

# The theme of identity in chang-rae lee's native speaker

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Chang-rae Lee's first novel *Native Speaker* became a real success. It makes a significant impact on people, as it touches eternal questions of identity search in the contemporary society. The novel won a great number of awards, which include the 1996 Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for First Fiction, the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, QPB's New Voices Award and others. It appeared in *The New York Times* and *The Best American Essays* and Chang-Rae Lee was a finalist for *Granta's American Novelists*. What is remarkable *Native Speaker* is really worthy of all these awards.

Theme of identity is a central one in *Native Speaker*. The main character of this novel is Henry Park. His parents were Korean immigrants and so all his life Henry tries to become a real American, a native speaker. Henry works as a spy for Glimmer and Associates. His main task is to collect information about non-white immigrants and citizens who have shadowy past.

After his son's death and the break with his wife Leila Henry is immersed into identity crisis. Only by the end of the novel he is able to recover from this crisis and find his true identity. Henry has analyzed all his life and seen some things in a new light, he makes a long way full of difficulties, disappointments and despair before he comes to true understanding of his identity.

After their son's death Lelia cannot understand Henry's reaction, his emotionless state. In reality, Henry cannot come in terms with his son's loss, he takes it very hard, but he does not want to show it, he hides his feelings and closes in his shell. Before Lelia's departure at the airport she gives Henry

a brief note, where she describes him: " You are surreptitious / B+ student of life....

Yellow peril: neo-American... stranger / follower / traitor / spy" (Lee 12). This pushes him to reflection about his life. Starting analyzing his past Henry understands that his ability to repress emotions, his skills to memorize everything he learns and a tendency to wear a mask to be socially accepted can be explained by his Korean origin. He also understands that these skills help him to be a natural spy. He is an alien in America, although he was born here, he does his best to be a true American.

He does not admit this fact even in his mind but starting thinking about his parents and his origin he understands that it is true. His profession used to help him feel protected and real American because his main mission is to control non-white people: spying is " the perfect vocation for the person I was, someone who could reside in one place and take half steps out whenever he wished [. . .] I thought I had finally found my truest place in the culture" (Lee 127). At the same time his cold and detached attitude alienates his wife from him.

All Henry's thoughts about his past do not allow him to continue his work, he cannot wear his spy mask any more. He loses his job then he gets another opportunity to work with John Kwang, but this work again reminds him about his Korean origin and his father.

Henry tires to reconnect with his wife. She is not sure whether she really means anything for him, whether he loves her or just requires as the

housemaid, whose name he does not know. Lelia always pushes her husband for the empathetic reflections. He feels that he must overcome this barrier in cultures between them. Henry knows that Lelia cannot hide her feelings as he does and he loves her for this.

" She must be the worst actor on earth. And perhaps most I loved this about her, her helpless way, love it still, how she can't hide a single thing, that she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy. That I know at every moment the precise place where she stands" (Lee 158). All in all Henry convinces his wife that she is his life and that she is extremely important for him. He finally is able to be close with Lelia, to build intimacy between them. His perception of the world has changed and so has his identity.

At the end of the novel Henry is completely different person with much broader identity. He has found a balance between American and Korean cultures. He has reached harmony inside of his soul. Now he understands that America does not make fell foreigners aliens but it gives freedom and an opportunity to realize desires and makedreamscome true. Henry becomes a native speaker of his self and that helps him to be successful in all his activities. Henry understands that identity is something more than just American or Korean nationality. It is your inner self and it does not matter where you live and what you do and what language you speak, the only thing that matter is your inner freedom and moral certainty.

#### Works Cited:

Lee, Chang-Rae. *Native Speaker*. NY: Riverhead Books, 1995.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-theme-of-identity-in-chang-rae-lees-native-speaker/>