

"quiet odyssey" by mary paik lee essay sample

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“ Quiet Odyssey” by Mary Paik Lee Essay Sample

Life in the United States was anything but heavenly for Asian Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As vividly described in Mary Paik Lee’s autobiography, “ Quiet Odyssey”, a very large majority of the Asian American population residing in America during this time period “ never had enough money for a normal way of life” (Lee, p. 9). They usually had to resort to difficult physical labor to barely get by, jeopardizing their health in the process. Japan’s subjugation of Korea, even though it actually took place in Korea, greatly affected the Korean population in America, sometimes even causing some of the initial Korean presence in the States.

Lee’s story reveals some of the obscure aspects of Korean history that otherwise may be more difficult to excavate. It also depicts the racial discrimination severely rampant during this time, and how Asian Americans worked to better their position in American society despite this obstacle. Asian Americans in Mary Paik Lee’s Quiet Odyssey brutally experienced the effects of poverty, degradation, colonialism, and racial discrimination, as reflected in Lee’s accounts of personal experience and Asian American Cultures 101 of the University of Washington.

Asian Americans, including Lee and her family, were constantly harassed by poverty and degradation, which eventually led to health deterioration. Even when Asians came equipped with some level of education—such as Lee’s father, who had studied to be a minister—they usually had to resort to farming and produce stands, the kinds of degrading jobs reserved specifically for Asian in America, which also included small groceries, tobacco

shops, chop suey joints, dry-cleaning and pressing shops, and laundries. These jobs required long and difficult work days only amounting to minimal income, which made Lee's family's main goal "to earn enough money to buy food to feed all of [her family]" (p. 46). Every member of the family needed to contribute to this goal—to her parents' embarrassment, even Lee's "one-dollar-a-week wages were needed to feed the family" (p. 24), and her brother Meung's dreams of going to high school are shattered by his obligation to support the family.

Soda and ice cream are considered "luxury items" (p. 88), and Lee's first experience with a toothbrush and toothpaste only comes after marriage. Health conditions due to malnutrition were common because of the lack of food with the exception of "all things... unfit for human consumption" (p. 16). She meets the "end of [her] hopes for a high school diploma" (p. 58) when she is told to stay out of school for two years as a result of severe malnutrition. She was not the only one to experience these kinds of poor health conditions. Many Asian Americans took on physically demanding jobs that worked them much over their physical tolerance level because they had to feed their families, having no other choice in a society so Anti-Asian. However, Korean Americans had less of a choice than other Asian Americans due to domineering powers back home.

Lee and other Korean Americans' lives are further emotionally complicated by the effects of Japanese colonialism back in their homeland. The Paik family's initial reason for immigration was because they were forced to hand over their house to the Japanese soldiers. This meant the beginning of their

tough life in America. Over the years, stories of ruthless persecution in Korea traveled by word of mouth and letters from escapees in China. Lee and her family experience great emotional pain when they hear about the March First Movement in 1919, or, the Mansei Uprising, through which their relatives are accused of influencing their pupils to rebel and are persecuted. The Paik family back in Korea constantly writes to Lee's father for financial assistance, which was needed as a result of economic hardship caused by Japanese oppression. Many Korean American families did their best to send financial aid to Korea, to assist their families in need and to help liberate their homeland.

This meant extra financial burdens for Koreans in America, added on top of the already-present financial responsibilities. As for the emotional discontent they faced, they could do nothing else but to "carry on" (p. 61). The mental discomfort Lee and her family lives with caused by their knowledge of the status quo is uncomfortable, but at the same time, portrays the events that otherwise would not be as widely known. Because Japan tried not to let the rest of the world grasp too much knowledge about Korean persecution by heavily censoring letters and torturing Koreans to the point of near death but not complete death to ease the callous picture, autobiographies such as *Quiet Odyssey* are good sources of what really went on. The obscure accounts of the persecuted are incorporated into Lee's story, recounting the gruesome tragedy in Korea with no embellishments. However, as Korean Americans were battling colonialism overseas, they and other Asian Americans were battling a bigger opposition in America.

The largest conflict Asian Americans suffered from in nineteenth and twentieth-century America was between racial discrimination and the desire for acceptance, which is also the most frequently encountered aspect in Lee's story. Asian Americans were excluded solely because of prejudice; because of their physical appearance, not their actions. They were forced to be cautious of even the most innocent activity, such as using the restrooms, solely because of the color of their skin. Lee lived in a society where numerous facilities were labeled "For Whites Only" and people looked at Orientals, "upon whom every white person was looking with hatred" (p. 95) as if they were "something from Mars" (p. 50).

Her first day in elementary school consisted of her classmates "[chopping her] head off" (p. 16) just because she looked different from them. During this time, not very many Asian American families sent their children to a white public school, where it was "common practice" to "give the nonwhite students lower grades than the whites" (p. 56). Many of them sent their children to segregated schools, or refrained from sending them to school altogether. Everywhere they went, the "atmosphere [and attitude were] chilling" (p. 24, 54). For this reason, "people like [Lee had] to look before going anywhere" (p. 78), for the fear of accidentally overlooking the "For Whites Only" signs. For her, even the church was "For Whites Only," before the local judge clears up the situation, when a churchgoer "[glares at her] with hatred in his eyes and [tells her] to 'go to hell'" (p. 54).

Because of this barrier to racial harmony created by American society, Asian Americans had to exert much effort to fit in and be accepted. Lee's father

wisely advises that Lee " always watch the wife's reaction to whatever [that happens] and try to please her" (44) whenever she visits a white family's home. He knows, like many other Asian Americans, that they would have to " learn to get along with everyone" (p. 16) to survive in America. They took extra precautions to make sure not to " cause ill feeling towards [their] people," and to " prove to Americans that [they] are also human beings" (p. 103).