseo herself once used individual fashion choices to change how she was perceived in comparison to her peers. In both cases, readers see how the freedom and choice to dress a certain way is an indicator of capitalist status. In the case of the television interviewees, vibrant clothing is also a symbol of personal power. Since this clothing is intended to dispel any pity or appearance of poverty, it empowers the wearer by combatting preconceptions about North Koreans as such. In this way, clothing choices allow these North Koreans to reshape how they are perceived by the world at large.



The theme of human rights emerges most strongly in the book at the same time that it emerges strongly in Hyeonseo's life. The topic of human rights is essential in helping readers understand why injustices continue to be perpetuated in North Korea. Western readers may be surprised to learn that the first essential step in ensuring human rights is fostering an awareness and education about what those rights are. This first crucial step may be taken for granted by many readers living in countries where their rights are clearly defined and protected by the law. The importance of human rights education cannot be underestimated if one hopes to break the cycles of power abuse in North Korea.

The difficulty of living a free life is also highlighted in this section as Hyeonseo's family struggles to adjust. Through these characters, readers see prime examples of the complexity of freedom. One is shown how freedom may be a burden to those accustomed to living without it. This struggle also emphasizes the importance of freedom as a human right which people must value in order to be able to live with it.

Brian and Min-ho's eventual friendship is symbolic of the reparations between two previously warring nations. Their friendship illustrates that it is possible, with time, to overcome decades of political propaganda in order to see a person for who they really are. The friendship between these two and the symbolic reconciliation between former enemy nations encourages readers to believe that Korean reunification may one day be possible.

Vocabulary

stoically, arduous, reticent, guile, stultifying, rapacious, inimitable



Important People

Hyeonseo Lee

Hyeonseo Lee is the book's author, main character, and titular "Girl With Seven Names." Born to a high status family in North Korea, she had a comfortable and pleasant childhood, unusually free from the daily poverty and hardship experienced by other North Koreans. As a teenager, Hyeonseo begins to experience disillusionment with North Korean society and longs to express her individualism more fully. This, combined with a natural curiosity and interest in the outside world, is what prompts her to take her fateful trip across the river to China at the age of seventeen.

From an early age, Hyeonseo has struggled with issues of identity. This begins when she discovers that her father is not her biological parent. Her struggle with identity continues in her teenage years through her desire to express individualism in a country which demands egalitarianism in all domains. As a teen, this search for individual identity expresses itself through unique fashion choices and a taste for clandestine music and television shows. Later, after she leaves North Korea, Hyeonseo's struggles with identity become more serious as she tries to reconcile her relationship to her home country and find a sense of place in the capitalist world.

Hyeonseo is a naturally brave and resourceful woman. When unexpectedly unable to return home, she uses whatever available resources she has to make her way in the world. When her aunt and uncle set her on a life path she does not desire, she strives out on her own and manages to provide for herself successfully. Although at a disadvantage due to her illegal status and lack of higher education, Hyeonseo uses her bravery, tenacity, and intelligence, not only to further her education and begin a solid career path, but also to achieve stability and security in South Korea.

Hyeonseo's Mother (Unnamed)

Hyeonseo's Mother is a respected, high status North Korean woman who knows how to work the country's political and social systems to her advantage. Hyeonseo's Mother encourages her daughter's individualism by buying her fancy shoes with foreign currency. Hyeonseo's Mother is a skilled businesswoman who succeeds in establishing a profitable illicit trading business which helps to provide for the family. She is well connected and skilled at bribing the country's officials to get what she needs.

Hyeonseo's Mother has "high standards for everything" (14). She hates untidiness and always makes the effort to look her best in public. She is stubborn and independent, refusing to stay in a loveless marriage with Hyeonseo's biological father. She also places a high value on the importance of family. Her desire to reconnect with her siblings is what makes her want to go back to North Korea after defecting, but it is her



relationship with her children that keeps her in South Korea. This value of family is passed down to Hyeonseo herself.

Nearly all of her mother's other personality traits are also passed down to Hyeonseo. The two women share an entrepreneurial spirit, sense of independence, stubbornness, and skill in managing bureaucracies. Her mother's high standards may be part of what eventually causes Hyeonseo to have high expectations for herself. Hyeonseo recognizes many of her personality traits are inherited from her mother. Hyeonseo's mother is also a superstitious woman and believer in fortune.

Min-ho

Min-ho is Hyeonseo's brother, although technically they do not share the same biological father. Knowledge of this difference in bloodlines caused Hyeonseo to distance herself from her sibling as a teenager and the two were not very close as children. However, many years of separation and Hyeonseo's sense of the importance of family bring them close together as young adults.

Min-ho is stubborn, resourceful, and business-minded like his mother and sister. As an adult, he sets up a successful trading business for himself bringing black market motorcycles over the border. It is his illicit trade connections with border guards that make him confident he can get his mother safely out of the country.

Min-ho is protective of his mother and keeps his feelings bottled up for the most part, like his father did. When overcome with emotion, he tries to keep his sadness a secret from his mother and sister. Min-ho has an overwhelmingly cheerful disposition, even when imprisoned in Phonhong Prison. He has an incredible ability to endure physical hardship and discomfort but struggles more under the pressure of a rich, free, capitalist society. Min-ho is the type of person to make the best of a bad situation. He finds a way to enjoy discovering the world, even from the inside of a prison cell, by learning English from a cellmate.

In spite of Min-ho's resilience, doggedness, and positivity, he struggles to adjust in South Korea. His hard working attitude gets him quickly promoted in the construction industry, but he begins his new life restless and disaffected. His illegal smuggling skills and North Korean education are worthless in the South. Eventually, his resilient and positive personality wins out and he enrolls in university to begin a new life.

Dick Stolp

Dick Stolp is a traveller from Australia who meets Hyeonseo in Laos. He has been travelling through Asia and is emotionally invested in the North Korean cause. Hyeonseo learns little about him personally or his life in Australia, but later she finds out that he is "not a rich man" (261). In spite of this, Dick offers to pay Hyeonseo's fines and expenses to get her family out of Laos.



Dick's character is symbolic of the kindness of strangers that Hyeonseo has experiences so rarely in her life. This type of unconditional generosity is unfamiliar to her and contrary to what she has learned about human nature from her North Korean upbringing. Dick shows Hyeonseo a new way of being. He is also the first person to demonstrate to her that the outside world knows, and cares, about what is happening to the North Korean people.

Hyeonseo's relationship with Dick and experience meeting other travellers through him is what makes her realize she should learn English. In many ways, Dick plants seeds in Hyeonseo's mind that will influence her later life. Her decision to learn English and her realization that the outside world cares about North Korea are part of what will eventually lead her to become a humanitarian advocate. Dick Stolp also makes Hyeonseo curious to meet more Westerners.

Hyeonseo's Father (Unnamed)

Hyeonseo's Father is the man who raised her and took her into his family without question, even though she is not his biological offspring. Her father is a loving parent and a high ranking military officer. He comes from a high status family and is respected in his career and community. His high rank gives him access to goods many people do not have and he receives food and household items as gifts and bribes. This combination of factors allows him to provide for his family very well by North Korean standards.

Hyeonseo's Father believes in the importance of being able to communicate with other language-speakers. This demonstrates that he is looking beyond the insular world of North Korea and values a connection to other countries. This is why he insists Hyeonseo learn Chinese calligraphy.

Later, Hyeonseo's Father leaves the military and gets a job which requires him to travel regularly. The freedom to travel and hold a passport are also symbols of high status but it is not long before he falls under suspicion and government surveillance. He is arrested and accused of abuse of position and bribery, but Hyeonseo believes he had merely fallen out of favour or irritated a superior. After he is released to the hospital, he keeps his feelings bottled up and sinks into a severe depression. He dies not long after and his cause of death is ruled a suicide.

Kim

Kim is Hyeonseo's serious boyfriend whom she meets after establishing her career in China. He is South Korean and comes from a well-off family. He works in his family's property management and real estate business. He is supportive of Hyeonseo's decision to emigrate to South Korea and provides her with financial support throughout the journey to get herself and her family to the country.



Kim is well educated and lives an effortless life thanks to his family money. He is well-respected, sensitive, and loving but also has a reckless and rebellious streak. Hyeonseo trusts him with the secret of her identity and believes they will one day get married. This possibility of marriage is part of what motivates Hyeonseo to move to South Korea where he is from.

However, Kim's family is traditional and cannot easily accept Hyeonseo's lack of education and family background. Eventually, the two realize that a long-term relationship is not possible. Hyeonseo knows he will not defy his family to marry her and he agrees that their potential future would be too difficult.

Brian

Brian is an American graduate student at Yonsei University in Seoul. Hyeonseo meets Brian through an organization called PSCORE (People for Successful Corean Reunification). Brian is open and honest. He speaks without guile or evasiveness and is not the least bit status-conscious. Brian and Hyeonseo begin dating and he helps her realize that the world cares about the suffering in North Korea. In this way, he nurtures the seeds planted in Hyeonseo's mind by Dick Stolp.

Brian helps Hyeonseo open her unexamined thoughts and he is "the first to show [her] a free intelligence, with a humorous, skeptical mind" (287). He helps her to confront South Korean prejudices about status and North Koreans. He also forces her family to confront their own prejudices about Americans. Eventually, their relationship allows her family to overcome their ingrained ideas about the West and Westerners. Brian brings stability to Hyeonseo's life and helps her feel settled. They eventually get married.

Geun-soo

Guen-soo is a young Korean-Chinese man who Hyeonseo's aunt sets her up with in Shenyang. Guen-soo is gangly, nondescript, and Hyeonseo finds him glib and uninspiring. He is a university graduate but does not work and lives instead off family money. He is very close to his mother and speaks of her with deference.

Guen-soo knows Hyeonseo is North Korean and is willing to keep her secret. He begins preparing her to be his wife by encouraging her to improve her Mandarin and correcting her on points of etiquette. Guen-soo is harmless but he and his mother are controlling and Hyeonseo knows she cannot marry him for this reason. Hyeonseo does not believe he has strong feelings for her and is surprised later to find out that he is heartbroken after she breaks off their engagement.

Ok-hee

Ok-hee is Hyeonseo's close friend in China and South Korea. Ok-hee is also a North Korean defector and she is the only person in China that Hyeonseo feels she can really



relate to. Having a North Korean friend is important to Hyeonseo because Ok-hee helps her to feel understood. Ok-hee and Hyeonseo help each other with their plans to get to South Korea and act as support systems for each other. On her first night of freedom in South Korea, Hyeonseo spends the night at Ok-hee's house where she feels less alone and overwhelmed.

Uncle Jung-gil

Uncle Jung-gil is a distant relative of Hyeonseo's on her father's side. He and his wife live in Shenyang, China and that is where Hyeonseo goes when she first leaves North Korea. Uncle Jung-gil is the first person to debunk some of the propaganda and misinformation Hyeonseo has been told about her home country. Uncle Jung-gil and his wife support Hyeonseo during her first years in China and provide her with her introduction to capitalist society.



Objects/Places

Hyesan, North Korea

Hyesan is the city where Hyeonseo's family is from. It is also where she lives for most of her life in North Korea. It is a border city on the Yalu River opposite China. This geographical position gives the city's residents easier access to trade and foreign goods. It is a hub of trade and smuggling which brings prosperity and business opportunities to the city's locals.

Hyena's ethos of prosperity and entrepreneurship rubs off on Hyeonseo's business-minded family members. It is partly their hometown's proximity to China that allows Hyeonseo's mother and brother to start such lucrative businesses in illegal trading. Laws are less strictly enforced in Hyesan because government officials and border guards want a share of the profits. The city's proximity to China and lack of strictness is part of what makes it possible for Hyeonseo to get to leave the country at all. It is also what introduces her to the possibility of the outside world in the first place.

Seoul, South Korea

Seoul, South Korea represents true freedom to any North Korean defector. There, Hyeonseo can finally achieve citizenship status and live legally. Despite the freedoms of living in China, illegal immigrant status limits Hyeonseo's potential. The legitimacy of living in Seoul and becoming a legal South Korean citizen is what finally gives Hyeonseo full freedom and independence.

Seoul and South Korea also represent a connection to home for Hyeonseo. She feels she belongs in her sister country and feels a connection to other ethnic Koreans despite their differences in culture and upbringing. Seoul offers a possibility for what North Korea could become should the two countries ever achieve reunification. The fact that the South Korean government considers all North Koreans as their citizens demonstrates the South Korean belief that the two countries should be one.

While Hyeonseo struggles with issues of identity and tries to figure out where she belongs in the capitalist world, South Korea is the closest she can get to home.

Hanawon

Hanawon is a facility in the South Korean countryside where all North Korean defectors are sent upon arrival. Hanawon gives defectors a two-month crash course in how to live in a capitalist society. Without this education, many defectors would not be able to adjust to their new lives.



Hanawon demonstrates the vast disparities between North and South Korea, and serves to highlight the challenges defectors face in the outside world. The existence and importance of Hanawon shows readers how difficult it is for a North Korean defector to adjust to freedom. Here, one sees how something which is taken for granted in South Korean society is a real challenge for people like Hyeonseo. Hanawon asks readers to consider the challenges of freedom and the potential burden of being able to shape one's own life.

Anju, North Korea

Anju is where Hyeonseo lives from the ages of four to seven. It represents the dark side of the North Korean regime and exposes Hyeonseo to realities she had not experienced in Hyesan. Anju is an industrial city with a polluted river that encompasses the many disadvantages of the city's coal mining industry. The family's reluctant relocation away from extended relatives in Hyesan demonstrates the importance of proximity to loved ones. This idea will recur throughout the book as characters are forced away from the people they love.

Anju is where Hyeonseo witnesses some of the worst atrocities of life under North Korean rule. It is where, at just seven years old, she witnesses her first public execution. A string of executions without due legal process occurs while the family is living in Anju. While this is not uncommon in North Korea, Anju represents the very worst aspects of North Korean life. Anju is set up in contrast to Hyesan which Hyeonseo associates with family and prosperity.

Pyongyang, North Korea

Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea and is set up as a mythic and futuristic place where only the most privileged may live. Pyongyang is representative of the stratification of North Korean society, despite the regime's alleged commitment to egalitarianism. Pyongyang represents the full glory and goodness of the Kim family and their government. When famine strikes the country, Pyongyang is the last to feel the effects.

Pyongyang's high status demonstrates the hypocrisy of the North Korean government and shows how stratified power structures are able to thrive in an autocracy.

Changbai

Changbai is Hyesan's twin city across the river in China. Changbai represents possibility and potential for residents in Hyesan. It is what allows Hyeonseo's family to develop profitable business ventures but, more importantly, it is what gives her a sense of the outside world. Proximity to Changbai allows teenaged Hyeonseo to pick up illegal Chinese television networks and it is Chinese soap operas that prompt her curiosity in



the country. Without a view of Changbai across the river and access to Chinese goods, Hyeonseo might never have thought of leaving North Korea.

Changbai is also what gives Hyeonseo a connection to her family after she defects. It is there that she is able to briefly meet with Min-ho when he crosses the river temporarily. Additionally, Hyesan's proximity to Chinese cell phone towers in Changbai is what makes it possible for her to phone her family regularly throughout their years apart.

Shenyang

Shenyang is Hyeonseo's first introduction to a modern capitalist city. It is the delights and lure of the city that cause her to overstay her sojourn in China and make it impossible for her to return home. Shenyang represents a freedom and prosperity that Hyeonseo could not possibly have imagined. It is also where she first learns about the lies and propaganda she has been taught in North Korea. Shenyang represents the first small opening in Hyeonseo's mind as she is introduced to the realities of the world at large for the first time.

Shanghai

Shanghai is "the biggest, brashest city in Asia" and it is where Hyeonseo begins to establish her new life with confidence and success (156). Shanghai's position as a vast metropolis makes it possible for Hyeonseo to re-examine her identity. It is a city where countless new people arrive to start over and Hyeonseo feels she can reinvent herself and "be anyone [she wants] to be" (156).

It is in Shanghai that Hyeonseo is able to get a legitimate ID card and establish a solid career for herself. However, the city's potential for reinventing one's self does not help Hyeonseo's feelings of alienation from home. Shanghai also represents Hyeonseo's continued feelings of displacement as an illegal immigrant in China. It is these feelings of non-belonging in Shanghai that partly contribute to her desire to move to South Korea.

Laos

Laos is where Hyeonseo's family is detained and imprisoned on their way to South Korea. Hyeonseo is the victim of extortion throughout her time there while her family suffers horrendous prison conditions. The difficulties they face in Laos are representative of how some neighboring countries view North Koreans. Instead of being seen as refugees, they are treated as criminals and taken advantage of. The terrible exploitation of North Koreans in Laos demonstrates one type of international approach to these refugees and highlights the need for greater international support for defectors.



United States of America

The United States of America represents the evils of capitalism throughout Hyeonseo's childhood. Americans are seen as violent and immoral enemies whose country is responsible for atrocities against North Korea. Later, when Hyeonseo learns more about the outside world and North Korean propaganda, the United States becomes a symbol for freedom. When Min-ho struggles to adjust in South Korea, Hyeonseo suggests they go to America because "there's uncertainty in Korea, but America's the country of freedom" (285).

When Brian and Hyeonseo get married, the family travels to the United States for the first time. A scene in which Hyeonseo's mother samples American food in a Chicago diner, "completely at her ease," is the concluding paragraph of the book (293). The choice to use this scene in America as the book's conclusion is symbolic of the family's long journey toward freedom.



Themes

Identity

Throughout *The Girl With Seven Names*, issues of displacement and belonging contribute to Hyeonseo's difficulty in establishing a sense of her own identity. Early in her life, she feels she does not belong to her father when she discovers he is not her biological father. This lack of familial belonging in a country which values family and bloodlines confuses Hyeonseo's sense of identity and makes her feel distant from her father and brother.

Later, Hyeonseo's issues with identity flourish due to her physical displacement and immigrant status. While living in China as an illegal immigrant, it is impossible for Hyeonseo to ever feel like she belongs. She is forced to construct multiple new identities for herself, not out of a sense of self-development, but out of fear and desperation. Her fabricated identities are not a reflection of who she is, but are a cover for her true self: A North Korean defector. Keeping her true identity a secret for so many years takes a toll on Hyeonseo's sense of self. Without the freedom to share her true identity with the world, she can never truly fit into her life in China.

Hyeonseo seeks to resolve the issues of identity caused by her displacement in China by moving to South Korea. Hyeonseo believes she will have more of a sense of belonging in her sister country, among other Koreans. Part of her identity is tied to her ethnicity, so being displaced in China makes her feel isolated and alone. Hyeonseo also longs to move to South Korea so she can be free to divulge her true identity as a North Korean defector.

When Hyeonseo claims asylum in South Korea, she reconnects with that true identity for the first time in many years. For the first time since leaving home, she uses her North Korean name, symbolizing a reconnection with the self. However, Hyeonseo soon finds that displacement as an immigrant will continue to impact her life in South Korea. She feels, as an immigrant, she can never fit in in a new country in the same way she would at home. Her identity is now also tied up in her immigrant status as well as her position as a North Korean defector. Despite her best efforts to fit in, Hyeonseo can never completely self-identify as South Korean because she is displaced from the homeland that has shaped so much of who she is.

Patriotism

In *The Girl With Seven Names*, deeply ingrained feelings of patriotism shape the mindsets, choices, and lifestyles of the book's North Korean characters. Initially, Hyeonseo's family's long history of patriotism and devotion to the communist cause is what grants them such high status and privilege in their society. It is their patriotism that



allows Hyeonseo to have such an enjoyable childhood and it also shelters her from the many hardships faced by other North Koreans.

Patriotism is an inherent part of Hyeonseo's childhood which shapes her ideology and lifestyle. She is accustomed to taking care of the portraits of the Kim family and she regularly participates in organized communist activities such as the Mass games. As a child and preteen, Hyeonseo believes in the communist cause and is eager to join the country's mandatory communist youth movement. It is not until her teenage years that a lifetime of forced patriotism begins to foster disillusionment. At that time, years of the government's ideological indoctrination begin to take a toll on this independently minded young woman. This transition shows how forced patriotism can backfire, causing individuals to develop individualistic mindsets and prompting them to make rebellious choices.

Hyeonseo's ingrained patriotism gives her a complicated relationship with North Korea even after she defects. She self-identifies as a patriot and admits she loves her country decades after leaving it and learning about its evils. Patriotism does not prevent Hyeonseo from seeing her country's flaws, but it makes her motivated to work toward a better future for her homeland. Her patriotism grows and develops over the course of the book. It starts as blind acceptance of her country's ideologies and loyalty to the Kim dictatorship. But, as she grows and learns more about the outside world, patriotism manifests itself through activism. She becomes dedicated to raising awareness and improving the situation in North Korea. She loves her country and is able to separate that love from the disgust and dislike she feels for the country's dictatorship. Patriotism motivates Hyeonseo to work toward a better future for North Korea.

Human Rights

The *Girl With Seven Names* argues that human rights cannot be upheld unless a country's citizens are educated in what those rights are. Hyeonseo explains that human rights violations are allowed to continue unimpeded in North Korea because the citizens are not even aware of their rights. Without a concept of human rights, she argues, one cannot know when those rights are being violated. Hyeonseo believes that the lack of understanding in this area is part of what maintains the North Korean dictatorship by blurring the lines between the oppressor and the victim.

Without clear ideas of their rights, citizens are at time not even aware when they are abusing the rights of others. This perpetuates cycles of inequality, violence, and human rights abuses. The lack of understanding of human rights also prevents North Korean citizens from rebelling against the ruling dictatorship. In such an isolated society, with no comparative information about other societies and ways of being, North Koreans cannot possibly be expected to have any ideas about other ways of living, let alone understand the notion of human rights. Education on human rights is an important step in undoing the ideological indoctrination perpetuated by the Kim dictatorship.



A lack of understanding about human rights also perpetuates the miss-treatment of North Korean defectors as they travel through neighboring countries. Instead of being treated as refugees, they are often imprisoned as criminals. Without knowledge of human rights abuses and refugee rights, North Korean defectors cannot possible advocate for themselves in these situations. Hyeonseo herself is not initially familiar with the concept of political asylum, a system put in place to protect the human rights of refugees.

Over and over again, readers see the human rights of North Koreans being abused throughout this book. At first, it is at the hands of their own government which regularly conducts public executions without trail and limits the freedoms of its citizens at every turn. Examples of human rights abuses extend even to the smallest of examples, in which women are forbidden from wearing certain types of clothes in public. The fact that these human rights abuses continue when defectors are detained, extorted, and imprisoned demonstrates how easy it is to take advantage of a population which has no concept of its rights and freedoms. Without education in human rights, North Korean citizens will continue to suffer.

Freedom

The *Girl With Seven Names* illustrates unusual and unexpected attitudes toward freedom through the characters' relationships to North Korea. Unlike citizens in a capitalist society, North Koreans are not as concerned with the concept of freedom. Most defectors do not leave their home country because they are craving liberty. Without any other societies against which to compare their own, they have no concept of what so-called "freedom" or "liberty" even looks like. Instead, most defectors are motivated to leave by starvation or some trouble they've found themselves in. Unlike in the Western world, freedom is not highly valued or considered a right in North Korea. This unusual disregard for freedom stems in part from the citizens' lack of education on human rights and the outside world.

Defectors in *The Girl With Seven Names* have difficulty adjusting to the freedoms of capitalist society. Freedom is, unusually, presented as a terrifying concept. This different attitude toward freedom forces readers to ask themselves if liberty is worth the sacrifices it costs and fear it causes. For Hyeonseo, her mother, and Min-ho, at times it is not. The predictability, security, and familiarity of life in North Korea gives them a comfort that cannot be understated. Life in a so-called free society is challenging because it requires an individual take an unprecedented amount of control and responsibility over his or her life.

Even after leaving North Korea, Hyeonseo, her mother, and Min-ho all discover ways in which they are still not truly free. Hyeonseo is restricted by her illegal immigrant status in China and the entire family feels limited by their "low-status" North Korean identity in South Korea. The characters' unusual attitudes toward freedom demonstrate that the concept is relative. To even be aware of freedom as a tangible concept, one must have a degree of liberty in education and ideology. For Hyeonseo's mother and Min-ho, at



times the cost of freedom itself is limiting. They are hindered by their educational backgrounds and find it difficult to excel in the competitive world of capitalism. In this way, readers see that a free society comes with limitations of its own.

Fortune

Throughout this book, Fortune is established as a guiding force in the lives of the characters. Hyeonseo often has no logical explanation for the many lucky breaks and windfalls she experiences on her long and difficult journey. She inherits her superstitions and belief in fate from her mother, who took her to visit a fortune-teller as a child. In a secular society like North Korea, belief in fate and fortune offers people a guiding principle to help explain life's seemingly random twists and turns. Hyeonseo is so used to experiencing selfishness and accusations from her fellow citizens that an act of kindness from a stranger in North Korea seems like a gift from the guiding hand of Fortune.

When Hyeonseo meets Dick Stolp, she describes him as an angel. This metaphor allows his character to become a physical manifestation of Fortune. Hyeonseo's word choice demonstrates the power of the metaphysical to take an active role in a person's life. The mere fact that she and Dick crossed paths in the first place can only be explained by the blessings of chance. Time and time again, Hyeonseo narrowly escapes imprisonment or discovery. At times, she can credit her survival to her wits and intelligence but, at other times, she can only thank the kindness of fortune.

Hyeonseo's belief in the guiding power of fortune is demonstrated when she decided to change her name one last time after making it to South Korea. In order to help her make this choice, she turns to the wisdom of a fortune teller. After so many challenges and struggles, Hyeonseo is keen to adopt a lucky new name and does not hesitate to consult someone who is in touch with the workings of fate.

Styles

Structure

The *Girl With Seven Names* is broken down into an introduction, a prologue, three parts, and an epilogue. The introduction places the main character at the end of her story in February 2013. This choice tells the reader that the character will survive her tumultuous journey and will emerge in a successful position. As such, the rest of the narrative is about how she arrived at this place. The introduction also serves to illuminate the author's reasons for writing this book, as well as the takeaway she hopes it will give to readers. This decision to be so clear and upfront about her hopes and motivations frame how the reader will view the rest of the story.

The prologue is a stand-alone scene which offers a snapshot from Hyeonseo's childhood. This scene is a flashback from the introduction but a flash-forward from where Chapter One will soon begin. The decision to include this scene introduces some of the themes which will come up throughout the book and foreshadows the challenges Hyeonseo's family will face in North Korea. This foreshadowing is an important structural choice because it will color how readers perceive Hyeonseo's prosperous and happy childhood in the upcoming chapters.

Parts One, Two, and Three of the book are all of roughly equal length and are divided to highlight the three distinct phases of Hyeonseo's life. Part One centers on her childhood up until the moment she leaves North Korea. Part Two is the story of her life as an illegal immigrant in China up until she lands in Seoul. Part Three covers Hyeonseo's early days in Seoul and the journey of getting her family there to join her.

Structurally, Hyeonseo marks the end of each Part, and each phase of her life, with a literal or metaphorical journey. Part One ends with her journey to China and Part Two ends with her trip to Seoul. Part Three concludes with the impending metaphorical journey into married life with Brian's proposal. The epilogue also ends with a journey as Hyeonseo and her family travel to the United States for her wedding. Choosing to end each of the major sections with a journey serves as a repetitious literary device to help readers through the transition from one section to the next.

Perspective

The majority of *The Girl With Seven Names* is written in first person limited omniscient. As a memoir, the story is told in the first person with Hyeonseo as the main character and narrator. However, in some sections Hyeonseo recounts events before she was born, when she was too young to remember them, or when she was not present. In these cases she primarily uses the third person. However, she still refers to certain characters as "my grandmother" or "my father." As such, Hyeonseo is present in every



story through her connection to the characters. In addition, all the stories she tells, even those before she was born, serve to feed and flesh out her personal narrative.

Like most memoirs, *The Girl With Seven Names* adopts two voices and parallel perspectives. Hyeonseo as both the main character and the narrator experiences every event as a duality. Once when it is lived and once again when she is revisiting it to write about it. This duality allows her to have a perspective on her own past and to draw conclusions, make judgements, and reflect on her own personality.

For example, Hyeonseo is particularly reflective in scene which illustrate her own bad behavior, such as when she distances herself from her loving father unnecessarily. Hyeonseo's ability to have a honest perspective on her own life makes her a more sympathetic character and trustworthy author.

Tone

The Girl With Seven Names adopts a mostly serious tone in keeping with the book's serious subject matter. Hyeonseo addresses issues of human rights, identity, patriotism, and freedom with the complexity and gravity that they deserve. However, she is never so serious that she alienates readers or appears morally superior. She is honest about her own flaws and capable of writing with a humble tone without appearing self-deprecating or demanding sympathy.

Hyeonseo presents the challenges of her life honestly, without melodrama. This straightforward approach allows readers the space to have their own emotional reactions to her story. Instead of demanding readers take action and join her in her activism, Hyeonseo's simple and honest tone encourages them to draw conclusions for themselves. She does not shy away from voices her opinions and manages to strike a tonal balance of persuasiveness without guilt-tripping or begging for sympathy.

Since English is not Hyeonseo's first or second language, the word choices, metaphors, and syntax are all relatively simple and accessible. While the book was co-authored with David John, the authorial voice is consistent throughout. John's position as a full-time writer and editor likely helped to strengthen the book but his role as co-author does not appear in the text and blends seamlessly with Hyeonseo's narrative voice.



Quotes

By the time you read this, the five of us will no longer exist in this world.

-- Anonymous (chapter 16 paragraph 4)

Importance: This quote appears in a letter written to a colleague of Hyeonseo's mother. This quote drives home the severity of the famine in North Korea. It is one of the first instances where Hyeonseo realizes that her country is not as prosperous and successful as she has been led to believe by government propaganda. This quote is the beginning of her slow realization that many of her country's people are suffering and dying. This is one of the first examples of teenaged Hyeonseo's initial feelings of disillusionment about her country. It also highlights Hyeonseo's privileged upbringing which has, until now, sheltered her from many of the realities of average North Korean life.

As many discover, freedom -- real freedom, in which your life is what you make of it and the choices are your own -- can be terrifying.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 39 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the challenges many defectors face after leaving North Korea and starting a new life in a capitalist society. For most readers, the idea that freedom can be terrifying is likely a new concept. This quote prompts readers to examine their own way of life from a new angle and imagine how their society presents unique challenges of its own. This quote calls into question the very nature of freedom. By equating freedom with fear, one wonders if the two ideas must always go hand in hand. Can one truly call it "real freedom" if it inherently brings fear and terror to your life?

My most basic assumptions about human nature were being overturned.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 48 paragraph 26)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the significance of Hyeonseo meeting Dick Stolp. The unconditional kindness and generosity he shows her challenges the lessons she'd learned about humanity from her North Korean upbringing. Not only is she meeting a Westerner for the first time and overcoming North Korean propaganda about them, she is also learning that the world is a less cynical and treacherous place than she believed. In North Korea, she'd learned it was risky and dangerous to trust anyone outside her family. While in China, she'd lived by cunning and deception in order to survive. For the first time, she is beginning to see that human nature is not inherently selfish and is discovering the good in people.

Every girl was in school uniform and all had short hair, no longer than shoulder length. I stood out a mile in my pink Chinese coat and my perm, and a new pair of tall, fashionable boots.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 12 paragraph 5)



Importance: Hyeonseo's teenage fashion choices are symbolic of her sense of personal identity and desire to cultivate a uniqueness. This quote also demonstrates how these qualities are discouraged by North Korean society. Hyeonseo's nonconformity is all the more serious because she is the only one in her school who dares to challenge the conventional and accepted style. Hyeonseo's fashion choices and desire for individual self-expression are also symbolic of her broader disillusionment with North Korean society as a whole. This quote also demonstrates that Hyeonseo is not afraid to challenge North Korean conventions and break the rules.

One of the main reasons that distinctions between oppressor and victim are blurred in North Korea is that no one there has any concept of rights. To know that your rights are being abused, or that you are abusing someone else's, you first have to know that you have them, and what they are.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 53 paragraph 19)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the complex and ingrained ideological differences in North Korea which allow human rights violations to continue to such a degree. It also illustrates Hyeonseo's belief that the first step in bringing better human rights to North Korea must involve initial education on the concept itself. These sentences also serve to help the reader understand why so many human rights violations are allowed to continue by the North Korean people. The ideological differences are so vast that the people there do not know about the potential power of asserting their rights.

I would like to shed my North Korean identity, erase the mark it has made on me. But I can't.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (Introduction paragraph 17)

Importance: This quote demonstrates Hyeonseo's struggle to reconcile her sense of identity and patriotism with the realities of life in her home country. Now that she lives in the outside world, she recognizes the horrible aspects of her country's regime and the marks it has made on her. However, she also associates North Korea with home, family, and a happy childhood. As such, she cannot shed her North Korean identity. It is a part of who she is. But, at the same time, she wants the country she loves to become a good place and free itself from dictatorship.

These desperate bids for asylum were being filmed by a human-rights organization to highlight China's inhumanity in refusing to treat escaped North Koreans as asylum seekers.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 33 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is in reference to television footage of many North Koreans being detained while trying to enter South Korean embassies in various countries. On a personal level, this introduces the idea of political asylum to Hyeonseo and is the beginning of her interest in moving to South Korea as well. On a broader level, it illustrates the attitudes of many countries toward North Korean defectors. Instead of treating them as refugees, they are treated as illegal immigrants or criminals and are



often sent back to face punishment in North Korea. The possibility of asylum gives Hyeonseo the chance to live as a legal citizen in South Korea but it also demonstrates how many international attitudes and legal systems work against escaped North Koreans instead of helping them.

Our entire family life, eating, socializing, and sleeping, took place beneath the portraits. I was growing up under their gaze. Looking after them was the first rule of every family.
-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

Importance: The quote illustrates how the Kim dictatorship permeates every household in North Korea in both a physical and ideological way. Hyeonseo literally grows up under the portraits of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-Il. Their presence on the wall is a metaphor for their overseeing presence in all aspects of North Korean life. The importance of looking after the portraits is significant because it is an example of how ideological indoctrination begins in the home. From a young age, Hyeonseo is taught the importance of caring for the portraits. Their exalted status in the household helps to maintain the exalted status of the dictatorship as whole throughout North Korean society.

Am I North Korean? That's where I was born and raised. Or am I Chinese? I became an adult there didn't I? Or am I South Korean? I have the same blood as people here, the same ethnicity. But how does my South Korean ID make me South Korean? People here treat North Koreans as servants, as inferiors.

-- Hyeonseo (Internal Monologue) (chapter 40 paragraph 25)

Importance: This section of internal monologue demonstrates Hyeonseo's identity struggles and issues of patriotism which continue after she becomes a South Korean citizen. This quote shows how identity can be fragmented, and constructed from multiple different aspects of a person's life. However, that fragmentation can often lead to an identity crisis in which a person, like Hyeonseo, longs for a more cohesive and firm sense of self. This section also demonstrates that patriotism does not only come from citizenship or legal status. Despite being a South Korean citizen, Hyeonseo does not feel she fits in with the rest of the country's natural-born population.

The dice were rolling again. Now it was all in Fortune's hands.

-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 45 paragraph 58)

Importance: This quote illustrates Hyeonseo's belief in the hand of Fortune in her life. It also shows that she feels much of her life up until this point has been determined by chance and luck. The metaphor of rolling dice symbolizes the many gambles she has taken, and continues to take, on the road to freedom. The capitalization of the word "Fortune" demonstrates a personification of the concept, as if Fortune is the person responsible for her future. The capitalization is also a sign of respect, demonstrating Hyeonseo's belief in the power of fate. This quote also shows that the book's main character has inherited her superstitions and beliefs from her mother who used to visit fortune tellers regularly.



In North Korea family is everything. Bloodlines are everything.
-- Narrator (Hyeonseo) (chapter 8 paragraph 24)

Importance: These two sentences demonstrate why family is so important to Hyeonseo and her mother. It explains some of their later motivation to be reunited at any cost, no matter the risks. It also helps the reader to understand why both Hyeonseo and her mother feel compelled to return to North Korea after defecting in order to be reunited with the families they've left behind. This quote also serves to demonstrate why Hyeonseo has such a hard time connecting with her father after discovering that he is not her biological parent.

I'm not helping you. I'm helping the North Korean people.
-- Dick Stolp (chapter 48 paragraph 19)

Importance: This quote helps to explain Dick's motivation for helping Hyeonseo even though she is a total stranger. Dick is invested in the plight of North Koreans and sees an opportunity to do something to help them. It demonstrates that his motivations are political and humanitarian rather than personal. It also gives Hyeonseo evidence that people in the world at large care about the plight of her people.



Topics for Discussion

Identity and Patriotism

Discuss how Hyeonseo's struggles with identity are connected to her feelings of patriotism.

Human Rights

How does the North Korean government use human rights violations to keep the Kim dictatorship in power? Use examples from the book.

Identity and Patriotism

How do Hyeonseo's teenage fashion choices reflect her feelings of identity and sense of patriotism?

Freedom

Explain why a North Korean defector may later feel compelled to return to his or her home country. Use examples from *The Girl With Seven Names*.

Human Rights

How are neighboring countries complicit in the suffering of North Korean people?

Identity

Explain the significance of the book's title. Why do you think the author chose it? Suggest two alternate title possibilities and explain the reasons for your suggestions.

Fortune

Explain the role of Fate/Fortune in *The Girl With Seven Names*. How does it influence the development of the story and characters?

Literary Style

Explore the author's choice to divide the book into an introduction, prologue, three parts, and an epilogue. How does this division influence the book's structure and the



development of the narrative? Do you agree with the author's structural choices? Why or why not?

Social Status

Explain the similarities and differences of how social status is defined in North and South Korea.

Social Status

How does Hyeonseo's changing social status in North Korea, China, and South Korea influence her choices and opportunities?