

## BOOK REVIEW

***Familiar Things***

Author: Hwang Sok-yong  
 English Translator: Sora Kim-Russel  
 Publisher: Scribe, London  
 Year of Publication: © 2017  
 ISBN 978-1-925228-99-1

**Anindya Firda Khairunnisa**

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Email: [anindyafk@gmail.com](mailto:anindyafk@gmail.com) / [afk322@nyu.edu](mailto:afk322@nyu.edu)

*Familiar Things* (translated from its Korean title **낯익은 세상** – a familiar life) is a novel written by one of Korea’s award-winning writers, Hwang Sok-yong. Throughout his career, Hwang is renowned for his relentless socio-political criticism of the Korean government and society, writing politically-committed works that touch on sensitive—and at times, controversial, issues such as war, death, justice, and the human within it all. *Familiar Things* is a meditation on a rapidly changing society and all the people, of all things familiar, dumped to the margin of society and made estranged.

The book follows the journey of Bugeye and his mother, who, after his father’s detention into the re-education camp, had to move to the Flower Island, a landfill site at the outskirts of Seoul. The 13-year-old boy’s life shifted from insufficiency to extreme poverty, where he had to live by scraping junks with his mother. Here, Bugeye learned to navigate the harsh life of the shantytown: competing for scraps with other trash pickers, getting involved with the junkyard kids, getting used to his mother’s new affair, and having the adventure of his life meeting the supernatural bodies that inhabit the Island.

**A UNIQUE POLITICAL TAKE**

One of the book’s strongest point is how it highlights the price of development that is often overlooked. Despite not explicitly stated, the novel was set in 80s South Korea, taking place during the reign of Chun Doo-hwan and his infamous re-education camp era. The camp, which is purposed to “cleanse” the “socially-ill”, was a move set to boost the president’s regime. Around 40.000 civilians suspected as potential rebels, criminal-record holders,

and government critics were held without trial. Hwang, through his story-telling, is asking us to ponder on the consequences of such political manoeuvre.

Those looking for the detailed exposition of the political era, however, might find themselves disappointed by Hwang’s lack of elaboration on it. After being mentioned at the beginning, and despite being a significant historical event that pushes the story forward, the fact that Bugeye’s father was sent to the camp is never again mentioned. Bugeye’s story moves along as if his father is a forgotten distant past. There is no elaborate accounts of the camp, nor the explicit discussion of the era’s political turmoil. It is because *Familiar Things* is not much of a historical novel, in a sense that Hwang is disinterested in having an exhausting description of the history and politics of the time. He instead focuses on the characters, on the (extra)ordinary life of the shantytown, and I believe that is precisely why this is a successful socio-political critique.

Hwang’s choice to put the camp on the outskirts of the narrative is a deliberate—and arguably brilliant move: It is a call for us to focus on the aftermath of the political into our everyday life. The number of those who were sent to the camp might not exceed the hundred thousand, but the effect it brings to the society is more extensive: there are tons of women and children like Bugeye and his mother who were driven to extreme poverty and starvation due to losing a vital family member. It is a fact that many fail to consider when looking at a political disaster, and is the centre of Hwang’s vibrant tale.

*Familiar Things* ask us to see a different take on South Korea’s economic struggle to become the giant they are today: how political move often destroys the life of the ordinary people. It argues that what the

nation loses is not merely the number of victims sent for rehabilitation, but a whole generation deprived of humanity, and it is beautifully narrated through the eyes of the most vulnerable; the 13 years-old Bugeye, a child struggling in the world of garbage pickers. It also invites us to ponder on the hidden price of our modern life. Many nations had pushed their marginalized to the edge for the sake of development, and we sometimes forget how beyond the number and statistics, they are all human. Hwang and his choice to focus on the characters at the micro-level is a call for the reader to see the issue from a unique perspective.

### A RAW SOCIAL CRITIQUE

The story mostly takes place in a giant landfill of Flower Island, where waste from all over Seoul was dumped to be scraped by the competing trash pickers. By placing the characters and the garbage as one connected ecosystem, Hwang is drawing a haunting comparison. Just like the garbage they have to pick every day, the trash pickers were also people abandoned to the margin of society. In the unforgiving modern world, when their use is due, even human could easily be discarded.

*Familiar Things*, like many other works by Hwang, is a substantial critique of society. In Hwang's story, even the poor have to compete—if not more fiercely—with one another due to the systematic oppression and failure of the power-holder. The trash picker's territory, for example, was divided into classes depending on who can pay the permit fee to the government. From the beginning, Bugeye's mother faced hostility, as her addition was seen as a threat to the already-strict competition in the sector.

In emphasizing the trash picker's marginalized status and address class differences, Hwang uses smell as a recurring motive—a similar pattern also seen in Oscar-winning South Korean movie, *Parasite* (2019). When Bugeye steps into the Flower Island—also note how ironical the choice of name here—he was welcomed with the foulest of odour. The acrid smell then becomes an inescapable mark that made him and the other trash pickers distinct from the everyday local. The politic of smell is especially apparent when they have to interact with people outside of Flower Island. Due to their foul smell, they were rejected by many establishments in the city, and only when they had scrubbed themselves clean will they get accepted as part of the normal. *Familiar Things* also uses smell to highlight class difference by illustrating the hypocrisy of the wealthy, for example, in the case of the church event. The church near the shantytown often received a visit from rich ladies, who were eager to help

by giving basic necessities to the inhabitant. Kindness and affection, however, is as far as publicity takes. The rich ladies grab the children when they take photos of each other but then cover their noses for the smell. The trash pickers went through discrimination for something entirely outside of their control.

In the shantytown, children were also left to fend for themselves. Bugeye faked his age to gain his place amongst the kids, something he had learned on the street living in the city. It is bittersweet to witness the children being forced to mature too fast. At a young age, for example, Bugeye already understood the importance of dignity. Even though he is used to the rough life and poverty, he adopted the nickname Bugeye because it was something that he “earned” like an adult by giving the police a stink-eye during his arrest as a child.

The social commentary in the book feels particularly powerful due to Hwang's choice of perspective. Bugeye is a complex and reflective character, a balanced mixture of a child's curiosity and an adult-like melancholy and scepticism. Following his experiences and thoughts, the reality of the trash picker's world appears strikingly engaging and thought-provoking. Furthermore, Bugeye's relationship with the innocent and childlike Baldspot, the son of the man his mother had an affair with, is interesting because of their contradictory dispositions. Their dynamics is heartwarming, a breeze of fresh air that makes the story such a pleasure despite the bleak setting.

### A MAGICAL ECO-CRITICISM

It was Baldspot that introduced Bugeye to the *doekkabi*, and the wonderful world they lived in which is juxtaposed with the filth of shantytown. Bugeye's life in Flower Island slowly changed after the encounter. Started out as a form of escape from the adult world, Bugeye found himself drawn to the magical world of the spirit, which then rewarded him and his brother's innocent kindness with a wad of fortune. Through the boys' interaction with the *doekkabi*, whose peaceful existence was threatened with the pollution of the garbage dump, Hwang prompts the reader to think about how human destroy their relationship with nature and the spiritual beings that had once become indispensable to human's life. The *doekkabi* is another symbol of things that were once familiar, yet now become strangers in human life

Through the existence of the Kim's—the *doekkabi* family, Hwang Sok-yong again shows how he is a master of utilizing the magical into his realist take. He brilliantly weaves the supernatural aspect of the story to highlight human guilt and the lost value in

modern life. Just like the ghost in his renowned work, *The Guest* (first published in Korea in 2002), the *doekkebi* of *Familiar Things* is an integral part of the story. It feels fitting to use *doekkabi*, supernatural beings closely related to spiritual possession of everyday, inanimate object, to criticize the consumerism of the capitalistic era that carelessly produces mountains of trash every day. They are also used to illustrate the rapidly changing landscape, an inescapable consequence of speedy modern development, and what it does to our nature.

*Familiar Things* criticize the modern human relationship with their material possession. The idea of connectedness, the unbreakable link between every living thing—the human, inhuman, nature—is at the centre of the story. The *doekkaebi* continuously reminded Bugeye of the interconnectedness of their world, how the change brought in the human world is swallowing the *doekkaebi* village whole. However, the act of sending the garbage to be processed away from its owner is already an act of severing this connectedness. It becomes easy for the previous owner to simply forget, to act irresponsibly of what they own and thrown, when the consequences of their wasteful consumption is conveniently taken care of far from their eyes. It is hard to become sympathetic to what is unseen; like the garbage and the people driven to Flower Island, and the forgotten *doekkaebi*.

The first time Bugeye went to work with his mother; he was struck with how eerily unfamiliar everything has become entangled with one another in the landfill. The garbage was everything—it was foul, dirty, ugly, even sometimes shiny—but above everything, it now possesses the face of a stranger. What used to be part of human's everyday life become unrecognized once it is thrown away. *Familiar Things*, therefore, is also an eco-criticism that stretch over decades. Despite having 80s Seoul as a background, but the environmental critique of the book is still relevant to today's context as the wave of ecological awareness is surging like never before. The dynamics between modernism, consumerism, waste problems, and how human sees their relationship with "things", are vividly explored by Hwang.

### **“THEY WOULD COMEBACK. THEY ALWAYS HAD.”**

Despite having a strong supernatural element, *Familiar Things* is nevertheless a story of the human, of all their beauty and wickedness at the centre. It is a political, social, and environmental commentary, and Hwang flawlessly interlaces these different critiques in a story revolving around the most mundane of our every day:

trash. However, it is also true that his style might not be for everyone, especially those looking for a hard-hitting historical novel, as Hwang is subtle with his critique. Hwang's style appeals more to our most deep-seated emotion, and that what I believe makes his commentary hits even harder.

The bittersweet ending concludes *Familiar Things* gracefully. Hwang refuses to pick between a simple close-end nor a lofty resolution, going with a little of both. The story closes with things both changing and unchanging, and the world continues on despite a disastrous turn of event. Though bleak and dirty, however, *Familiar Things* ends in a positive note—it promises the return of things that are once lost.

It promises that nature—and all that it symbolises of human's life—will endure.