

Confronting the Immigrant's Truth in Change Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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Abstract

Chang Rae Lee's debut novel Native Speaker talks about a confused second generation immigrant and the continuous trial for understanding his own culture in foreign land. In this paper, the researcher will be discussing about the search of one's long forgotten native culture by the Korean American, the second generation immigrant in America. Henry, the protagonist finds his identity and the lost culture through the events which happens to him as an immigrant. Being a second generation immigrant, he was lost in the foreign land and slowly he tries to uphold his culture and identity by recognising the importance of both in his life. The confession mode in the spy genre of the novel makes it more amusing for the minority immigrant in America. Although the protagonist is an American born, he too goes through the taunts and never ending questions pertaining to his ethnic origin even from his American wife. To get back his love and to understand his roots, he takes up a search for his self, self identity and cultural identity. This transformation and the hybrid identity will be discussed in the paper.

Keywords: immigrant, ethnicity, identity, hybridity, confession, transformation

Chang Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* is the famous spy, diasporic novel which won several awards like the American Book Award and the PEN/Hemingway Award after its publication in 1995. The novel is acclaimed as one of the best novel written by 20th century Korean American Literature. Lee explores central issues of the first and second generation Asian American experience, their struggle to assimilate, the process of finding the identity, racial discrimination, exclusion from the centre, and the dreams of the immigrants. In the introduction to the volume *Alieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, it is rightly observed: "The truth is that Asian-Americans have been seriously writing since the nineteenth century, and writing well." (Chin 3) The writers, artists who belong to the hyphenated origin become the historian who narrates the serious events.

Chang Rae Lee traces the narration with using the first person narrative to trace the events of Korean American. Even though, the novel is known for its spy- genre, it begins with a very personal note of the Korean protagonist named Henry Park (who is seen leaving by his American wife Leila). Leila hands over a note before she leaves Henry, which holds the novel from its immigrant's perspective. These following lines are the crux of the novel which inspires Henry to explore about him.

*You are surreptitious
B+ student of life
first thing hummer of wagner and strauss
illegal alien
emotional alien
genre bug
Yellow Peril: neo- American*

great in bed
overrated
poppa's boy
sentimentalist
anti-romantic
_____ analyst (you fill in)
stranger
follower
traitor
spy (Lee 5)

This given note by his American wife leads him to move out from his shield of comfortable American life and to confront the truth behind his identity. He confronts that he has secretly denied but comes to have a sense of understanding of his cultural and personal identity in the end of the novel.

Lelia's letter gives a much wider outlook for the understanding of second generation Korean American immigrants facing the 21st century of America. Korean immigrants' second largest home for migration is US after the Republic of China. They came to US in a very small number during the early 20th century which is divided into 3 periods: the first wave from 1903 to 1949 ; the second wave of immigrants are those who has come in between 1950 to 1964 and the period afterwards is the third wave of immigrants which Chang Rae Lee adapts in his novels. Unlike the first wave and second wave immigrants, the third wave immigrants were not labourers, war victims and political refugees; rather they were well trained white collar workers. Chang Rae Lee portrays this second generation immigration who is often referred as 'gyopo' in Korean language.

Native Speaker is about the Henry the born American to Korean parents. Henry is well-versed in English unlike his parents who struggle to tell a phrase. The title of the novel is connected to the story from the beginning. Henry, who despite of his good language skill, is alienated under the racial issues. This struggle continues both in his personal and professional life. Working for a spy agency under an American organization, collecting the details of famous immigrants, never made him guilty until he confronts the note given by his wife,

The names which Leila refers him in the note not only destroys his shield image of Korean American doing a white collar job but also confronts him to the

real immigrants' ugly truth as Rey Chow says in her 'ethnic objection' theory. For so long Henry as an second generation immigrant was holding the shield image because of the granted lifestyle by his father, marriage with American wife, job in an American agency; but after the separation from his wife, he confronts with his ethnic background and his psyche towards his identity.

Born to a traditional Korean settled American family, Henry was more or like an American rather than a Korean. He doesn't understand why his father works hard when there is enough money to survive. His mother never asks about his father's work as he was an engineer in Korea but in America he works in fruits vendor shop. He doesn't like his father being not emotional but in the end he too ends up as Lelia calls him 'emotional alien' and 'sentimentalist'. He lives more like a professional spy than as a son, husband, or as a father. He ends up like a 'stranger' even to Lelia, and ultimately to himself. This 'stranger' Henry starts his journey of understanding himself through his spy job. The time period he gets after the departure of Lelia is the time period he uses to recognize himself from a 'stranger' to the immigrant. He overcomes this strangeness through the same spy job where he gets an opportunity to meet the psychiatrist Luzan and the politician John Kwang.

Henry, acting as a patient who suffers from anxiety meets Luzan in the clinic where he expresses his true feelings towards his dead son Mitt. He overcomes the shield of emotional alien through this by sharing his inner feelings as a father losing his son. According to the rules of the spy agents, they are not supposed to reveal their personal life to anyone but Henry fails in that and gives away his own information rather than collecting as a good spy. He fails in the project and his boss Hoagland gives him another project to follow the upcoming politician John Kwang.

This assignment leads Henry to open up his psyche shield from within. As any spy, he too for the sake of following Kwang closely gets a job as a receptionist and does every other work which is asked for. His racial uniqueness from the Americans gets him the job easily. Henry's spy job can be taken as an example for such idea where he does not

realize that he is working against his own ethnicity. “Harsh upbringing of Park back in Korea, has taught Park how to hide his emotions and how to remember everything he learns and the weirdest of all, how to feel an increasing sense of alienation” (Kim Sue 12). This nature of Henry gets him a job but it becomes too late for him to realize that he is working against his own ethnicity.

In the spy job, he is expected to be on help and assist Janice, the personal secretary of Kwang. He finds difficult to spy for the first time as he gets reminded of his father (who was a mystery to him) through Kwang. He confronts another major shield as Lelia calls him ‘traitor’, he understands the treachery he has been doing for so long without recognizing it. He understands how his spy work is used by Americans to spy on his own community and ethical people. He also knows the difference between two different cultures, the two different ideologies and identities when he spies on John Kwang.

Eduardo, Hoagland’s another secret agent working under Kwang, dies in a bombing of the building. Henry finds out it is because of Kwang who planned and executed Eduardo as he comes to know the truth about Eduardo. It becomes an eye opener for Henry as he could see that innocent people face crises because of the cultural indifferences. Being a second generation immigrant, working as a secret agent for an American organization, Henry confronts the shield of treachery as his wife calls him. It is only when he takes off this shield of ‘traitor’ from him, he openly supports Kwang before the media. Kwang was accused of taking people’s money in ‘ggeh’/ money club of Korea which is seen as the mutual bank system and failed to return it back. Henry understands the ‘ggeh’ (Korean money club where few participants will give small amount of money to one person in one rotation, and that follows without any interests) system of Korea through his father who also shared money to his club. Here, he confronts himself being culturally and ethically different from the Americans who could not understand their economic system and started accusing Kwang. As Rey Chow says that an “individual becomes ethnic through the pressure

created by social systems to do self-confessional literature, or literature that seeks to explore one’s own ethnicity” (Chow 1).

Henry’s self confessional journey starts when he confronts the immigrant’s reality and the ugly truth of living as migrants. For Henry, he comes out of this shield and openly supports Kwang when he was bullied by the protestors. Henry faces the truth at that moment when he hears the echoes of the same phrases which was used by his wife, the shouts calling them “Yellow Peril, neo American” and shouting to them to leave America. Henry born as an American confronts this truth as an immigrant and understands the cultural differences through Kwang’s life. Kwang leaves his mansion after the protest and returns to Korea whereas Henry after few months goes back to the same mansion to buy it from a broker without acknowledging the fact that he has shared history with the previous owner.

To conclude, Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* is a novel which doesn’t show any heroic deeds by the protagonist rather it shows the realization of the immigrant towards his culturally different America. The protagonist doesn’t fight violently or makes his presence through his strong dialogues, but he slowly adapts and emerges into a whole new person in the end after all the struggle of understanding his culture in a foreign land. The novel seems like a journey of a male second generation immigrant from an identity which was masked so far with false identity and facing the truth by removing the mask.

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