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Theoretical/Critical Essay Article

The Making of Immigrant Identities in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari, PhD (D) Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

Article History: Submitted 15 May 2022; Reviewed 2 July 2022; Revised 6 August 2022 Corresponding Author: Nagendra Bhandari, Email: <u>nagendra@pncampus.edu.np</u>

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Abstract

This article analyzes the formation of multiple and hybird identities of an immigrant in Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker (1995). Growing up between Korean ancestry and American surrounding, the second-generation immigrant Henry feels uncertainty and dilemma in his sense of belonging. He simultaneously travels in both cultural spaces in his quest of sense of belonging. At times, he attempts to identify himself with American cultural space along with his White wife. However, the reaction of the mainstream society to the immigrants of Asian origin like him makes him aware of his marginalized status in the US. In the same way, he cannot wholeheartedly identify with his Korean ancestry. His upbringing in the American cultural milieu problematizes his sense of belonging in the Korean cultural space. He negotiates between his origin and upbringing in the third space of the diaspora. This negotiation renders multiplicities and pluralities of self, which reflects in his evolving subjectivities that deconstruct the binary of home and host culture. This article examines the formation of hybrid and multiple subjectivities of Henry through his negotiations between his native and host cultural space. Homi Bhabha's notion of the third space, including hybridity, multiplicities and immigrant identities, has been employed to substantiate evolving multiple subjectivities of immigrants.

Keywords: Immigrant identities, diaspora, hybridity, third space

Introduction

Growing up in-between two cultural spaces remains crucial to the formation of the identity of the second-generation immigrants. In their domestic sphere, they are persistently exposed with the cultural practices of their origin by their parents who tend to act like a cultural transmitter of their home country to their children. Consequently, the second-generation immigrants in the diaspora grow up in constant exposures to various rites and rituals, including food and dress of their home country. However, they

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face totally different world outside their home when exposed to the Western education system and lifestyle in the public sphere. The mainstream cultural practices and lifestyles in the public sphere of their host country differ sharply from the domestic environment of the second-generation immigrants of Asian origin in the US. Such bicultural milieu shapes the subjectivities of the second-generation immigrants.

Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee often explores the domestics and public spheres of his Korean compatriots in his narratives. His Native Speaker (1995) depicts the intercultural and intergeneration negotiation of Korean American immigrants in the US. The immigrants: Henry and his parents involve in the constant process of cultural negotiation between their Korean upbringing and American surrounding. Moreover, their cultural negotiation involves within a family in the parents' preoccupation with their origin and child's fascination toward the Western way of life of the host country. Henry negotiates in interstitial space of diaspora as a second-generation immigrant oscillating between his Korean origin and host American milieu. His bicultural upbringing: Korean cultural practices inside home and American surrounding outside create confusion and dilemma in his sense of belonging. Being divided, he wonders whether he belongs to Korea or America. His relation with his White wife Lelia and his profession of a spy lead him to the quest of self identity. His wife leaves him with a series of allegations about his personality and characters. These allegations lead him to wonder who actually he is and what he wants in his life. Similarly, his profession of a spy in which he undertakes multiple roles also contributes to his confusion. He negotiates particularly in his domestic sphere and in his professional life in the third space of diaspora.

Hybridity, Multiplicities and Immigrant Identities

Homi K Bhabha in his postulation of the third space argues that culture and individual identity are always in the process of formation and reformation. He elaborates that culture involves in constant negotiation with other cultures deconstructing its ancestry and purity. Such a process of negotiation renders cultural conversion that forms an individual's identity. As an integral part of immigrants' lives, cultural negation operates in blending the cultural practices of their home and host countries. The transcultural negotiation between the home and host cultures slowly opens up possibilities for conversion. Cultural negotiation in the in-between renders a fusion of two cultural entities that produce a third identity after the original two have been altered.

Bhabha moves from the bipolar model featuring home country and host country to a tripolar one, which initiates the in-between space between home and host country. These in-between spaces provide "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood ... that initiate new sings of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (1-2). This is the place where the crossing over of time and cultural differences occurs and where new signs of identity are formed. The pre-existing cultural codes and ethnic traits get redefined in this space. The cultural differences are shaped by tradition but they are negotiated and redefined through the conditions of contingency and contradictions.

The cultural differences, in which immigrants negotiate in the diaspora, interact leading to the transformation of their identities. Bhabha asserts that the cultural interaction of in-between space creates newness that is not part of the past and the present, a revolutionary act of cultural translation. He clarifies that, "such act does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past ... that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (7). He does not negate the role of cultural practices of the home and host countries. They play crucial rules in forming immigrant's identity negotiating in the in-between cultural space of diaspora. In fact, the

in-between space is not simply merging between two opposites. But, it is creative and fertile space for formation of new form of identity.

The negotiation in the fertile and hybrid space of diaspora renders hybridity in immigrant's lives. Consequently, immigrants' identities are unstable, agonized and in constant flux vacillating on both the sides of the divide. This undermines the claims of a unified self. In that sense, immigrants' identity in the flux prospects fluidity and indeterminacy. In this context, Bhabha's notion of third space intrinsically involves in the formation of subjectivities of an immigrant. Likewise, Henry, the second-generation immigrant in Lee's *Native Speaker*, negotiates his identity in the third space of diaspora.

Childhood Dilemma

In Lee's novel, Henry's confusion about his sense of belonging in two cultural spaces: Korean and American is related with his accidental birth. He is an American citizen by birth; however, he explicates his American citizen as "an accident of birth." His mother delivers him "on this end of a long plane ride from Seoul" (334). He is born at the moment of his parents' arrival in the U.S. His birth takes place in the land of America. In this sense, he is an American citizen. However, he is born on "...end of a long plane ride from Seoul" (334). This means, he comes to America on the plane with his parents. From this perspective, he is a Korean immigrant like his parents. This temporal juncture of his birth makes him both an American as well as a Korean immigrant.

Henry confronts questions of identity and bicultural belonging since his childhood. He often ponders between the contrast of his Korean ancestry and his American surroundings. He recalls:

[F]or a time in my boyhood I would often awake before dawn and step outside on the front porch. It was always perfectly quiet. No Korean father or mother, no taunting boys or girls, no teachers showing me how to say my American name. I'd then run back inside and look in the mirror. . .to catch a glimpse of who I truly wasbut looking back at me was just the same boy again, no clearer than before. (323)

He wishes to explore his self-identity going beyond his Korean parents, white friends and teacher. However, his childhood attempts at discovering his true self without any interferences from his surroundings and ancestry lead him nowhere. He is inextricably caught up within the nexus of Korean family and American surroundings which renders confusion and dilemma about his self-identity.

Henry can neither identify with his Korean parents and their ways of life nor totally with his American friends. He can become American by acting, dressing and speaking like his White counterpart. However, his typical Korean biological make up differentiates him from his White friends. Rather, he "finds true affinity only with those like himself who are also of two cultures" (Om 44). While visiting a Korea-American friend Albert's house, he hears his friend's dad speak in the "very words, in the very tone and gesture of [Henry's] own growing up, a familiarity arose that should have been impossible" (Lee 97). Although Albert is not one of his close friends, Henry senses "something else" (97), an intimacy, perhaps in their shared experience, that he has never felt with the closest of his White friends. The shared bicultural upbringing renders affinity with his Korean American friend Albert.

Dual cultural upbringing deconstructs Henry's unified sense of self rendering fragmentation and uncertainty in his cultural identity. In his childhood, he is expected to behave like a Korean in his home whereas he is supposed to behave as an American publicly. This dual cultural allegiance problematizes his sense of self. So, he attempts to

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find his true self in the mirror in his childhood. He would go inside and watch himself on the mirror to have a glance of his true identity. However, the mirror does not reflect who actually he is. He fails to locate himself either American or Korean cultural space. He appears perpetually caught between cultures, identities and perhaps even logics. He is unable to unify his fragmented sense of self to form unified identity. Evidently, the Whitman quote that precedes the text of the novel, "I turn but do not extricate myself, / Confused, a past-reading, another, / but with darkness yet" (1) highlights Henry's perpetual oscillations between different fragmentations of his self. Such confusion and uncertainty looms over his adulthood, too.

Multiplicities in Adulthood

The childhood uncertainties perpetuate even his adult life in which he often ponders whether he is an American or a Korean immigrant. At times, he claims himself as an American citizen like the dominant White group. He wonders why young American boys protest against Mayoral candidate Kwang for his Korean origin. Henry thinks: "By rights I am an American as anyone, ... as any of these people chanting for fire in the heart of his house" (Lee 335). At the same time, he identifies with immigrants, "I can never stop considering the pitch and drift of their forlorn boats on the sea. . . promising nothing to their numbers within, headlong voyages scaled in a lyric of search, like the great love of Solomon" (335). Such dilemma is further evident when he talks about his food habit. He explicates: "I'm American" (326) because he orders too much food while eating Chinese cuisines like other Americans. However, he asserts his Korean origin at times. He declares that: "We Koreans have reinvented the idea of luck" which is most often "bad, and try to do everything we can to prevent it" (327). His shifting claims about his sense of belonging reveals his inherent position in the third space of diaspora as a second-generation immigrant.

Henry does not feel at home in any cultural space. He "always seems disconnected from people, advancing through several coexisting cultural subjectivities while simultaneously remaining external to them" (Narkunas 331). In his self-examination, he confesses: "I will duly retreat to the position of the good volunteer, the invisible underling. I have always known that moment of disappearance. . . . That always honorable-seeming absence. It appears I can go anywhere I wish. Is this my assimilation, so many years in the making?" (Lee 202). He claims that he can go anywhere and take up any identities which are obviously useful traits of his professional espionage. His skills of remaining 'invisible' and undertaking several identities render a fluid and fleeting identity that does not find firm sense of belonging to any culture. Consequently, he neither can claimhimself as wholly an American nor as solely a Korean immigrant. His profession of espionage further complicates his sense of belonging.

Henry's profession of a spy underscores his fleeting and unstable sense of belonging in two cultural spaces: American and Korean. His career as a spy allows him to temporarily leave the old and create a new identity through 'legend', the invented background of fake identity. In fact, creating and recreating identity is part of his job. While spying, he "could be anyone, perhaps several anyones at once" (127). His employer demands him to take up various forms of identity and extract secrete information for their client. Spying entailshim to straggle between different forms of identities. For Tina Chen, the performance of multiple roles as a spy is "a logical extension of his personal history as a Korean American struggling to negotiate the divide that separates how others perceive him and how he sees himself' (638). His profession resembles with his negotiation of cultural identity in the diasporic third space.

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Henry seems to be divided between his professional need of a spy and his connection with his past. While performing the role of a spy, he has to adopt various forms of identities to suit his needs. In this process of performing various false identities lead to the "gradual loss of his true self" (Om 46). Obviously, his employer encourages to abandon his past: "Our mode at the firm was always to resist history, at least our own" (Lee 28). For instances, Henry succinctly remarks about his colleague Pete: "He's intentionally lost that huge baggage, those encumbering remnants of blood and flesh, and... carries no memory of a house, no memory of a land" (173) as if he has no past or ancestry. Pete deliberately loses his indigenous culture, values and practices of his land of origin. In fact, Henry is both pitiful and envious to Pete. He is sympathetic to Pete for losing his connection with his origin. At same time, he is jealous with Pete who embodies multiple personas without the burden of his past. Unlike Pete, he cannot be totally free from his past. He is sandwiched between professional demand of self-erasure and psychological and emotional link with his origin. Such bifurcate obligation and connection render ambivalence in his cultural identity which is also evident in his married life.

Henry's relation with his White wife Lelia who constantly makes him aware about his non-American origin and his profession of a spy which demands to change his identity frequently complicate his quest of self identity. His wife leaves him with a series of accusations. These allegations lead him to wonder who actually he is and what he wants in his life. The conjugal conflict "is the impetus for Henry's self-evaluation because it forces him to question who he is, and who he wants to become" (Om 50). In the same way, his constant undertaking of false personas blurs the line between truth and fiction which makes it more difficult for Henry to retain what is genuine identity (50). Henry makes a self-reflective comment referring to his fellow spy Jack: "Our work is but a string of serial identity. But who was the Jack. . . was he just another version in the schema, or the true soul, or could he have been both" (Lee 33). His questioning of Jack's dual nature reflects his own dilemma and confusion. Performing various identities as a spy complicates his quest of who actually he is. Moreover, his marriage with a White girl aggravates his quest for identity in the diasporic third space.

Henry, in his self-retrospection, confesses that he initiates his search of identity on: "the day my [Henry's] wife left she gave me a list of who I was" (1). Before exposing the contents of the list, he explains that he has made three copies; one for his purse "as a kind of personal asterisk," one set is for the future in case he ever "wanted pity or needed some easy ammunition," and the final one is "to historicize" that he mails to himself (4). In fact, by "making copies of his wife's list, he reveals facets of his insecurity: his reliance on other people's assessment for identification" (Hurst 82). In this process, he destroys the original one undermining the authenticity of original one and revealing his preference for multiplicities, "I prefer versions of things, copies that aren't so precious" (Lee 4). By keeping photocopies instead of original, "he exhibits his preference for distancing, no doubt for psychological protection; the real thing being too dear, he can only deal with the image, the representation, the copy" (Hurst 82). In this sense, Henry reveals his lack of self-confidence about himself. Such uncertainties surface in the use of languages also.

Pluralities of Language

Henry mimics the language of the dominant White people in order to assimilate into the American society. In the process, he pays attention on every detail and aspects to sound like a native speaker. However, he confesses the limitation of his imitations:

But I and my kind possess another dimension. We will learn every lesson of

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accent and idiom, we will dismantle every last pretense and practice you hold This is your own history. We are your most perilous and dutiful brethren, the song of our hearts at once furious and sad. For only you could grant me these lyrical modes. I call them back to you. Here is the sole talent I ever dared nurture. Here is all of my American education. (Lee 320)

As an immigrant, he expresses that 'every lesson of accent and idiom' of the dominant language can be mastered and mimicked. In doing so, immigrants are like Bhabha's "mimic man" (86). Bhabha explains that mimicking subjects: the colonized people partially identify themselves with disciplinary authorities. The partially identification leaves the subjects at the ambivalent site of "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86). Despite his attempts, Henry's English sounds almost the same way like native speaker but not quite the same. In fact, he places himself and immigrants in an ambivalent relation to American, implying that are at once "perilous and dutiful brethren" (Lee 231). Such state makes him over sensitive while using English.

His English language in the real conversation reflects his self-consciousness and over sensitive nature. In their first meeting, Lelia perceptively tells him that he "look[s] like someone listening to himself, you pay attention to what you are doing" (12). Although Henry has good command over English language, he is insecure when it comes to the dialogue of his real life. Conversely, his "struggle with words is highlighted and heightened by his wife's easeful command of it, and because language comes so naturally to her" (Om 47). As a speech therapist, Lelia has an acute ability of effectively verbalizing her thoughts. At their first meeting, he notices Lelia's articulating power, "she could really speak. At first I took her as being exceedingly proper, but I soon realized that she was simply executing the language" (Lee 10). In fact, his bicultural and bilingual upbringing results in his discomfort with English language. He is expected to speak his parents' native tongue at home and converse in English outside the family. His perpetual juggling between two languages unravels his negotiating subjectivity in the diaspora.

Henry's ability of using both English and Korean language unravels his dual sense of belonging. He struggles with both adopted English and his native Korean language. This is evident since the beginning of his public school. Henry struggles a lot for his English language. He often self-practices and takes extra supportive classes for the improvement of English language. This late initiation of learningEnglish renders constant feelings of inadequacy in him. As an adult, he shows his deficiency of his English, "I will always make bad errors of speech. I remind myself of my mother and father, fumbling in front of strangers ... Sometimes I'll still say *riddle* for *little*, or *bent* for *vent*" (234). In the same way, he has doubt about his command over Korean language. While taking dinner at a Korean restaurant, he thinks of speaking in Korean to the waitress but he does not as he is "half afraid of disappointing her with some fumble of poorly accented words" (316). Despite his Korean upbringing and learned English, he continues to struggle in both languages as if stranded in a no-man's land (Kim 253). His struggle with both English and Korean reflects his stranded position of somewhere in between American and Korean cultures.

Henry's command over English language like native speaker and his typical Korean face renders uncertainty in his sense of belonging neither in Korean nor in American cultural spaces. He puts on "a linguistically native face by speaking native-like American English" (Moraru 77). Henry manages to sound like a real American despite his Korean background. He works hard on his speech "so that his interlocutors hear...an orally flawless national performance" (78). Only people with expertise in language like his wife Lelia who is a language therapist may detect his non-native origin. However,

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"he produces—in a thespian sense—his "nativity" linguistically while inside still hearing and feeling the confusingly plural rustle of idioms, multiple and shaky pronunciations, phonetic dilemmas and phonation challenges" (78). The internal confusions result from his Korean upbringing and his sense of awareness about his status as an outsider in American society. In this sense, his face or his Korean origin takes back what his voice gives him. It disfigures his American figure by figuring him as a foreign and outsider. His Asian face, as his son Mitt innocently calls, "Charlie Chan, face as flat as a pan" (Lee 103), defaces his identity, or complicates what the voice strives to simplify. Apparently, he sounds like an American native and he looks like a Korean. Such bifurcated allegiances lead him in-between third space of cultural interaction.

In the course of learning English language, Henry reveals his divided self of observer and observed. Young Henry is very much anxious in learning Standard English and becomes watchful about his own learning process. In fact, "Henry turns his observation inward, demonstrating the double consciousness" (Jirousek 11) while learning English. He recalls carefully observing himself while practicing English pronunciation, "When I was young I'd look in the mirror and address it, as if daring the boy there; I would say something dead and normal, like, 'Pleased to make your acquaintance,' and I could barely convince myself that it was I who was talking" (Lee 179-180). At this moment, Henry seems "to divide himself into two persons, observer and observed, 'Americanized' and 'foreign,' voiced and voiceless" (Jirousek 11). He faces difficulty in reconciling the two disparate aspects of himself. This sense of divided self recurrently manifests in his and other immigrants' use of English.

Evolving Self

Henry demonstrates his changing perception about his Korean origin and his Korean American father. This change reflects in his changing perception about his use of English. Initially, he seems to be over sensitive about his English. In his first meeting with Lelia, he remarks that: "People like me are always thinking about still having an accent" (Lee 12). She replies: "You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker" (12). Paying attention to his Korean origin, he becomes "extremely self-conscious of his speech" (Berner 148). However, he gradually gives up his over sensitive attitude of English language and even begins to miss his parent's English, "I think I would give most anything to hear my father's talk again, the crash and bang and stop of his language" (Lee 337). Moreover, he begins to understand his father: "when I consider him [his father], I see how my father had to retool his life to the ambitions" with his limited "knowledge of the language and culture" (333). With his changing attitude, he no longer wishes to be invisible being over sensitive about his Korean origin. He understands that "there is no fixed definition of who he is, and that a defining list, like the one Lelia left for him when she went away, does not exist" (Berner 149). His subjectivity is gradually evolving and changing so pre-existing cultural parameters and codes fails to conceptualize the changing subjectivity.

Henry professes the provisional, situational and subjective nature of truth and reality in his life. Such perception shapes his subjectivity and identity. His frequently changing identities in his espionage occupation reveal his transitory and fleeting nature of his individuality. In his profession, his deception of undertaking false identities enables him to get success. He realizes that: "whatever I possess in this life is more or less the result of a talent I have for making you feel good about yourself when you are with me" (Lee 6). He further adds: "I won't speak untruths to you. . . . I make do with on- hand materials, what I can chip out of you, your natural ore. Then I fuel the fire of your most secret vanity" (6). In his confession, he values the instantaneous purpose of

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performing the task by selecting a truth suitable in the moment. He confesses: "The truth, finally, is who can tell it" (Lee 6). Deconstructing the universality of the truth, he personalizes it with the power of the speaker. For him, truth is merely a matter of "linguistic ability mixed with individual perseverance" (Hurst 82). In fact, encompassing the provisional and subjective nature of the truth, Henry reveals his unstable and transitory nature of his selfhood.

In the end, Henry attempts to reconcile his American and Korean cultural identity by hybridizing the both. At a glance, he seems to surrender to the dominant White culture by accepting a secondary position being an immigrant. He quits his spying job and reconciles with his white wife, Lelia. He also serves as a teaching aide in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class taught by Lelia. He enters this disciplinary space as "part of her materials, the day's curriculum" (Lee 348). In the classroom, Henry acts as the "Speech Monster" who would "gobble up kids but ... cower when anyone repeats the day's secret phrase, which Lelia has them practice earlier" (Lee 348). With this submission to the American space, he still cannot totally forget his Korean origin. He fondly recalls his son Mitt and his parents without any sadness and bitterness. He seems to have a new understanding with his past and begins to look them with new perspectives. The Korean origin of his parents and the accidental death of his son trouble him no more. Moreover, he prepares a hot Korean soup for wife following his mother's recipe, and Lelia eats the hot spicy soup on a hot day reluctantly. Such appreciation of both American and Korean origin reflects Henry's evolving self that emerges out of cultural interaction of diasporic third space. In fact, "there is no 'solution' to the dilemma of his identity," and, his quest "for solidity, belonging, and a 'true' identity remains. . . unfulfilled" (Chen 660). Rather, he encompasses multiplicities and pluralities.

Conclusion

In American diaspora, Henry demonstrates his conflicted identity constantly vacillating between Korean and American cultural spaces. His domestic Korean lifestyle and public American surrounding deconstructs his unified sense of self. As a result, he spends his childhood in uncertainties and dilemmas. Gradually, he hybridizes his Korean origin with American surrounding encompassing instability and provisionality of self and truth. His profession of a spy which demands to perform multiple roles and his relation with his White wife often manifests his unstable and fleeting subjectivity. He further reveals his unsteady nature in his oversensitivity in using English language. In the same way, he manifests his constantly changing subjectivity in his changing perception about his Korean parents, his wife Lelia, and English language. In this sense, his cultural identity is in a constant process of negotiation and transformation in the interaction of Korean and American lifestyle, language and ideals in American diaspora. In this process, his identities encompass multiplicities, deconstructing the binary of the home and host culture.

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