

The relinquishing of roots



Does assimilation into American culture occur easily for immigrants or individuals with foreign-born parents? As the characters in Chang Rae Lee's novel, *Native Speaker*, demonstrate, adjusting to the Western world comes with great difficulty and often ultimately results in a sense of alienation and shame. The narrator, Henry Park, a Korean-American suffering from an identity crisis, reveals the resentment he feels for his parents who relinquish their Korean roots in an attempt to attain the typical American dream.

Throughout the novel, Henry Park's attitude is critical, frequently finding fault with others. Differing from both of his parents who lack pride in their Korean heritage and instead try blending in with the Americans, Henry personally resides more in a territory of uncertainty, unsure about the classification of himself as a Korean or an American. For this reason, Henry comments:

I remember thinking of her, What's she afraid of, what could be so bad that we had to be that careful of what people thought of us, as if we ought to mince delicately about in pained feet through our immaculate neighborhood, we silent partners of the bordering WASPs and Jews, never rubbing them except with a smile, as if everything with us were always all right, in our great sham of propriety, as if nothing could touch us or wreak anger or sadness upon us (52).

He openly questions his mother's hesitancy and shame associated with her Korean background when he says, " I remember thinking of her, What's she afraid of, what could be so bad?" (52). The partial italicization of Henry's scrutiny profoundly exemplifies the stigma Mrs. Park feels associated with

her status as a Korean-American immigrant. Lee's sparing use of italics dramatizes her embarrassment and heightens the moment in the work. Henry's reference to his family's life as a "great sham of propriety" heavily attests to his objections for the front his family put on after immigrating. The extent to which the Park family goes in order to gain acceptance, such as hiding all negative emotions and instructing Henry to "show them how well [he] spoke English, to make a display of it," clearly exhibits the difficulties that accompany assimilation into the American culture (53).

The Parks maintain an outsider status in their neighborhood. Due to the Park's pride associated with independence and unreliance on others, Mrs. Park would discontinue cooking mid-recipe rather than borrowing the necessary ingredients" My mother...would gladly ruin a birthday cake rather than bearing the tiniest of shames in asking her next-door neighbor and friend for the needed egg she'd run out of, the child's pinch of baking powder" (52). Even such a small thing that carries no consequence brings shame upon her. By sharing this memory of his mother from the past, Henry allows the reader a greater understanding of the struggles his family underwent in the United States where they were viewed as complete foreigners in spite of attempting to relinquish all of their Korean ties. Henry's critical tone illustrates his disapproval of his parents' complete loss of their Korean identity, despite being born there, following their relocation to North America.

After moving to the United States and devoting his whole self to chasing the American dream, Henry's father's life not only revolves around money but also around the exploitation of his workers for his personal benefit. Henry's

cynical question “ What belief did I ever hold in my father, whose daily life I so often ridiculed and looked upon with such abject shame?” highlights the rocky relationship he had with him his entire life, cultivated by Mr. Park’s failure to fulfill the typical paternal role (53). By questioning, “ What belief did I ever hold in my father?” and employing the words “ ridiculed” and “ abject shame,” all of them with such strong negative connotations, Henry enables the reader to easily perceive his critical attitude towards his own father. With the lack of respect that Henry holds for Mr. Park, he surely does not find a role model in him and makes no effort to conceal his disdain from anyone, including his father. In addition to the people in his community who estranged Mr. Park, his own son also alienates him “ for the way he had conducted his life with [his wife,] and then his housekeeper, and his businesses and beliefs” (49). As Henry reflects on his upbringing, he allows the reader an opportunity to partially understand the personal impact that the lack of acceptance into one’s community has on his or her identity. After coming to America, Mr. Park found himself as a minority lacking all standing despite his degree in industrial engineering. In an attempt to regain the dignity he loses as a foreigner in the United States, Mr. Park turns to making money. The Parks’ lifestyle significantly changes from their initial existence as the traditional immigrant family in America living off of each day’s profit and dealing with very cramped living arrangements to trying to blend in with the upper class and repressing their Korean roots. Henry’s desire for his father’s temperament to revert back to being in generally better spirits is apparent when he remarks,

I wondered if my father given the chance, would have wished to go back to the time before he made all that money, when he had just one store and we rented a tiny apartment in Queens. He worked hard and had worried but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in (51).

The alteration in his father's disposition is evident to Henry, who in the past remembers his father dancing to music, working on his car, and socializing with other Korean friends. Henry notices these sources of joy in his father's life disappear following his great influx of money. By musing about the past, as evidenced when he says, " I wondered," Henry manifests how capitalism and " America, the brand of culture we had to live in," adversely impacted Mr. Park's quality of life and ultimately the entire family (103). Henry reflects on the level of his father's happiness prior to falling victim to America's materialistic nature as demonstrated through Henry's observations of his father's customers as " blue-haired matrons...[with] fancy dogs, and the sensible young mothers pushing antique velvet draped prams, and their most quiet of infants, and the banker fathers brooding about annoyed and aloof and humorless" (53). Henry recognizes through his father that tangible items and attaining the American Dream, in Mr. Park's case becoming very wealthy, affording his family the opportunity to live in a big house with a big yard, own fancy cars, and join the exclusive pool and tennis clubs, rarely result in contentment unless surrounded by a strong network of family and friends. Mr. Park evidences that an individual who completely rejects the core of his or her being in an attempt to integrate one's self into another culture loses his or her true identity and struggles to find happiness.

As exemplified through the Park's experience as Koreans in a new place, although immigrating to the United States affords new opportunities, obstacles such as discrimination can result in cultural alienation. Henry's critical tone throughout the work imparts the hardships that immigrant families undergo as well as his discontent for his parents' absence of pride in their heritage. Ultimately, the Park family will remain lost in America until they defend their Korean roots and find pride in their background.