

Heroic Representation and Personality Cult in Han Sul Ya's Gaeseon: The Construction of Young Kim Il Sung in Early North Korean Literature

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of the young Kim Il Sung as a heroic figure in Han Sul Ya's short story Gaeseon which was published in 1948 and analyzes how such representation contributes to the construction of personality cult discourse in early North Korean literature. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method using close reading and textual analysis. The primary data consist of narrative descriptions, dialogues, and textual passages related to Kim Il Sung's characterization and the settings presented in the short story. The findings reveal that Gaeseon constructs Kim Il Sung's heroic image through various narrative strategies. First, familial narratives, particularly through the character of Mother Changju, establish emotional closeness and legitimacy by presenting Kim Il Sung from the perspective of a close family member. Second, the idealization of Kim Il Sung's physical appearance, intellectual superiority, patriotism, and benevolent personality portrays him as an exemplary and flawless leader. Third, the incorporation of historical settings and biographical details blurs the boundary between fiction and historical reality, thereby strengthening the credibility of the heroic narrative. Finally, the persistent use of symbolic appellations and glorifying representations elevates Kim Il Sung beyond the status of an ordinary political leader and transforms him into a paternal and almost sacred figure. These findings suggest that Gaeseon functions not merely as a literary work intended for aesthetic appreciation, but also as an ideological apparatus that contributed to legitimizing Kim Il Sung's leadership and institutionalizing personality cult discourse during the formative years of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Keyword: Gaeseon, Han Sul Ya, Kim Il Sung, North Korean Literature, Personality Cult

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948 marked not only the political division of the Korean Peninsula but also the emergence of distinct literary traditions in North and South Korea. This political separation not only resulted in different political and economic systems but also gave rise distinct literary traditions in South Korea and North Korea. While South Korean literature developed in diverse directions and embraced various themes and literary styles, North Korean literature evolved under strict state supervision and became closely intertwined with political ideology. Literary works in North Korea were expected not only to fulfill aesthetic functions but also to disseminate socialist values and support state policies (Lee, et. al., 2012). Consequently,



literature became an important medium through which the state promoted political legitimacy and shaped public consciousness.

The ideological orientation of North Korean literature became particularly prominent during the early post-liberation period (1945-1950), commonly referred to as *Minju Geonseolgi* or the period of democratic nation-building (Shin & Oh, 2007). During this period, literary works primarily focused on educating the people, fostering patriotism, and promoting socialist ideals. The figure of Kim Il Sung frequently appeared as the central character in literary works because he was portrayed as a revolutionary hero who had liberated Korea from Japanese colonial rule and subsequently led the establishment of the DPRK (Lee, et. al., 2012). Such literary representations contributed significantly to the formation of Kim Il Sung's public image and later developed into personality cult in North Korea. According to Lim (2015), the personality cult surrounding Kim Il Sung was systematically constructed through various cultural and political apparatuses, including literature, education, and mass media. Literature, therefore, functioned not merely as an aesthetic medium but also as an ideological apparatus that reinforced the legitimacy of political leadership.

While Western scholarship frequently analyzes these phenomena as 'personality cult (Lim, 2015; Sundahl, 2023), within Korean literary historiography, this representational practice laid the foundational construction for what would later be formally institutionalized as Suryong Hyeongsang Munhak (Leader-representation Literature) (Jeon, 2014; Oh, 2009). In North Korean literary theory, this genre elevated the supreme leader (suryeong) into an aesthetically perfect, ethical archetype, and philosophical guiding light for society (Jeon, 2014). Although suryeong hyeongsang munhak was fully codified as state orthodoxy following the consolidation of the Juche ideology in the late 1960s (Oh, 2009), scholars have identified Han Sul Ya's early post-liberation texts, *Gaeseon*, as the seminal prototype that inaugurated this literary lineage during the *Minju Geonseolgi* era (Nam, 2012a; Koo, 2023).

North Korean literature after liberation can generally be divided into several periods: *Minju Geonseolgi* (1945-1950), *Joguk Haebang Jeonjaenggi* (1950-1953), *Jeonhu Bukguwa Sahoejuui Geonseolgi* (1953-1958), *Cheollima Undonggi* (1958-1967), and the period marked by the full implementation of the *Juche* ideology after 1967 (Shin & Oh, 2007). Among these periods, *Minju Geonseolgi* is particularly significant since it represented the initial stage of constructing the ideological foundation of the newly established state. Literary works produced during this period were closely associated with the state's efforts to introduce Kim Il Sung to Korean people and to legitimize his leadership.

One of the most prominent writers who actively participated in this ideological project was Han Sul Ya. He was the chairman of the DPRK's Federation of Literature and Art (KFLA) from 1948 to 1962 (Myers, 1994). As one of the North Korea's leading literary figures, Han Sul Ya produced numerous literary works that glorified Kim Il sung and promoted socialist values (Shin & Oh, 2007). One of his notable works is the short story *Gaeseon*, first published in 1948, the same year in which Kim Il Sung officially became the leader of North Korea. The story narrates Kim Il Sung's triumphant return to

Pyeongyang after years of anti-Japanese struggle and his reunion with his aunt, *Mother Changju*. Through this simple family reunion, Han Sul Ya presents Kim Il Sung as a charismatic, patriotic, compassionate, and heroic leader. Moreover, the story incorporates historical settings and biographical details that closely resemble those described in Kim Il Sung's autobiography *With the Century* (Kim, 1994), thereby blurring the boundary between literary fiction and historical reality.

Previous studies on Han Sul Ya's post-liberation literature has explored the construction of Kim Il Sung's political image through textual, ideological, and institutional perspectives. Nam (2012a, 2012b) analyzed the textual variations of Han's works such as *Hyeollo* and *Gaeseon*, demonstrating that early representation of Kim Il Sung's anti-Japanese armed struggle were initially grounded in the international communist line and historical realities. It was later revisioned in the 1950s and 1960s by formalizing the idolization of the leader through the additional description of Kim Il Sung's appearance and ideological symbolism. From a spatial and cultural perspective, Kim (2025) highlighted that Han deployed *Gaeseon* and *Hyeollo* as strategic rhetorical devices to dismantle colonial Seoul-centrism, elevate regional northern locality, and legitimize Pyongyang as the new revolutionary center, while crucially utilizing the maternal figure of Mother Changju as an emotional proxy for the Korean populace. Furthermore, Bae (2024) documented the institutional dynamics during Minju-Geonseolgi, showing how former KAPF writers under Han Sul Ya aligned with party directives to foster Kim Il Sung-centered patriotism, while Koo (2023) and Ko (2019) demonstrated how Han's later peace and anti-imperialist discourses evolved as ideological extensions of state legitimacy.

However, while previous studies have primarily examined Han Sul Ya's works through diachronic textual revisions across decades (Nam, 2012a), macro-political alignments (Bae, 2024), or subsequent wartime discourses (Ko, 2019; Koo, 2023), limited critical attention has been paid to the internal narrative architecture of the original 1948 edition of *Gaeseon*. Particularly, how the 1948 edition constructs the heroic legitimacy of Kim Il Sung through narrative strategies. In particular, the ways in which characterization, setting, and familial narratives contribute to the formation of personality cult discourse in early North Korean literature remain underexplored.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the representation of the young Kim Il Sung as a heroic figure in Han Sul Ya's *Gaeseon* (1948) and to analyze how such representation contributes to the construction of personality cult discourse in early North Korean literature. By analyzing characterization and setting through the perspective of personality cult, this study argues that *Gaeseon* functions not merely as a literary text but also as an ideological instrument designed to legitimize Kim Il Sung's leadership during the formative years of DPRK.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the representation of Kim Il Sung in Han Sul Ya's short story *Gaeseon* (1948), taken from the compilation book of North Korean literature called *Munhakkwajisongsa Hanguk munhak seonjip, 1900–2000: Bukhan munhak* (Shin & Oh, 2007). The primary data of this study consist of narrative descriptions, dialogues, and textual passages

related to Kim Il Sung's characterization and the settings presented in the short story. The data source is the first edition of *Gaeseon* published in 1948 by Han Sul Ya. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and previous studies concerning North Korean literature, personality cult, and Kim Il Sung.

The data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques. First, the researchers repeatedly read the short story to identify textual segments depicting Kim Il Sung's physical appearance, personality traits, familial relationships, and historical settings. Second, the identified data were classified according to the analytical categories of characterization and setting. The data were then analyzed qualitatively by interpreting how these narrative elements contribute to the construction of Kim Il Sung's heroic image. Finally, the findings were interpreted through the perspective of personality cult to explain how *Gaeseon* functions as an ideological instrument in legitimizing Kim Il Sung's leadership during the early period of the DPRK.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FAMILIAL NARRATIVE AS A STRATEGY OF HEROIC LEGITIMATION

One of the most distinctive narrative strategies employed by Han Sul Ya in *Gaeseon* is the use of familial relationships to construct and legitimize the heroic image of Kim Il Sung. Unlike many political narratives that portray national leaders through military achievements or ideological discourses alone, *Gaeseon* presents Kim Il Sung primarily through the perspective of a close family member, namely Mother Changju. This narrative choice is particularly significant because it enables the author to introduce Kim Il Sung not only as a revolutionary hero but also as a family member whose virtues are recognized by those closest to him. In late 1945, Kim Il Sung was still unfamiliar to many Koreans because he had spent many years fighting outside the country (Pihlainen, 2017; Tertitskiy, 2015). By positioning Mother Changju as one of the central figures in the story, Han Sul Ya creates a narrative framework that simultaneously humanizes and glorifies Kim Il Sung.

Mother Changju occupies a prominent position in the story as both a family member and an ordinary citizen of Joseon. In the story, she is repeatedly referred to as "Aunt (*sukmo*)", emphasizing her kinship with Kim Il Sung. At the same time, she is also addressed as "Mother Changju (*Changju Emoni*)", a naming practice commonly found in Korean society in which married women are identified through the name of their eldest son. This dual appellation serves two important functions. First, it situates Mother Changju as a representative of ordinary Korean people who experiences Japanese colonial rule and long for a great leader of the country. Second, her familial relationship with Kim Il Sung creates an impression that the depictions of Kim Il Sung in the story originate from someone who has known him since childhood. Therefore, the narrative appears more convincing to readers because the positive portrayal of Kim Il Sung as a leader is presented by his closest family member.

Furthermore, Mother Changju is consistently depicted as a devoted admirer of Kim Il Sung. Despite her husband's objections and various physical obstacles, she remains determined to attend Kim Il

Sung's public speech and meet her nephew. Her unwavering determination is illustrated in the following excerpt:

”에라, 장군은 어머니도 없고 숙모도 업다더냐. 어머니 안 계신 장군이니 숙모가 어머니를 대신하면 못쓴다는 법 대전통편에도 있다는 말 못 들었다. 온 조선 사람을 위해서 목숨을 내놓고 싸운 장군이 왜놈과 땅임자 놈들에게 한평생 구박받고 살아온 숙모를 괘시할 까닭이 없는 것이다. 하물며 오늘은 온 평양 사람이 제 마음대로 장군을 보러 가는데 내가 어찌 못 간단 말이나.”하고 주눅 좋은 숙모는 기어이 성수를 참지 못해서 머리를 새로 빗고 새 옷을 꺼내 입고 집을 나서 20 리 허위단심 대숨에 죄어 걸어 바로 시내에 들어가 기림리행 전차를 잡아탔다.” (Page 136)

[“era, jangguneun eomeonido eopgo sukmodo eopdadeonya. eomeoni an gyesin jangguni sukmoga eomeonireul daesinhamyeon motsseundaneun beop daejeontongpyeonedo itdaneun mal mot deureotda. on joseon saram-eul wihaeseo moksumeul naenokho ssaun jangguni waenomgwa ttangimja nomdeurege hanpyeongsaeng gubakbatgo saraon sukmoreul gwalsihal kkadaki eopneun geosida. hamulmyeo oneuleun on pyeongyang sarami je maeumdaero jangguneul boreo ganeunde naega eoiji mot gandan marinya.”hago junok joheun sukmoneun gi-eoi seongsureul chamji mothaeseo meorireul saero bitgo sae oseul kkeonae ipgo jibeul naseo 20ri heowidansim daesume jo-eeo georeo baro sinae-e deureoga girimrihaeng jeonchareul japatatda.”]

“Look, is it because General Kim Il Sung doesn't have mother means that he also doesn't have an aunt? I never heard that rule in Daejeontongpyeon which stated that an aunt couldn't replace the role of the dead mother of General Kim Il Sung. General Kim Il Sung has fought and risked his life for the sake Joseon people have no reason to dismiss his aunt who has been treated unpleasantly by the occupiers and landowners. Besides, today all Pyeongyang people can go to see General Kim, Il Sung. But why can't I?” said Mother Changju who finally with brave and unstoppable spirit, combed her hair, put on new clothes, and left the house. She traveled as far as 20 ri to the city and then took the tram towards Gimri.”

The significance of Mother Changju becomes even more apparent when her characterization is compared with the figure of Hyon Yang Sin, Kim Il Sung's real aunt, as described in Kim Il Sung's autobiography *With the Century* (Kim, 1994). Although it is difficult to determine whether Mother Changju directly represents Hyon Yang Sin, several striking similarities can be identified between the two figures. Both are portrayed as elderly female relatives who eagerly await Kim Il Sung's return and eventually reunite with him during the Triumphal Return event. The resemblance between the fictional and autobiographical narratives blurs the boundary between fiction and historical reality, thus strengthening the impression that the events depicted in *Gaeseon* closely reflect actual historical experiences.

Beyond her psychological and familial devotion, Mother Changju's physical journey to the rally embodies a profound geopolitical and spatial reorientation in early post-liberation literature. As the text describes, she undertakes a strenuous journey from the rural periphery of Mangyongdae, walking twenty *ri* (approximately eight kilometers) before boarding a modern electric tramway bound for Gimri Stadium in downtown Pyongyang. This physical trajectory mirrors the broader spatial

mobilization of the colonized masses transitioning into socialist citizens. More significantly, as Kim (2025) demonstrates in his study of Han Sul Ya's post-liberation political geography, this narrative setting actively participates in dismantling the colonial legacy of Seoul as the center of Korea. Throughout the colonial era, Seoul operated as the uncontested imperial metropole and cultural hegemony, fostering an entrenched regional hierarchy that marginalized northern provincial intellectuals. This alienation fueled Han Sul Ya's deep-seated antagonism toward Seoul-based literary elites (Kim, 2025). In *Gaeseon*, Han structurally counters this hierarchy by elevating Pyongyang as the authentic, sacred epicenter of revolutionary rebirth.

...That day I at the meeting place I met my aunt, Hyon Yang Sin, and my maternal uncle, Kang Yong Sok, when the ceremony was over. When I look back upon the moment when I met my aunt after descending from the platform, tears still well up in my eyes.

I did not know how the old woman forced her way through the jostling crowds, but she was in my car shedding tears. I was told later that Ju To Il had seen her squeezing her way through gritted teeth towards the platform and brought her to the car. She grasped my hands and said with deep emotion: "Nephew, how many years has it been?" "Aunt, you have had so much trouble looking after a large family alone!" I said in greeting. (Paragraph 1—2).

Mother Changju's persistence demonstrates not only familial affection but also profound admiration for Kim Il Sung as a national leader. Throughout the story, she repeatedly expresses her pride, emotional excitement, and deep respect toward him. When she finally sees Kim Il Sung, she becomes overwhelmed with emotion and finds it is difficult to remain calm. Her emotional response suggests that Kim Il Sung is no longer perceived merely as a beloved nephew but as a charismatic leader who has returned to bring hope and prosperity to the Korean nation.

“가만히 가만히 장군의 숙모가 어째 이 모양일까.”

하고 숙모는 가슴을 만지며 힘써 돋우랴하려 하나 온몸은 자꾸 떨리기만 하였다. 숙모는 바싹 귀를 기울이고 장군의 말을 한마디 한마디 새겨볼 수는 없으나 그 소리를 듣는 사이에, 소련 군대가 들어오자 거미새끼 흩어지듯 뿔뿔이 쫓겨가던 광경이 다시금 선히 보이고 그 환경 가운데서 번개같이 휘날리는 장군의 모양이 눈앞에 어른거렸다. ... (Page 140)

[“*gamanhi gamanhi janggunui sukmoga eojjae i moyangilkka.*”

hago sukmoneun gaseumeul manjimyeo himsseo dochubalbeuryeo hana onmomeun jakku tteolligiman hayeotda. sukmoneun bassak gwireul gi-urigo janggunui mareul hanmadi hanmadi saegyeobol suneun eoepuna geu sorireul deutneun saie, soryeon gundaega deureo-oja geomisaekki heuteojideut ppulppuri jiotgyeogadeon gwanggyeongi dasigeum seonhi bo-igo geu gwangyeong gaundeseo beon-gaegachi hwinallineun janggunui moyangi nun-ape eoreungeoryeotda.]

“*Calm down, calm down..... is this the aunt of General Kim Il Sung?*”

She rubbed her chest and tried to calm herself down. However, all of her body was always shaking. She tried to listen carefully and remembered every single word came out from Kim Il

Sung, but she couldn't do it. When she did it, the Soviet army entered, and the sight of the little spider being driven away again became a mystery, and the shape of the general fluttering from its body was visible in the face."

From the perspective of Personality cult, Mother Changju's admiration functions as a narrative device through which readers are encouraged to share similar feelings of reverence toward Kim Il Sung. The emotional bond between aunt and nephew humanizes Kim Il Sung by presenting him as caring family member, while simultaneously elevating him as a heroic savior of the nation. Through this familial narrative, Han Sul Ya successfully transforms a private family reunion into a symbolic encounter between the leader and the people. Therefore, the depiction of Mother Changju can be interpreted as a strategy to legitimize Kim Il Sung's leadership and to foster emotional attachment between the leader and the North Korean people during the formative years of the DPRK.

CONSTRUCTING THE IDEALIZED BODY OF KIM IL SUNG

Another significant strategy employed by Han Sul Ya in *Gaeseon* is the construction of Kim Il Sung as an idealized and flawless leader through the depiction of his physical appearance and personal qualities. Throughout the narrative, Kim Il Sung is represented not merely as a political leader or military hero but as an exemplary figure who embodies both physical perfection and moral excellence. Such idealization is characteristic of North Korean literary works during the early post-liberation period, in which literary representations of political leaders often served ideological purposes by presenting them as role models for the people.

The idealization of Kim Il Sung begins with the depiction of his physical appearance. In the story, Mother Changju recalls Kim Il Sung's childhood appearance with great affection and admiration. She remembers his face as resembling the full moon (*daeboreum*), accompanied by a warm smile, beautiful dimples, distinctive snaggletooth, and bright eyes that convey intelligence and wisdom.

돌아서 만경대 집으로 걸어나가는 창주 어머니의 눈에는 어린 시절 장군의 얼굴이 대보름 달덩이처럼 떠올랐다.

그 잘 웃는 얼굴, 웃을 때마다 두 볼에 파지는 인정머리 있고 아름다워 보이던 보조개와, 유달리 애티 있게 보이던 덧니, 억실억실하고 무한히 슬기 있어 보이는 눈... 이런 것이 어제인 듯 역력히 머릿속에 다시금 그려졌다. (Page 134)

[*doraseo mangyeongdae jibeuro georeonaganeun changju eomeoniui nuneneun eorin sijeol janggunui eolguri daeboreum daldeongicheoreom tteo-ollatda.*

geu jal utneun eolgul, useul ttaemada du bur-e phajineun injeongmeori itgo areumdawo boideon bojogaewa, yudalli aeti itge boideon deotni, eoksireoksilhago muhanhi seulgi isseo boineun nun... ireon geosi eojein deut yeoknyeokhi meoritsoke dasigeum geuryeojyeotda.]

On the way back home to Mangyeongdae, Mother Changju remembered the face of General Kim Il Sung that looked like *daeboreum* when he was young.

That smiling face, beautiful dimple and cheeks which show his warm-heartedness, snaggletooth that shows his puerility, the sharp eyes that reveal his infinite intelligence ... All of these were apparently

drawn in Mother Changju's head as if it had been just yesterday.

Furthermore, the idealization of Kim Il Sung is also strengthened through the depiction of his bodily posture and personal demeanor. Mother Changju describes him as having a handsome appearance, a broad chest, and an indomitable spirit that neither fears danger nor succumbs to despair.

“그 끝맛한 풍신, 동그스럼한 얼굴, 잘 웃는 얼굴, 짝 벌어진 가슴, 겁낼 줄 모르고 낙망할 줄 모르는 그 기상…… 분명히 옛날의 어린 장군 그대로다. 모습 뿐 아니라 몸동작도 꼭 그 인상이다.” (Page. 138)

[“*geu kkeulmithan pungsin, donggeuseureomhan eolgul, jal utneun eolgul, jjik beoreojin gaseum, geopnael jul moreugo nakmanghal jul moreuneun geu gisang..... bunmyeonghi yetnarui eorin janggun geudaeroda. moseup ppun anira momdongjakdo kkok geu insangida.*”]

“A handsome appearance, a round face and a friendly smile, a broad chest, a spirit that is never afraid and disappointed ... clearly the same as the previous General Kim Il Sung. Not only is his appearance, but also his body moves do the same.”

This description demonstrates that Kim Il Sung's physical appearance is deliberately aestheticized. The comparison of his face to the full moon is particularly meaningful within the Korean culture context, as the full moon traditionally symbolizes completeness, prosperity, harmony, and auspiciousness. By associating Kim Il Sung with such imagery, Han Sul Ya elevates him beyond the level of an ordinary human being and portrays him as a figure destined for greatness. Moreover, the emphasis on his warm smile and dimples humanizes him and fosters emotional closeness between the leader and the readers.

In addition to physical attractiveness, Kim Il Sung is also portrayed as possessing extraordinary intellectual and moral qualities. His eyes are described as revealing “infinite intelligence”, suggesting not only intellectual superiority but also wisdom and visionary leadership. Such representation reinforces the image of Kim Il Sung as a leader who possesses the necessary qualities to guide the newly established nation. Rather than presenting him merely as a military commander, the story constructs him as an intellectual leader capable of directing the future of Korea.

Crucially, this bodily and psychological construction operates at the dynamic intersection of indigenous Korean cultural symbolism and the imported aesthetic imperatives of Uni Soviet's Socialist Realism. On the one hand, the comparison of Kim Il Sung's youthful face to daeboreum invokes a deeply rooted Korean cultural archetype that signifies completeness, prosperity, fertility, and auspicious harmony. By anchoring the leader's physical appearance, Han Sul Ya renders Kim Il Sung culturally recognizable and emotionally comforting to the Korean people.

On the other hand, the simultaneous accentuation of Kim's 'broad chest', radiant health, and fearless soul directly mirrors the canonical Soviet socialist realist archetype of the 'positive hero' (Clark, 2000; Dobrenko, 2007). In socialist realist literary doctrine, which was actively disseminated throughout Northern Korea under the Soviet Civil Administration and embraced by former KAPF

writers under Han Sul Ya's leadership (Bae, 2024; Gabroussenko, 2010), the positive hero was ideologically mandated to exhibit boundless vitality, unwavering political consciousness, and supreme physical stamina. The hero's body was not a private vessel, but an ideological apparatus designed to overcome social crises and inspire emulation among the laboring masses (Clark, 2000). Han Sul Ya thus executes an ingenious aesthetic synthesis in *Gaeseon*. He grafts the physical vitality and revolutionary optimism of the socialist realist positive hero onto the benevolent, auspicious imagery of traditional Korean folklore. In doing so, the narrative constructs young Kim Il Sung not merely as a military commander, but as an extraordinary physical and moral vanguard capable of carrying the burden of national reconstruction.

Besides emphasizing his physical perfection, *Gaeseon* also portrays Kim Il Sung as a deeply patriotic leader committed to national reconstruction. Following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule, Kim Il Sung is depicted as being particularly concerned with improving education and raising the intellectual capacity of the Korean people. He believes that farmers and ordinary citizens should receive proper education and ideological guidance so that they may contribute to the rebuilding of the nation.

장군은 왜놈들이 짓밟아놓은 조선 사람의 지능을 빨리 열어주어야 하리라 생각하였다. 농민들에게 옳은 사상을 주고 학문을 속히 주어야 하리라 하였다. 그러면 거기에서 반드시 놀라운 지혜가 다시 살아날 것이다. 농촌의 남자들과 아낙네들의 “가갸 거겨” 읽는 모양, 아들 손자들에게서 글 배우는 늙은이들의 허 꼬분 소리가 탐탐히 보이고 들리는 듯해서 장군은 부지중 웃었다. (Page 145)

[*jangguneun waenomdeuri jitbalbanoheun joseon saramui jineungeul ppalli yeoreoju-eoya harira saenggakhayeotda. nongmindeurege orheun sasangeul jugo hakmuneul sokhi jueoya harira hayeotda. geureomyeon geogieseo bandeusi nollaun jihyega dasi saranal geosida. nongchonui namjadeulgwa anaknedeurui “gagya geogyeo” ikneun moyang, adeul sonjadeuregeseo geul bae-uneun neulkeunideurui hyeo kkobun soriga thamthamhi boigo deullineun deuthaeseo jangguneun bujjung useotda.*]

General Kim Il Sung thinks that the intelligence possessed by the people of Joseon, which had been trampled on by the colonials, must be sharpened soon. He also thinks of conveying the proper ideology and education to the farmers. When all that has been applied, the people's outstanding wisdom will naturally be revived again. The situation in which men and women read “*ka-kya keo-kyeo*,” where the elderly people learn to read letters with unnatural voices, pronouncing each sound so carefully, makes General Kim Il Sung laugh out unintentionally.”

This portrayal extends Kim Il Sung's heroism beyond the battlefield. He is not represented solely as a revolutionary fighter who liberated the nation but also as a visionary statesman concerned with education, social welfare, and national development. Such representation contributes to the construction of Kim Il Sung as the ideal fatherly leader who guides and nurtures the people toward a prosperous future.

The idealization of Kim Il Sung's body and character serves important ideological functions. By consistently emphasizing his physical greatness, intellectual superiority, patriotism, courage, and benevolence, *Gaeseon* constructs an image of Kim Il Sung as an exceptional individual who possesses qualities far beyond ordinary people. This representation encourages readers to admire, respect, and accept Kim Il Sung as the legitimate leader of the newly established North Korean State.

HISTORICAL REALISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE TRIUMPHAL RETURN

The incorporation of historical settings and biographical details that closely resemble actual events in early North Korean history is another aspect that reinforces the historical realism of *Gaeseon*. Rather than creating a completely fictional narrative, Han Sul Ya deliberately situates the story within recognizable historical contexts, thereby blurring the boundary between literary imagination and historical reality. This strategy enhances the credibility of the narrative and strengthens the heroic representation of Kim Il Sung.

“예, 내일 한 시에 기림리 운동장에서 시민대회를 엽네다” (Page 134).

[“*ye, naeil han sie girimni undongjangeseo simindaehoereul yeopneda*”]

“*Yes, a mass citizen's rally will be held at Girimri Stadium at one o'clock.*”

One of the most apparent examples of historical realism in *Gaeseon* is the depiction of Kim Il Sung's triumphant return to Pyongyang following Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule. In the story, Kim Il Sung delivers a public speech at Girimri Stadium, where thousands of people gather to welcome him. The setting is particularly significant because Girimri Stadium was indeed the site where Kim Il Sung delivered his first public speech during the historical event commonly known as the Triumphal Return on October 14, 1945. Moreover, the story specifies that the event took place at approximately one o'clock in the afternoon, a detail that closely corresponds to historical records of the actual event.

Historically, this rally was organized with the support of the Soviet military, who introduced Kim Il Sung to the public as a national hero (Tertitskiy, 2015). However, in *Gaeseon*, Han Sul Ya does not highlight the Soviet role. Instead, the story focused on the delivery of deep emotions of the Korean people who welcomed Kim Il Sung with tears and joy. A new government cannot build long-term authority only through military power or official laws, but also through connection with the people emotionally (Vu, 2022). The incorporation of such historically verifiable details suggests that Han Sul Ya intentionally sought to reconstruct an important political event through literary representation. By embedding actual places, dates, and events into the narrative, Han Sul Ya creates an impression of authenticity, encouraging readers to perceive the story not merely as fiction but as faithful representation of historical reality.

The strategy of historical authentication is further reinforced through the similarities between *Gaeseon* and Kim Il Sung's autobiography *With the Century* (Kim, 1994). As discussed previously, several episodes in the short story closely resembles events narrated in the autobiography, particularly those concerning Kim Il Sung's reunion with his relatives following his return to Korea.

Both in *Gaeseon* and autobiography *With the Century* (Kim, 1994), the emotional encounter between Kim Il Sung and his aunt occupies a central position, emphasizing familial affection and mutual admiration.

“이리 오시오. 여게 앉아서 잠시 기다리시오. 지금 곧 연설하셔야겠으니 끝날 때까지 기다리시오.” 하고 장군의 자동차에 앉아 기다리라 하였다. 좀 어마어마한 생각이 들었다.

그러나 생각하면 이제부터는 당당한 장군의 숙모다. 그리하여 숙모는 북석북석한 자동차 쿠션에 앉으며, ... (Page 139)

[“*iri osio. yeoge anjaseo jamsi gidarisio. jigeum got yeonseolhasyeoyagesseuni kkeutnal ttaekkaji gidarisio.*” *hago janggunui jadongcha-e anja gidarira hayeotda. jom eoma-eomahan saenggaki deureotda.*

geureona saenggakhamyeon ijebuteoneun dangdanghan janggunui sukmoda. geurihayeon sukmoneun bukseokbukseokhan jadongcha kusyeone anjeumyeo,]

"Come this way. Please sit here and wait for a moment. The General is about to deliver his speech, so please wait until it is finished."

They escorted her to the General's car and asked her to wait there. The situation felt almost unreal and overwhelming. However, she soon reminded herself that she was now the aunt of the illustrious General. With this thought in mind, she sat down on the plush cushions of the car seat, ..."

The blurring of fiction and reality performs important political functions. According to North Korean literary principles, literature was expected not only to entertain readers but also to educate them and cultivate political consciousness (Lee, et. al., 2012). Therefore, presenting fictional narratives as closely aligned with historical reality allows literary works to serve as effective ideological instruments. In the case of *Gaeseon*, the use of historical realism contributes to the construction of Kim Il Sung as a legitimate national leader whose heroic achievements are presented as historically undeniable.

LITERARY REPRESENTATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF PERSONALITY CULT

The preceding discussion have demonstrated that *Gaeseon* employs various narrative strategies to construct Kim Il Sung as an ideal and heroic leader. Beyond characterization and historical realism, *Gaeseon* also incorporates numerous symbolic representations that contribute to the emergence of Kim Il Sung's personality cult. Through glorifying appellations, idealized descriptions, and symbolic narratives, Han Sul Ya presents Kim Il Sung not merely as a political leader but as an extraordinary figure whose authority transcends ordinary political leadership.

One of the most prominent features of personality cult in *Gaeseon* is the persistent use of honorific appellations associated with Kim Il Sung. Throughout the story, Kim Il Sung is rarely referred to simply by his name. Instead, he is consistently addressed as Janggun (General), emphasizing his military achievements and revolutionary credentials. The repeated use of this appellation serves not only as a form of respect but also as a symbolic representation of Kim Il Sung as the liberator of Korea and legitimate leader of the newly established state.

The story also highlights the significance of Kim Il Sung's revolutionary name. Although Kim Il Sung's

birth name was Sung Ju, *Gaeseon* repeatedly emphasizes the name 'Kim Il Sung', which had already acquired symbolic value among the Korean people. The narrative suggest that the name itself represents revolutionary heroism and national liberation. In the story, Mother Changju prefers to call him 'General Kim Il Sung', rather than by his childhood name, Sung Ju. It shows that the identity of Kim Il Sung as a leader is inseparable from the destiny of the nation.

Another important aspect of personality cult found in *Gaeseon* is the symbolic transformation of Kim Il Sung into a paternal and almost sacred figure. Several expressions associated with Kim Il Sung, such as *Oboi* (Father), *Seseungi* (Teacher), and *Taeyang* (Sun), reflect the gradual elevation of his status beyond that of an ordinary political leader. Within North Korean political culture, these appellations carry profound ideological meanings. The title *Oboi* portrays Kim Il Sung as the benevolent father of the nation who protects and nurtures the people. Similarly, the title *Seseungi* constructs him as a moral guide and educator whose wisdom directs the future of society. Meanwhile, the symbolic association with the sun (*Taeyang*) elevates Kim Il Sung to an almost sacred status, suggesting that he serves as the source of life, hope, and prosperity for the nation.

The emergence of these sacred, paternalistic appellations in *Gaeseon* signifies more than an embryonic stage of charismatic leadership. In early North Korean literary criticism, depicting the leader was not treated as ordinary creative fiction, but as a sacred pedagogical assignment where the protagonist must embody absolute perfection (Jeon, 2014). Han Sul Ya's deliberate narrative erasure of doubt, moral fallibility, or internal conflict in Kim Il Sung's characterization established the foundational conventions of this genre. By substituting dramatic tension with unanimous communal adoration from both the kinship figure of Mother Changju and the cheering masses at Girimri Stadium, *Gaeseon* prefigured the ideological prerequisites of *suryeong hyeongsang munhak*, demonstrating how literature was systematically mobilized to convert revolutionary history into an inviolable political myths.

The emergence of these symbolic representations demonstrates that *Gaeseon* participates in the early formation of Kim Il Sung's personality cult. According to Lim (2015), personality cult is characterized by the systematic glorification of a leader through political and cultural representations that depict the leader as exceptional, infallible, and indispensable to the nation. The representations found in *Gaeseon* closely correspond to these characteristics. Kim Il Sung is consistently portrayed as physically perfect, morally superior, intellectually gifted, and deeply committed to the welfare of the people. Moreover, the narrative presents him as the sole figure capable of leading Korea toward a prosperous future.

The construction of personality cult in *Gaeseon* is further strengthened by the absence of alternative representations. Throughout the story, no character questions Kim Il Sung's authority, challenges his decisions, or presents opposing viewpoints. Instead, all characters express admiration, respect, and gratitude toward him. Even Mother Changju's personal memories function primarily to reaffirm Kim Il Sung's greatness rather than to reveal his human limitations. Such narrative uniformity creates an image of unanimous public support and contributes to the naturalization of Kim Il Sung's political

legitimacy.

Through this short story, Han Sul Ya acted as a the author played a role as mediator in conveying the state's nation-building agenda to the Korean people. He employed literature as an effective and accessible medium of propaganda through which Kim Il Sung's ideas could be disseminated to society. For Kim Il Sung, literature was expected to serve as a vehicle for transmitting political doctrines, promoting socialist culture, and fostering patriotism and love for the homeland. Although literary works were allowed to incorporate certain artistic elements to avoid excessive rigidity, their primary function remained ideological rather than aesthetic (Kim, 1972, in David-West, 2009). Rather than developing dramatic conflicts or intricate plotlines, the narrative primarily focuses on portraying the reunion between Kim Il Sung and his aunt during the historical event known as the Triumphal Return. This relatively simple narrative structure allows the story to concentrate on the glorification of Kim Il Sung, thereby reinforcing its ideological and propagandistic functions.

The respectful titles given to Kim Il Sung in *Gaeseon* show the early stages of his personality cult. In North Korea, state propaganda often works like a religion, where the leader is viewed as a savior (Lim, 2015; Vu, 2022). Stories about Kim Il Sung from across writers and perspectives follow a common hero pattern that tells more about leaving home, facing danger, and returning as a hero. In *Gaeseon*, Han Sul Ya describes this return and begins using special titles such as Oboi (parent/father) and Taeyang (sun). Although official media in 1945 still praised the Soviet Union and Stalin alongside Kim (Tertitskiy, 2015), Han Sul Ya's literature was presenting Kim Il Sung as a moral, caring, and perfect leader. *Gaeseon* helped create the early stage of personality cult of Kim Il Sung in North Korean literature.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Han Sul Ya's *Gaeseon* constructs the heroic image of Kim Il Sung through various narrative strategies that simultaneously contribute to the early formation of personality cult discourse in North Korean literature. The findings reveal that the representation of Kim Il Sung in the short story extends beyond conventional literary characterization and functions as an ideological mechanism aimed at legitimizing his leadership during the formative years of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

The analysis shows that familial narratives play a significant role in establishing Kim Il Sung's heroic legitimacy. Through the character of Mother Changju, Han Sul Ya presents Kim Il Sung from the perspective of a close family member, thereby creating an impression of authenticity, emotional intimacy, and public trust. In addition, the idealization of Kim Il Sung's physical appearance, intellectual superiority, patriotism, and benevolent personality constructs him as an exemplary and flawless leader worthy of admiration and loyalty. The incorporation of historical settings and biographical details further blurs the boundary between fiction and historical reality, reinforcing the credibility of the narrative and strengthening Kim Il Sung's heroic image. Moreover, the persistent use of symbolic appellations and glorifying representations elevates Kim Il Sung beyond the status of an ordinary political leader and transforms him into a paternal and almost sacred figure.

Taken together, these findings suggest that *Gaeseon* should be understood not merely as a literary work intended for aesthetic appreciation, but also as an ideological text that participated in constructing and disseminating the official image of Kim Il Sung in early North Korean society. Through the combination of familial intimacy, historical realism, symbolic glorification, and idealized characterization, Han Sul Ya employed literature as an effective ideological apparatus to legitimize Kim Il Sung's political authority and cultivate emotional attachment between the leader and the people. Consequently, *Gaeseon* played an important role in reinforcing Kim Il Sung's legitimacy and in laying the cultural foundations for the subsequent institutionalization of personality cult discourse in North Korea.

This study contributes to Korean literary studies by demonstrating how literary texts functioned not only as aesthetic products but also as political and ideological instruments during the early stages of North Korean nation-building. More broadly, the study highlights the significance of literary representation in shaping collective memory, political legitimacy, and leadership discourse within authoritarian contexts. Future research may expand this discussion by examining other North Korean literary works produced during the *Minju Geonseolgi* period, comparing representations of leadership across different periods of North Korean literary history, or employing alternative analytical frameworks, such as narrative semiotics, to further explore the relationship between literature and ideology.

STATEMENTS OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author(s) herewith declare that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the data collection, analysis, and the editorial process, and the publication process in general.

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