

# Erasure in change- rae lee's "a gesture life"



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Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life* tells the story of a man of slippery character. Known by his neighbors as "Doc," Franklin Hata is a friendly face around town, always maintaining a respectful, purposeful distance. He assimilates with the people of Bedley Run quietly and gracefully, but his peers can tell that there is more to his background, where and from what he comes from, than he lets on. Between flashbacks and reflections, Lee weaves together a narrative that explores the experiences and actions of a humble Japanese immigrant in America. In an attempt to move forward, Hata must erase parts of his past, his origins, and his identity.

Upon leaving his birth parents, Hata dissolves any evidence of his Korean-ness, abandoning the language and his Korean name - given to him by "the tanners," as he refers to them - and adopting the name and way of life of his new, Japanese family. He works hard to prove he deserves their sponsorship and immerses himself in their culture and education, reborn into a new life, one where his past never existed. In a setting where Koreans are treated as second-class citizens, Hata renounces his native-born identity, burying his origins beneath his complacency with his new culture. When he enlists in the Japanese Imperial Army, he becomes a servant of the nation; his identity becomes synonymous with that of the troop, no longer his own, though he maintains the Japanese facade - because it presents him as more "acceptable," offers more credibility to his peers. Similarly, after settling in Bedley Run after the war, he tries to epitomize the "normal," nuclear American life as best he can; moves into a beautiful home, adopts a daughter (whom he hopes will pass for his own), and tries to complete his family with a wife, Mary Burns. His painful experiences during the war fall to

the wayside, any history with the Imperial Army wiped from his being as outwardly as he can manage. It is in this way that Hata finds himself systematically and thoroughly shifting and changing his character with each new phase of his life. He shapes his being to better fit the expectations and intentions of the people around him, erasing any parts of him that trail behind - the ones that don't fit the mold. It is the only way he knows how to be.

Hata's desire to erase parts of his being extends to others as well, when their histories seem to impede on his; when their interactions with him reflect badly on his character. Lee crafts several parallels in Hata's life that revolve around conflicting ideas of abortion and rebirth that exemplify his swiftness to rid himself of reflections of "bad" character. Erasing something before it begins, or perhaps before it realizes it exists, and returning to creation, born again, different - like Hata, beginning his life again by rescinding his past. The most striking example lies in the parallel between Sunny and K, and Hata's role in each of their lives. During the war, passivity is Hata's defining characteristic; he is a mere bystander in the middle of a conflict that very much hinges on his stance. Because of his lack of action when action is called for, K is tragically mutilated; her small fetus, full and perfect, is ripped from her belly and tossed aside on the grass, never to be born. Years later, he pushes Sunny to have a late-term abortion despite her hesitance and reconsideration; he actively convinces the doctor to do the procedure, even acting as the surgeon's assistant and invasively operating on his daughter. He never speaks of K to anyone, nearly erasing her from any part of his history, and aids in erasing a massive part of Sunny's life, taking her unborn

child from her. Tying up loose ends, as he believes is the right thing to do. Taking it upon himself to make something happen when he should not.

In his old age, Hata tries to reconcile his deeds. Walking through Sunny's bedroom - which has been totally stripped of all its contents except the bed, symbolic of his purposeful removal of any evidence of her from the house - and then into her bathroom, he crawls into her old bathtub to reflect. The dirty, red-brown water that initially comes forth "with a violent spew" (289) spills unto him, a reminder of both the menses that K hadn't had in the months he knew her and the blood let by Sunny during her abortion, birth and abortion opposing each other in his daughter's cramped childhood bathroom. The water returns to its normal transparency as he lets it run, of course, the memories swirling down the drain, pushed out of his sphere of being once more. Curled into a fetal position, almost suspended in the hot water, Hata tries to make peace with his mistakes. The scene evokes an image of a fetus in a womb, motionless in a quiet stasis - another parallel by Lee. Reflecting on his life, wondering how to atone for his actions (or lack thereof), Hata seems to disentangle his being from the body that has committed them. He thinks about returning to a time before his creation; for once, rather than erasing his past and beginning again, he wishes he could backtrack as if starting fresh for the first time, free of any identity or even origin. Never to be born, never to cause any damage, never to taint or stand by or erase.

The idea of dissociation - from one's life or one's self - weaves itself between and within, almost as a product of, his need for erasure. So much of his past has been swept under the rug, boxed up, locked, shoved to the back of a top

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shelf of the closet - he can't remember who Franklin Hata is anymore; so many parts of him have been erased that he struggles to present a complete identity even inwardly. " Now and then," he says, " I somehow forget who I really am... I lose all sense of myself." (285) He sometimes feels as though his self is projected not just out of, but in spite of, his body; changing tenses from " I" to " he" when describing himself, like he exists on adjacent planes: the world where Hata does his morning laps in the pool, and the world where he opens his mouth and breathes below the surface, letting water rush into his lungs.

Ultimately, Hata cannot escape the conditions of his past. In attempting to preserve the facade he has so carefully crafted, he loses his true self.