

Between Subversion and Integration:

A Study of Two Korean-American Novels

بين التمرد و الاندماج:

دراسة لروايتين كوريتين أمريكيتين

A dissertation submitted by Dina Magdy El-Dakhakhny

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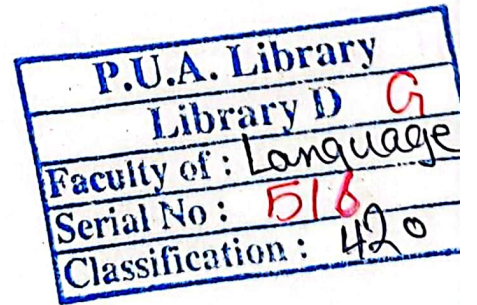
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Conclusion

Long-Term Guests: Straddling the Cultural Fence

A quarter of a century lost
Without having detangled the knots of life
Like a piece of tough lettuce
Pushed aside on a salad plate
A stranger in America.
--Yung Whi Chung, "A Stranger" (Y. Choi 33)

It is the purpose of this research to investigate the position of Korean Americans between subversion and integration, between the rejection of certain cultural elements and the adoption of others to become assimilated, as portrayed in *Native Speaker* and *The Interpreter*.

Like other racial minorities, the Korean community has a history that is uniquely its own. Although Asians are mistakenly lumped together, each ethnic group has its individual experience in the United States. The Korean experience is closely related to the Korean War, often engendering the image of the Korean war orphan which makes Koreans welcome as potential immigrants. Once granted entry, the whole Korean community is viewed in terms of the model minority, a concept or theory that both *Native Speaker* and *The Interpreter* disclaim as pure fiction, or the yellow peril, meaning in threatening terms. The American feelings of desire and fear are projected into these stereotypes that Koreans have to fight against. What both pigeonholes have in common is that they arouse a feeling of antagonism against Asians who are either brilliant and thereby pose a threat to the white American perceived sense of superiority or against the little Fu Manchus lurking in the dark recesses of the state, posing a threat to its stability and its welfare. Due to the apprehension engendered by both images, Koreans end up discriminated against in the workplace and prefer self-employment. They use their own capital in family-businesses in ethnic quarters, most notably in Koreatowns. Henry's father is a prime example of middleman minority small business owners. Even though a certain amount of social mobility is possible for him and his family, opening a chain of fruit and vegetable stores is as good as it can get for him. Suzy's family

introduces a new brand of family business when the parents start informing and hand this "business" down to their children; yet again, social mobility has its limit for them.

Korean Americans come in touch with the Korean way of living, which corresponds with the lifestyle the first generation experienced in Korea before immigrating, thereby creating an image of Korea frozen in time. In addition to that, on account of living in the United States, Koreans inevitably come in touch with American customs, values and practices. The rather limiting way of looking at culture in terms of binary opposites or a Hegelian process of synthesis and sublation detracts from the complexity of the process of identity formation. Henry Park and Suzy Park both struggle to define themselves against the oftentimes jarring ideologies and they find out through their individual experiences that shunning one part of one's heritage does not work. One should look at culture in terms of numerous and varied praxes existing side by side, *abseits*, instead of looking at it in terms of binary opposites where one side inevitably dominates over the other, leaving it as a site of absence and loss. This view explains why Henry and Suzy have individualist tendencies and still create *cheong*; and even though they do not personally experience the hardships their parents' generation faces, they can still feel *han*, even if in a milder form. Both characters realize that while they cannot be categorized as one or the other, there is a third modality open to them, which incorporates parts of both worlds without elevating any one part over the others. Both novels go to great lengths to show that the human character is rarely that easy to classify in terms of one extreme or another, more so when one is the product of the interplay of two cultures.

This realization emerges in the way the characters choose to represent themselves. We see Henry and Suzy manipulating their bilingualism, for instance, taking from the Korean sphere the knowledge of the different meanings of silence, and combining it with American self-assertive speech to create a linguistic tradition that is exclusively their own. Moreover, as

a spy and detective, respectively, they maneuver deftly between social visibility and invisibility and reflect their multilayered identity through the multiple roles they take on.

What these few preceding chapters collectively demonstrate is that the meeting of cultures has its boons but also its disadvantages. They serve to discredit the misconception that immigrants have only two options, namely to become fully assimilated or stay in touch with their Korean roots. If they view the two cultures in terms of two individual sets from which they have to choose only one and leave the other entirely, they will end up losing both. The answer is to pick and choose what suits the individual and his or her multiple roles from both cultures to form a more unique and enriched character. It is therefore not a matter of becoming either Korean or American but rather of becoming a mixture of both. To recreate Koreanness based on the memories of the first generation would not make Korean Americans any closer to contemporary Korean culture, which has changed over the years; shunning the Korean lifestyle altogether, on the other hand, is not an option for American-born Koreans, because of their visible otherness which automatically associates them with their Korean heritage. The answer is not to oscillate between the complete adoption of one cultural construct and its subversion, but rather to find a place between those two extremes and between the two cultures. This sort of hybrid personality would be welcome, and rather encouraged in the name of multiculturalism, as long as it does not openly clash with the American national fantasy.

This research is by no means exhaustive or extensive. For the purpose of coherence and compactness a lot of ideas both novels had to offer had to be left out. My research is conducted through the lens of ethnic writing; yet, it would be interesting to follow the journeys of Henry Park and Suzy Park by seeing the novels as Bildungsromane, not colored by ethnicity. It is also an attractive endeavor to examine other artworks, literary and non-literary, that are alluded to and discussed in the novels or that have influenced the writing

process. It is therefore imperative that my endeavor be seen as it really is, an attempt to explore the unique position Koreans inhabit in the American society through the characters depicted in these two novels, and not as a comprehensive study of the two novels or of the Korean-American dilemma as a whole.

More work concerned with the Korean-American experience is called for at the moment. Korean-American literature is still budding and is relatively unexplored compared to other Asian-American literary subdivisions such as Chinese- and Japanese-American literature. The experiences that have not found expression till now, namely those of the very early immigrants or of the newer Korean immigrants who are not fluent in English should be featured within Korean-American literature. The works that occupy the borderline between Korean literature and Korean-American literature should be added to the already existing corpus to widen its compass. The voices of Henry's father and the greengrocers, whether in English, Korean or a mix of both, would definitely add a new perspective to the existing scope. Moreover, there are untold stories of the wives of American servicemen who left their homeland in the wake of the war to accompany their husbands. Although stories of comfort women have been told, the wives did not get enough attention until now. There is so much more to be written, read and explored when it comes to Korean-American literature. And if the existing corpus is any indication, these will be works to look forward to.