Princess Bari by Hwang Sok-yong

Reader's Report by Deborah Smith

Introduction

Princess Bari, the latest novel from Hwang Sok-yong, arguably South Korea's most renowned living author, showcases the poetic prose style and impassioned political engagement that have made his name.

On the one hand, Princess Bari is the thoroughly contemporary (yet rarely heard) tale of a young North Korean refugee, forced to flee her country when a relative defects to the south, his action condemning the rest of the family by association. Smuggled across the Tumen river into China, young Bari ekes out a living in the forest with her shaman grandmother, but soon moves on, alone, to a massage parlour in a provincial city. From here, a nightmarish journey crammed into the hold of a container ship brings her to London, where she begins to make a home for herself among the multicultural underclass. Now eighteen, Bari finally feels that she's put her troubles behind her, but still has a long way to go both spiritually and psychologically before she comes to the end of her journey, and to a deeper understanding of the curious parallels between her life and that of her namesake, the legendary Princess Bari. For Princess Bari is also a palimpsest, in which the modern girl's harrowing story overlays the Korean shamanist myth of a legendary princess, abandoned at birth, who must undergo various ordeals and travel to the uttermost edge of the world in order to bring back the water of life.

Importance and appeal of the book

Princess Bari would have immense appeal for a broad range of English readers. Hwang Sok-yong is indisputably one of the 'big names' of Korean literature, while his determination to engage with North Korea (for which he has previously suffered imprisonment) as opposed to merely ignoring it sets him apart from the majority of his fellow countrymen and aligns him rather with the liberal political inclinations of the translation's likely readers. Both he and Princess Bari have been feted in South Korea and praised by top international writers such as Nobel prize-winner Oe Kenzaburo. North Korea is, of course, a source of great fascination for those in the UK, and yet fictional treatments are few and far between. One recent notable exception is The Orphan Master's Son, which did extremely well and garnered a great deal of immediate interest due to this same subject matter. However, there were questions over 'authenticity' i.e. how well the author knew his subject, whereas this is precisely what Hwang Sok-yong's book can provide, given the author's Korean nationality and the fact that he has spent time in North Korea.

In addition to the immediate interest provided by the subject matter and Hwang Sok-yong's stature in the literary world (his previous works have also been published in Japan, China, France, Germany, the UK and US, among others), Princess Bari is extremely well written and makes use of a unique narrative structure, influenced by traditional Korean shaman rituals, which will appeal to all literary-minded readers regardless of whether or not they have a particular interest in Korea. Having said that, these shamanist elements also provide a unique window into a little-known culture which is sure to prove fascinating to anyone with an interest in other countries and peoples.

Comments on format and structure

The book is divided into twelve chapters and follows a chronological narrative, written in the first person, and told from the perspective of an older Bari looking back over her life. As the book
progresses, we see how the course of Bari's life can be mapped on to that of the mythical Princess Bari, and how the ordeals (both physical and psychological) which the former undertakes can also be seen as stages in a Korean shaman ritual. These fantastic scenes are interspersed in the realist narrative, resulting in an eerie mingling which is one of the book's great strengths.

Chapter 1

In the first chapter, Bari narrates her childhood in Cheongjin, North Korea, during the 1990s. She explains how, as the youngest of seven daughters when her parents desperately wanted a son, she was abandoned at birth by her mother, but rescued by her shaman paternal grandmother, who lived with the family and the family dog, Hindung. Her grandmother, recognising the parallel with the shamanist foundation myth of Princess Bari, then gave her the name Bari, meaning 'abandoned'. She tells us a little about how her grandmother raised her father as a single mother; how, when her parents first met, there was friction between her grandmother and her parents because of the former's shamanism; and how her mother suffered under the pressure to produce a son who would continue the family line.

When Bari is five, she has a vision of a girl in white, falls ill and is taken to hospital. From this point on, there were various uncanny episodes which showed that she had inherited her grandmother's supernatural powers of perception, something which had to be hidden from her father.

Chapter 2

Hindung gives birth to seven pups, the seventh of which Bari adopts and names Chilsong, recognising herself in the runt of the litter. Her older sisters laugh at her for her closeness to the dog, calling her strange. Bari's maternal uncle turns up at the house, saying he's been discharged from military service. One of the sisters, Hyeon-i, takes an instant dislike to him. He stays with them for several months and Bari's father helps him to get a job at a company trading in foodstuffs. It is around this time that Bari remembers things starting to go bad in the wider world beyond her immediate home, with severe food shortages. The family manages to scrape by thanks to the uncle's job, but there isn't enough food for the dogs and the children are told that Hindung has gone away, likely to be eaten. The eldest sister, Jin-i, moves away to get married, and the second eldest, Seon-i, joins the army. Bari's father becomes the regional director of Musan city, thanks to his language skills. When the family travels to Musan, just across the border from China, Bari is struck even more by how the country seems to falling into disorder. We meet Uncle Loach, who works for a Chinese import-export company and has been aiding Bari's uncle in black market dealings. He brings the family various gifts, like delicious chocolate cakes smuggled from the forbidden South. Meanwhile, the situation is getting progressively worse for ordinary North Koreans. Uncle Loach tells Bari's father that he's seen talks regarding reunification of the two Koreas on Chinese TV. One day, Bari recalls the streets of Musan suddenly filled with soldiers, and how all the women she saw in the street were crying – it was the day of the Great Leader Kim Il-sung's death. The food shortages that follow are worse than ever, and Bari's uncle turns up at their house, in despair because the supplies for his company have run out. Bari's mother recommends he get in touch with Uncle Loach. Nothing is sold in the city anymore, and people are roaming the countryside in search of food. Bari's parents are unable to dissuade her uncle from crossing the Tumen river into China, never to be seen again.

Chapter 3

Bari's teachers gradually stop showing up at school. Sometimes she goes to the Tumen river with her sister Mi-i and sees in the water the corpses of those who'd tried to get across, and soldiers shoving the still-living back from far bank into the water. In the town, dead bodies are left to rot in
the houses. Bari’s father goes into business with Uncle Loach to provide for the family, and hides smuggled goods in their house. One night Chilsong goes missing, and it's only through Bari’s special connection with the dog that they're able to find her, clearly injured because someone had tried to catch and eat her, and bring her back. The countryside is flooded, and the sisters go out with their grandmother to forage grasses to eat. One day Uncle Loach turns up, and tells them how he's found out how serious their country's situation really is through watching foreign news reports. He tries to persuade Bari’s father to take the family across the Tumen river into China, reluctantly informing him that Bari's uncle has gone to the South, something that is likely to condemn the family by association. Still loyal to North Korea, Bari's father curses the uncle as a deserter. Soon afterwards, some men come round and take the father away, and while he's away their home is requisitioned. Mi-i slips away to China; Bari's mother sets out with the two older daughters, while the grandmother stays behind with Bari and Hyeon-i. With her second sight, Bari dreams of her mother and older sisters, but knows that they have died. Uncle Loach comes to take those who have been left behind across the river into China, where they are taken in by a member of the Korean minority community. Bari's father eventually makes his way to them, much affected by his time in captivity. The situation for the North Korean refugees becomes unstable as more and more make their way across the border and the tide of feeling begins to turn. Bari's father goes deeper into the hills and builds the family a hovel out a earth and rocks. They move there, and have to make the hard decision to sell Chilsong to the family who have been hiding them.

Chapter 4

Bari describes their hard life in the woods. After Hyeon-i freezes to death, her father decides to leave. Bari is left behind with her grandmother, who whiles away the time telling her more of the story of her mythical namesake Princess Bari, who had to find the water of life in order to save her royal parents and all the people of the world, who had sickened from some disease. Her grandmother explains to the young Bari that it wasn't that the water was a special water in a certain hard-to-find location, but that only someone with the right kind of heart would be able to perceive its special properties when they came across it. Bari dreams again of the silent girl all in white. They are out foraging one day when the grandmother dies, and Bari packs her bags and swims back across the river, with Chilsong for company, to see if any of her family are still alive. What follows is a dream-like, hallucinatory wandering through the ravaged North Korean landscape, where the trains no longer run and orphaned children haunt abandoned houses. Bari’s dead grandmother appears to her in waking dreams, their interactions as matter-of-fact as though she were still alive. Hellish scenes follow in which Bari is forced to flee a wildfire; she later recalls hearing about the fires in North Korea that year, how they were started because the starving populace were foraging in the mountains, where they lit fires but then starved to death before they could put them out. After Chilsong is savaged to death by wild boar, Bari is left alone, surviving through bushcraft. Realising that it is impossible for her to get all the way to Musan by herself, she retraces her steps back to China.

Chapter 5

The head of the household who sheltered Bari’s family discovers Bari back living in the mud hut, and has her move in with his family, where she picks up some Chinese and learns to read and write. Deciding that her best bet in finding a family member is to look for Mi-i, who came over to China before her, she gets in touch with Uncle Loach. Her brings her to the city, a place of saunas, karaoke bars and raucous restaurants, where she gets work at a massage parlour. She becomes close with Shang, one of the older girls there, who takes her under her wing and teaches her how to become a masseuse. Here, too, those around her soon pick up on the uncanny abilities Bari has inherited from her grandmother. When Shang's husband Zhao opens a massage parlour in Dalien they take Bari with them. Thinking back, the older Bari wonders if what happened to her
subsequently, the journey to England in the hold of a ship, happened because her life had to follow the course of Princess Bari's mythical wanderings. The people from whom Zhao borrowed the money for the massage parlour show up and beat him up, demanding to be paid. Zhao decides they have to leave the country and pays a man to smuggle them onto a ship. But at the last moment the man refuses to let Zhao on board, and threatens to toss Shang and Bari over the side if they don't do as they're told. Alone with Shang, Bari sees visions of her dead family dressed in white, waiting for her on a long bridge somewhere. At the next port, more people are smuggled on, assigned numbers instead of names, shoved into a steel container with barely room to move around. Given only survival rations, they begin to die off in the course of the ship's journey. Soon, Bari knows, the hell of the journey will turn them into animals.

**Chapter 6**

Bari's method of surviving the journey is to “shrug of the shell of my body” and move further into the spirit world. Cries from the underworld mingle with the sounds of the boat's engine and the waves beating against the sides, and through it all the voice of grandmother, telling her she must go back to the waking world and live on there, for the sake of her family. A shaman's song wells up inside Bari, and as she sings it the visions fade away. Back in the darkness of the container, when Shang stops a man from touching Bari, the men then beat Shang, strip her and rape her. This is too much for Bari, who drifts back into the spirit world, where she sees crows and magpies dismantling her skeleton. But then she watches as her grandmother puts the bones back together and sings a song over them. Bari begs her not to leave, but once again the visions fade.

**Chapter 7**

Bari remembers little of how, aged 15, they finally arrived in London. Separated from Shang, she is taken to work at a restaurant in Chinatown then, too young to be hired as a prostitute, moved to a nail salon near Elephant and Castle, where she is fascinated by all the different cultures and ethnicities she sees. She becomes friendly with an elderly Pakistani man who lives in her building, and meets his grandson, Ali, who asks her out on a date.

**Chapter 8**

Sara, a regular customer at the nail salon, is impressed by Bari's skill as a masseuse and hires her to work for her mistress, Emily, a wealthy woman in her fifties who lives in Holland Park. While giving Emily a massage, Bari sees visions of the older woman's past in Johannesburg. Recognising Bari as a shaman, Emily helps her to induce further visions, in which she sees more scenes from Emily's life in South Africa – the gold mine which her white father and grandfather ran, corpses on a battlefield. Emily shares Bari's gift, which she learned as a child from the black woman who raised her. Bari dreams of her grandmother, and asks her to continue with the story of Princess Bari. Her grandmother tells her that Bari meets and marries a kind of guardian, making Bari wonder whether she will end up marrying Ali.

**Chapter 9**

Bari has been working at the nail salon for a year when the British government starts cracking down on illegal immigrants. Bari comforts her Nigerian neighbour when the latter's husband is arrested, and learns how and why they came to the UK. Bari, who has been calling herself Chinese, tells Ali that she is actually from North Korea, and Ali's grandfather Abdul tells her about their family, how they had to flee their home during Partition. Abdul gives Ali and Bari his blessing to get married, and they then travel up to Leeds to see the rest of his family. Bari describes in detail their traditional Pakistani wedding, and looks forward to what she knows from the story of Princess
Bari should come next – the birth of their child.

Chapter 10

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as the situation becomes difficult for Muslims living in Britain, it transpires that Ali's younger brother Osman has disappeared to Pakistan. Bari cannot dissuade Ali from going to look for him, and keeps her pregnancy a secret so as not to cause him added strain. Months later, still with no word from Ali, Bari gives birth to a daughter. Abdul believes that Ali has died in the violence which has broken out around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, but Bari feels in her heart that Ali is still alive. She searches for him in her dreams, asking the spirits of the dead to help her find him.

Chapter 11

Shang comes to find Bari at the salon. Things have clearly not gone well for her, and Bari is ashamed to not recognise her at first. She borrows some money from Bari, but says she cannot pay it back. Bari tries to persuade her to abandon her current life and become a masseuse, but Shang knows all too well that it's too late for her now. Bari leaves her to look after her infant daughter while she goes to the launderette, but when she comes back she sees the baby has fallen down the stairs and Shang is nowhere to be found, having stolen some money and run away. Bari rushes her daughter to hospital, but she is already dead. Bari shuts herself up at home in grief and rage at her daughter's death. She wishes to kill Shang. Abdul tries to comfort her by talking to her about his beliefs in Allah and an afterlife, but Bari refuses to be consoled.

Chapter 12

In the spirit world, Bari's grandmother shows her that Bari's daughter is there with them. Bari begs to join them, but her grandmother refuses. She tells Bari that she must get on the huge ship she sees there and sail over the seas of fire, blood and sand before she reaches the end of the world. But these three hells turn out to be formed of visions from the real world. The sea of fire is the hell on earth that is war, with planes, helicopters and guns; in the sea of blood, the countless souls of the dead, including her own family, join in her the boat, demanding she tell them the meaning of their deaths; the sea of sand shows her the hell of ignorance, hate, and misunderstanding. At the fire side, Bari tries to find the water of life among a fantastical landscape of castles, gardens and devils, but finds only some ordinary water in a well, which she drinks. But on the way back over the three seas she finds a new understanding blossoming inside her, and when she sees the souls of the dead again she explains to them that their deaths were all caused by human wants. Bari awakens from her long dream and decides she will live. She realises that the water of life is important mainly as something to hope for, because a life without hope is no different from death. Bari goes back to work, and learns that Shang killed herself. She also hears news of Ali, that he is alive but being held on false charges in Guantanamo bay. When Bari turns 21, Ali is finally released. Bari becomes pregnant again, and they open a small shop together. They witness first-hand the 7/7 bombings, and the book ends with them hurrying away from the scene, crying at what they have seen.