

Exploring Identity in Korean Diaspora Fiction: A Character Analysis of Henry Park in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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Abstract

This study examines the complex identity issues faced by Henry Park, the protagonist of Chang-Rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker*, through the lens of Hannah Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu. By examining Henry's experiences as a 1.5-generation Korean-American immigrant, this analysis elucidates the tensions between cultural assimilation and heritage preservation. The study describes Henry as a "Lesser Stranger", a nuanced identity state situated between complete alienation and full assimilation. Furthermore, the analysis draws parallels with Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* in order to gain further insight into Henry's internal conflict and external societal pressures. In conclusion, this paper offers a comprehensive examination of the Korean-American experience, contributing to broader discussions on diaspora, identity, and cultural integration.

Keywords: Korean-American literature, identity and assimilation, pariah and parvenu, diaspora experience, cultural conflict

Raziskovanje identitete v korejski diasporični fikciji: analiza lika Henryja Parka v romanu *Native Speaker* avtorja Chang-Rae Leeja

Izveleček

Študija se pogloblja v zapletene identitetne boje Henryja Parka, protagonista romana *Native Speaker* avtorja Chang-Rae Leeja, skozi prizmo konceptov parija in parvenuja, ki ju je razvila Hannah Arendt. S proučevanjem Henryjevih izkušenj kot 1,5-generacijskega korejsko-ameriškega priseljence ta analiza poudarja napetosti med kulturno asimilacijo in ohranjanjem dediščine. Študija uvaja pojem Henryja kot »manj tujega« (*Lesser Stranger*), niansirano stanje identitete, ki je postavljeno med popolno odtujenost in popolno asimilacijo. Prav tako vzpostavlja vzporednice s Frantzom Fanonom in njegovim delom *Črna koža, bele maske*, da bi bolje razumeli Henryjev notranji konflikt in zunanje družbene pritiske. Za konec članek ponuja celovito raziskavo korejsko-ameriške izkušnje ter prispeva k širšim razpravam o diaspori, identiteti in kulturni integraciji.

Ključne besede: korejsko-ameriška literatura, identiteta in asimilacija, parij in parvenu, diasporna izkušnja, kulturni konflikt

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Introduction

Diaspora literature is a broad term that encompasses the body of literary works produced by authors who live outside their native lands. These works often reflect on themes of exile, displacement, and the negotiation of cultural identity.

This genre is characterized by its examination of the complexities of identity formation, the sense of belonging, and the struggles of maintaining cultural heritage while assimilating into a new society. It provides a voice for the experiences of immigrant communities, highlighting their challenges and contributions to the multicultural mosaic of their adopted countries. The narratives in question facilitate a more profound comprehension of the immigrant experience and the multifaceted ways in which individuals and communities negotiate their dual identities.

The novel *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee 이창래, published in 1995, represents a seminal work in the field of Korean-American literature (Lee 1996). It engages with the intricate dynamics of identity, assimilation, and cultural displacement. The narrative is centred on Henry Park, a 1.5-generation Korean-American immigrant who is confronted with the challenge of reconciling his Korean heritage with his American upbringing.

This paper examines Henry's multifaceted identity through the theoretical lenses of Hannah Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu (Arendt 2022), as well as Frantz Fanon's exploration of identity in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008).

The main character of Henry Park exemplifies the complex and often conflicting experiences of immigrants, who must navigate the tensions between cultural assimilation and the preservation of their ancestral heritage. Working as a spy for a political candidate, Henry's professional life mirrors his personal quest for belonging, making him both an insider and an outsider within his community. This duality is central to an understanding of his identity as a "Lesser Stranger", a term introduced in this study to describe an individual who is neither completely alienated nor fully assimilated (Kang 2021).

By examining Henry's internal conflicts and societal pressures, this analysis illuminates the broader Korean-American experience and contributes to discussions on diaspora, identity, and cultural integration. It also situates the novel within the broader context of Korean diaspora fiction, demonstrating its significance within this literary tradition.

This study addresses several key research questions. It examines the ways in which Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* portrays the complexities of identity and cultural assimilation for 1.5-generation Korean-American immigrants, and also looks at

the ways in which Hannah Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu can assist in comprehending the character of Henry Park and his dual existence within American society.

This study will examine the contribution that the notion of Henry as a "Lesser Stranger" makes to the discourse on immigrant identity in diaspora literature. It is possible to identify parallels between Henry Park's internal conflicts and the themes explored in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (Kim 2006, 238). This paper will examine the ways in which *Native Speaker* reflects the broader themes of diaspora literature and the insights it provides into the Korean-American experience. The aim of this paper is to improve our understanding of the lives of immigrants, focusing on the complexities of identity formation and cultural negotiation. It aims to provide insights into the broader human experience of displacement and belonging.

Evolution of the Korean Diaspora Literature in the United States

In order to comprehend the literary works of Chang-Rae Lee, which are part of the literature of the Korean diaspora in the US, it is imperative to understand the earlier literature of this diaspora. This is because the development of Korean diasporic literature is a journey of identity exploration, and these explorations collectively contribute to the formation of a distinct cultural identity.

The first Korean immigrants to the US arrived in Hawaii in 1902, marking the beginning of a significant wave of Korean immigration to the country (Yi 2019, 274). However, it was not until after the Korean War and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that significant numbers of Koreans began to settle in the US (Oh 2007, 18). This influx of immigrants led to the emergence of Korean-American literature, initially focusing on the experiences of the first generation of Korean immigrants and their struggle to adapt to a new country while preserving their cultural identity.

The initial cohort of Korean immigrants encountered a multitude of challenges, including racial discrimination, language barriers, and economic difficulties. Their literary works frequently reflected these struggles, portraying the harsh realities of immigrant life and the tension between maintaining one's cultural heritage and assimilating into American society. One of the earliest and most influential works of Korean-American literature is *East Goes West* by Younghill Kang 강용흘, published in 1937. Kang was a Korean-American writer, most renowned for his 1931 novel *The Grass Roof* and its 1937 sequel, the fictionalized memoir *East Goes West*:

The Making of an Oriental Yankee. He also authored an unpublished play, *Murder in the Royal Palace*, which was performed in both the US and Korea. The novel *East Goes West* narrates the experiences of a young Korean man who relocates to America with the ambition of pursuing a career in writing. However, he encounters significant challenges in adapting to the complexities of American society. This work is noteworthy not only for its literary merit but also for its portrayal of the immigrant experience, which served as a foundation for subsequent Korean-American literature (Choe 2006, 107).

Other early works include Richard E. Kim's 김은국 *The Martyred* (1964), which examines the experiences of Korean intellectuals during the Korean War. The novel explores the psychological and moral complexities faced by individuals in times of conflict, reflecting broader themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the search for meaning in the aftermath of war. Furthermore, the novel addresses broader questions pertaining to the war and Korean Christianity. The text considers the relationship between the collective suffering of the public during wartime and the individual factors of faith, hope, confession, and so forth. While the narrative is centred on the twelve murdered ministers, Kim also considers the suffering of the innocent Koreans as a whole, thereby implicitly posing the question of whether the people of Korea are just as much "martyrs" as the murdered men. The novel achieved considerable commercial success, remaining on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for twenty weeks and being translated into ten languages. The work was also nominated for the National Book Award and the Nobel Prize in Literature (Gim 2023, 368).

Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982) is another foundational text that helped establish Korean-American literature as a distinct field of study. Her work provided a critical analysis and contextualization of the social and historical forces that have shaped the production of Korean-American literature. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Korean-American literary scene began to flourish, with an increasing number of writers publishing their works and exploring a wider range of themes and styles. This period saw the emergence of writers such as Chang-Rae Lee, who published his debut novel, *Native Speaker*, in 1995. This work examines the themes of identity, assimilation, and cultural displacement through the narrative of Henry Park, a Korean-American man who serves as a spy for a political candidate. Lee's lyrical prose and nuanced characterizations introduced a new depth to the exploration of the immigrant experience, emphasizing the internal and external conflicts faced by individuals straddling two cultures.

Other significant works from this period include Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's 차학경 experimental piece *Dictee* (1982), which examines themes of language,

memory, and identity through a fragmented, multi-genre narrative. Cha's innovative approach to narrative challenged traditional forms and offered a profound meditation on the intersections of personal and collective histories (Oh 2007, 51).

Gary Pak's 게리 박 *The Watcher of Waipuna and Other Stories* (1994) also emerged during this period. This work explores the experiences of Korean immigrants in Hawaii and addresses themes of cultural identity, family, and community.

Korean-American literature continued to evolve in the 2000s and 2010s, with an increasing number of writers exploring the experiences of the second and third generations of Korean-Americans, as well as the experiences of adoptees and mixed-race individuals. This period also witnessed a surge in the popularity of Korean pop culture in the US, which served to draw greater attention to Korean-American literature and culture. Notable works from this period include Krys Lee's 크리스 리 *Drifting House* (2012), a collection of stories about Korean immigrants in the US and their descendants. Lee's narratives elucidate the emotional and psychological intricacies of displacement, belonging, and identity across diverse generations and settings.

Another significant work from this period is Min Jin Lee's 이민진 *Pachinko* (2017). The novel encompasses several generations of a Korean family residing in Japan, delving into themes of identity, exile, and resilience. The novel received considerable acclaim for its expansive narrative and its nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by Koreans in Japan. It highlighted issues of discrimination, cultural preservation, and the enduring quest for a sense of home.

The field of Korean diaspora literature in the US is currently experiencing a period of vibrant and diverse growth, with writers exploring a wide range of themes and styles. Korean-American writers are continuing to expand the boundaries of what Korean diaspora literature can be, offering new insights into the experiences of Koreans in the US through a diverse range of genres, including memoirs, novels, poetry, and graphic novels. Contemporary writers such as Cathy Park Hong 캐시 박 홍 and Alexander Chee 알렌산더 지 are notable examples of this trend. Hong's poetry collection, *Engine Empire* (2012), employs a distinctive combination of lyrical and narrative techniques to explore themes of identity, language, and history. Chee's novels *Edinburgh* (2001) and *The Queen of the Night* (2016) examine the experiences of a mixed-race Korean-American protagonist, examining themes of identity, sexuality, and the complexities of navigating multiple cultural worlds.

Overall, Korean-American literature has evolved from its early focus on the immigrant struggle to a broader exploration of diverse experiences and identities

within the Korean diaspora. This literary tradition continues to reflect the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity, the search for belonging, and the resilience of immigrant communities, contributing to the rich tapestry of American literature (Joo and Lee 2008, 120).

In summary, Korean-American literature has undergone a significant evolution, moving from an initial focus on the immigrant experience to a more expansive exploration of the diverse experiences and identities within the Korean diaspora. This literary tradition persists in reflecting the ongoing negotiation of cultural identity, the search for belonging, and the resilience of immigrant communities, thereby contributing to the rich tapestry of American literature.

The character of Henry, the protagonist of *Native Speaker*, is not the sole creation of Chang-Rae Lee, but instead represents a condensation and an archetype of the development of Korean diaspora literature in the US.

The Literary Contributions of Chang-Rae Lee

Chang-Rae Lee is a seminal figure in Korean-American literature, whose works have significantly advanced the understanding of the immigrant experience and the complexities of cultural identity. As a Korean-American novelist, Lee provides invaluable contributions that offer deep insights into the immigrant experience and the complex dynamics of cultural assimilation and identity negotiation. His literary works are distinguished by their lyrical prose, vivid characterization, and in-depth examination of the Korean-American experience, rendering him a pivotal figure in contemporary American literature.

Chang-Rae Lee was born in South Korea in 1965 and subsequently relocated to the US with his family at the age of three. He was brought up in Westchester County, New York, and attended Phillips Exeter Academy, an elite boarding school in New Hampshire. Lee subsequently pursued a degree in English at Yale University, before subsequently undertaking an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Oregon. His academic background provided a robust foundation for his literary career, equipping him with the requisite skills to articulate the nuanced experiences of immigrants.

Lee's writing is primarily concerned with the themes of identity, migration, and the immigrant experience. He frequently examines the intricate manner in which individuals negotiate cultural disparities and societal expectations. His debut novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), represents a seminal work that examines the life of Henry Park, a Korean-American man who is attempting to reconcile his cultural identity

while working as a spy for a political candidate. The novel's intricate portrayal of Henry's internal and external conflicts attracted considerable critical acclaim and resulted in the author being awarded the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for first novel. *Native Speaker* continues to be regarded as a seminal work in Korean-American literature, celebrated for its insightful exploration of the complex issues surrounding assimilation and cultural displacement (Jeong 2018, 83–95).

In addition to this novel, Lee has also authored several other notable works. In *A Gesture Life* (1999), the author examines the life of a Korean-American man who served in World War II and grapples with the implications of his past actions. This novel, like many of Lee's works, is distinguished by its profound psychological insight and its capacity to elucidate the intricacies of cultural and personal identity. In *Aloft* (2004), which was a finalist for the National Book Award, the author shifts the focus to a suburban American setting, but continues to explore the themes of identity and belonging. His other novels include *The Surrendered* (2010), which examines the consequences of the Korean War, and *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), a dystopian narrative that incorporates speculative fiction with social commentary. His most recent publication, *My Year Abroad* (2021), represents a further advance in his narrative technique, offering a novel perspective on cross-cultural encounters and personal transformation.

Lee's role as a professor of creative writing at Stanford University serves to reinforce his dedication to fostering the growth of new literary voices and to promoting a more profound comprehension of the immigrant experience. He has exerted a significant influence not only on American contemporary literature, but also on Korean literature. All of his novels have been translated into Korean, with *Native Speaker* having been translated on two occasions, which indicates that publishers and editors are striving to enhance the calibre of translations of Lee's works into Korean (Bang 2009).

As well as Korean, Lee's novels have been translated into over 20 other languages, thereby demonstrating their global relevance and appeal. His ability to capture the nuances and complexities of cultural identity, coupled with his powerful storytelling, have established him as a respected and influential figure in contemporary literature.

Chang-Rae Lee's literary oeuvre offers profound insights into the Korean-American experience and the broader themes of migration, identity, and cultural assimilation. His works not only enrich the field of diaspora literature but also provide a compelling lens through which to understand the multifaceted nature of immigrant life. Lee's experience during this period is analogous to that of *Native Speaker's* principal character, Henry. Lee has now achieved considerable literary

and social success, but during the early stages of his immigration he encountered the same linguistic challenges as Henry, and shared the same aspiration to become Americanized through the acquisition of language. At the same time, Lee persisted (and persists) in striving to maintain his Korean identity (Koreanness) through his literary works. The genesis of Lee's quest for identity can be traced back to Henry.

Henry Park: Navigating Identity in *Native Speaker*

The 1995 novel *Native Speaker* by the Korean diaspora author Chang-Rae Lee presents the compelling narrative of Henry Park, a Korean-American man worked for a Korean-American politician in a big city. Henry is a character of considerable complexity and subtlety, whose experiences of identity and belonging are explored in depth throughout the novel.

The narrative structure of the novel can be summarized as follows:

In *Native Speaker*, Chang-Rae Lee examines the concepts of identity, assimilation, and the immigrant experience through the life of Henry Park, a first-generation Korean-American working as an industrial spy in New York City. The personal turmoil experienced by Henry begins with the departure of his wife, Lelia, who leaves him due to his emotional unavailability and secretive nature. This sets the stage for his introspective journey. Professionally, Henry is employed by a clandestine espionage agency and is assigned the task of infiltrating the campaign of John Kwang, a prominent Korean-American politician running for mayor. As Henry becomes increasingly immersed in Kwang's vision for greater political representation and social justice, he experiences a sense of professional and personal conflict. This is due to the fact that he must balance his professional obligations with his growing admiration for Kwang, who becomes a surrogate father figure. The narrative is interspersed with flashbacks to Henry's childhood and his strained relationship with his father, Mr Park, and the profound impact of his mother's early death. The death of Henry's son, Mitt, and the subsequent deterioration of his marriage serve to intensify his internal conflict regarding his cultural identity and sense of alienation. As Henry uncovers information that could be damaging to Kwang and forms genuine relationships within the Korean-American community, his sense of loyalty and belonging become increasingly complex. The novel reaches its climax with a fire at Kwang's campaign headquarters, which precipitates a crisis that forces Henry to confront the moral implications of his actions. In the aftermath, Henry reassesses his identity and position within society, acknowledging his dual status as both an insider and an outsider. In the novel, Lee offers a poignant and

nuanced exploration of the immigrant experience, illuminating the intricate balance between assimilation and cultural identity.

Henry is the son of Korean immigrants who place a high value on education and assimilation. But despite the aspirations of his parents, Henry experiences a sense of alienation from both Korean and American cultures. He is proficient in English, yet he never feels entirely at ease in the American way of life. Furthermore, his linguistic duality mirrors his broader struggle with cultural identity. Furthermore, Henry experiences difficulty in articulating his desires and emotions to those around him, which further complicates his identity.

In his capacity as a spy, Henry is tasked with penetrating the Korean-American community in New York City and gathering intelligence on their political views and activities. As he becomes more deeply immersed in this community, he begins to establish meaningful connections and to question his own sense of loyalty and motivation. His interactions with John Kwang, a Korean-American politician, are particularly transformative. Kwang prompts Henry to reconsider his preconceived notions and encourages him to perceive his community in a new light. Kwang is a successful Korean-American who serves as a role model and father figure to Henry. Henry views Kwang favourably and is keen to learn from him. Kwang is an effective leader, adept at winning people over and garnering their support. Henry thus discerns a contrasting model immigrant in Kwang compared to that presented by his biological father. Nevertheless, Henry ultimately sees that Kwang is also a self-serving individual. In this “fake” manner, Kwang exemplifies one of the means by which the stranger persists. Henry perceives this and learns to survive in his own way.

The novel presents Henry as a character who grapples with profound questions of identity, loyalty, and the concept of home. He endeavours to reconcile his Korean heritage with his American upbringing, seeking a sense of belonging in a society where he feels perpetually on the margins. His journey is characterized by the necessity to make difficult choices regarding the extent to which he should adhere to the expectations and assumptions of external forces, and the extent to which he should prioritize his own identity.

One of the central themes of *Native Speaker* is the complexity of the immigrant experience and the negotiation of cultural differences and expectations. Lee deftly examines the predicament of Henry in this context, caught between two cultures and struggling to find a sense of belonging. The essence of Henry’s identity crisis can be distilled into two fundamental elements. The initial issue concerns language. As a Korean-American, Henry’s objective is to attain comprehensive linguistic proficiency in the English language. This is also the reason why he ignores

his Korean parents, who lack proficiency in English, and wishes for his son to speak perfect English. It is also noteworthy that Henry's wife is a speech therapist. The second factor is Henry's career. Despite his intelligence and academic prowess, Henry does not occupy a prominent position in mainstream society. He is gainfully employed in a stable position, yet the nature of his work is such that he is unable to openly discuss it with others, because he is working as a spy.

These two issues are ultimately addressed at the conclusion of the novel. As he grapples with his identity, Henry's perspectives on language and his profession evolve, prompting him to take action. He is employed by foreign nationals who have limited proficiency in the English language, working in collaboration with his spouse. This indicates that he is driven by a desire to assist individuals who are confronted with similar challenges to those he faces. Furthermore, the novel also addresses the issue of identity, and prompts the reader to consider the nature of identity and the ways in which our experiences and interactions shape it.

Henry Park is surrounded by a cast of characters who each contribute to his exploration of identity and cultural conflict in different ways. His estranged wife, Lelia Park, is a speech therapist from a wealthy Scottish-American East Coast family. The relationship between Henry and Lelia serves to illustrate the cultural and emotional distances that Henry must navigate. The death of their son, Mitt Park, at the age of seven, represents a profound source of grief for the Park family and marks a pivotal point in Henry's emotional journey. John Kwang, a Korean-American politician running for Mayor of New York, becomes a surrogate father figure to Henry. Kwang represents the aspirations and contradictions inherent in the immigrant experience. Another significant figure is Emile Luzan, a Filipino-American therapist whom Henry initially spies on but eventually befriends. Emile assists Henry in his recovery from the trauma of Mitt's death, thereby illustrating the potential for cross-cultural understanding and support. The narrative of loyalty and personal integrity is further complicated by the involvement of Sherrie Chin-Watt, John Kwang's PR assistant, who is having an affair with the politician. Henry's father, Mr Park, a man of high expectations and traditional values, was once an industrial engineer in Korea, and his values have significantly shaped Henry's identity. The early death of Henry's mother from cancer, when he was ten years old, had a profound effect on his emotional development. Dennis Hoagland, Henry's superior in the spy agency, exemplifies the professional pressures and ethical quandaries Henry confronts in his dual role as a spy. The Maid (Ahjuma), a young Korean woman who provided care for Henry during his childhood, represents his connection to his Korean roots. May Kwang, the wife of John Kwang, represents the personal sacrifices and complexities inherent in the institution of immigrant marriages. Furthermore, the narrative

incorporates Sophie, Jack's Italian-American spouse, which adds another layer of cultural diversity. Jack, Henry's closest friend and colleague, is of Greek descent, thereby underscoring the common experiences of immigrants from diverse backgrounds. Janice Pawlowsky, Henry's campaign manager for John Kwang, is adept at navigating the professional landscape of political campaigns. The death of Eduardo Fermin, a Latino man who idolized John Kwang and perished in the fire at Kwang's campaign headquarters, serves to illustrate the themes of idealism and betrayal. Pete Ichibata, a Japanese colleague renowned for his lewd humour and excessive alcohol consumption, exemplifies the multifaceted and occasionally discordant experiences of immigrants. John Kwang Jr., the son of John and May, experiences difficulties at school and serves as a reminder of Henry's own son, Mitt. Peter Kwang, John Jr.'s brother, represents the next generation grappling with their dual heritage. Lelia's parents represent the cultural and generational contrasts within Henry's extended family, while Molly, Lelia's friend and an artist, provides Lelia with support during her separation from Henry.

The characters surrounding Henry are not exclusively American, and all are grappling with their identities. These characters exert a direct and indirect influence on Henry. It is through his relationships with these characters that Henry comes to understand himself.

Among the characters, however, Henry remains the central figure through which the novel's primary themes are explored with regard to the immigrant struggle for identity.

It is noteworthy that there are notable similarities between Henry Park and the author, Chang-Rae Lee. Both are 1.5-generation Korean-American who relocated to the US at an early age and confronted the difficulties of negotiating dual cultural identities. Both Henry and Lee were socialized in environments that emphasized assimilation, yet simultaneously experienced a sense of being perpetual outsiders. Lee's personal experiences undoubtedly inform his vivid portrayal of Henry's struggles with identity, belonging, and cultural loyalty. The autobiographical element lends the novel a sense of authenticity, as Lee draws upon his own insights and experiences to shape Henry's character and narrative journey. As previously stated, Henry's predicament regarding his identity is somewhat resolved by the conclusion of the play. Following the revelation of the negative effects of immigrants like Kwang attempting to assimilate, Henry comes to understand that this is an inadequate solution, and not the only one. He also comes to understand that the lives of immigrants who are not integrated into the dominant culture but who are striving diligently despite the challenges they face are also meaningful. Ultimately, Henry considers his future prospects by assisting those who aspire to

become proficient in the English language. The novel concludes without providing a definitive answer, instead posing a further question. However, it is arguably one of the most significant in the process of identity formation.

Native Speaker is a powerful and nuanced exploration of the Korean-American experience, exploring the intricacies of identity, belonging, and loyalty. Through Henry's journey, Lee sheds light on the immigrant struggle to find a place in a society that often marginalizes them. The novel stands as a poignant reflection on the immigrant experience, offering readers a profound understanding of the challenges and complexities faced by those navigating multiple cultural identities.

To fully understand Henry, the protagonist of *Native Speaker*, it is essential to examine him from multiple perspectives. In this study, I analyse Henry through three different lenses, considering him as a diasporic figure. This approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of his character and the broader themes of identity, belonging and cultural negotiation within the novel.

Identity and Assimilation in *Native Speaker* and *Black Skin, White Masks*

The most effective methodology for analysing Henry is through the lens of Frantz Fanon's theory, which has been widely employed in the field of literary criticism. This is because Fanon's perspective provides a profound framework for understanding the psychological and cultural conflicts experienced by diasporic individuals.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is a seminal work in postcolonial theory, providing a profound exploration of the psychological effects of colonialism and racism on individuals. In this critical text, Fanon argues that colonialism and racism create a pervasive sense of inferiority in people of colour, leading to feelings of self-hatred and a compulsion to assimilate into the dominant culture. He examines how language and cultural norms are employed to reinforce power dynamics and maintain the *status quo*, having a deep psychological impact on the colonized.

Similarly, in *Native Speaker*, Chang-Rae Lee explores the psychological effects of assimilation and the difficulties faced by immigrants in navigating cultural differences and expectations. The protagonist, Henry Park, finds himself caught between two cultures and struggles to find a sense of belonging in either. He constantly negotiates his identity, attempting to reconcile his Korean heritage with his American upbringing. Like Fanon's work, *Native Speaker* raises critical questions about the power dynamics inherent in cultural assimilation and the ways in which individuals are shaped by their experiences (Chang 2021, 137).

Fanon's exploration in *Black Skin, White Masks* is characterized by his use of psychoanalytic theory, and his deep dive into the unconscious mind, illustrating how colonial subjects internalize the inferiority imposed upon them. He examines how black individuals, in particular, adopt the behaviours and attitudes of the colonizers, aspiring to be accepted in a society that marginalizes them. This process often leads to a disconnection from their own cultural roots and a fragmented sense of self.

In *Native Speaker*, Henry Park's life mirrors these themes as he navigates his dual identity. As a Korean-American, Henry tries to assimilate by mastering the English language and adopting American cultural norms, hoping to gain acceptance and success. His fluency in English and his ability to navigate American society often place him at odds with his Korean heritage, creating a persistent internal conflict.

In a colonial context, the ability to speak the language of the dominant country fosters a sense of identification with the dominant culture and a perception of a relatively elevated position within the colonized society. French-speakers in former French colonies experienced this phenomenon, and Henry, the protagonist of *Native Speaker*, finds it empowering to be able to speak English freely. Nevertheless, despite the ability to speak the language, it is impossible for him to become a native speaker. This is the central theme of this novel. Fanon's work also emphasizes the destructive impact of adopting the colonizer's language and culture, arguing that this adoption reinforces the colonized individual's sense of inferiority and perpetuates the power imbalance. In *Native Speaker*, Henry's use of English as a means of dominance, particularly over his Korean parents, highlights this dynamic. His linguistic proficiency becomes both a tool of empowerment and a source of profound internal strife, illustrating the complex interplay among language, power, and identity.

Moreover, both Fanon and Lee employ complex and nuanced writing styles that challenge readers to engage deeply with the issues at hand. Fanon's use of psychoanalytic theory to explore the unconscious effects of colonialism and Lee's lyrical prose and vivid characterizations both serve to highlight the psychological and emotional dimensions of their subjects. While *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Native Speaker* were written in different historical and cultural contexts, they share similar concerns and themes. Both works offer powerful insights into the complexities of identity and the ways in which cultural norms and power dynamics shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

In *Native Speaker*, Henry attempts to conceal his "yellow-skinned" (instead of "black-skinned") identity by adopting the "white mask" of English (language). Specifically, his use of English as a weapon to dominate his Korean parents is

analogous to the behaviour of natives of French colonies who spoke fluent French to gain the favour and acceptance from their colonizers.

By examining Henry's character through the lens of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, we gain a deeper understanding of the immigrant experience and the profound psychological effects of cultural assimilation. It is particularly noteworthy that the language employed by the dominant power, and the knowledge of that language, becomes a mask through which the dominant power can hide itself.

Both texts illuminate the ongoing struggle for identity and belonging faced by individuals navigating multiple cultural landscapes, offering invaluable perspectives on the human condition in the context of postcolonial and diasporic experiences.

The Concept of the Lesser Stranger in Understanding Henry Park

Another analytical tool for examining Henry Park is the concept of the "Lesser Stranger", a term coined relatively recently (Kang 2021).

Unlike his parents, Henry is not a "perfect stranger/perfect Korean" in America. However, he remains a stranger/not-perfect American, both in appearance and in the trajectory of his life. Therefore, a concept is needed to define his unique position within American society, and thus I propose Lesser Stranger to describe Lee's depiction of a state that is not entirely alienated from a group. While Henry is situated in a "hyphenated condition" (Lee 2018, 122–23), he is closer to the group he has come to and remained in, rather than the group he has left behind. Unlike hyphenated individuals who tend to derive their identity from "us" in the group they left, a Lesser Stranger exhibits more complex tendencies. They retain the self-reflective view of a stranger, but also possess a subjective interest in personal matters. Such individuals tend to draw their identity from the "us" in the group in which they remain. Consequently, the language of a Lesser Stranger is the language of the group they stay in, and the relationships they aim for are directed towards the "us" in the group they remain in. They may even view their previous relationships in the group they left behind from the new perspective of the group they are now in. In other words, the dual issues of language and affiliation (or profession) represent the fundamental elements of Henry's confusion over identity.

To illustrate this concept, consider the "us" in the group over there that one has left—where one is less of a stranger, and thus a Lesser Stranger—and the "us" in the group over here, where one now remains. This helps visualize the Lesser Stranger's position, suspended between two cultural spheres. While it can certainly be argued that Lee himself belongs to the group he remains in—namely,

America—the characters in his novels, particularly those like Henry in his early works, should be read as examples of Lesser Strangers. This concept allows us to better understand the complex nature of the Korean-American experience and the ways in which individuals navigate the tension between their past and present cultural identities.

The notion of the Lesser Stranger is particularly relevant to Henry's experience in *Native Speaker*. Unlike his parents, who are more visibly alienated from American culture, Henry embodies a more nuanced form of estrangement. He is linguistically proficient and culturally attuned to American norms, yet he is constantly reminded of his otherness by both society and his internal struggles. This dual awareness positions Henry in a liminal space, not fully accepted by either his inherited or adopted cultures, but not fully alienated, either.

Moreover, Henry's professional life as a spy further accentuates his Lesser Stranger status. The role of a spy necessitates the concealment of one's identity, yet simultaneously demands a sense of belonging. The concept of a Lesser Stranger encapsulates this duality, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of identity that defines Henry's existence, both professional and private.

By applying the Lesser Stranger framework to Henry's character, we gain deeper insights into the immigrant experience portrayed in *Native Speaker*. This concept sheds light on the intricate dynamics of cultural assimilation and the personal transformations that accompany it. Henry's journey illustrates the broader Korean-American experience, characterized by a continuous balancing act between embracing a new cultural identity and honouring one's roots.

In conclusion, the concept of the Lesser Stranger provides a valuable lens through which to examine Henry's character in *Native Speaker*. It underscores the complexities of identity formation for immigrants who, like Henry, find themselves caught between two worlds. This analytical tool enriches our understanding of the novel and offers a nuanced perspective on the Korean-American experience, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of cultural integration and personal identity.

Arendt's Concepts of the Pariah and Parvenu in Analysing Diasporic Identity

Hannah Arendt produced a substantial corpus of works on the nature of the human being, and is one of the most influential diasporic writers of all time.

Arendt's essay *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* offers a profound exploration of the life of a Jewish woman living in early 19th-century Berlin. Arendt's

examination focuses on Varnhagen's struggle to navigate the social and cultural barriers imposed by a predominantly Christian society (Arendt 2022).

This essay introduces two pivotal concepts that are central to understanding Varnhagen's predicament: the pariah and parvenu. These concepts not only elucidate the central character's life, but also provide a valuable framework for analysing the complexities of assimilation and identity in other contexts, including Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker*.

Arendt defines the pariah as an individual who is excluded from society due to their inherent identity. In Varnhagen's case, her Jewishness rendered her a pariah within German society. Despite her efforts to assimilate and conform to the dominant culture's manners and customs, she remained an outsider, never fully accepted. The parvenu, conversely, is someone who attempts to transcend their pariah status by adopting the values and behaviours of the dominant culture. Arendt argues that Varnhagen's attempts to achieve parvenu status were ultimately futile, as she could never completely escape the marginalization rooted in her Jewish identity.

Arendt's exploration of Varnhagen's life is significant for its detailed examination of the experiences of Jewish women in 19th-century German society. Her concepts of the pariah and parvenu offer profound insights into the complexities of assimilation and identity, which continue to resonate in contemporary discussions of marginalized groups and social exclusion (Pitkin 2000, 71).

These theoretical constructs are particularly relevant for analysing the character of Henry Park in *Native Speaker*. Initially, Henry aspires to attain the status of a parvenu, striving for perfect adaptation to become the ideal American. For Henry, achieving this status involves mastering the English language to such an extent that he can be perceived as a native speaker. However, consistent with Arendt's theory, Henry retains a sense of this pariah status despite his efforts to assimilate. He remains an outsider, caught between his Korean heritage and American cultural norms.

Henry's experience encapsulates the tension between the pariah and parvenu that Arendt describes. His character embodies the struggle of many immigrants who, despite their attempts to assimilate, are continually reminded of their outsider status. Henry exists as a Lesser Stranger, navigating a hyphenated identity that places him neither fully within nor completely outside American society. He is not a "perfect stranger" like his parents, who are more visibly alienated from American culture, but he is also not entirely assimilated. This nuanced position makes Henry an archetypal character in diaspora literature, reflecting the complexities of cultural identity and assimilation.

Arendt's twin concepts not only illuminate Henry's character but also offer a valuable framework for understanding other figures in diaspora literature. By exploring Henry's inner self through Arendt's theoretical lens, we can gain deeper insights into the multifaceted nature of identity in the context of migration and assimilation. Arendt's analysis helps articulate the persistent challenges faced by individuals who, like Henry, straddle multiple cultural identities.

Moreover, Henry's professional life as a spy further complicates his identity. His role requires him to seamlessly blend into various cultural settings, using his outsider perspective to gather intelligence. This duality mirrors his personal life, where he is constantly adapting to navigate between his Korean heritage and American societal expectations. The concept of the Lesser Stranger effectively captures this duality, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of identity that defines Henry's existence.

In addition to the social dynamics of assimilation, Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu also emphasize the psychological dimensions of identity. The pariah, forever conscious of their exclusion, develops a self-reflective and often critical perspective on society. The parvenu, on the other hand, internalizes the norms of the dominant culture but is haunted by an inescapable sense of otherness. Henry Park's character illustrates this psychological tension vividly. His attempts to dominate his Korean parents linguistically, using English as a tool of empowerment, reflect his internalized conflict. Despite his proficiency, Henry can never entirely mask his heritage, much like Varnhagen could never escape her Jewish identity.

In conclusion, Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu provide a profound framework for understanding Henry Park's character in *Native Speaker*. These concepts underscore the intricate dynamics of identity formation for immigrants caught between two worlds. This analytical framework enriches our comprehension of the novel and offers a nuanced perspective on the Korean-American experience, emphasizing the complex interplay of cultural integration and personal identity. Through Arendt's lens, we gain a clearer picture of the immigrant struggle, revealing the depth and persistence of issues related to identity in diaspora narratives.

Conclusion

This study examines Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, exploring the complex identity struggles of Henry Park. It employs theoretical frameworks from Hannah Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu, as well as Frantz Fanon's exploration

of identity in *Black Skin, White Masks*. By employing these analytical frameworks, we have illuminated the broader Korean-American experience, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions on the topics of diaspora, identity, and cultural integration.

Henry Park, a 1.5-generation Korean-American immigrant, exemplifies the conflicting pressures of cultural assimilation and heritage preservation. His character represents a multifaceted portrayal of the multifaceted experiences of immigrants, straddling two worlds yet fully belonging to neither. The term Lesser Stranger is thus an apt description of Henry's state of being, situated between complete alienation and full assimilation. This nuanced identity is of significant importance in order to gain a deeper understanding of the broader themes that are explored in the novel. Hannah Arendt's analysis of Rahel Varnhagen's life through the lenses of the pariah and parvenu has yielded substantial insights into Henry's character. Initially, Henry sought to attain parvenu status by perfecting his English and adopting American cultural norms. However, he remained haunted by his inherent pariah status, unable to fully escape his Korean heritage. This duality is a central aspect of the immigrant experience, serving to highlight the psychological and societal challenges of assimilation. Frantz Fanon's examination of the psychological consequences of colonialism and racism is analogous to Henry's experiences. Fanon's assertion that adopting the colonizer's language and culture serves to reinforce a sense of inferiority is reflected in Henry's internal conflict. Despite his linguistic proficiency, Henry's use of English becomes both a tool of empowerment and a source of deep internal strife, mirroring the complex interplay among language, power, and identity. The concept of the Lesser Stranger provides a valuable framework for understanding Henry's character. This concept encapsulates the ongoing process of identity formation that defines Henry's existence. He is situated between two cultural and social contexts, that of his Korean heritage and that of American society. Consequently, he occupies a liminal space where he is neither fully accepted nor entirely alienated. This analytical tool enhances our comprehension of the novel and provides a sophisticated insight into the Korean-American experience.

Henry's professional life as a spy further complicates his identity, requiring him to adopt the cultural norms of various settings while maintaining an outsider's perspective. This duality is reflected in his personal life, where he is continually required to adapt in order to reconcile his dual heritage with societal expectations. By employing this analytical framework, the novel *Native Speaker* illuminates the challenges faced by immigrants in establishing a sense of belonging within a society that often marginalizes them.

In this work, Chang-Rae Lee presents a nuanced and intricate portrayal of the Korean-American experience through the character of Henry Park. The complexities and conflicts Henry's experiences as a Lesser Stranger illuminate the challenges that many Korean-Americans confront as they navigate identity, culture, and belonging in the US. By examining Henry's identity as both an outsider and an upstart, we can gain a more profound comprehension of how individuals navigate cultural differences and expectations in a multicultural society. Lee's portrayal of Henry's multifaceted identity, coupled with his examination of the intricate dynamics of cultural assimilation and the search for a sense of belonging, offers readers a poignant and thought-provoking reflection on the Korean-American experience.

This study has addressed several key research questions. It initially examined how Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* portrays the complexities of identity and cultural assimilation for 1.5-generation Korean-American immigrants, like both the author and the main character in the novel. The novel illuminates the internal and external conflicts experienced by Henry Park as he attempts to reconcile his Korean heritage with his American upbringing. It illustrates the challenges of maintaining cultural identity while striving for acceptance in a new society. The work portrays the protagonist, Henry, grappling with his identity as he experiences situations similar to those of the author, Lee. The novel depicts Henry's interactions with individuals who embody similar characteristics as he attempts to define his own identity. Furthermore, the text illustrates the adaptation of a character in a diasporic situation through the medium of language (in this case, American English).

Secondly, the study examined the ways in which Hannah Arendt's concepts of the pariah and parvenu assist in comprehending the character of Henry Park and his dual existence within American society. Arendt's framework illuminates the challenge Henry faces in reconciling his aspiration for assimilation (parvenu) with his intrinsic outsider status (pariah). This duality is of significant importance in comprehending Henry's internal conflict and the overarching themes of identity and belonging within the novel.

The application of Arendt's and Fanon's theoretical frameworks to the text *Native Speaker*, as presented in this study, has provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex processes of identity formation and cultural negotiation experienced by immigrants. Henry Park's experience exemplifies the broader themes of diaspora literature, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of cultural integration and personal identity. This study enhances our comprehension of the immigrant experience, offering profound insights into the challenges and complexities faced by those navigating multiple cultural landscapes.

In conclusion, *Native Speaker* serves as a compelling and insightful work of literature that contributes significantly to our understanding of the complexities and nuances of cultural identity in America's multicultural society. In presenting Henry's story, Chang-Rae Lee offers a poignant reflection on the immigrant experience, contributing significantly to the discourse on identity and belonging in diaspora narratives.

The objective of this study was to present a range of tools for the analysis of Henry as an archetypal figure in diasporic literature. Nevertheless, the further utilization of each analytical tool in order to gain a more profound understanding of the character is a topic that will be addressed in future research.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) in the framework of the research project (J6-50202) "The Confucian Revival and its Impact on Contemporary East Asian Societies through the Lens of the Relation between the Individual and Society". This work was also supported by the Seed Programme for Korean Studies of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service at the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-INC-2250001).

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