

Navigating Dehumanization: A Study of Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live*, A North Korean Journey to Freedom and Ting Xing Ye's *My Name is Number 4: A True Story* ♣

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Abstract

*Dehumanization in the form of wars and ostracisation has been present since time immemorial as a defensive mechanism to an emergency need alongside man's coexistence. However, dehumanization as a normative practice began with the world wars and was subjected to totalitarian whims. Totalitarians navigate their power by repressing social and emotional connections between people and cultivating enmity through intimidation. This paper focuses on how routinized dehumanization occurs by nullifying humanity and subjectivity through eroding social trust in an autocracy. The article draws upon human rights methodologies and psychological insights to explain human degradation with a specific focus on the life narratives of North Korean defector Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live*, A North Korean Journey to Freedom, and Ting Xing Ye's *My Name is Number 4: A True Story**

Keywords: Social Trust, Dehumanization, Subjectivity, Affective Socialization.

Introduction

The experience of dehumanization, where individuals are stripped of their inherent dignity and humanity, is a prevalent and devastating reality for many North Koreans. This paper aims to examine the manifestations of dehumanization through a comparative analysis of two memoirs: Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live: A North Korean Girl's Journey to Freedom* and Ting Xing Ye's *My Name Is Number 4: A True Story* are stories of survival from North Korea and China. These accounts provide a harrowing yet essential glimpse into the systematic violations of human rights that have permeated the North Korean regime, underscoring the urgent need to address these atrocities and empower the resilience of the North Korean people.

Literature Review

The experiences of North Korean defectors have shed light on the widespread human rights violations and dehumanization taking place in the country. Scholars have examined the psychological and social impacts of these traumatic experiences, with a focus on the process of religious conversion (Jung 147) and the challenges faced by North Korean refugees in adjusting to life in South Korea (Ryu and Yang 49). Studies have found that North Korean defectors often

face discrimination, social stigma, and difficulties in adapting to the cultural and family norms of South Korean society, further compounding the trauma they have already endured (Emery 999). One study on the relationship between victimization by political violence and abuse of offspring among North Korean defectors found a significant link. However, this was not mediated by PTSD or alcohol abuse/dependence (Emery 999). Another study explored the role of evangelical missionary work and humanitarian aid in the Sino-North Korean border area, highlighting the complexities of religious conversion and the contestation of ideas around religious freedom and salvation (Jung 147).

Discussion

Dehumanization is a widely condemned universal phenomenon that fails to acknowledge human beings by their fellow beings, which allows their humaneness and agency to be annulled. The social and cultural aspect of dehumanization, which irrationally labels a distinct category of human beings as subhuman or despicable, is critically reflected in academic studies of human rights. The biased framework within which certain humans are placed owing to their identity, ethnicity, nationalism, and race attributes to them a tag of an outcast or “perpetual outsiderhood” is pondered in human rights literature. These sundry literatures are sometimes obscured and Elizabeth Anker reiterates in her book *Fictions of Dignity: Embodying Human Rights in World Literature* claims “Not only are they underwritten by the dual fictions of human dignity and bodily integrity, but they yield a highly truncated, decorporealized vision of the subject—one that paradoxically negates core dimensions of embodied experience” (2).

War and genocide stand synonymous with dehumanization, expanding the concept to the persecution of socially underprivileged groups to erase them from the very category of humans. Some identities foment prejudices and scapegoating that result in systematic dehumanization in the form of violence and commodification. Ethnic differences, racism, disability, gender ideologies, and technological interventions are reasons to divide people into others and perpetuate dehumanization on account of the differences in their identity. When ethnic cleansing and genocides portray depersonalization, gender-based dehumanization is legitimized through rape and domestic violence. Feminists implicate pornography as another aspect of dehumanization by stripping women of their autonomy and multifaceted identity, solely presenting them as objects for sexual satisfaction.

Jews during Hitler’s administration, Tutsis in the Rwandan Genocide, Balkans in Kosovo, and capitalists in revolutionary China were victims incapacitated completely through institutional policies and practices. Referring to *Human Rights and Literature, Writing Rights*, Pramod Nayar explains, “Dehumanization consists of a refusal to recognize the human qualities of others, an association of the other with negativity, an essentializing of this other and the amplification of the other as a threat” (5).

Human rights envision the state’s obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens because the state can be a probable enemy which thwarts the fulfilment of entitlement benefits. International human rights law enshrines the state as the upholder of human rights because the state can be a potential lawbreaker at times, which can violate the rights. The law attributes to states “the obligation to respect”, the obligation to protect and the “obligation to fulfill”, indisputably proving the state is the responsible authority to champion human rights.

The obligation to respect ensures that the state forbids hindering the advantages enjoyed by individuals and collectives. The state should not abuse the private and social lives of its citizens simply by its intervention, causing wounds to their dignity. State protection against any human

rights violations is treated with a free and fair trial; promising judicial remedies and reparations fall under the “obligation to protect”. The obligation to fulfill expects the state to build institutions and resources where claims and arguments supporting human rights can be recognized.

The primary onus of the state is to build institutions like law and order to effectively actualize human rights, guarantee civil liberties, and promote political participation. Apart from preventing misuse of power by the state, human rights measure the moral commitment of the state by providing people with opportunity and security.

The state’s security lapses often ended up in social unrest, igniting state-sponsored violence and massacres. The state violates the law by controlling and oppressing minorities or dissidents to maintain the status quo. Both authoritarian regimes and some democracies often engage in actions that contravene the law. This paper aims to bring a detailed study of the institutionalization of trust mandated by the state to negate the subjectivity of its citizens in autocratic settings from the life memoirs of North Korean defector Yeonmi Park’s *In Order to Live, A North Korean’s Journey to Freedom*, and Chinese Cultural Revolution victim Ting Xing Ye’s *My Name is Number 4. A True Story*.

Literary narrations about pain and suffering induced by the state or other influences are represented time and again through life narratives, broadening the scope of “Human Rights Literature.” The expropriation of human dignity has been from time immemorial and has evoked much attention when victims narrated their unbearable agony through stories. These stories made readers rethink the definition of humans and what it means to deprive them of humanity. The stories become imprinted in public consciousness and strengthen a culture to promote human rights.

Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, in *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, state that “victims of abuse around the world have testified to their experiences in an outpouring of oral and written narratives. These stories demand that readers attend to histories, lives, and experiences often vastly different from their own. Indeed, over the last twenty years, life narratives have become one of the potential vehicles for advancing human rights claims” (1).

Totalitarian government subverts moral principles of social relations and trust, which are highly institutionalized and driven by fear. In a totalitarian milieu, civic engagement is curtailed, and cult worship and outdated dogmas are promoted as a way to mould a loyal and patriotic citizen. It’s part of the autocratic agenda to entrench fragile social relationships to destroy a sense of belongingness and to be solely rooted in the veneration of the cult. This type of society operates through social constraints and immobility to disrupt the community fabric that affects social networks and human bonds. Interdependence and emotional intimacy among people, which are based on social trust, are what society thrives on. Social trust is the ability of individuals to repose faith and confidence in another individual, contributing to a harmonious social relationship. Social trust is an offshoot of social relations that can have a lasting impact on people’s identities to perceptions. To coexist with other human beings in harmony and credence encourages personal growth and social cohesion.

The North Korean dictatorship and the Chinese Cultural Revolution witnessed a massive humanitarian crisis while fostering a proletarian revolution through dehumanization. North Korea is one of the most notorious autocratic countries functioning today. Having been ruled by a personalist dictator for decades, the country is a self-proclaimed and self-isolated communist country, governing according to a prescribed ideology called Juche, embedded in cults, crimes, and human rights infringements. The Chinese Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong also adopted an absolutist rule, creating an ethical void by eroding social ties and perpetrating state violence.

The destructive totalitarian social norm is surveillance to detect possible enemies and dissidents who pose a threat to the existing political system. Manipulating public consciousness disables people from forming meaningful social interactions and trust. Yeonmi Park recalls her initial encounter with the politically charged school textbooks, which function as a medium for disseminating propaganda and instilling confidence in their leaders. Class hours were mostly devoted to mugging up on party principles and public endorsement of the leaders. She laments that she is unable to form an autonomous thought as she regurgitates what her government says. The creative spaces to promote socialization were mind control centers and indoctrination camps to break trust in human relationships. She recollects,

As soon as you are in school, you are drilled in the 10 principles of the regime, like the Ten Commandments of the Bible. (Number 1: We must give our all in the struggle to unify the entire society with the revolutionary ideology of the Great Leader Comrade Kim Il Sung. Number 2: Respect the Great Leader, respected comrade Kim Il Sung, with utmost loyalty” Number 10: We must pass down the great achievements of Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung’s revolution from generation to generation, inheriting and completing it to the end. (48)

The dictatorship creates affective socialization where loyalty is developed through guilt and shame. The affective relationship towards their leader is cultivated through constantly reminding the people about insecurity and alienation, and the possible disaster that can occur without the presence of their beloved leader. The apprehension about alienation and isolation is achieved among people while indoctrinating them about the consequences of relying on themselves and fellow humans, thus destroying their subjectivity and natural inclination to trust others.

The interpersonal relationship constructs a moral society with shared culture and norms. The moral person is disassociated with human affinity through affective and political socialization in a totalitarian regime. *In Trust, A Sociological Theory*, Piotr Sztompka argues that a moral society is built on the foundations of trust, loyalty, and solidarity. He adds

There are three basic components of moral community. The first is trust; that is the expectancy of others' virtuous conduct toward ourselves. The second is loyalty; that is, the obligation to refrain from breaching the trust that others have bestowed upon us and to fulfil duties taken upon ourselves by accepting somebody's trust. The third is solidarity, which is caring for others' interests and readiness to act for them, even if it conflicts with our own. (5)

Cult adoration spurns loyalty and trust in fellow humans other than the cult itself. The citizens' binding commitment is to trust the one and only leader despite his viciousness. Disloyalty to leaders is met with torture and brutal abuse, and discord between people is encouraged to maintain the status quo.

Agents of socialization, like family and schools, are spaces for debasement and humiliation. Schools organize self-criticism and mutual criticism to identify the personal flaws and drawbacks of others and castigate them in public. The strategic manipulation of children through systematic indoctrination was the tactic of authorities to keep unwavering loyalty toward their leader. The trust is conditioned to be attached solely to the leader; hence, it is unilateral and institutionalized. The Chinese Revolution gave open permission to loathe one's parents and rebel against them, for championing capitalism is proof of the state's way of cultivating mistrust to ruin social ties. The state destroys meaningful social connections to turn citizens into state-owned individuals and to enforce its ideology.

North Korea's *inminban* system, or neighbourhood watch or spy network, is a state institution culpable for betraying social trust among people. Park says, “We all belonged to 'inminban, neighbourhood people units', and we were ordered to inform anyone who said the wrong thing; we

live in fear, and almost everyone, my mother included, had a personal experience that demonstrated the dangers of talking” (16).

The emergence of the fault-finding convention in public spheres during Mao's era intensified the hostile academic environment. The act of public humiliation and attributing stigmas to each other had severed the ties of social dynamics, and mutual discord paved the way for social unrest. Mao called for the collective support of students from schools and universities for the shared purpose of inciting violence to carry out the spirit of revolution.

Mao denounced the bourgeois and permitted others to treat capitalists and those who have capitalist ancestry with utter derision. Ting-Xing Ye, in her memoir *My Name is Number 4, A True Story* recounts. “All the political turmoil had swirled through my school. All the personal attacks on teachers should have made me more careful, but I was still naïve. I believed that staying silent meant staying safe. I did not yet understand that in a system built on fear, even silence can be seen as rebellion” (32).

Trust is based on life experiences and social virtues of kindness and probity. Cult devotion and fear of a tyrannical government validate these social evils. The book *What is Public Trust in Health Systems* states certain crucial elements for trust to sustain, like “relationships, communication, truth, autonomy, alternatives, and no guarantee” (Gille 12). The only faith the people can build is in their leader, dissolving all other connections, leading to social isolation. Through lies and glorification, the leader arbitrarily constructs confidence in himself.

The role of communication is important in building trust. The despotic regime sticks to propaganda that primarily resorts to sentiments and emotional appeal. Propaganda is often manipulated to realize an agenda that lacks accountability and transparency. The communication flows in a one-way direction where the leader disseminates misinformation and predominantly involves commands and instructions. North Korean state media and Chinese newspapers officially became the mouthpieces of the state's ideology, idolizing leaders and propagating lies about their valour and charisma. Media highlights North Korea excelling in revolution, just to detach people from reality. From institutional communication to interpersonal communication, which is teeming with lies and deception, erodes the subjective world and social trust of people.

The availability of a single source of communication feeds people misleading information, tainting public perceptions. Chairman Mao openly proclaims violence in his Little Red Book of quotations to sustain the revolution and ideology. The open support of violence promotes a breach of interpersonal attachments as well as interpersonal trust, breeding enmity among each other.

Despotic spaces never secure the criteria for assessing human dignity with truth and autonomy. The communication of views is always restricted by party rules and the glorification of leaders under the guise of good governance. The merciless execution of people depending upon mere speculations and gossip without being brought to justice shows deliberate depersonalization and is proof of systemic collapse. The institutions and administration are responsible for transforming individuals into assailants and offenders. Autonomy to remain a true individual is antithetical to the constitution of a brutal dictatorship.

When politics becomes synonymous with the whimsical operations of a solo dictator and his unaccountable leadership, citizens are left with no alternative other than to surrender to one's disposal. The planned social isolation during the Cultural Revolution demonstrated humanity's inability to exercise moral agency in a culture of fear. The climate of aggression transpired in offices and communes and changed into a space for reciprocal abuses.

Bryan Turner, in his book *Human Rights and Vulnerability*, writes:

Two processes – embodiment and enselfment – express the idea that mind and body are never separated. Who we are in a social process that is always constructed in terms of a particular

experience of embodiment. Suffering (a loss of dignity) and pain (loss of comfort, which we need to feel secure and confident) are always intertwined, and so vulnerability is both a physical and spiritual condition. Finally, our experiences of the everyday world involve a particular place, a location within which human experiences of the body and our dependency on other humans unfold. (27)

Human rights violations ultimately lead to social disconnection, as community bonding is based on inner turmoil and emotional pain rather than trust and love.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has provided a deeper understanding of the experiences of dehumanization and human rights violations faced by North Korean defectors, as depicted in the memoirs of Yeonmi Park and Ting Xing Ye. The findings have shed light on the lasting psychological, social, and familial impacts of these traumatic experiences, as well as the challenges encountered in the process of adapting to life in South Korea. The examination of these personal narratives, in conjunction with the scholarly literature, demonstrates the value of addressing the complex and diverse nature of human rights abuses and the need for comprehensive support and rehabilitation efforts to help North Korean refugees reclaim their humanity and reintegrate into society. The dehumanization negates their right to life in a regime of antipathy and animosity. Social atomization does not make a socially productive and ethical individual, but rather an individual's predisposition to be included in any associations makes them socially worthy. Ultimately human is born to thrive himself through reproduction, social bondage and solidarity to regulate his emotional and physical existence that would suit his evolutionary nature as well as his social identity. This social estrangement shatters the intersubjectivity and also destroys the subjectivity of the victim, which amounts to dehumanization. "Atomistic individuals cannot make for themselves a life worthy of human beings" (Donnelly 30). Human-linked emotions have a profound influence on shaping the discourse of human rights as it is based on mutuality and reciprocating the same. Technological interventions are advancing to make life less complicated, which could disassociate men from real and meaningful connections. Dehumanization will demand attention as it continues to exist as long as human existential crisis and devaluation remain in a world of digital divide, AI domain ethics and genetic engineering, broadening further studies on the capacity for a deep, interdisciplinary and inclusive research.

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