THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA AND KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE: GENDERED MIGRATION IN DEFECTOR MEMOIRS AND SCREEN MEDIA*

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INTRODUCTION

Migration, and more specifically forced displacement, has become one of the defining structural conditions of the 21st century (Stankovic et al., 2021). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide reached approximately 120 million in 2024, reflecting intensifying geopolitical conflicts and the deepening entanglement of mobility, precarity and global inequality (UNHCR, 2024). Within this broader landscape, the North Korean diaspora occupies a distinctive analytical position shaped by Cold War division, post-socialist economic collapse, authoritarian governance and the global circulation of media images that continually reframe displacement as both a humanitarian crisis and a cultural narrative.

Since the 1994–1998 famine, women have been disproportionately represented among the waves of defection, accounting for approximately 72% of migrants to South Korea between 2004 and 2023 (Korean Ministry of Unification, 2023). More than merely a case of geographic relocation, this movement represents a diasporic formation structured through networks of adaptation, survival and resistance (Clifford, 1997). In this sense, the North Korean diaspora emerges not as a fixed identity but as a shifting relational field shaped by gendered precarity and transnational mobility.

The visibility of the North Korean defector has undergone a radical transformation in parallel with the global rise of the Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). While early South Korean media framed North Korea on the basis of rigid ideological paradigms, the contemporary Hallyu era (post-2000s, and

particularly in the 2020s) has reconfigured the defector as a transnationally circulating media figure embedded in global platform economies. For the "*Jangmadang* Generation" (North Koreans born between the early 1980s and the early 2000s), South Korean media functioned historically as a catalyst for defection; today, the same media landscape constitutes the primary arena for the circulation, mediation and global consumption of survival narratives.

This study interrogates the cultural production of the North Korean diaspora by foregrounding the role of the contemporary Hallyu media economy, with particular attention to the ways that global streaming platforms such as Netflix shape the aesthetic and narrative circulation of defector stories. Although women represent the majority of North Korean defectors and play a central role in testimonial production, their experiences remain under-theorised in media and cultural studies. This article addresses this gap by focusing on gendered survival as an analytic category, while also combining South Korean primary sources and transnational media discourse in an effort to reduce the linguistic and archival asymmetries that structure international scholarship on North Korean migration and representation.

Drawing on defector life-writing, interviews conducted in the UK and screen media, the analysis is structured around what could be described as a "theoretical triangulation" of Guy Debord's (1967) concept of the spectacle, Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the gaze and Alison Landsberg's (2004) notion of prosthetic memory. These frameworks are employed to examine how narratives of survival are aesthetically organised for transnational circulation. The central questions guiding the study are how visual and narrative strategies of the Hallyu era shape global perceptions of North Korea and its defectors, and the extent to which this "spectacle of survival" both disrupts and reproduces configurations of victimhood, gender and national belonging.

THE ARDUOUS MARCH AND THE FEMINISATION OF SURVIVAL: GENDERED POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PRECARIOUS LIFE

The Arduous March (1994–1998) constitutes both a humanitarian catastrophe and a structural rupture in the political economy of the North Korean state. While demographic estimates suggest between 600,000 and 1,000,000 deaths during this period (Haggard & Noland, 2007), its analytical significance lies less in the number of fatalities than in the reconfiguration of governance, distribution and everyday life that followed the collapse of the socialist provisioning system. This rupture was exacerbated by the death of Kim Il-sung in 1994 and the broader geopolitical transformation brought by the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Communist Bloc, which stripped the North Korean system of many of its external economic and ideological supports. The breakdown of the Public Distribution System (PDS) resulted in food scarcity and gave rise to a reorganisation of the way North Koreans subsisted, grounded in informal economies, illicit circulation, and gendered labour adaptation.

Since the Arduous March, North Korean migration has undergone a profound structural transformation. In addition to causing mass starvation,

SINCE THE ARDUOUS MARCH, NORTH KOREAN MIGRATION HAS UNDERGONE A PROFOUND STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION. IN ADDITION TO CAUSING MASS STARVATION, THE COLLAPSE OF THE PDS LED TO THE EMERGENCE OF INFORMAL SURVIVAL ECONOMIES (*JANGMADANG*), IN WHICH GENDER BECAME A DECISIVE FACTOR SHAPING MOBILITY, EMPLOYMENT AND RISK

the collapse of the PDS led to the emergence of informal survival economies (*Jangmadang*), in which gender became a decisive factor shaping mobility, employment and risk. As a result of this transformation, women became the main agents of survival. While men remained largely dependent on formal state institutions such as the military, factories and administrative systems, women were increasingly participating in cross-border trade, informal markets and clandestine migration networks. This asymmetry reflects what Saskia Sassen (2000) describes as the "feminisation of survival", whereby women disproportionately absorb the burdens imposed by economic restructuring and government withdrawal. In the North Korean case, however, feminisation is not only economic but also spatial and embodied, producing forms of mobility that are simultaneously adaptive and profoundly precarious.

MIGRATION ACROSS THE NORTH KOREA–CHINA BORDER AND BEYOND IS THEREFORE NOT A LINEAR MOVEMENT FROM OPPRESSION TO FREEDOM BUT A FRAGMENTED AND MEDIATED PROCESS SHAPED BY BROKERS, INFORMAL ECONOMIES, RELIGIOUS INTERMEDIARIES AND DETENTION REGIMES

Migration across the North Korea–China border and beyond is therefore not a linear movement from oppression to freedom but a fragmented and mediated process shaped by brokers, informal economies, religious intermediaries and detention regimes. This condition can be theorised using Judith Butler's concept of "precarious life", (2004: 25) which emphasises that vulnerability is socially and politically produced and unevenly distributed. North Korean women experience a particularly intense form of precarity as their mobility is simultaneously enabled and constrained by transnational networks that expose them to trafficking, forced marriage, detention and systemic invisibility.

Migration also results in a transformation of subjectivity. As Iain Chambers argues, it constitutes a "journey of no return", continuously destabilising identity through displacement (1994: 5). For North Korean defectors, this trajectory unfolds across multiple thresholds—from internal displacement to clandestine movement through China and Southeast Asia, and finally to resettlement in South Korea or a third country. Each stage involves not only physical risk but also epistemological dislocation, which strips notions such as home, identity and belonging of their referential stability.

This destabilisation is intensified by what Vilém Flusser calls an "uncanny sensation" that makes the homeland seem simultaneously familiar and strange, present and absent (1995: 30). In the diasporic consciousness, North Korea is therefore not a stable empirical referent but a layered construct shaped by ideology, memory and mediated representation.

In this context, media plays a structurally central role. Alison Landsberg's (2004) concept of prosthetic memory provides a framework for understanding how mediated representations of migration circulate and are affectively internalised by global audiences. In the case of the North Korean diaspora, such narratives invite affective engagement with experiences of famine, escape and displacement. However, this process operates within what Guy Debord defines as the "society of the spectacle", in which lived experience is replaced by representation and social relations are increasingly mediated through images (1967: 12). The North Korean defector is thus transformed into a dual figure: both the subject of lived trauma and the object of global visual consumption.

The so-called "*Jangmadang* Generation" embodies this structural contradiction. Growing up in conditions of famine and state collapse while si-

multaneously being exposed to illicit South Korean media, including television dramas, films and popular music, this cohort occupies a structurally split cultural position. Exposure to these contradictory experiences generates a recursive cultural logic whereby South Korean media produces imaginaries of escape and modernity while defector narratives are later reabsorbed into the same media system as evidence of suffering, authenticity and survival. Within this loop, gender functions as a primary axis of visibility. Female defectors are disproportionately represented in both memoir and screen media, not only due to their demographic predominance in the real world but also because their narratives align with global narrative economies of vulnerability, endurance and redemption. Yet this visibility is structurally ambivalent, as it elicits recognition and empathy while simultaneously reinforcing hierarchies of suffering that position women as primary victims of trauma, while men are more readily associated with agency, reintegration and professional mobility.

MEMOIR BOOM: PERFORMING THE SELF FOR THE GLOBAL GAZE

The proliferation of North Korean defector memoirs over the past two decades constitutes what may be analytically described as a "memoir boom". These life narratives transform experiences of displacement into globally circulating accounts of trauma, survival and moral legibility. Paradoxically, the increase in the number of published testimonies has coincided with a marked decline in actual defection rates since the early 2010s, suggesting a shift in North Korean migration from physical movement to representational production. The defector has thus become both a geopolitical subject and a media narrative figure whose presence has been intensified by textual, visual and digital circulation.

A foundational text in this representational field is Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy* (2009), which established a dominant interpretive framework for North Korean life-writing. While grounded in journalistic ethnography, Demick's text positions famine as the central narrative axis around which North Korean subjectivity is rendered intelligible to global readers. In so doing, it risks limiting North Korean life to a restricted repertoire of suffering, deprivation and moral endurance. Individual biographies are interpreted less as unique stories than as fragments illustrative of systemic collapse, resulting in what can be understood as narrative homogenisation. Subsequent memoirs authored by defectors both reproduce and complicate this representational logic. In Hyeonseo Lee's *The Girl with Seven Names* (2015), identity is constructed through fragmentation and multiplicity rather than linear selfhood. The repeated renaming of the subject functions not just as a biographical detail but also as an index of ontological instability, whereby the self is constantly reconstituted across shifting geopolitical and institutional contexts. Identity emerges here as a survival strategy rather than a stable essence, distributed across borders, documents and acts of concealment.

By contrast, Yeonmi Park's *In Order to Live* (2015) foregrounds corporeal vulnerability and embodied trauma as its dominant narrative mode. The memoir repeatedly focuses on scenes of hunger, trafficking and sexual violence, producing a narrative economy in which the body becomes the primary site of political inscription (Park & Vollers, 2015). Survival is rendered legible through bodily suffering, aligning the text with global humanitarian expectations of recognisability. Rather than calling into question the authenticity of the testimony, this highlights the conditions under which trauma becomes narratively and commercially intelligible in global publishing markets. These memoirs operate within what Laura Mulvey theorises as a broader regime of "to-be-looked-at-ness", which positions female bodies as sites of visual and affective consumption

THE MEMOIR BECOMES A FORM OF CULTURAL CAPITAL. TESTIMONY IS BOTH AN ACT OF REMEMBRANCE AND A MODE OF PROFESSIONALISED SELF-PRODUCTION THAT TRANSLATES SURVIVAL INTO GLOBALLY RECOGNISABLE NARRATIVE VALUE

(1975: 837). Although memoir is a textual form, its circulation is embedded in visual economies that include interviews, lectures, documentaries and digital platforms. The female defector is therefore not only read but also visually framed as an object of humanitarian empathy.

This dynamic is further intensified by translation practices, editorial mediation and publishing infrastructures, particularly in markets in the English-speaking world. Memoirs are not simply transmitted but actively restructured through an editorial selection and narrative framing process that privileges coherence, emotional accessibility and moral determination. A regime of narrative legibility is thus established, to which end trauma must be organised into linear and affectively intelligible sequences in order to circulate effectively within global media systems.

Within this regime, the memoir becomes a form of cultural capital. Testimony is both an act of remembrance and a mode of professionalised self-production that translates survival into globally recognisable narrative value. This gives rise to a structural tension between agency and mediation: while defectors assert narrative authority over their lived experiences, their voices are simultaneously shaped by the expectations of humanitarian discourse and global media platforms that reward particular configurations of suffering.

This condition can be further explained with reference to Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (2004: 2), which describes how individuals acquire mediated memories of events they did not directly experience through cultural technologies such as film, television and memoir. In the case of North Korean defector narratives, prosthetic memory enables global audiences to inhabit famine, escape and displacement as affectively immediate experiences despite geographical and circumstantial distances. However, this mediated empathy is structurally embedded in what Guy Debord calls the "society of the spectacle" (1967: 12), in which social relations are increasingly mediated by images and representation substitutes lived experience. More than merely communicate trauma, defector memories circulate as spectacular objects that must remain legible, consumable and affectively productive in global attention economies.

The "*Jangmadang* Generation" embodies the historical contradiction underpinning this memoir boom. Their formative lives were shaped by the simultaneity of state collapse, famine and the clandestine circulation of South Korean media, including television dramas, films and popular music. In this recursive process of mediation, defector narratives are transformed from testimonies of individual experience into cultural sites where competing claims to authenticity, suffering and survival are asserted and negotiated.

THE NORTH KOREAN DEFECTOR NARRATIVE AND THE HALLYU SPECTACLE

The representation of North Korean defectors in South Korean media has undergone a significant transformation in the Hallyu era, shifting from Cold War ideological caricatures to affectively charged, globally legible figures embedded in transnational media circulation. This transformation, however, does not constitute a rupture so much as a reconfiguration of earlier representational regimes. As Aram Kim (2022) argues, gendered patterns of migration and representation were already evident in the post-Korean War period. From the 1950s through to the 1980s, in Sou-

th Korean cinema—particularly in Korean War films, including depictions of female partisans—and on television, North Koreans were depicted in accordance with rigid ideological frameworks shaped by Cold War politics. In these works, cinematic space, framing and narrative positioning were governed by a binary moral logic that clearly distinguished enemy from ally. By the 1990s, however, the figure of the North Korean soldier underwent a notable transformation, becoming central to the emergence of the South Korean blockbuster and its reconfiguration of national division as spectacle (Lee, 2023). What distinguishes the contemporary period is therefore not the presence of North Korea in South Korean media but the formal reorganisation of its visibility through camera work, colour schemes, perspective and spatial design under the conditions of global streaming capitalism.

ACROSS BOTH LITERARY AND AUDIOVISUAL FORMS, DEFECTION IS CONSISTENTLY REFRAMED THROUGH A KINSHIP-BASED ECONOMY OF OBLIGATION IN WHICH SURVIVAL LABOUR IS CARRIED OUT PRIMARILY BY THE FEMALE SUBJECT. WHETHER IN MEMOIR OR IN GLOBAL STREAMING DRAMAS, NARRATIVE LEGIBILITY DEPENDS UPON THE TRANSFORMATION OF GEOPOLITICAL RUPTURE INTO EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGIBLE FAMILY STRUCTURES

Beyond their thematic concern with North Korean displacement, defector memoirs and their cinematic reconfigurations in Hallyu media share structural similarities in their narrative organisation of survival. Across both literary and audiovisual forms, defection is consistently reframed through a kinship-based economy of obligation in which survival labour is carried out primarily by the female subject. Whether in memoir or in global streaming dramas, narrative legibility depends upon the transformation of geopolitical rupture into emotionally intelligible family structures.

In this sense, the memoir boom analysed in the previous section and the Hallyu spectacle examined here operate in the same representational regime. Both require the translation of displacement into a morally readable configuration of suffering, endurance and family repair. The defector is not an autonomous political subject but a figure whose legitimacy is secured through kinship responsibility, most often articulated through mother-child or sibling bonds in conditions of extreme precarity. This shared narrative grammar becomes visible when comparing textual life-writing and audiovisual representation. In both domains, female figures such as Kang Saebyeok are not exceptional constructions but rather condensations of a previously established logic: survival as obligation, mobility as sacrifice and defection as the deferred work of family restoration.

Building on this narrative grammar of kinship-based survival, Hallyu media products have formalised defection as a visual regime in which spatial design, cinematography and affective coding render displacement globally comprehensible. In this context, platforms such as Netflix intensify this transformation by demanding narrative legibility across linguistic and cultural boundaries. As a result, complex histories of displacement are condensed into a limited set of recognisable figures: the victim, the survivor or the morally exceptional subject. Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" (1967: 12) is central here, as lived experience is increasingly replaced by mediated representation.

This logic is most clearly visible in the series *Squid Game* (Ojingeo Geim, Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix: 2021-2025), where Kang Sae-byeok serves as a paradigmatic figure in the Hallyu-era defector imaginary. Her subjectivity is construct-

ed through restricted spatial access, as the camera consistently confines her within enclosed environments that limit orientation and reinforce the sense of structural precarity. Cinematic space is constructed in the series as an abstract competitive architecture rather than a socially grounded geography, eliminating any stable sense of belonging or territorial anchoring. At the level of camera work, Sae-byeok is frequently framed in tight close-ups and medium shots that limit our spatial awareness while intensifying emotional proximity. These shots isolate her face as the primary site of meaning production, reducing spatial depth and reinforcing the idea of psychological containment. The use of shallow depth of field further dissolves the background space, rendering the environment blurred and unreadable, which contributes to epistemic uncertainty. The series also relies heavily on desaturated colour palettes dominated by greys and cold blues, and muted lighting conditions that strip the environment of warmth and cultural specificity. This chromatic strategy constructs an affective atmosphere of exhaustion and survival, where colour itself becomes a marker of precarity.

Spatially, Sae-byeok's memory of North Korea is presented in fragmented form rather than as a coherent geography. In the episode "Gganbu" (#1x06: Kkanbu, Hwang Dong-hyuk, Netflix: 2021), this structure is condensed: Sae-byeok's recollection of returning to a devastated village does not unfold within a stable framework but emerges as isolated narrative fragments. The absence of establishing shots disrupts the spatial continuity, producing what can be understood as a *collapsed narrative space*, in which trauma displaces geography. This process aligns with Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory" (2004: 2), where audiences adopt mediated experiences of trauma through cultural representation. In this context, however, prosthetic memory is structured through formal visual constraints—framing, colour grading and spatial restriction—that determine how trauma is made legible. The gendered dimension of this construction is crucial. Sae-byeok's body is not eroticised, but it is affectively contained through the use of close-up, which transforms vulnerability into consumable emotional intensity. Her eventual death completes this transformation, converting her from a narrative agent into a symbolic figure in the spectacle.

GENDER ALSO STRUCTURES VISUAL REGIMES IN COMPETING SPATIAL FORMATIONS OF MIGRATION

A contrasting spatial logic appears in *Crash Landing on You* (Sarang-ŭi Pulsich'ak, Park Ji-eun, tvN: 2019), where North Korea is constructed through expansive rural landscapes, warm colour grading and symmetrical framing, producing an aestheticised rendering of geopolitical division. Cinematic space is thereby stabilised and softened, reducing political tension with pastoral familiarity. The use of warm tones and a balanced composition produces what can be described as a "soft spectacle" in which ideological difference is visually neutralised.

A gendered differentiation is also evident in the series, as the male protagonist Ri Jeong-hyeok is constructed as a figure of disciplined masculine power. His visual framing consistently emphasises composure, spatial control and protective sovereignty, positioning him as a stabilising presence within the narrative economy of division. In contrast to female characters, whose mobility is often articulated through vulnerability, emotional negotiation or romantic suspense, Ri's subjectivity is grounded in a contained authority that creates the impression of a character able to master rather than merely endure space. In this configuration, masculinity is aligned with spatial legibility and narrative agency, while femininity is more consistently coded through affective exposure and relational dependency.

Gender also structures visual regimes in competing spatial formations of migration. In *Extraordinary Attorney Woo* (Isanghan Byeonhosa U Yŏng-ŭ, Moon Ji-won, ENA: 2022), female defector figures are consistently framed through static medium-close shots, shallow spatial depth and high-key lighting, which isolate them in emotional rather than social space. Their visibility is thus organised through an affective regime of proximity that restricts spatial extension, positioning femininity within enclosed circuits of recognition and emotional legibility. By contrast, *Doctor Stranger* (Dakteo Ibang-in, Park Jin-woo, Kim Joo, SBS: 2014) constructs male defector subjectivity through expanded spatial mobility, clinical environments and narrative-coded professional agency within transnational medical and political infrastructures. Dynamic camera movements and mobile tracking shots convey a sense of spatial permeability, suggesting that male characters have access to institutional networks and circulatory pathways that extend beyond their immediate environment. Mobility here is not merely physical but structurally embedded in regimes of access, expertise and institutional negotiation.

These formal differences suggest that gender in Hallyu media is encoded not only at the level of narrative but also through distinct spatial regimes of visibility. Camera movements, framing and depth of field all contribute to the distribution of mobility and constraints, producing a gendered hierarchy of spatial legibility that determines a body's degree of freedom or containment. Understood in relation to the broader Hallyu spectacle, these configurations do not eliminate ideology but reconfigure it through formal systems that determine how defection is made visible in the first place. Camera, colour and spatial composition operate as regulatory devices of perception, structuring the conditions under which North Korean defection is rendered emotionally intelligible, narratively functional and politically readable for global media audiences.

SPATIAL REGIMES OF MIGRATION: CINEMATIC INTERVENTIONS AND THE LIMITS OF SPECTACLE

While mainstream K-dramas often operate within the logics of spectacle and global consumption, South Korean and transnational films offer alternative aesthetic strategies aimed at negotiating and at times resisting these dominant modes of representation. These cinematic interventions expose the limits of the Hallyu spectacle by foregrounding the material, spatial and affective dimensions of migration that are often flattened in mainstream narratives. A key strategy used in these films to differentiate them is their treatment of space as an active rather than neutral cinematic force. Unlike the compressed narrative spaces of television drama, where geography is subordinated to plot acceleration, these films construct space as fragmented, unstable and structurally meaningful. Migration is thus not simply movement across territory; rather, it is an experience of spatial discontinuity.

In *My Name Is Loh Kiwan* (Nae Ireumeun Loh Kiwan, Kim Hee-jin, Netflix: 2024), European space is constructed as bureaucratic and affectively cold, structured through institutional imagery rather than depictions of cultural belonging. The repeated use of shallow focus renders backgrounds blurred or inaccessible, keeping the spatial integration unstable. The space is never fully legible; it is mediated by paperwork, waiting rooms and fragmented encounters. The film's colour palette reinforces this sense of estrangement, relying on cold, desaturated blues and grey-green tones that suppress warmth and intensify emotional distance. Colour functions here not as an aesthetic surface but as a structural index of alienation, creating an environment that visually precludes any possibility of belonging. The camera movements intensify this condition, as handheld medium shots following the protagonist generate a paradox of mobility without orientation:

movement is tracked, but a stable sense of spatial control is withheld from both the character and the viewer. Corridors, narrow streets and institutional interiors dominate the frames, resulting in a spatial recursion where characters circulate in constrained rather than expansive settings. This spatial logic is also gendered. Male subjectivity is given limited navigational agency through the use of medium shots that permit partial mobility, whereas female characters are more frequently confined to tight close-ups that isolate them in an emotional rather than a geographic space. Bodily mobility is thus unevenly distributed between genders.

THIS INTERROGATION OF SPACE IS NOT LIMITED TO FICTION FILMS, BUT CAN ALSO BE FOUND IN DOCUMENTARY AND HYBRID FORMS

In the film *On the Way to South* (Nam-ŭro Kanŭn Kil, Kim Sang-rae, 2025), the spatial logic is based on an expansive environment instead of institutional fragmentation. The Mongolian desert becomes a space of exposure where the geography itself exerts pressure on the body. Extreme long shots render human figures tiny in vast horizontal landscapes, subordinating the body to its immense surroundings. This setting conveys a persistent sense of vulnerability: figures are repeatedly positioned at the edges or the bottom of the frame, surrounded by overwhelming expanses of sand and sky. This space here is elemental rather than institutional, defined by endurance rather than belonging. The film's colour design amplifies this condition through muted earth tones and high natural contrast, creating an environment defined by barrenness, heat and exhaustion. The colour is environmental rather than symbolic, embedding precarity in the material texture of landscape. The camera work is restrained, with static and slow-moving shots that depict the landscape far beyond human action. Movement becomes repetitive and exhausting, collapsing the protagonist's experience of space and time into a state of physical fatigue. There is no stable viewpoint; the camera remains grounded, aligning our perception with the limitations of the human bodies rather than with a visual mastery of the landscape.

This interrogation of space is not limited to fiction films, but can also be found in documentary and hybrid forms. In *Beyond Utopia* (Madeleine Gavin, 2023), migration is constructed with handheld cinematography, fragmented spatial continuity and night-vision colour grading, producing a visual field evocative of surveillance, in which space is partially visible but never fully accessible. Borders are inferred rather than shown, reinforcing the precarity of movement. The inclusion in Gavin's film of the North Korean defector Hyeonseo Lee, author of *The Girl With Seven Names* (2015), blurs the boundaries between testimony and mediation. Rather than focusing on humanitarian intermediaries, it turns to the defection process itself as a form of exposure. It follows a North Korean family along clandestine escape routes, rendering them visible primarily as figures of survival under constant surveillance.

An even more intense expression of this logic can be found in *Humint* (Ryoo Seung-wan, 2026), which focuses on defections across the Russia–North Korea border and foregrounds the intelligence infrastructures established to monitor human movement. In this film, migration is primarily framed not as a question of survival or humanitarian rescue but as an operative field of knowledge extraction. Bodies become sites for the production, circulation and monetisation of information in transnational security and trafficking networks. In this configuration, defection is structured according to a humint (human intelligence) logic in which human subjects function simulta-

neously as vulnerable bodies and informational assets. Gendered precarity is central to this system, as trafficking economies, coercion and family rescue imperatives have a disproportionate impact on female mobility. Visibility is not merely representational but also operational, embedded in regimes that convert lived experience into actionable intelligence. Positioned between observational documentary and slow cinema modes, *Humint* marks a transition from the visibility of escape to the operationalisation of human movement as intelligence related to border regimes.

In contrast, *Little Pyongyang* (Rittŭl P'yŏngyang, Roxy Rezvany, 2017) adopts a more observational spatial logic. Through static framing, symmetrical composition and subdued lighting, the film constructs a stable yet layered environment in which memory, everyday life and diasporic temporality all coexist. Rather than a rupture, migration is depicted as a continuity embedded in ordinary time. The camera holds instead of following, allowing subjects to inhabit the space without narrative acceleration. This results in a temporal density in which repetition, suspension and incompletion resist emotional compression. Ambiguity is preserved rather than resolved, rejecting full legibility as an aesthetic principle.

In all these works, what emerges is not a unified aesthetic but a differentiated field of spatial regimes: institutional fragmentation, exposure to the environment, the visibility of surveillance, intelligence extraction and observational duration. Despite their formal differences, these cinematic forms remain shaped by the broader conditions of global media circulation, where visibility is unevenly distributed and structurally mediated. The Hallyu spectacle, therefore, is not a single genre, functioning instead as a prevailing visual logic against which alternative spatialities are defined, negotiated or partially withheld.

CONCLUSION: FROM HALLYU SPECTACLE TO DIGITAL AGENCY

The North Korean diaspora, emerging from the historical rupture of the "Arduous March", has evolved into a complex and globally mediated phenomenon shaped by the intersection of gender, migration and media circulation. In this article it has been argued that the figure of the North Korean defector must be understood not simply as a political subject or humanitarian category, but as a culturally produced and mediated figure whose visibility is structured by the logics of the Korean Wave and the broader global media economy. In memoirs, television dramas, films and documentaries, the defector's narrative has been transformed into what Guy Debord (1967) conceptualises as the "society of the spectacle," in which lived experience is reorganised into forms of representation designed for consumption. In this context, a "spectacle of survival" emerges as a central paradigm: trauma is narrated but also aestheticised through recognisable narrative arcs and visual conventions that render it intelligible to transnational audiences. While such representations facilitate global visibility of North Korean defectors, they also risk flattening the complexity of individual experience into emotionally legible tropes.

At the same time, this study has shown that the spectacle is not a monolithic structure. From the combined perspectives of Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze (1975) and Alison Landberg's concept of prosthetic memory (2004), representation can be understood as a site of tension between empathy and objectification, identification and distance, agency and mediation. Female defectors, in particular, occupy a paradoxical position: they are highly visible in global media systems, yet this visibility is frequently structured through gendered regimes of affect and containment in which the female body becomes a site of emotional legibility and narrative constraints.

The analysis of memoirs has demonstrated how defector narratives are shaped by both personal testimony and global publishing infrastructures, resulting in what may be described as performative authenticity. Although authors such as Hyeonseo Lee and Yeonmi Park exercise narrative agency, their accounts are also mediated through editorial and market logics that privilege certain configurations of suffering, resilience and redemption. In this sense, memoir becomes a site where lived experience is translated into globally readable narrative forms that both enable and delimit expression.

Similarly, the analysis of Hallyu screen media has shown how the defector is reconfigured as a transnational figure in platform-driven economies. In globally circulating series such as *Squid Game*, North Korean characters function as condensed figures of trauma and resilience, enabling forms of prosthetic memory while remaining shaped by the aesthetic demands of global streaming culture. As a result, defection becomes both visible and constrained within regimes that prioritise emotional clarity, narrative compression and visual immediacy.

The cinematic and documentary interventions discussed in this article offer important counterpoints to this dominant logic. Through alternative uses of space, temporality and visual form, films such as *My Name Is Loh Kiwan* and *On the Way to South* challenge the immediacy of spectacle by foregrounding fragmentation, endurance and exposure to the environment. Documentaries such as *Beyond Utopia* and *Little Pyongyang* further complicate this field by oscillating between a visibility of surveillance and observational restraint. Yet even these alternative forms are still entangled in global circuits of production, funding and distribution that structure what can be seen and how it can be seen. The transition to digital platforms marks a further transformation in this representational landscape. Social media environments such as YouTube and Instagram have allowed some defectors to become active producers of their own narratives, shifting from objects of representation to subjects of self-mediation. This introduces new forms of agency and immediacy in storytelling. However, as Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics suggests (2008), visibility itself is a regulated field of power. Algorithmic infrastructures prioritise emotionally engaging and visually consumable content, thereby reproducing many of the same logics of selection, exposure and commodification that structure the Hallyu spectacle.

This article has proposed that the representation of North Korean defectors can be understood through three overlapping regimes: the ideological cipher; the spectacular icon; and the digital subject. Rather than forming a linear progression, these regimes coexist in a layered representational field in which Cold War imaginaries, Hallyu-era spectacle, and platform-mediated self-representation intersect. In all three, gender remains a central structuring axis, shaping the distribution of visibility, agency and affect. While this study has primarily focused on cinematic and televisual forms of representation, the increasing role of digital and social media platforms in the creation of self-mediated defector narratives suggests a shift in the conditions of visibility beyond traditional Hallyu structures.

WHILE THE INCREASED VISIBILITY OF NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS IN GLOBAL MEDIA MARKS A SIGNIFICANT MOVE AWAY FROM THEIR HISTORICAL MARGINALISATION, THIS VISIBILITY MUST BE CRITICALLY INTERROGATED. VISIBILITY DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY TRANSLATE INTO EMPOWERMENT; IT CAN ALSO PRODUCE NEW FORMS OF COMMODIFICATION, EMOTIONAL SCRIPTING AND EPISTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

While the increased visibility of North Korean defectors in global media marks a significant move away from their historical marginalisation, this visibility must be critically interrogated. Visibility does not automatically translate into empowerment; it can also produce new forms of commodification, emotional scripting and epistemic constraints. Studies of North Korean defectors should therefore not be limited to examining their representation, but should also attend to the conditions in which that representation becomes possible and meaningful. Such an approach requires an ethical and analytical shift beyond the consumption of trauma toward a recognition of defectors as situated political and cultural agents who actively participate in shaping the narratives that make their lives intelligible. In this sense, the future of North Korean diaspora studies lies not only in analysing representation, but in rethinking the aesthetic, institutional and technological conditions that structure it. ■

NOTES

* This research was supported by the 2024 Korean Studies Grant Program of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2024-R-073). This work is also part of the project TRAMEVIC (Transnational Memories in East Asian Visual Culture, Ref. CIGE/2023/066), funded by the Valencian government's Department of Education, Culture, Universities and Employment.

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THE NORTH KOREAN DIASPORA AND KOREAN POPULAR CULTURE: GENDERED MIGRATION IN DEFECTOR MEMOIRS AND SCREEN MEDIA

Abstract

This study examines the gendered dimensions of the North Korean diaspora as represented and circulated in Korean popular culture through defector memoirs, interviews, K-dramas, films and digital and social media, situating these narratives in the contexts of transnational memory, historical tensions and migration studies. A large wave of displacement following the "Arduous March" famine of the mid-1990s—during which hundreds of thousands died—is framed by the legacies of Japanese colonial rule, the unresolved Korean War and the peninsula's enduring Cold War-shaped division. Since the early 2000s, women have represented over 70 percent of defectors to South Korea, yet their experiences of sexual violence, human trafficking and forced marriage in China—where they are classified as illegal migrants rather than refugees—remain underexamined. This study analyses how female defectors construct survival narratives and negotiate visibility across transmedia platforms embedded in the Korean Wave. These narratives illuminate the intersections of personal displacement and East Asian geopolitics, while digital media amplify complex forms of witnessing for global audiences. Applying frameworks of trauma memory, witness narrative, and transnational media studies, the article demonstrates how women's migration stories in Korean popular culture challenge conventional notions of victimhood, heroism and national belonging.

Key words

North Korean diaspora; Gendered migration; Defector narratives; Collective memory; Transnational media; Korean popular culture; Defector memoirs; Screen media.

LA DIÁSPORA NORCOREANA Y LA CULTURA POPULAR COREANA: LA MIGRACIÓN POR MOTIVOS DE GÉNERO EN LAS MEMORIAS DE LOS DESERTORES Y LOS MEDIOS AUDIOVISUALES

Resumen

Este estudio examina las dimensiones de género de la diáspora norcoreana tal y como se representa y difunde en la cultura popular coreana a través de memorias de desertores, entrevistas, dramas coreanos, películas y medios digitales y sociales, situando estas narrativas en el contexto de la memoria transnacional, las tensiones históricas y los estudios sobre migración. La gran ola de desplazamientos que siguió a la hambruna de mediados de la década de 1990, conocida como la «Marcha Ardua», durante la cual murieron cientos de miles de personas en medio del colapso económico y la muerte de Kim Il-sung, se enmarca en el legado del dominio colonial japonés, la Guerra de Corea sin resolver y la división de la península, moldeada por la Guerra Fría. Desde principios de la década de 2000, las mujeres representan más del 70 % de los desertores a Corea del Sur, pero sus experiencias de violencia sexual, trata de personas y matrimonios forzados en China —donde se las clasifica como migrantes ilegales en lugar de refugiadas— siguen sin ser suficientemente investigadas. Este estudio analiza cómo las mujeres desertoras construyen narrativas de supervivencia y negocian su visibilidad a través de plataformas transmedia integradas en la ola coreana. Estas narrativas iluminan las intersecciones entre el desplazamiento personal y la geopolítica de Asia Oriental, mientras que los medios digitales amplifican formas complejas de testimonio para el público global. Aplicando marcos conceptuales sobre la memoria traumática, la narrativa testimonial y los estudios transnacionales sobre los medios de comunicación, el artículo demuestra cómo las historias de migración de las mujeres en la cultura popular coreana desafían las nociones convencionales de victimismo, heroísmo y pertenencia nacional.

Palabras clave

Diáspora norcoreana; Migración por motivos de género; Relatos de desertores; Memoria colectiva; Medios de comunicación transnacionales; Cultura popular coreana; Memorias de desertores; Medios audiovisuales.

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Article reference

Lee, H. (2026). The North Korean Diaspora and Korean Popular Culture: Gendered Migration in Defector Memoirs and Screen Media. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, *42*, 138-153. https://doi.org/10.63700/1394

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Referencia de este artículo

Lee, H. (2026). La diáspora norcoreana y la cultura popular coreana: la migración por motivos de género en las memorias de los desertores y los medios audiovisuales. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, *42*, 138-153. https://doi.org/10.63700/1394

recibido/received: 18.12.2025 | *aceptado/accepted:* 22.04.2026

Edita / Published by

associació cineforum L'ATALANTE

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ISSN 1885-3730 (print) /2340-6992 (digital) **DL** V-5340-2003 **WEB** www.revistaatalante.com **MAIL** info@revistaatalante.com