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## Victimhood nationalism: compelling or competing?

Following is the last in a series  
exploring nationalism in Northeast  
Asia. – Ed.

Yoko Kawashima Watkins' autobiographical novel "So Far from the Bamboo Grove" tells about how the author, an 11-year-old Japanese girl, and her family were faced with threats on their lives, hunger and fear of sexual assault on their way home to Japan from Nanam, North Korea, upon Japan's defeat in World War II. The novel describes with realism and in plain language the ordeal Japanese had to go through. Many Japanese who used to live in Korea during the Japanese colonial rule, are said to have experienced a similar fate when they had to go back home upon their country's defeat in the war. The Korean translation of the novel was first published in Korea in April 2005. It was in January 2007 that the novel abruptly became the focus of national attention in Korea, after Korean-Americans in Boston and New York lodged a protest against the decision to include the novel in the history reading list for sixth graders in the fall of 2006. A Korean-American female student in New York even refused to go to school as a sign of protest and the Korean Consulate in Boston sent an official letter of protest to the U.S. State Department.

What the Korean-Americans were claiming was that the novel portrays Koreans, who were the innocent victims of Japanese colonial rule and the war, as "evil perpetrators." One may grasp what the Korean-Americans were claiming as average American students do not know much about what happened in East Asia during and after the war. The novel chooses a form of narration made by a young girl, thus making it difficult to point a finger at its omission of comments on injustices and crimes, such as the Nanjing massacre, perpetrated by the Japanese colonial power and army.

Guenter Grass's 2002 novel, "Im Krebsgang," portrays an incident in which innocent German civilians became victims of an attack made by a Soviet Union submarine. We do not say that the writer tries to defend or justify Nazism just because his novel does not focus on atrocities perpetrated by the Third Reich. "Im Krebsgang" is for adult readers who clearly remember the Holocaust and other war crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany, while "So Far from the Bamboo Grove" is intended for young American students ignorant of East Asian modern history.

That difference explains why one should listen to the suggestion made by Harvard University professor Carter Eckert that Richard Kim's "Lost Names," which portrays an ordeal experienced by a Korean boy during

Japan's colonial rule, be included in the reading list for American students. He also suggested that proper historical notes concerning Japanese colonial rule over its Asian neighbors in "So Far from the Bamboo Grove" should be made.

The way Koreans view "So Far from the Bamboo Grove" is quite different from how Americans do. In Korea, it involves contemporary politics of memory fed by hereditary victimhood more than a matter of understanding the past. It is related to history politics deployed by the state and historical consciousness rooted in civil society.

Koreans, both liberals and conservatives, appear not to care about what the Japanese writer says about the personal pain she experienced during deportation. Instead, they point out inaccurate facts of her memory and accounts. This is very similar to the positivistic attitude adopted by Japanese rightists who say that testimonies of comfort women, concerning atrocities perpetrated against them during the war, are not supported by written evidence and thus are not worthy of listening to.

Within the same context, Korean mass media focus on the very hypothetical allegation that her father was probably an officer of the Japanese Imperial Army's infamous medical Unit 731 in an attempt to blur the writer's status as a victim and make her accounts unconvincing.

The way Korean mass media respond to the Japanese novel epitomizes the typical attitude: the dualism that Japanese were victimizers and Koreans were victims should not be questioned under any circumstance. They may think that the writer's memory concerning Koreans threatening and terrorizing her on her return home will do harm to Koreans' collective status as innocent victims of colonialism. However, my historical insight says that the story contained in the novel could have happened. After World War II German civilians who stayed in Poland's recovered territories (ziemia odzyskana), or Sudetenland of the Czech Republic, were similarly subjected to terror. About 2 million German civilians are reported to have been killed, attacked, lynched or raped by Russian, Polish or Czech soldiers during the deportation. Right after the war, there was a saying that most Poles in the recovered territory of Wroclaw/Breslau had a German concubine.

In 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, some Czech and Polish historians pointed to the need to remember the pain experienced by German civilians in recovered territories right after the war but they were soon shouted down by those who said they betrayed the fatherland trying to justify Nazi crimes.

Nazi crimes against humanity are not justified by those who point to the need to remember the pain experienced by innocent German civilians. In actual fact, victims of colonialism or war aggression are not exempt from the need for self-reflection. The fact-finding investigation of a massacre of Jews in Jedwabne, Poland dealt a mortal blow to the established view that Poles were only victims during the war. Poles were not default victims. They were bystanders most often and perpetrators occasionally.

The reflexive memory by Primo Levi, an Auschwitz survivor, makes us wake up to the surprising fact that there was a grey zone between victims and victimizers even in the extreme conditions of Auschwitz. The historical complexity does not allow room for neither collective

guilt nor national innocence.

In such a light, the dualist premise that Koreans are all victims and Japanese are all victimizers is a very simplified view intended to reinforce a strong sense of nationalism. The view appears to turn a blind eye to the fact that, from a gender or class perspective, some Korean men, like some Japanese men, could be perpetrators, and female peasants of the colony together with working-class men of Japan could be victims.

What needs to be pointed out is how Koreans' collective memory of victimhood works out in the political arena. Following the 1945 liberation from Japanese colonial rule, the two leaders of South and North Korea, Syngman Rhee and Kim Il-sung, shared the determination that Koreans should never allow themselves to lose their sovereignty again, despite their difference in ideological views. All concerted efforts would be made to build-up state power by positively taking part in national projects in compliance with the leader's orders and instructions. That is to say, the view of themselves as hereditary victims of colonialism worked to justify the attempt of the powers that be to mobilize the general public for national projects.

I want to call it "victimhood nationalism." It is not specific only for the nationalism of Koreans. Ben Gurion of Israel also said, "It is in our interest to use Hitler ... for the building of our country" within the same context.

At a certain stage of development, victimhood nationalism intends to justify nationalism and occasionally past victims may transform themselves into future victimizers in time. That is the irony of victimhood nationalism. It is through victimhood nationalism that the state power of Israel and Armenia, whose people were the victims of the Holocaust and a racial massacre perpetrated by Turks, are trying to justify their acts of using violence against Palestinians and Azerbaijanians, respectively.

Victimhood nationalism also plays out in great power states. The collective self-perception of victimhood also provided the nationalism of the United States with grassroots support. The societal support for the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq in 2003 would not be possible without the thought that the United States is a victim of international terrorism.

The idea of victimhood nationalism (that Austria was the first victim of Nazism) is also found among Austrian voters who elected Kurt Waldheim, a former Nazi officer as their President in 1986. The fact that the French remained silent concerning the popular anti-Semitism held by the Vichy regime during the war also had something to do with the victimhood.

In East Asia, victimhood nationalism appears to work this way. The thought that Japan was the world's first victim of the atomic bomb underlies the Japanese's denial or silence over their atrocities perpetrated against their colonies and enemies. The thought that the abduction of some Japanese can be justified underlies such crimes perpetrated by North Koreans, who regard themselves as victims of Japanese colonialism.

This will in turn lead to the thought that Japan is also a victim of abduction. Under their victimhood nationalism thus reinforced, Japanese will not admit that they were perpetrators against Korea,

China, Southeast Asia and some Pacific islands. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's remarks that the Japanese government is not responsible for the problem related to "comfort women" should be viewed in this context.

The victimhood nationalism adopted by Japan is likely to stimulate the two Koreas and China's victimhood nationalism. Perhaps, Abe's remarks about comfort women got under the skin of Koreans' victimhood and renewed their sensitivity to the novel of "So Far from the Bamboo Grove." That explains why Korean mass media started carrying critical opinions on the matter as if they acted under some orchestration.

It appears that the victimhood nationalism held by the two countries makes them antagonize each other – but they are actually accomplices in that they work to reinforce each other's position. The national conflicts among East Asian countries originated in this antagonistic complicity of victimhood nationalism.

Is it too naive an idea to wish that the controversy over "So Far from the Bamboo Grove" should serve as an occasion for East Asians to have honest self-reflection of their victimhood nationalism?

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