

Forbidden Relations: South Korean Incest Dramas and the Crisis of Interrupted Kinship

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INTRODUCTION

THE INCEST TABOO IS A PARTICULARLY INTRIGUING ANGLE from which to examine the theme of biologism and identity, as it involves a preoccupation not only with biological kinship but also with the function of prohibitions in creating social norms. The entanglement of identity with biological kinship becomes even more complicated when the incest taboo manifests as a recurring cultural trope within the context of a specific ethnonational history. In contemporary South Korea, for example, there is a peculiar prevalence of incest dramas in popular culture. More than twenty South Korean television dramas and films in the past fifteen years alone involve the possibility of an incestuous relationship as a subtext. *Autumn Tale* (2000) and *Winter Sonata* (2002), the television serials that ostensibly launched the “Korean Wave” in broader Asia, as well the cult classic and critically acclaimed film *Oldboy* (2003), are among the numerous productions in which key characters who at one point or another are thought to be biologically related fall in love.¹ An Internet search of the term “Korean incest drama” yields numerous K-drama (Korean drama) discussion boards and blog posts devoted to the topic. A Google search yields results such as “K-dramas in Which the Lovers Might Be Siblings,” “I love my oppa/ge ge: the charm of incest dramas,” “Fauxcest Is the Best!” “*Tree of Heaven*: Tears, heartbreak,

¹ Along with *Autumn Tale*, *Winter Sonata*, and *Oldboy*, other television shows and films that feature incest subtexts (to varying degrees) are *My Girl*, *Tree of Heaven*, *What Star Are You From?*, *Snowman*, *Stairway to Heaven*, *Bad Love*, *Autumn in My Heart*, *Damo*, *Ireland*, *90 Days: Time to Love*, *That Winter the Wind Blows*, *Hotel King*, *You're Beautiful*, *One Fine Day*, *Sopyonje*, *The Petal*, *Mother*, *Pietà*, and *Moebius*. I do not believe that this is an exhaustive list, as there may be others of which I am not aware.

yakuza, doom, incestuous siblings. All in a day's work for Korea." Fans repeatedly ask, "Incest scares are very, very common in Korean drama—why?"² In this essay I will attempt to answer this question from a historical point of view that takes into account how tropes originate, circulate, and evolve. I will show how the now-familiar incest trope in South Korean cultural productions has roots in the historical material conditions created by war and national division.

Geopolitical and civil conflicts devastated the Korean peninsula—destroying homes, displacing masses of people, and separating family members from one another. Though Korea was freed from Japanese rule as one result of World War II, national independence was complicated by American and Russian occupations on either side of an arbitrary partition at the 38th parallel. In 1948 the division was formalized along Cold War ideological lines, setting into motion the systematic purging of political dissidents, mass killings, and floods of refugees. By the time of the Korean War (1950–53), the "civil war" had very much become a gruesome international conflict between Cold War superpowers. The peninsula was thoroughly decimated by relentless, ruthless warfare. Indiscriminate napalm raids and combat strategies of "saturation" and "area" bombing were so destructive that one reporter described "the countless ruined villages" as "the most terrible and universal mark of the war on the Korean landscape."³ General Emmett O'Donnell, chief of Bomber Command, reported to the 1951 Senate hearings that "the entire, almost the entire Korean Peninsula is just a terrible mess. Everything is destroyed. There is nothing standing worthy of the name."⁴ Three and a half to four million soldiers and civilians were killed on both sides; the ethnic Koreans who died constituted 10–15 percent of the entire national population at the time.⁵ In February 1952 the UN released figures estimating that "one out of every nine men, women and children in North Korea had been killed. In the South, 5,000,000 people had been displaced and 100,000 children were described as 'unaccompanied.'"⁶ Families were literally separated by these conditions: those who could not cross the 38th parallel together, those who got separated within the seas of refugees, siblings who were orphaned and then not adopted together, and so on.

And the war continues to this day. There was no peace treaty—only a military armistice signed in 1953 that established the Korean Demilitarized Zone. The DMZ became the de facto new border between North and South Korea and is today the most heavily militarized border in the world. The untold numbers of families who were separated during the chaos of massive internal migration—which was complicated further by the closed, impenetrable DMZ border and by considerable international refugee migration and adoption—created a remarkable situation of sociocultural trauma. In 1983 the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) in South Korea hosted a televised "campaign to reunite ten million divided families,"⁷ which attracted so much interest that what began as a ninety-five-minute program turned into more than 453 hours of

² <http://mihansa.net/obstacles-love-romance-korean-drama/>.

³ Walter Sullivan, quoted in Marilyn B. Young, "Korea: The Post-war War," *History Workshop Journal* 51 (2001): 116.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁵ Tobias Hübinette, "The Orphaned Nation: Korea Imagined as an Overseas Adopted Child in Clon's *Abandoned Child* and Park Kwang-su's *Berlin Report*," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 231.

⁶ Young, "Korea," 116.

⁷ Foley disputes the widely accepted number of "ten million" separated families in Korea. He shows that it is nearly impossible to calculate the precise number given the sheer chaos on the Korean peninsula from 1945 to 1953. See James A. Foley, *Korea's Divided Families: Fifty Years of Separation* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003).

live broadcasts in which 100,952 applicants participated, resulting in as many as 10,189 reunited relatives, of whom some were international adoptees.⁸

These experiences of separation are on such a large scale and have been ongoing for such a prolonged period of time that they have created on the peninsula the shared experience of a crisis of *interrupted kinship*.⁹ Korean film director Park Chan-wook has noted the widespread sociocultural impact of the tragedy of division on everyday life:

Right, it happens everywhere in daily life. So when we live our lives without a care in the world, *we can always encounter someone directly related to that tragedy*, and through the relationship with that person, the tragedy touches us, too. In that way, I come to take on what someone else used to carry by himself. The tragedy of the Korean division, which seemed to have nothing to do with [the film] *Geumja* (*Lady Vengeance*), comes down to her with the gun the old [North Korean] spy hands her. This is the network that makes up society.¹⁰

There are several aspects of Park's statement that are significant for understanding how the plague of separations created by the war's devastation on the peninsula has had long-lasting consequences that are experienced on the everyday scale. In a small, densely populated country like South Korea—which is about one-fifth the size of California but with a current population of over fifty million—it was impossible *not* to “always encounter someone directly related to that tragedy” of separated families in the decades following the Korean War. For the first generations after the war, it was entirely typical for a Korean to have several relatives missing or in North Korea and to have no idea where they were and whether they were alive or not. Compound this experience with the also typical experience of knowing many other families in the same situation. This brief mental exercise reveals the phenomenology of how the interpersonal nature of tragedy on such a massive scale, through exponential multiplication, becomes a thoroughly collective experience of historical trauma. It is the lived experience of a collective crisis of interrupted kinship. How does such a collective tragedy manifest itself in culture? The recurring trope of the incest scare in cultural productions is, in my view, one manifestation of the crisis of interrupted kinship in the social imaginary. The mass displacements of war and the installation of the 38th parallel's DMZ literally created social conditions in which relatives were separated from or lost to each other, making possible the kind of trope that hinges on what could happen if one met a long-lost relative without knowing him or her as such. The circulation of the incest trope in South Korea is the imbrication of the collective experience of national division with the individual-intra-subjective experience of literal separation from family members.

THE OTHER SIDE OF DARK REMEMBRANCE: FORCED SEPARATION AND FORBIDDEN RELATIONS

My analysis centers on an award-winning 1983 novella written by Lee Kyun-Young: *The Other Side of Dark Remembrance* (*TOSODR*). I see this text as a literary precursor¹¹ to the more recent

⁸ Ibid., 85–86. This program was recently dramatized in the 2014 film *Ode to My Father* (국계시장, literally *International Market*).

⁹ “Interrupted kinship” is the key principle for the larger project I am currently working on.

¹⁰ Interview with Park Chan-wook, “Sympathy for the Old Boy,” trans. Steffen Hantke and Aryong Choi-Hantke, June 8, 2008, <http://www.ikonmagazin.de/interview/Park.htm> (emphasis mine).

¹¹ To clarify, I am not asserting that *TOSODR* is the *first* example of the use of the incest motif in Korean literature, or even in postwar literature. Stories involving incestuous relationships date as far back as oral-

and familiar incest dramas in South Korean popular culture. I suggest that this particular story demonstrates how the trope of incest, and the anxiety about biological kinship that it provokes, emerged from and evolved under prolonged traumatic conditions that literally disrupted lines of biological descent on the Korean peninsula. *TOSODR* brings together how the narrative strategies of incest anxiety in Korean cultural productions seem to be tied to biological aspects of the past that indirectly index war, national division, and lost memory. I focus on how the logic of the incest taboo corresponds to psychosocial effects stemming from the traumatic experiences of interrupted kinship relations.

TOSODR follows a relatively simple plotline: a Seoul salaryman, who remains unnamed, misplaces a satchel containing important work documents after a night of drinking with his friend. He had gotten so drunk that he wakes up in the morning not knowing where he is or what had happened the night before. The novella follows him as he attempts to retrace his steps from that evening in order to find his satchel. The protagonist ends up confronting what emerged from his unconscious when he was not in full control of it: his memories of a long-lost sister. They had become orphaned during the war but were so young that he does not remember much clearly; he cannot be sure of how old he is, of how old she is, or even if they might be twins. He knows that they were briefly together in an orphanage before she disappeared one day. Over the course of the novella, the reader discovers that this abrupt separation had left a deep wound in the protagonist's psyche, one that has affected his life profoundly despite his attempt to forget about it.

Even though there is nothing in the story line of *TOSODR* itself that references the partitioning of the peninsula, the story has been understood as a metaphor of the divided nation as separated, orphaned siblings. The protagonist's sister is his lost half, and he is an incomplete, fractured self without her. This divided-nation metaphor has been obvious to South Korean readers since the novella was published in 1983, officially situating it within the classification of the "division novel" (*pundansosöl*) in Korean literary history.¹² The division novel became a recognizable literary trend beginning in the late 1970s with novels like Kim Won-il's *Evening Glow* (*Noül*, 1978) and Jeon Sang-guk's *Ah-be's Family* (*Abeüi Kajok*, 1980), which critically examined the psychological impact of national division on the people of Korea. In *TOSODR*, the metaphor of the siblings works as a stand-in for the divided Korean nation on both literal and symbolic levels. It literally describes the kinds of separations that occurred all over the peninsula, including those involving orphaned children, who were the most vulnerable. But it also symbolically taps into a kind of ethnonationalistic and racialized sentimentality in which all ethnic Koreans are seen as one dispersed family—an image that has become a powerful metaphor of the Korean nation itself.

origin Korean folklore. However, my argument is that *TOSODR* shows how the current iterations of the incest trope in contemporary popular culture have more recent roots in the conditions of war that created mass displacement and divided families. In the postwar period, Jang Yonghak wrote *The Legend of Origin* (1962), an incest drama that very much fits within the thesis of this essay but that I did not choose for analysis because it is not translated into English and is therefore not readily accessible the way *TOSODR* is. Kim Dongni (1913–95) wrote a number of stories with characters involved in incest, but Heo Ryeonhwa has shown convincingly that Kim's fixation with incest in his stories stems from his own unfulfilled romantic love for an older female cousin who died when he was eleven years old. See Heo Ryeonhwa, "Kimdongni sosörüi күнч'insanggan mot'ip'ü yön'gu" [The study of incest in Kim Dongni's novels], *Journal of Modern Korean Literature* 34 (2011): 159–84. Kim Dongni's specific use of the incest trope is more of an outlier rather than a support for or a contradiction of my argument here.

¹² Even the description of the book on the back cover of the English translation says, "This novella falls into the fiction genre dealing with the division of North and South Korea."

This can be traced back to the pervasive myth of Korea as a homogeneous and “pure-blooded” nation, a self-description that arose in reaction to Japanese colonialism. Activists during that period promoted a “we consciousness” that has since evolved into an ethnonationalism that takes for granted shared ancestry, ethnic purity, and a familial type of belonging. Roy Grinker picks up on the role that Korean reunification discourse plays in the idea of the nation as family: “Koreans often construe division not only as the separation of the nation but also as the separation of families, and as a result unification is construed as the reunion of separated family members. The nation is the family writ large. Thus, although Korean division is sometimes represented in terms of land, or more literally the ancestors’ lands (*pundandoen choguk*), the more conventional and primary representation is the division of people.”¹³ For this reason, discourses concerning both the Korean War and the partition at the 38th parallel have been predominantly framed in terms of “brothers at war” and “divided families.”¹⁴

With this context of audience reception in mind, I want to show how this story illuminates the enmeshment of Korean memory and identity with constructs of kinship. What interests me is how this novella’s central metaphor—the trauma of a divided nation being *like* the forced separation of brother and sister—takes on the twist of a possibly incestuous kind of reunion on the level of plot. At a very young age, the central character lost his family through circumstances caused by the war, leaving him with a series of unanswered questions that haunt him: Where is he from? How old is he? Where is his sister? Is she even his real sister? Try as he might to ignore them, he is persistently haunted by the questions of his biological origins and the possibility of having a living blood relative. The story depicts the psychic and social effects of the trauma of interrupted kinship that had occurred as a result of war and national division. In the story’s overarching conceit, there is a sense of *forbidden relations* that grew out of the circumstances of war: certain relations were made “forbidden” because war and national division interrupted existing configurations of kinship relations for many people, such as orphans, international adoptees, and families split by the geopolitical partition that bars them from one another. Could it be that this sense of forbidden relations, rooted in historical trauma and in geopolitically enforced prohibitions, slides into another sense of forbidden relations, one that connotes incest? I argue that this incest “scare” is a narrative strategy that signals a confluence of the traumatic effects of forced separation, the desire for reunion, and the problem of forgetting.

THE LONG-LOST SIBLING: TRAUMA AND DESIRE

The potential long-lost sister figure in the story is Miss Min, a hostess-prostitute at a hostess bar¹⁵ the protagonist visited on the night he lost his satchel. Since he can’t remember even visiting that particular bar, the mystery that ends up preoccupying his search for the satchel is the question of who had taken care of him that night. Having pieced together aspects of what had happened that evening after interviewing various people with whom he had interacted, he learns that a woman had been with him when the cab driver dropped them off at the inn. He learns that he had fallen

¹³ Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 102–3.

¹⁴ See Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013); and Foley, *Korea’s Divided Families*.

¹⁵ A hostess bar caters to men seeking female servers and companions as they drink. These female servers also often provide sexual services. By the 1980s, the terms “hostess” (*hosūt’esū*) and “bar girl” (*sulchipyōcha*) were thus often euphemisms for prostitutes.

“asleep with [his] head resting on her chest”¹⁶ in the cab, that she had escorted him to the inn, undressed and cleaned his body of the dirt and blood from a street brawl, hung up his clothes, and tucked him into bed before leaving—all without seeking any thanks or compensation for her efforts. He wonders to himself: “she looked after this drunken man *as if she were his wife or sister*, but was not after anything he had, and then vanished before daybreak without leaving any trace so that he would not know of her good deed, like *a chaste woman who had a brief illicit love* but immediately came back to her senses” (92, emphasis mine). In this passage, we see the confluence of both romantic and sibling love in how the protagonist imagines the woman’s type of care for him—as that of a wife, a sister, or a lover. The woman had clearly spent most of the night with him, and the question of whether they had had sex crosses his mind more than once throughout the story, though in the end he highly doubts it because of how drunk he had been. It seems likely, however, that they had been quite intimate even if it had not been completely sexual.

The link between sibling love and Miss Min also emerges through the protagonist’s unconscious in a dreaming state. While waiting at the taxi company office to speak to the cab driver who dropped him off at the inn, he dozes off and has a dream that at first seems incongruous with the satchel situation occupying his waking moments. This dream is the first reference to the Korean War in the story and a clue that his odd subconscious actions of the night before had something to do with the contents of the dream.

The dream begins with a little boy and a little girl playing and laughing together in an idyllic field of flowers. Abruptly, the mood of the scene turns: the flowers begin screaming, the boy becomes tangled and bloody in a bramble of thorny branches, and the children start crying and calling for “Mommy”:

“My children! My children!” a woman’s voice called from afar. “Where are you, my children?” the woman’s voice called again. Oh, oh, blood spurted from the boy’s arm and drenched him all over. Blood! It’s blood! . . . There was a flying machine in the sky, and it looked like a dragonfly. “Children! Children!” the woman called more urgently. The flowers that had been screaming hurled themselves to the ground. And then an explosion engulfed the woman’s shriek.

Hold each other’s hands, children, you mustn’t let go! The woman’s voice was screaming its last words. . . . The boy held the girl’s hand. Deafening gun reports ensued. The girl let go of his hand. Countless refugees passed through the widening gap between them.

My hand! Hold my hand! (35–36)

The dream and the mystery woman seem to have an underlying connection in his subconscious, as it is moments after he wakes up from this dream that the protagonist learns from the cabbie the previously mentioned crucial information: that a woman had escorted him to the inn, that he had fallen asleep with his head on her chest, that this woman had taken care of him “as if she were his wife or sister.”

This dream abruptly punctuates the narrative early on, but we learn that this dream cobbled together bits and pieces of the protagonist’s memories of traumatic experiences during the Korean War. Later in the story, he recounts not as a dream but as a *memory* (“the things he remembered now”) the “endless procession of people, the noise, the airplane that looked like

¹⁶ Kyun-young Lee, *The Other Side of Dark Remembrance*, trans. Jung-hyo Ahn (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2001), 40. All subsequent page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

a dragonfly, smoke and flames, gun reports, cold, whimpering children, hunger” (67). The little girl is his sister, whom he calls Hye-Su, and the woman is their mother. He could remember his mother suddenly falling down among the crowd of people on the road, and “the distinct color of the blood that had stained his hand when he had touched her chest and the voice of his mother crying out something desperately for the last time. . . . Mother said he and Hye-su had to keep holding each other’s hands” (67). She implores him to hold on to Hye-su’s hand with the hand stained by her own blood. That blood—metonymically standing in for the loss of their mother’s life and, by extension, the advent of their orphanhood—binds the two children to each other. It symbolizes the link of blood that unites them and that gives them an identity to hold on to. But despite desperately trying to stay together, they later end up becoming separated when Hye-Su disappears from the orphanage one day. The mother’s last words to the children—her injunction to “hold each other’s hands,” to not let go—haunt the protagonist well into his adult life.¹⁷

These elements of the dream-memory make a return in the protagonist’s interaction with Miss Min. Even after the lost satchel turns up at work on Monday morning after having been returned by someone who happened to find it, “a sudden obsession naggingly depressed him” (88). He makes an excuse to leave work, and the following sequence of his actions again seems to align Miss Min in his subconscious with the long-lost sister. First, he goes back to the neighborhood he went to when he was drunk—Imun-dong, which he realized at one point was in search of his sister who was rumored to have been adopted by “a dentist in Imun-dong.” This time, he inquires at the district office and a realtor office about any dental clinics in the area around 1955. Everyone is eager to help him, but the search tellingly seems to indicate that the rumor of her adoption was false: “They could not find any such clinic” (90). Immediately after following this possible lead to his sister, he heads straight to the bar where Miss Min works, as if an internal logic pushes him there.

The end of the story makes it impossible *not* to speculate that Miss Min could be his sister, at the same time that she becomes his potential lover. Miss Min admits that she had taken care of him that night because she felt compelled by the similarity of their fates. The protagonist’s drunken state had disinhibited him enough that he had told her his life story—about how he was orphaned so young that he doesn’t know his age, about his experiences in the orphanage, and about his sister. Miss Min explains, “I listened to your story till the end. . . . I simply could not leave. Do you know why? . . . I don’t know my age either. . . . I was an orphan too” (101). He notes that she is about his own age, around thirty years old (97), which is within the age range his sister would be. She also recognizes and remembers all the minute details of life at the orphanage that he remembers (102).

This last scene also evokes their possible blood relation by subtly echoing the protagonist’s mother’s last words to “hold each other’s hands.” The story ends, quite fittingly, with the pair holding hands: “He clasped her hand in his palm. Her hand was warm, but it was no longer a strange woman’s hand to him.” This gesture of holding hands destroys the barrier that had previously demarcated their relationship as strangers. Holding hands in the protagonist’s traumatic dream-memory was a gesture of desperate grasping under threat of separation, but in this last scene it morphs into a gesture of affection and the prelude to a long embrace: “She put her head on

¹⁷ The image of family members desperately holding hands for fear of losing one another during the mass displacement and chaos of the war has become a repeatedly circulated trope in and of itself, most recently exemplified in the opening scenes of the 2014 film *Ode to My Father*.

his chest. He felt some warm and salty moisture, like tears, slowly filling him up from the bottom of his heart. He put his arm around her and drew her closer to him. Placing her hands softly on his chest, she snuggled in his arms. His heart pounded mysteriously. Her hand gently stroking his chest, she remained in his arms like that for a long, long time” (103). Miss Min’s embrace, and her tears, have the effect of filling up the void in his heart that has plagued him since his kinless youth. And this is how the book ends, with the two embracing as lovers more than siblings.

This journey of the gesture of holding hands is marked by a trail of blood, which also moves through conceptual permutations: from the blood of war, encapsulated in the memory of his bloody, dying mother, to the blood on his hands from holding her, to the blood relation between the siblings, to Miss Min’s desire to share her blood with another human being through procreation. When faced with this man who was too drunk to care for himself, Miss Min instinctively took on a mothering role. She says that she tended to him like a “big urchin boy,” washing every part of him carefully with what in Korean is called *sunjōng*—a feeling of pure, self-sacrificing devotion. This leads the protagonist to ask her if she has any children from prostituting. She confesses to him that she had had an abortion even though she had wanted to keep the baby: “She had wanted to have the child and raise him. She wanted to *share her blood* with another being” (102, emphasis mine). The protagonist makes the connection, responding, “So I was your baby the other night” (102). Her longing for a baby brings together the literal blood that she washed off the protagonist’s body with the blood connection of biological kinship she yearns for. The different registers of the meaning of blood in the story converge in the figure of the long-lost sister. She is a layering of relationships—sister, mother, lover—condensed into one figure that psychologically attempts to recuperate all that was lost.

The trauma of separation produced both a void and a desire: the *void* created by interrupted kinship relations and the *desire* to fill that void. Compounding this dynamic of lack and desire is *the problem of forgetting*, which threatens to turn desire for kinship into a *taboo desire* for a long-lost relation. The protagonist’s memory of his sister is so hazy, with none of the details of her name, age, or circumstances of leaving the orphanage clear, that nearly any woman of a certain age range who was also orphaned during the Korean War could be his sister. These are the children who were orphaned at such a young age that it was impossible for them to remember anything accurately later when they became adults. Hence, the possibility of an incestuous attraction in this story is ultimately rooted in the trauma of forced separation coupled with a problem of memory.

TRAUMA AND THE PROBLEM OF FORGETTING

As already mentioned, the protagonist’s dream seems to be based on the underlying memory of a real-life traumatic experience. As we read on, however, we realize that the protagonist himself doubts the accuracy of his own memory of the events. He doesn’t know what his mother’s name was or where she lived; he doesn’t remember what she looked like. Whenever he thinks of his mother, he remembers her last words, “Hold each other’s hands,” but he is not entirely sure that she said them at all or if “she might be a person of whom he had no memory at all from the beginning.” It occurred to him that “those words might have been some sort of autosuggestion” (68).

His memory of his sister is similarly unstable. He declares that “his memory of Hye-su was always clear and accurate,” and he remembers details like the fact that Hye-su was a pretty girl, that everyone at the orphanage seemed to believe that they were siblings, that Hye-su had called

him “big brother” (*oppa*) (68). At one moment, he declares, “There was no doubt that Hye-su was his sister,” but in the next moment, the idea that he and Hye-su were siblings strikes him as “an absurdity” (72). He may have remembered that she was pretty, but paradoxically he “could not remember her face” (66) or how old she was or whether Hye-su was her real name: “Hye-su was his younger sister. Or she could have been his older sister. Or they might even be twins. He could not remember her face, but her name was Hye-su. . . . He was not sure if Bak Hye-su was her own name, or a new name given to her by someone at the orphanage” (66). As much as he “remembers,” he also questions that very memory.

The instability of his memory is undoubtedly an effect of early childhood trauma: the trauma of witnessing massive upheaval and destruction during the war, of his mother’s death, of being displaced and homeless, of forced separation from his sister. The protagonist’s dream and his drunken search for his sister, followed by a fugue state, indicate that he could be suffering from post-traumatic stress. The diagnostic criteria for PTSD as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* indicate that traumatic events are persistently reexperienced as “intrusive distressing recollections of the event,” including dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations, and illusions.¹⁸ Moreover, the failure of memory—misremembering or the inability to remember or articulate memory—is one of the key characteristics of PTSD. This is in large part because traumatic memories, according to trauma researcher Dr. Judith Herman, “lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images.”¹⁹ The traumatic experience is essentially a reference that can never be anything more than *indirect*. Cathy Caruth insists that trauma cannot be traced back to a locatable event in an individual’s past. Instead, what we witness is “its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.”²⁰ The traumatic experience returns, again and again, to repeatedly address the survivor in the attempt to communicate a reality or truth that is not otherwise comprehensible. The peculiar mode of representation in traumatic narratives is linked as much to what is known as to what is unknown because of the intrinsically deferred nature of this “truth.” Our protagonist in *TOSODR* is doggedly haunted by what is unknown—the question of what happened to his sister—even as he tries desperately to move on from the past.

Another reason for the instability of his memories is that he was orphaned so young that it is difficult to ascertain the “origin” of his memories. Twice he likens the visual and thematic content of his memories to scenes from movies: “In the turmoil of the war, nothing maintained accuracy. . . . A few broken pieces of faint remembrance flickering in his mind like some disconnected sequences chipped from old movie films—that was all he knew about his experiences in the war” (66). “[H]e could not tell for sure whether they were experiences he had actually gone through, or those he had read or seen in the movies about a hundred thousand war orphans and had somehow decided to believe had happened to him” (67). My own translation of the original Korean here would be slightly different: “he could not tell for sure whether those *memories* were

¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric Association Task Force on *DSM-IV, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 428.

¹⁹ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 38.

²⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

memories of his own experiences or those of one hundred thousand war orphans in books he has read, or movies he has seen, whose reality had become his own *memory*" (51, emphasis mine). The emphasis in the original text is on the repeated word *kiyök*, "memory," which seems to indicate his preoccupation with what constitutes memory itself. He uses *kiyök* interchangeably for the idea of personal memory (his own) and cultural memory (books and movies).

His confusion over whether his memory is of real events or of scenes from movies or books resonates with his telling of the dream. The dream-memory has a cinematic quality to it; it is visually dynamic, like a series of camera shots edited together to create a scene. Audiovisual "effects" coalesce into a kind of surrealistic perspective in which dragonflies turn into warplanes and flowers scream and "[hurl] themselves to the ground." Altogether these effects compellingly evoke a bomb explosion experienced from the perspective of a fallen child. The dream is also cinematic in its limited third-person perspective. The protagonist-dreamer is not the boy in the dream, experiencing the scene from the first-person perspective. Rather, he is on the outside, looking in, from a perspective that is analogous to that of a film spectator.

What the protagonist's predicament indexes in part is an existing visual archive of private and public images that, when coupled with a faltering memory, become confused in his mind as one and the same. Sharing narratives, whether historical or fictional, is one of the ways that the individual aligns with society. Cinema and television, as well as fiction, can have the effect of socially calibrating individuals. The individual's memory thus ends up being constituted in part by collectivity. As such, the protagonist's dream-memory brings up the role of collective memory and, specifically, cultural memory in identity formation. Alison Landsberg has suggested that public cultural memory, particularly in the form of cinema, can function as a "prosthetic" to private memory.²¹ The technologies of mass culture make it possible for anyone to absorb collective memories and to assimilate historical events through which they did not live as "personal experience." *TOSODR* shows how prosthetic memory via culture can have ambiguous implications: memory can be revised to the point of confusion between one's own memory and the public memory created by the cultural circulation of images and narratives about the past. Our protagonist shows how the inability to distinguish between real and prosthetic memories compounds the problem of remembering when dealing with the aftermath of lived historical traumas.

The protagonist's persistent problem of forgetting directly contributes to a crisis of identity. He seems lost in relation to both his own sense of self and his place in society. The narrative captures the anxiety that such questions generate by never referring to the protagonist by name. His namelessness stresses the significance of names in the intertwining of biology with identity. Traditional Korean naming culture has built into it a method of genealogical tracing by clan, such that one's name indicates not only one's father's line over centuries but also things like order of birth, place of clan origin, and generational level.²² Orphans and other displaced individuals were stripped of these identifying markers, which became inaccessible for various reasons, such as never being able to return to one's home or the destruction of family records during the war. Our protagonist is one of these individuals, in a sense rendered without history and, by extension, without identity. He does not remember his mother's name; he does not remember his sister's

²¹ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²² This information built into names is possible if families over many generations maintain the *jokbo* (family lineage book) and the practice of *dollimja* (circulating characters).

name. He refers to his sister as “Hye-Su,” but he does not know if Hye-su was his sister’s own name or a new name given to her by the orphanage. Moreover, he refers to her several times as “Bak Hye-su”—Bak being the last name of a dentist in the neighborhood of Imun-dong who supposedly adopted her. His usage of “Bak Hye-Su” subtly indicates that he probably doesn’t know his own surname, since he cobbles together the name he remembers calling his sister with the last name of a stranger who may or may not exist. The people who populate his memories and who are attached to his sense of identity are essentially nameless individuals. His own namelessness in the book encapsulates the inaccessibility of his past and his lack of identity. The protagonist’s namelessness also depicts him as an everyman kind of figure; he is the typical salaryman in early 1980s Seoul and could be any man one encounters on the street. It reminds the reader that the traumatic consequences of war and national division have affected not just a handful but masses of people. But the effects of these traumatic events are hidden under the trappings and pressures of everyday life, so that on the surface, everyone looks the same as the next person.

The pressures of everyday life also encourage forgetting. If it is true, as Maurice Halbwachs declared, that “one cannot remember alone,” then it is also true that our own memories weaken for lack of external supports. Individual and collective forgetting happens as social frameworks inevitably change from one period to another. The protagonist witnessed in his own lifetime one Korea becoming two countries: North Korea and South Korea. He witnessed South Korea’s transition from a war-torn and impoverished country to a rapidly industrialized country dominated by the culture of late capitalism. In this context of rapid change, forgetting becomes treated as the equivalent to “moving on.” According to Halbwachs, collective memory evolves in large part as “society represents the past to itself” in different ways by modifying its conventions. Individuals come to accept these conventions as the new normal, inflecting their own recollections in the same manner.²³ In my view, this is a framed process of forgetting that is shaped by social change and the desire for progress. Everyone *wants* the protagonist to forget about Hye-Su. Everyone wants to believe that she is *not* actually his sister. The superintendent of the orphanage laughs at him, saying, “You’re wrong, boy. . . . She is no relative of yours,” insisting that the protagonist was too young when he entered the orphanage to have remembered his mother’s last words to not let go of his sister’s hand (71). His own adopted mother preferred that he forget about Hye-su too, saying, “Why don’t you forget her? . . . Now you have me. I will do everything for you. You can forget her and go on living with me” (77). What the protagonist does remember is met with skepticism, while forgetting is socially approved as evidence of moving forward.

“Grandmother” of the orphanage recalls that she had taken in both the protagonist and Hye-su from the army barracks because she could not separate them—the boy refused to let go of Hye-su’s hand. While this may seem to constitute evidence that the protagonist and Hye-su were siblings, Grandmother herself, on the basis of a kind of biologicistic reasoning, was hesitant to believe it. She avers, “I really can’t believe you’re brother and sister [because] I can’t tell which one of you two had been born first.” When the protagonist speculates that they may be twins in that case, Grandmother further protests, “Siblings must have some resemblance in their physical features, however young they might be, but you two just didn’t have that resembling look” (74). Her pseudobiologicistic logic evaluates their phenotypical appearances in order to dismiss the possibility of consanguinity. This logic haunts the protagonist—the very value of biological kinship that compels him to look for his sister is the one thing he cannot prove beyond a shadow

²³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172–73.

of a doubt. After many years, he eventually despairs over finding Hye-Su because of all the potential problems—even if she did recognize him and remember him, “how could he prove the fact that they were siblings? Maybe there was some medical way to confirm it, but he would never resort to such a method” (77). This questioning of whether or not Hye-Su is the protagonist’s sister is repeated at the level of the reader. We too ask, “Were they or weren’t they siblings?” But does it matter so much, when they certainly felt and acted like siblings? Would his loss of Hye-Su mean anything less saddening if she weren’t his biological sister? It is not until the end—when we realize that Miss Min could be his sister—that the question of their biological relationship suddenly confronts us with a taboo that brings out the complexity of the problem of memory at the crossroads of the individual and the social.

In *TOSODR*, the incestuous subtext functions as a kind of discursive ellipsis: it captures the displaced anxieties, yearnings, and effects of the trauma of national division. Incest is a multiplication of kinship relations condensed on to one body, which in this story psychically attempts to recuperate what was lost. The trope of desire for the forbidden incestuous object stands in for a yearning for a mythic prior unity, for an overcoming of a traumatic forced separation. Incest dares to confront, perform, and live out the forbidden. The figuration of incest signifies a retreat inward, a refusal to circulate one’s body, one’s blood, and one’s care outside one’s family. In this sense, one can see *TOSODR* as a reaction to the Cold War demands of a kind of exogamy that compelled Korea to be split and manipulated by competing interests. It signifies a return to figurative “endogamy” in which a reunited Korea opts out of geopolitical power struggles.

CONCLUSION

Today, we can see symptoms of the original collective crisis of interrupted kinship that set in motion the circulation and evolution of the trope of the incest scare. We see repeats of the contours of the circumstances and plotline that appeared in *TOSODR*. In popular television dramas, for example, the incest scare usually involves a man and a woman presumed to be siblings or half siblings, one or both of whom are single-parent children, orphaned, or émigrés who have returned to Korea. There is also typically a *key loss of memory* that creates the possibility that one wouldn’t recognize one’s sibling or even know that one had a sibling. However, the typical denouement of these stories involves the realization that the love is not incestuous after all, giving the viewer the vicarious gratification of overcoming trauma and finding true love without having to disrupt the status quo.²⁴

I want to make clear that I am not saying that the trope of incest always looks the same in South Korean incest dramas. What I have argued is that the current iteration of the trope has origins in the collective crisis of interrupted kinship following the war, and that it circulated readily as a manifestation of the crisis. Current South Korean incest dramas reflect the effects of historical trauma and interrupted kinship relations without necessarily “remembering” the referent at all. This is possible because tropes can reflect what Michel de Certeau calls “the memory of a

²⁴ For example, in the prototypical case of *Winter Sonata*, the main male character loses his memory after a car accident, after which his single mother decides to use the services of a hypnotist to erase his bastard past and change his identity completely. She moves them to the United States, where she gets married in order to provide her son with a father and a fresh start. However, when he returns to Korea as an adult, he falls in love with a woman whom both the key characters and the audience believe for several episodes is his half sister. At the very end of the series, of course, their sibling relationship in fact turns out to be false, and all ends happily ever after.

culture.” He believes that the expressions of the memory of a culture remain repressed specifically in literary zones and popular culture because they are “tricks” that characterize “a popular art of speaking.”²⁵ I see the repetition and evolution of the incest trope in South Korean cultural productions as a kind of response to and internal (not necessarily conscious) manipulation of the hegemonic order; the trope perpetuates a traumatic aspect of the memory of a culture, even as that memory is repressed or actively forgotten. The trope emerged from the violent incursions of geopolitics, war, and national division that literally interrupted lines of biological descent on the Korean peninsula. Over time, the incest trope has evolved and diversified as the original experience of trauma has become forgotten or repressed under circumstances of tremendous sociocultural and economic-political change in the past sixty years. But the residues of historical trauma continue to circulate in Korean culture. [A]

²⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 24.