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Book Review

A Nation Forged in Sweat and Struggle

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Hwang Sok-Yong (2023), *Mater 2-10*, Translated by Sora Kim-Russell and Youngjae Josephine Bae, Scribe Publications, United Kingdom, Pages 474, ISBN: 9781913348953.

For anyone who wants to experience the throbbing pulse of a working class — its resistance, dilemmas, hopes, and betrayals — *Mater 2-10* offers a brilliant canvas. This political novel chronicles the lives of three generations of a Korean family, spanning the era of the Japanese colonisation of Korea in the 20th century to the contemporary times. *Mater 2-10*, as Sok-yong mentions, is the name of a locomotive, a symbolic reminder of the division of Korea into North and South following the Japanese surrender after World War II.

The novel opens in the 21st-century Korea where Jino, the fourth-generation member of the Baekman family, is staging a sit-in protest atop the chimney of a power plant where he works. The factory has laid off almost all workers, and the protest is against this decision. Hwang Sok-yong describes with wry humour the tough conditions of the sit-in where Jino navigates a narrow space of the chimney for more than a year, combining physical discipline with psychological resilience to keep himself rooted to the cause of the working class.

Sok-yong's imaginative brilliance comes out when we find Jino waking up in the middle of his sleep, mystically walking through railroad tracks and narrow alleyways, revisiting his ancestors and conversing with the dead. We land in Korea under Japanese occupation through these dreams, where Baekman, Jino's great-grandfather; Ilcheol his grandfather; Icheol, the granduncle; and grandmother Guemi form the central characters of this landscape.

The contrasts within the family come alive as we witness the divergent paths taken by the two brothers, Ilcheol and Icheol. Ilcheol follows the footsteps of his father to become a railway worker under the Japanese

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administration, while his brother Icheol is an activist in the Communist Party, clandestinely organising meetings under the veil of a book club, while remaining under close surveillance by the Japanese police. With one member on the run from the colonial authorities, we witness the metamorphosis in the lives of all the family members over time.

Sok-yong opens the window to the turbulent past of Korea, with the primary purpose of transporting us to the struggles of a working class that is fighting both colonial oppression and the bourgeois social order at the same time. Icheol is seen asking a fellow comrade, "Are the independence movement and class struggle different from each other?" The challenges within the communist organisation — when to strike, how to organise, whether to wait for commands from a central leadership outside, or to build a working-class movement from the bottom up — are questions that confronted the Communist Party in Joseon (the former name for Korea). It is fairly instructive when a senior comrade is found telling Icheol, "Never bring up revolution or anything big like that when you're talking to the working masses. The trick is to raise quiet questions about everyday life."

This took me back to the writings of Frantz Fanon in his 1963 book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, explaining why national liberation struggles cannot be reduced to struggles for an anti-capitalist transformation, even though the two may intersect. This is further exemplified in a passage in SokYong's novel that shows how the Communist party had to realign its priorities to make itself relevant for the masses: "Instead of a few socialist intellectuals gathering to proclaim the formation of a party, the plan was for activists to infiltrate places where labourers and farmers made their livelihoods."

From the torturous interrogation rooms and prison cells to the assimilation policies of the Japanese administration aimed at systematic erasure of the Korean language and culture, Hwang Sok-yong's storytelling impressively remains loyal to illuminating the history of the oppressed people of Korea. Again, to quote Fanon, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it." This once again makes the point that anti-imperialist struggles take specific, localised forms, and are not abstract universal categories.

Hwang Sok-yong's female characters, the other oppressed half, come with their own stories too. During Guemi's imprisonment, we learn that poor women from the countryside were sold for a pittance that enslaved them for several years to Japanese and Korean businessmen. Many were sold off to factories and later sold to brothels for "learning too slowly."

We also witness women activists emerging from anti-communist interrogation rooms, also called 'the torture factory,' where women were treated no differently from men, except that violence and oppression spoke a different language on female bodies. They were stripped naked, hung upside down, electrocuted, and forced to write confessions. As Yeonsuk, a woman activist who barely survived the prison torture, tells Jino, "For those coming out of the interrogation room, the fear of torture was outweighed by the shame and humiliation." The detention centre that was started in 1976 was shut down later in 1987 following the public outrage over the death of a student activist Park Jong-cheol in detention.

Amidst the palpable political tension throughout the novel, Sok-yong also provides readers with lighter, endearing moments through the mysterious, spiritual connection between the women in Baekman's family. The towering reappearance of Baekman's dead wife, Juan-daek, on all significant occasions, fiercely protecting her children and family during famines and floods, and the ability of the 'Uncanny Guemi' to see the past and the future are delightfully magical and add a folkish dimension to the story.

The book, panning fluidly between Korean workers' struggles under imperial Japan and present-day South Korea, reminds us how capitalism continues to be a system under crisis. Even decades after it gained independence from colonial rule, Korean workers struggled with long working hours, poor wages, exhaustion and illnesses. Any form of worker protests or attempts to unionise were repressed brutally. If imperial encroachments were necessary for capitalist survival and expansion during the colonial era, neo-liberal restructuring by way of shutting down factories, laying off workers, and moving business to other countries for cheaper, more docile labour is economically justified in contemporary times.

It is telling when Jino asks Yeongsuk, "Nuna, you said that between Jeon Tae-il taking his life in the 1970s and Juik Hyeong taking his in 2003, Korea hasn't changed at all." Jeon Tae-il, a 22-year-old cloth designer, immolated himself to protest against labour law violations by manufacturing sweatshops, while Juik, the chief of the metal labour union branch at a ship construction company, hung himself after a 129-day protest against employers filing lawsuits against union leaders as compensation for stoppage of work during unionised strikes (Jang, 2004).

Through the struggles of workers, we come to realise that change can be painfully slow. And yet optimism and hope are kept alive when we hear Jino remembering his grandmother Guemi's words, "the world moves forward one teeny tiny step at a time."

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