

Manipulation of the spy novel in Chang- rae Lee's Native Speaker



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* describes the difficult and oftentimes discouraging assimilation of a young Korean American, Henry Park.

Throughout the novel, Henry struggles to find his true self in either Korean or American culture. His effort to mold an identity in a foreign country leaves him an "emotional alien...stranger [and] follower," often feeling like he is invisible to those around him (5). Similarly, Chang-Rae Lee manipulates common Asian stereotypes to aid his novel's purpose. It is not a coincidence that the sneaky, reserved, private, and secretive traits required of a spy are also fitting of American expectations for immigrants. Indeed, Lee's choice to assign Henry the career of a spy is a cultural convention in itself. Ultimately, Henry's role as a spy serves as a symbol for the American immigrant experience. Chang-Rae Lee moves beyond the one-dimensionality of a traditional spy novel and, instead, uses Henry's career as a vehicle to express the fractured and conflicting identities induced by assimilation into American culture.

A Korean native, Henry is the perfect candidate for his occupation. While exact details of his work are never fully expressed, we learn that he is employed by Glimmer and Co., a shady information firm specializing in gathering secret and beneficial data on individuals in immigrant communities. Undoubtedly, Lee is playing on stereotypes defining Asians as sneaky, quiet, and deceptive. Henry's appeal to spying stems from the "cultural legacy of silence" learned from his parents who were authentically Korean (Chen 639). Almost inescapably, Henry finds that his "truest place in the culture" is his job, especially since his boss "bemoaned the fact that Americans generally made the worst spies" (118, 160). In order for his work

to be effective, Henry must devise fictitious narratives for himself so that he will remain undetected when faced by his clients. As a result, the line between Henry's true self and his portrayal to outsiders is often indistinguishable. Similarly, Lee draws on parallels between Henry's physical position as an outsider and spy and his position as an emotional or cultural outsider resulting from his immigrant status. Also, the nature of impersonation required of a spy echoes the immigrant inclination to present a front to those considered "more" American than immigrants themselves. The invisibility Henry practices as a spy "coincides with the in/visibilities of race" (Chen 645). After all, even Henry is familiar with "that secret living" practiced by foreigners in America (163). For example, his childhood is plagued with memories of customers at his father's grocery shop who "didn't seem to see [him]" and "didn't look at [him]" because he "was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them" (49). In this way, Henry and his career become a metaphor for immigrants more generally. Furthermore, for someone who has ambiguous self-perception and identity, it is ironic his work at Glimmer and Co. requires him to investigate, dissect, and sum up the identities and intentions of others. While Henry's career requires him to explicitly describe others' identities and invent multiple identities for himself to accomplish this goal, he is completely dependent on those around him to shape his personal identity. His "inability to divorce personal problems from professional obligations" leaves him searching for self-definition and validation through others' eyes. As an end result, his professional secrecy bleeding into personal relationships contributes to his already fractured identity.

By the end of the novel, Henry realizes that his deceptive acts and false identities as a spy have personally compromised him. His performance as a spy has deeply affected his sense of self and his personal relationships. In general, his “ co-mingling of reality and illusion” comes to represent a larger immigrant struggle between American assimilation and ethnic allegiance (Chen 653). Indeed, these struggles become evident in his personal and professional relationships with his wife, Lelia, and his subjects Doctor Luzan and John Kwang. For instance, the story begins with a list of descriptors that Lelia has left for Henry before she leaves him for the islands, adjectives like, but not limited to, “ surreptitious, illegal alien, emotional alien, stranger, follower, spy” (5). This list is what initiates Henry’s internal conflict about his true identity and leaves him realizing he does not know who he truly is or which culture he belongs to. Lelia’s list reveals Henry’s lack of self-agency and more generally: “[she] symbolizes his general willingness to let someone else determine who he is” (Chen 165). Instead of protesting Lelia’s unflattering descriptions of him, Henry accepts her assessment and spends their separation living up to or being defined by her perceptions of who he is. By engineering this element of the narrative, Chang-Rae Lee illuminates the struggle that immigrants experience in resisting outside ideas of who they are and what defines them as “ American.”

In general, Henry’s identity crisis is caused by his “ inability to divorce his personal problems from his professional obligations” (Chen 644). During his separation from Lelia, Henry is assigned coverage of a psychoanalyst, Dr. Luzan. In order to gather information successfully, Henry must create a pseudo-self, or a “ legend,” as he refers to it (22). However, when Dr. Luzan

asks Henry, "Who, my young friend, have you been all your life?" during the therapy session, Henry realizes that he is "stringing the legend back upon himself" (205, 22). Thus, Henry's "true" personal narrative becomes intertwined with the fictitious Henry Park, causing him to "becom[e] dangerously frank, inconsistently schizophrenic" (22). He explains: "When I was in the chair across the desk from Luzan I completely lost myself" (22). In this moment, Chang-Rae Lee attempts to illuminate the result of being from two different cultures yet belonging to neither. Since Henry can commit to neither his authentic self nor his fictional narratives, he is left feeling completely isolated and "othered." Additionally, Henry's relationship with another assignment subject, John Kwang, reveals the same sort of ambiguity. If it is Lelia who represents to Henry everything American he aspires to be, then it is John Kwang who represents the most cherished aspects of Korean lifestyle and culture. Although Kwang ostensibly represents the same type of American-ness as his political opponent, he is still able to retain his inner Korean heritage. For Henry, Kwang embodies the kind of seamless assimilation that he is unable to achieve. As with Dr. Luzan, the "legend" that Henry writes for himself becomes unravelled as his admiration for Kwang grows. Henry eventually "succumbs to the illusions of his own performances," and his relationships with both Dr. Luzan and John Kwang signify his inability to separate his fictional self from his "real" self (Chen 644).

Henry's role as a spy ultimately serves as a symbol for the American immigrant experience. Despite the ability of those around him to easily define his role in America as a non-native speaker, Henry is never quite able

to reconcile his Korean background with his American residence. In short, Chang-Rae Lee's deliberate career choice for Henry draws on parallels between Henry's physical position as an outsider and spy and his position as an emotional or cultural outsider, an alienation resulting from his immigrant status.

Works Cited

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