

Searching for Self-Identity in the Tower of Babel

*The Denotation and Connotation in
Korean-American Novelist Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker*

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Self-Identity Search and the Korean-American Literature

In the 1990s, *Native Speaker** by Chang-rae Lee not only raised the awareness of the Korean-American literary world following a decade of many Korean-American novels' publication, but also offered a fresh take on the theme of self-identify search. The first attempt at incorporating a quest for self-identity into the Korean-American novel was made in the 1930s with Young-Hill Kang's work**, and subsequently, this theme had been a mainstay in the Korean-American literary world well into the 1980s. The search was however more refined through the process of internalization by Chang-rae Lee's arrival. His novel clearly exhibits its possibilities as a serious literary piece and shows the process toward achieving the American dream. It captures the author's desire in harmonizing immigrants' voice and placing them in his own narrative structure. What's more essential is however how the protagonist's linguistic inferiority complex or frustration contributes to the story's development, in which his search for self-identity takes place.

The author subtly portrays the protagonist's process of awakening through the structure, conventions, and technique of a detective novel. Strictly speaking, Henry Park, who appears as "I" in the novel, is not the author himself. In the foreword for the Korean edition of the novel, the author however states, "I wanted to make reference to the spirits I was continually led to while writing this book. Spirits can come out of both literature and life. It is especially true that literature is the same as everyday matters to an author." The protagonist of the novel might therefore be the author himself, and the story autobiographical. One may

be tempted to feel that Henry Park's experience reflects the author's as well as those of a collective body of immigrants.

Even more telling is that the author's view of New York as the Tower of Babel was the catalyst for the protagonist's story. Based on his perception and discoveries about language, Henry starts his quest for self-identity. As the story develops, the narrator confronts a major conflict in coping with the dominant culture around him and its language. As Chang-rae Lee puts it, only those who speak English as a mother tongue can be leaders in American societies, especially leading ones, and Korean-Americans (who cannot speak English fluently) are no less marginalized than other immigrants they meet are. Immigrants' weak command of English as well as their skin colors are factors that alienate Korean-Americans from their new home in the novel, and this alienation is an essential problem that has arguably intensified the collective identity crisis in Korean-American novels or their lives.

As a private detective, Park pries into others' secrets. Yet he has to disguise himself thoroughly. Moreover, he cannot inform others of his true identity; he cannot reveal his identity even to his most intimate companions including his wife, parents, brothers, and eventually, himself. In a note written by his wife, "You are surreptitious/ B+ student of life/ first-thing hummer of Wagner and Strauss/ illegal alien/ genre bug/ Yellow peril: neo-American/ great in bed/ overrated/ poppa's boy/ sentimentalist/ anti-romantic/ _____analyst (you fill in)/ stranger/ follower/ traitor/ spy" (*Native Speaker* 5). She declares a separation and leaves. The note insinuates that the protagonist search for his own identity from now. Park tried hard to forget the note, considering it as no more than a list of mean words. His search for self-identity however becomes tied to languages when he finds a slip of paper under the bed: "a poor command of language," it says.

This note is a decisive clue in decoding his identity, and *decoding* takes on a special meaning for the character, as his process of knowing himself is linked to the process of decoding language. In fact, the list of insults written by Park's wife hints at the central theme, being as an impetus for the entire story. Contrary to its title, *Native Speaker*, Park is not even somewhat fluent; he has "a poor command of language."

The protagonist calls New York a second Tower of Babel, while also thinking of it as a new incarnation of ancient Rome. In the biblical story, God decides to confuse humans by making them misunderstand each other. The Tower of Babel was a symbol of human prides and ceaseless desire. The punishment for the Tower of Babel was God's creation of language barriers and thereby the absence of communication, leading to human isolation. In Park's view this barrier in his contemporary Babylon results from native English speakers' pride and immigrants' difficulties. To become a leading citizen in the Tower of Babel, immigrants must be as fluent in English as any native speaker is. In this new world, America seemingly demands obedience and conformity to the dominant population's language, culture, and their way of thinking. The dominant population's pride and immigrants' inferiority complex with English thus become an impassable barrier for immigrants, a sign of linguistic imperialism in the US.

The protagonist was raised under the strong influence of the society's dominant language-English- from the early age. He might as well have inherited his skin color and linguistic inferiority complex from his first-generation immigrant parents who were not able to speak English well. From the viewpoint of immigrants from the non-English-speaking world, the US is a nation of which only native English speakers can be a member. Minorities and foreigners are effectively the loyal subjects of the American linguistic empire. According to Young-Hill Kang, Korean-American writers regularly bring up linguistic problems, because language acquisition is often an insoluble dilemma for first- and 1½-generation Korean-Americans. Their skin color and lack of English skills keep them in the social periphery. Although the author himself, as a 1½-generation immigrant, has a good command of English, he has likely witnessed the pain his parents and other immigrants suffer because they cannot speak English well. Alienation by skin color and English was an essential problem to their identity crisis. It is therefore natural for the author to use this theme as a major axis of story development.

Park's wife, meanwhile, teaches English. Their first date happened as a result of Park's observation of her flawless English in an earlier get-together. Park carefully takes note of the command of English by his colleagues and John Kwang, his assigned target, at his workplace, the

private detective agency. The protagonist, who speaks Korean at home but English outside, has been constantly and consistently experiencing a great deal of confusion. His linguistic inferiority complex makes progress toward discovering his own identity through the experience of his son's death, separation from his wife and his detective work. Witnessing the collapse of John Kwang, the protagonist realizes that no matter how hard he tries, he will never escape his Korean tongue, Korea-ness, and Korea itself. In the end, he decides to be an American despite being a minority, after hearing his wife sincerely calling out her pupils' names in their own languages. The scene, in which the names of immigrant children are called out in their own native languages, leads Park to have an epiphany. In the last scene, he succeeds in the search for self-identity in the Tower of Babel, overcoming the pressure of the American linguistic imperialism.

This concludes my presentation. Thank you for listening. I will be happy to answer any question you may have.

* Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

** Young-hill Kang (1898-1972). Korean-American novelist. In 1921, he moved to Canada, and then to the US. He studied at Boston, Harvard, and New York University. *The Grass Roof* (1931), *The Happy Grove* (1933), *East Goes West* (1937).

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