

**Reflections on the Korean War and the Limits of Its Expression: Korean Short Stories of the 1950s to 1970s**  
Miriam Löwensteinová, Czech Republic

**Key words:** Korean War, literature, short story, scenery, lyrical realism, limits

## **I. Introduction**

As an act of violence, every war needs justification. Those in power provide interpretations that make sense of war. These often lead to deep, even moral justifications. Those that interpret war, the war interpreters, appeal to extreme patriotism; they try to establish a euphoric spirit in which they call people to identify with a certain symbolic (but false) world.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, people believed in the moral energy of war, which subordinated the selfish human to the historical mission of the nation. Man was supposed to be regenerated by it. It helped him turn to “correct” values. However, after World War II, nobody frankly believed in this idea. (Loewenstein 1991, 46)

Historically, because of its geographical location, Korea has been a battlefield many times. Almost all the wars were defensive, whether the country was being invaded by Mongols, Japanese, or Manchurians. These were also wars in which the existence of the state or nation was distressed. Therefore Koreans perceived them as patriotic.

In 1950, Koreans on the both sides of the DMZ had no enthusiasm for the war. Martial traditions were almost forgotten and the images of heroes were fixed in mythical form. The old history reflected the war as the culmination of nature’s catastrophes, as a state of disharmony that eventually led to a balanced state. Literature reduced wars into the worshipping of heroes. They were depicted as knightly duels between two rightful men who possessed equal and idealistic visions and who both had the moral qualities necessary for a justified victory. Both rivals personified the whole kingdom. They were fighting on the battlefield for the glory and honour of their kingdom, their families, and their own. The depiction of the warrior from the old times was thus – although he may have been a real historical personality – unrealistic, universal, and served as a paragon of clearly stated virtues. This is the same way war was presented in medieval literature (esp. *Imjinwaeran* and *Pyŏngja horan*, wars with the Japanese and Manchurians). Only a portrayal of the enemy has been changed: he could possess martial qualities but as an enemy, he could not be moral.

In the modern era, esp. in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Koreans adopted the very emotive kind of nationalism. Patriotism or intimate identification with the nation is, in a sense, a primitive sensual mechanism that was used by propagandists when the Korean War broke out. Clichés turned into ideals that justified politics and decisions in both the North and the South. The Czech journalist Ferdinand Peroutka characterized it as: "the warriors were looking for ideas because they recognized that ideas helped the fight." (Peroutka 1974, 51) The idea of fighting for the nation demanded a simplified view and absolute subordination to authorities, i.e. the certain violation of the free will. As the modern western idea of the individual was not common in Korea at that time, some of the propagandists' appeals and slogans were able to provoke feelings of acquiescence.

## **II. The Korean War: The Exclusive Realm of Korean Writers?**

The Korean War was a fratricidal war, a war of two ideologies, and a proxy war between superpowers. Today it is often called the “forgotten war.” In the USA, for a long time it was

officially only referred to as “police action” or “conflict.”<sup>1</sup> As a war, it did not influence the world literature as, e.g., Vietnam did. William D. Ehrhart<sup>2</sup> found very few novels, stories, poems about the war or testimonies written by American soldiers. Korean War poetry was not included in numerous “war anthologies.” Ehrhart explains this embarrassing absence of the Korean War in American literature as the result of a lack reader interest and by a general lack of demand war experiences. European writers have also not produced novels, short stories, or poetry that includes the Korean War. Almost all accounts of the conflict are ideological, manifests written not by soldiers but by journalists or “official” writers. In Eastern Europe, literature reflecting the Korean War was created on orders by the various Communist parties.<sup>3</sup> The reaction of the official Chinese literature was also temporary and, greatly affected by changes in national politics in the 1950s.

Thus the Korean War, as a theme in literature, remains the domain of Korean writers. This means that the theme in all its current extent is largely Korean: the battlefield, the settings, the plot, and most of the protagonists. As the Korean War was perceived as a Korean conflict, there are almost no images of American or other U.N. soldiers. The same problem brings the expression of the situation from which we could recognize the perception of foreigners by the Korean people. It appears the turmoil of war prevented people from obtaining a clear understanding of foreign presence, and the Korean people not differentiate between foreign enemies and supposed saviours.<sup>4</sup>

Pak Wan-sō, in her short story *Kū salbōlhaettōn narūi halmikkot* (Pasqueflower on That Bleak Day, 1977), attempts accurately portray Americans. The plot takes place in a remote village where only women remain. Then the “big-noses” (American soldiers) arrive. As they think Americans are looking for prostitutes, they gather in one house and discuss how to address the situation. Finally, the oldest woman decides to go to the Americans to protect the young girls. Upon seeing the old woman undressed, the Americans laugh and offer her boxes of food. The old woman is proud and states:

“It was thanks to their being Yankees that I returned alive and even received presents. If they were Japanese, they’d have shot me dead... And if they had been Russians, they’d have raped me nonetheless, regardless of my age...”

And the narrator adds:

Of course, neither the old woman nor any other woman in the village had ever set foot outside this country, and none of them had ever seen or become acquainted with any foreigners, whether Yankees or Russians. This was their first contact with any foreigner at all. (Pak Wan-sō: A Pasque-Flower on That Bleak Day. In: *The Rainy Spell and Other Stories*, 212).

---

<sup>1</sup> Analyzing the Korean War remains the focus of many contemporary historians. For details see: William Stueck: *In Search of Essences: Labeling the Korean War*. In: *Remembering the “Forgotten War”*. Ed. by Philip West and Suh Ji-moon. New York, London, An East Gate Books, M.E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 187- 202.

<sup>2</sup> William D. Ehrhart: *Above All, the Waste: American Soldier-Poets and the Korean War*. In: *Remembering the “Forgotten War”*. Ed. by Philip West and Suh Ji-moon. New York, London, An East Gate Books, M.E. Sharpe, 2000, p. 40-54.

<sup>3</sup> This is the case in the Czech Republic.

<sup>4</sup> U.N. soldiers were addressed in the war poetry of the Koreans. For details see: *Brother Enemy. Poems of the Korean War*. Edited and translated by Suh Ji-Moon. White Pine Press, Buffalo, New York, 2002. In contemporary stories where foreign soldiers are described they are generally enemies or “bad” characters.

This story does not have a tragic tinge and is actually humorous. Nevertheless, the situation above is one that could have easily ended tragically.<sup>5</sup>

Foreign soldiers as individual heroes are very rare in the stories. An exception is the black soldier, Bob, in Ch'oe Il-nam's *Tonghaeng* (Fellow Travellers, 1959). Bob gets lost from his unit. He walks through the snow and finally he freezes. His companions – fellow travellers – were a newborn baby and a dog. The fates of other individuals are not described at all, with U.N. troops treated as a whole, as a mass.

### III. The Limiting of the Korean War in Korean Literature

Most Koreans consider the Korean War as something that was initiated by the Soviet Union and the USA, and they disregard their own culpability. They view themselves as victims of insane world policy. This approach has also emerged in literature. The Korean War can not be observed, as in olden times, as a duel of two moral rivals nor as a duel of two ideological camps or historical truths, from which one should be proved victorious. In this war, every Korean was defeated. The common people cannot identify themselves with the simplified view of *us and them*, nor with the thesis that those with an opposing ideology deserve death. Moreover, North Koreans were not the only communists; there were plenty in the South. The idea of killing in the name of ideology has no moral justification. Propaganda was used to try and explain this situation to Koreans; it attempted to produce a goal for the conflict and an image of the enemy. The war was presented as a rightful war that would liberate brothers and sisters and unify the nation; the problem was that the official propaganda demonized other Koreans, turning them into enemies simply for living on the other side of DMZ. This divided Koreans into the moral and immoral. People were simply classified by their residence, although many in the South were forced to serve in the North Korean Army because they were not able to escape before the Communists took control in the early days of the war. This is the crucial point in depicting the war itself. One cannot ignore the enemy, but it is much harder to judge him. The enemy was not a foreign devil, as in the past, but a fellow countryman, a neighbor, a relative.

War and literature, irrespective of the classical truism *inter arma silent musae*, have an affinity for each other. War is a powerful topic, regardless of its objective historical importance, due to the extreme situations that people must endure. And authentic experience is ultimately subjective experience. The encounter with death cancels ideological controversies. War means paralysis, the sense of the absurd, the loss of sense, the collapse of traditional models. It is the kind of despair that can lead humanity to lose perspective and hope for the future. However death<sup>6</sup> itself is presented as a simple act, as in O Sang-wŏn's *Yuye* (A Respite, 1955):

Then the sound of rifle shots. But they sound different, like something from the other world. It is nothing. I must walk.... No, it's nothing, nothing.... It won't matter who just died. There is nothing more commonplace than that. (O Sang-wŏn: *Yuye*. In: *Hanguk hyŏndae taep'yo sosŏlsŏn* 8, 106)

At the beginning of every literary creation stands a very important question: "should I deal with the theme freely?" Observing the literature reflecting the Korean War, the answer is "no." The theme remains undoubtedly ideologically limited in all its aspects. As Joseph Strelka says: "historical situations exist in which the politics hold all the manifestations of life, including literature, and it will curtail them intensively and absolutely, that avoiding the political proclamation should be not only unethical but totally impossible." (Strelka, J. P. 2001, 10) However, the correct political view is defined by the authorities, which in turn form the accepted interpretations. These need not be declared, as the individual absorbs them.

---

<sup>5</sup> Both American and Russians were observed as the real enemies at that time.

<sup>6</sup> Concrete descriptions of death do not often appear in Korean literature.

We could say that in Korea there is not a usual kind of war fiction. So far, the Korean War has produced no great (or arguably even fair) war novels commensurate with the importance of the tragic event itself. Korean literary critics often explain this fact by the nature of the war. It was a civil war; there was no gain or glory at stake except that elusive thing called ideology. This is portrayals of heroism and military valor do not adorn the fiction. The prevailing approach to the topic has also been influenced by the fact that National Security law (*Kukka poanpŏp*) and Anticommunist law (*Pangongpŏp*) were applicable for a long time. They were broadly utilized not only during the war but also after it. These regulations in conjunction with the taboo nature of the subject in the society at large discouraged many writers from challenging norms and either writing or trying to get published to stories that focused on the war.

War is not only a military action, but also a battle of words. As to the Korean War, its predecessor was the struggle between pure and proletarian literature struggle that can not really be classified as a real battle. Both parties had no practical ideological knowledge and their rivalry took place in their manifests. Nevertheless, just after the war broke out, literature, and the prominent writers in both North and South Korea were called on to introduce the war spirit to the people and to create an image of the enemy. Authorities explained this as the “high mission” to the nation.<sup>7</sup> Today, their manifests and appeals are mostly lost, or, in the case of the Republic of Korea, they are preserved in the ROK Ministry of Defense archives.<sup>8</sup> As far as militant poetry is concerned, it was almost always written to appeal to patriotism. The best of the war poems were collected in the anthology *Brother Enemy*, edited and translated by Suh Ji-moon in 2002. As she has said, some of them have no value, but as we have seen, they vary a great deal in theme, their unofficial rhetoric, and the sympathy they grant the enemy.<sup>9</sup> Today such poems are mostly curiosities. They are more the documents of the war and sometimes of aggressive, militant emotions.

Expressing the authentic experience of death is not easy, although in world literature the mythical images of heroes, heroism, and heroic death have continued to appear well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> However, in Korean literature, especially in the short story, heroes vanished definitively with the advent of the Korean War. This war could not be comprehended as the conflict of two rightful worlds or heroes, as was common in the past. There were no heroes, only victims. In his *Image of man in post-war Korean fiction* (Kim Chong-un 1973, 4-14), Kim Chong-un called this phase of post-war literature the period of the “Walking Wounded.”

We have to be aware that the description of the war, or the battlefield experiences was possible only when they respected the (un)officially given rules and limits. It meant illustrating or seeing the conflict in black and white, in a distorted point of view. That is why

---

<sup>7</sup> During the Korean War, several ROK military journals such as *Chŏnsŏn munhak* (Warfront Literature), *Haegun* (The Navy), *Ch'anggong* (Blue Sky) have been founded. In 1955, a two-volume anthology *Chŏnsi hanguk munhaksŏn* (Wartime Anthology of Korean Literature) was published by the Education Bureau of the Ministry of Defense.

<sup>8</sup> Suh Ji-moon discusses this topic in her preface to the anthology *Enemy Brother*. She believes the concrete writers are not Ŏyong (journalists or reporters in government pay) but rather writers with a sense of patriotic duty. For details see: *Remembering the “Forgotten War”*. Ed. by Philip West and Suh Ji-moon. M. E. Sharpe, 2000; *Brother Enemy. Poems of the Korean War*. Edited and translated by Suh Ji-Moon. White Pine Press, Buffalo, New York, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Let us quote some words from Jo Ji-hun’s poem *Here lies a Communist soldier*: “Whether enemy or brother / you are a human being / a sacred creature deserving love.” In: *Brother Enemy*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Europe has also had problems with the presentation of 20<sup>th</sup>-century wars, especially World War II. However, real war novels do exist, but the conflict was so tragic that the type of heroism that appears in medieval literature is very rare. In the last few decades, the most popular war writing has been testimonies written by individual victims of the war. See the novels by the Polish writer Jerzy Kosinski (b. 1933), esp. his *The Painted Bird* (New York, 1965), or novels and stories written by the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész (b. 1929), especially his *Man without Fate* (*Sorstalansag*, Budapest 1975).

short stories published in Korea since the 1950s through to 1970s lacked an in-depth personal approach to the reality of the war (even when the war was the central theme of a story).

The method employed by authors from this period could be labeled “lyrical realism,” i.e. we see only the vast dehumanizing aspects of the war, the turmoil in which small figures wander: uprooted, hungry, and confused. All the scenes are surrounded by natural scenery. Some critics explain this approach to the theme of war by calling it aestheticism, which functioned as a relic of the 1920s, because of the verbal struggle between pure and ideological literature. I think this form emerged to show a method of escape. This escape answers the question of *how to write about the war* and also partially answers questions *what to write about*. It was a way to write about the war and express feelings without touching the substance of the war itself. Authors were possibly searching for a code; they used hidden meaning in their texts. In this form of presenting the war, what is essential, is preserved and it becomes a tool for learning about the war.<sup>11</sup>

In classical Korean literature, prose was the form where personal attitude had no place. Prose was referral but not comment, in contrast to poetry, which had to have a personal note. That is why, in the post-war fiction, Korean authors, perhaps influenced by more than 30 years of Japanese censorship, tried to find their own way of the expression, especially when writing about the Korean War.<sup>12</sup>

What is present in two decades of post-war short stories is the Korean War. However in these stories – “stories of atmosphere”<sup>13</sup> – men face personal tragedies: the loss of their families and their homes. What was depicted was not a war, but war as an Apocalypse, its face from below. This avoidance of dealing directly with the war created stereotypes in narration. What stood aside was the reality of the divided families, the stigmatized families, the loss of traditional confidence in family or the rural community. Omitted were the substantial situations of abject failure or the many acts of cowardice. Naturally there were no author comments or critics of the war itself.

#### **IV. Korean War Made Concrete**

The avoidance of war material does not mean that the war had little effect on fiction. On the contrary, war is omnipresent, though it may only be mentioned in the subplot. Most of the post-war stories contain common formal features: 1) the author’s distance from the narrator, 2) distance from real time of the fiction, 3) narrative style, 4) frugal but poignant symbolism and many dialogues in dialects, 5) shared symbols, mostly natural and including color, 6) final reconciliation (harmonization) of the story.

The author’s distance from the narrator was used quite frequently; in the 1970s this included relying on a child narrator. This allowed writers to refer to something things that were *not their own experience*. What the hero says is *not the writer's opinion*. The author only acquaints us with the story or fate of a specific person in a specific situation. The frame of this stereotyped narration is colored by the dialects<sup>14</sup> and symbols, as we will discuss later.

#### **Stereotypes in Main Stream of Korean Short Stories**

---

<sup>11</sup> European writers also rely on testimony in their war narratives; the narrator does not comment on the events as there is the assumption that readers know what has happened. This may create challenges to later generations of Koreans, as the Korean War for the young generation is now history.

<sup>12</sup> The contemporary literary critic Kim Yoon-shik called their method rather ambiguous: “naïve humanism” (Kim Yoon-shik 1998, 17-31).

<sup>13</sup> “Stories of atmosphere” is the term used by Kim Chong-un (Kim Chong-un 1982, VII). I think this is a precise term for characterizing this phase of Korean literature.

<sup>14</sup> That is understandable as the plot is usually set in the country.

As noted earlier, in most of the post-war stories, there are only people who faced the personal tragedies, the loss of their families, their homes. The people – mostly rural people – are wounded physically or, what is less present, mentally. Thus war is presented as *calamity*, the word often repeated in poetry. Only from the subplot do we feel other losses, especially of traditional values like humanity, friendship, and home. These are rarely declared directly. Nevertheless, the sense of loss of national or self-identity was omnipresent, expressed by the images of confused and uprooted protagonists.

The plot of most of the post-war stories takes place in the countryside. The remote, rural society allows the author to depict the human tragedy in light of nature's indifference. Stories are tragic but sentimental, tinged by symbols that were also used during the Japanese colonial period. The stories also preserved traditional views on nature; and finally, nature is the only survivor of war. Settings of space and time are never applied; the actual time can only be guessed. The fate of the central character or family can be read symbolically. If a story is in Jöllado, it could also take place at the same time in Kangwŏndo or Ch'ungch'ŏngdo.

As to the symbols, darkness often appears<sup>15</sup> (the word *ŏdum* is often used in the titles of the stories, especially in the works of Kim Wŏn-il). Symbolic colors are also widely used: red<sup>16</sup> (red flowers, fire, sun) evokes blood, also light; yellow and white evoke innocence or virginity<sup>17</sup> (many scenes are located in sunny or snowy landscapes). Sometimes nature resigns to comment the human doings, even good or bad. It does not react, only exists as a symbol of constancy. In many stories the tragedy is observed by the magnificent mountains; water in the river is flowing, the sky is high and blue; the sun rises when the snow covers all the country. Frequently the flowers<sup>18</sup> appear not only as titles of stories, but also as features coloring the substance of the scenery. These symbols are connected to traditional Korean imagery often found in poetry and also in the so-called pure literature of the 1920s. The rhetorical means creating visual imagery are not only descriptive, with the Korean leveraged to reflect the imagery through onomatopoeia and by mimetic words.

Heroes and heroines are quite uniform. They have no faces though they do have names. Thus, their fates tend towards generalization. The only subcategories are man and woman that can be divided into pairs: *father-son* and *mother-daughter* or, something common in the 1970s, *mother-son*. The characters' appearance, behavior, qualities, nature, and thoughts are not described. They are depicted as innocent people, unprepared for tragedy. Their lives are thus determined by the war. Middle-aged characters are mainly interested in the field. Younger characters serve as examples for depicting parental longing (for sons) or for showing extreme poverty (girls). Therefore, stories are mostly family stories, often with people waiting for their sons or fathers, starving, and sometimes persecuted by soldiers or policemen. The characters – as puppets – mainly express no feelings (they do not speak about the war itself, their only feeling is how to survive). They return to an animal state, a basic state of perceiving reality and interpreting experience. In the stories, this kind of perceiving is not necessarily caused by the war, it might have other reason. The other stories should be called returning home. Disabled, mainly male protagonists face the fact that they have no family, no home. These “little” tragedies tell us about the most typical situation that war has brought to Koreans.

### **What Stands Beside or What Is Expressed in a Distorted Way?**

---

<sup>15</sup> The word "darkness" symbolized the colonial period.

<sup>16</sup> Since ancient times the colour red has been comprehend as a warning colour.

<sup>17</sup> White could be the symbol of the West, i.e. of death, also of virginity.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. mugwort (*ssuk*), pasque-flower (*halmikkot*), evening primrose (*talmajikkot*), balsamine (*pongsŏnhwa*).

### a) The “Real Image” of the “Enemy”

As there was no depicting the battlefield in post-war stories, the “problem” with the so-called enemy disappeared. When North Korean soldiers are mentioned, they are barely described or described in the style of I Pöm-sŏn’s *Hak maül saramdül* (The People of Crane Village, 1957):

Quite unexpectedly they found a group of people dressed in khaki surging into the village over the mountain ridge to the south. There were at least fifty of them, and they carried rifles on their shoulders. They said they had come to liberate the people of the village. The villagers didn’t quite understand the exact meaning of the word “liberation.” ... They stayed just one day in the village and headed south; at their heels came another group of such people, who stayed one day and spoke about things in way that was an exact copy of what the preceding group had spoken about. One group of these strangers after another came and went, making the same stereotyped remarks to the villagers, and it was only then that they came to realize for the first time that a war had broken out and that the strange visitors referring to everybody, without distinction, as Comrade, were the so called Inmingun. (I Pöm-sŏn: *Hak maül saramdül*. In: *Hanguk hyöndaetäp’yo sosölsŏn* 9, 23-24).

This quote reflects the “enemy” as a nameless mass. This manner of description prevails, even when the nameless soldiers are not innocent. They also violate and kill, although the acts of cruelty and barbarity are not expressed in a direct way. They are rather depicted by other means, as in Kim Wŏn-il’s *Talmaji kkot* (Evening Primrose, 1985). There – like in drama – the natural images change quickly, one after another. The reader has only to guess who violates, who kills, and what happens. It seems the aim of the author is to show the common people could not distinguish the real enemy. This face of war is more realistic and more pitiful.

The other way, though not very common, was depicting people who could not be comprehended as “enemies.” The prototype of this character appears in Hwang Sun-wŏn’s famous story *Hak* (Cranes, 1954), in which Hwang gives his successors a model for this expression. Two friends meet each other in different camps. Their initial non-confidence was intensive though very short:

“What’s a man who was vice-president of the Farmer’s League doing here? Why didn’t you escape? Obviously you were in hiding because you had some sort of mission, weren’t you?” (...)

“I’ve no intention of making excuses,” Tök-chae said. “I was made vice-president of the Farmer’s League because I was the son of the poorest of farmers and a hard working farmer myself. If that’s crime that merits death, there isn’t anything that I can do about it. I was then, and still I am a man whose only talent is to dig the earth.” (Hwang Sun-wŏn: *Hak*. In: *Hanguk hyöndaetäp’yo sosölsŏn* 5, 315-316)

More serious and problematic is the description of the the people who were forced to join the North Korean army. They could be judged as innocent, although their families were stigmatized and became objects of the terror that violated traditional rural communities. This fact was not reflected directly, as it would have also been an accusation of the politics. The theme was rare in the 1950s and 1960s. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s when authors like Kim Wŏn-il wrote stories like *Talmajikkot*.<sup>19</sup>

Direct portrayal of the “enemy” is attempted more openly by I Tong-ha in his story *P’ap’yŏn* (Shrapnel, 1982). The protagonist’s father has been a follower of socialist ideals

---

<sup>19</sup> This topic also appeared in the novels of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the fashionable heroes of the “new novels” are treated as North Korean “partisans” (i.e. not “reds” or “communists”).

and, after the Communists attack the village, the inhabitants show their enmity to his innocent family as it was “communist.” As a child, the narrator remembers it this way:

It was Uncle who saved my mother from a disgrace more horrible than death. ... Coming home on leave at that particular time, swinging an M-1 rifle not much taller than him, he saved my mother from a relentless crowd. Mother, after being dragged along several narrow alleys and thrown into a compost heap at the entrance to the village, looked like a mad dog over which death was hovering. Her torn clothing looked like rags and failed to cover even a woman’s most shameful area.... I had to watch, fighting back tears, while summer flies took up quarters in a pitch-black swarm in the hair of her most private area, where they stuck tenaciously. (I Tong-ha: *P’ap’yŏn*. In: Jangnangam tosi oe, 277).

### **b) Ideology**

The portrait of the enemy is closely connected with ideology. Ideology in general is also the aspect that is not mentioned very often. Its essence was often left unexpressed; moreover explaining the Korean War only as a war of two ideologies easily lends itself to simplification. What is more compelling is the reality of families divided by ideology, or better, by their political orientation or sympathies. Sometimes, as in I Tong-ha’s story, it is made clear that joining the North or South army was not an ideological decision but rather a decision of chance (thus his portrayal of the “devil” father and his “heroic” uncle). This approach was generally not taken or, as was common in the 1970s, was taken using the child narrator. This approach was used e.g. in Yun Hŭng-gil’s story *Jangma* (The Rainy Spell, 1975), where the child repeated word for word the quarrel of his two grandmothers:

"Be careful how you judge, son! Is it wrong of me to rebuke an old woman who’s praying for your brother’s death? Must you, too, blame me? She may be your mother-in-law, but she’s an enemy to me, and I can’t live with her under the same roof! If you don’t throw her out at once, I’m going to leave this house!"

The other grandmother reacts more emotively and, finally she uses the taboo word “communist.”

"All right! I’m leaving! I would hate to stay in this house any longer! I’d rather die out in the street than stay a minute longer in a communist’s house..." (Yun Hŭng-gil: *Jangma*. In: *Hanguk taep’yo jungtan’yŏn sosŏlsŏn* 50, 3, 262-263)

However, ideology in these post-war stories was never represented as something characters adopted by choice. The shift in the war theme in the late 1970s and in the 1980’s showed only the “other side” and referred more to the fact that partisans and communists had existed and that they had also been human beings.

### **c) Human Failure, Cowardice, Desertion**

The war also creates situations in which heroism need not be realized. Every human can fail; and as Karl Jaspers writes: "The defeated every time ... prefers life" (Karl Jaspers 1991, 12). It is not cowardice but human nature. When the soldier behaves in a cowardly manner, it is often treated as a betrayal, as in O Sang-wŏn’s *Yuye*, where the central thought of the hero is to not show his fear. Others focused on saving their own lives; which is the instinct of self-preservation. But readers or spectators of drama all over the world from ancient times to today generally prefer dead heroes to survivors. As Koreans have an affinity for heroism, descriptions of cowardice in Korean literature are rare.<sup>20</sup> Likewise with desertions. In the post-war literature, only one deserter appears, in a short story by Han Mahl-sook (*Sinhwaŭi*

---

<sup>20</sup> This approach has been taken in the popular TV dramas of today, e.g. “Seoul 1945.” In the show, whoever wore the uniform could not be a coward, only the civilian people should fail.

*tae*, *The Cliff of Myth*, 1957). Given this orientation in Korea, the absence of an abstract or specific critic of the war is understandable; and attributing responsibility to politics and the army is still not common in Korea today.<sup>21</sup>

## V. Shift in the Depiction: the 1970s

The above mentioned limits were also visible in the stories written by the generation war children in 1970s,<sup>22</sup> who represented a shift in attitude towards the war reality. A number of authors used child narrators and the story was told from their point of view. That was a rather new perspective as the child-narrator could be relatively unprejudiced and could formulate and ask legitimate questions, though he would not be able to answer. For example, Kim Wŏn-il's character Kaphae asked: "Is it so bad to be Red that [dad] had to be killed? ... People said that Reds will be punished by Heaven. But did Dad do all these things? I hope I'll get to know at some point. And then I'll understand everything." (Kim Wŏn-il: *Ŏdumŭi hon*, *The Spirit of the Darkness*, 1973. In: *Maŭmŭi kamok oe*, 341)

The child,<sup>23</sup> with his innocence, could open the door to the problem of the ideological division of families and describe his "objective" view of the injustice. As mentioned before, this approach to the war and its experiences was widely used in war stories and novels in Europe. In Korea, the most representative of this stream are short stories written by Kim Wŏn-il and Yun Hŭng-gil in the early 1970s. Their approach to the theme was innovative, but their heroes are limited in their views and statements.

## VI. Conclusion

The topic of the Korean War – from my point of view – still lacks authentic fiction. The "new" or "fashionable" perspectives on the war have been rather cosmetic and based on changes in terminology that have been connected to the official "politics of unification."<sup>24</sup> As the generation that experienced the war in adulthood has disappeared, authentic testimonies about the war will emerge through the eyes of adolescents and children of that time. Of course every literary creation depends on societal demand. We can only hope that what happened in Europe, where the testimonies about the 1930s and 1940s have been very desirable, will also happen in Korea.

Although many critics say that personal attitude limits or harms every art, I think the topic of the Korean War needs it. It could serve as some kind of collective therapy. The Korean War deserves more attention; many important questions have yet to be answered. True healing cannot take place by simply expressing feelings and depicting North Koreans as brothers. There is an unresolved question of responsibility and the role of politics<sup>25</sup> in the

---

<sup>21</sup> In "Seoul 1945" we see genuinely new (and false) portraits of historic personalities. It is ridiculous that Kim Il-sŏng was portrayed only as a strategist and I Sŭng-man as a coward and intriguer, a capricious old man.

<sup>22</sup> Channeling the writer's experience through a child has been very popular in Europe. In Korea – as far as the Korean War is concerned – it was done, for the first time, mainly by writers whose childhoods were traumatized by the fact that their fathers defected to the North or were left oriented. This "change" was also the result of politics and the prevailing attitudes towards North Korea in the early 1970s.

<sup>23</sup> That is not a new phenomenon. Children have been used in Korean literature from its beginning, e.g. in the *tongyo* genre. Children often served truth tellers or secret revealers.

<sup>24</sup> Observing the representative works of the last decades I find there some ridiculous tendencies that mostly concern the images of "enemy." Now, if somebody is Korean, he could not be guilty. That is the absurd flipside of the previous black and white presentation. In history, there are not only victims, but also people responsible for the politics and for disasters like a war.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Wŏn-il's novel *Paramkwa kang* (*The Wind and the River*, 1985) is the product of the new wave that started in the 1980s where the Korean War is depicted as the result of insane politics. He

1950s, the influence of the war on Korean morality, the war's impact on nationality, the formation of the Korean "split mentality," and so forth. It is arguable immoral for a nation to superficially deal with the scars of a violent past through false interpretation.

Europe is still addressing the concrete and abstract failures concerning fascism and communism. Yet, many of its historical myths have been preserved until today. Nevertheless, even if it is cruel, Koreans have to say everything they know about the Korean War. It is their obligation to forthcoming generations. Their testimonies can help prevent the misinterpretation, confusion, or catastrophes from happening in the future. And that is the task of literature, above all else.

### **Works cited**

*Brother Enemy. Poems of the Korean War.* Edited and translated by Suh Ji-Moon. White Pine Press, Buffalo, New York, 2002.

*Hanguk taep 'yo jungtanp 'yŏn sosŏlsŏn 50, 3.* Sŏul, Jungang ilbosa 1995.

*Hanguk hyŏndae taep 'yo sosŏlsŏn (1-9).* Sŏul, Jangiakkwa pip 'yŏngsa, 1996.

I Tong-ha: *Jangnangam tosi oe.* Sŏul, Tong-a ch 'ulp 'ansa 1995.

Jaspers, Karl: *Otázka viny* (Die Schuldfrage). Prague, Váhy 1991.

Kim Chong-un: *Images of man in postwar Korean fiction.* In: Korean Studies, vol. 2 (1978), p. 1-27.

Kim Wŏn-il: *Maŏmŏi kamok oe.* Sŏul, Tong-a ch 'ulp 'ansa 1995.

Kim Wŏn-il: *Paramkwa kang.* Sŏul, Munhakkwa jisŏngsa 1985.

Kim Yoon-shik: *Understanding Modern Korean Literature.* Seoul, Jipmoondang Publishing Company, 1998.

Loewenstein, B.: *O nacionalismu a revolucích* (Studies about Nationalism and Revolutions). Prague, NLN, 1991.

*Postwar Korean Short Stories. An Anthology.* Translated and edited with an Introduction by Chong-un Kim. Seoul, Seoul National University Press, 1982.

*Remembering the "Forgotten War".* Ed. By Philip West and Suh Ji-moon. New York, London, M.E. Sharpe, 2000.

Strelka, Joseph P.: *Literatura a politika. Pohledy z literárněvědné perspektivy* (Literature and Politic. View from the literary Perspective). Brno, CDK, 2001.

*The Rainy Spell and Other Korean Short Stories.* Translated and edited by Suh Ji-Moon. An East Gate Book, M.E.Sharpe/UNESCO Publishing, 1998.

---

writes: "My friend, don't compare my story to such an incident of fratricide because we never killed our own people. We also had leftists and rightists among us, but we were firmly united in the great goal of our nation's liberation. From this point of view, Kim in the North and I in the South are fools. They are simply puppets of Russia and America." (Kim Wŏn-il: *Paramkwa kang* 1985, 55)