When My Name Was Keoko

LINDA SUE PARK


For as long as Sun-hee and Tae-yul have been alive, the Japanese have occupied their homeland. All Koreans are forced to speak Japanese, to study only Japanese history, and eventually they are stripped of even their Korean names: Korean Olympic gold medalist Sohn Kee Chung, for example, became Son Kitei and is listed in most records as a Japanese national. Sun-hee becomes Kaneyama Keoko, her brother Kaneyama Nobuo. (Korean and Japanese names are family name first, followed by the given name.)

Park shows her storytelling prowess by creating a work in which, in spite of the density of the history that drives the story, her characters still retain their everyday humanity: Sun-hee is a young girl with friends at school, chores she must accomplish, and homework to finish. Tae-yul is ever the older brother, making sure he sets the correct example, frustrated he is not yet a man and desperately trying to help his family survive. The children's hero is their paternal uncle, a headstrong, passionate young man who is a freedom fighter forced into hiding when his printing press is discovered to be producing resistance materials.

With the advent of World War II, Japan's involvement means further subjugation for Koreans. All the while, resources become ever scarcer. Men and older boys are conscripted to serve in the Japanese military, where they are no more than human fodder. Tae-yul, shouldering the burden of his family's suffering, eventually “volunteers” in the hopes that his family will receive favorable treatment by the brutal Japanese. Young girls, ever younger, are urged to “volunteer” for factory work when in fact they will be forced into inhuman sexual slavery, tragically becoming so-called comfort women. Sun-hee escapes such a fate, but some of her fellow schoolgirls do not:

I hear that those girls weren't even allowed to go home and say goodbye to their families. They were taken by truck... after that probably a train... and a boat.

And then what? A factory somewhere, sewing uniforms? Maybe.

One of the most ominous “maybes” in literary history.

Amidst the turmoil and uncertainty, the Kim family manages to survive and even thrive. Like the resilient, single Rose of Sharon plant—the Korean national flower—that the family saves, hidden in the darkness of a shack when all such plants are ordered destroyed by the Japanese, Sun-hee's and Tae-yul's spirits remain unbound.

Part family drama, part coming-of-age, part historical narrative, Keoko is a worthy follow-up to Park's award-winning Single Shard. She continues to bear witness to her rich Korean heritage. Ironically, although her books have all been set in Korea, Park, who is Illinois-born and raised, had very little exposure to other Korean Americans or Korean culture growing up in the 1960s and 1970s.

“We were never exposed to much Korean history,” Park says. “My father was very much the type who wanted his children to assimilate—I think that was the common immigrant mentality then. So one of the things we did not do was speak Korean. Now he jokes that the way to get kids interested in
Korea is not to tell them anything when they’re growing up.” With four successful books, these days Park is a veritable expert.