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## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

### The Weight of Conformity: Unpacking the Model Minority in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

*Uyum Sağlamanın Ağırlığı: Chang-rae Lee'nin Native Speaker Adlı Romanında Örnek Azınlık Mitinin Açıklaması*

Vahit YAŞAYAN<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Dr. Öğretim Üyesi, Erzurum Teknik Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Erzurum / TÜRKİYE  
ORCID: 0000-0001-7484-6998

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#### ABSTRACT

Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* centers on Henry Park, a Korean American who works as a spy for a private intelligence firm, and offers an in-depth exploration of the effects of immigration, cultural identity, and assimilation on the individual. Henry is tasked with infiltrating the political campaign of John Kwang, a rising Korean American politician who represents hope for the Korean American community. As Henry navigates his dual role, the novel interrogates the pressures of the "model minority" stereotype, strained personal relationships, and cultural belonging. Through his internal conflict, *Native Speaker* critically examines the immigrant experience, underscoring how social expectations and assimilation impact personal identity and the complexities of living across cultural boundaries. This article examines the aspirations of three central characters in *Native Speaker*—Korean immigrant Mr. Park, his son Henry Park, and the politician John Kwang. By analyzing their respective dreams, this study reveals that these Korean American ambitions, while diverse in their personal goals, are unified by their entanglement with the Asian American model minority stereotype. Despite generational differences, Mr. Park, Henry Park, and John Kwang represent distinct facets of this stereotype: the self-made immigrant, the self-effacing and dutiful subordinate, and the overachieving public figure, respectively. These characters' ambitions not only reflect their individual struggles but also underscore the broader socio-cultural pressures that shape and constrain the Korean American experience, highlighting the hidden costs associated with their pursuit of success and the model minority myth.

#### ÖZ

Chang-rae Lee'nin *Native Speaker* adlı romanı, özel bir istihbarat firmasında casus olarak çalışan Koreli Amerikalı Henry Park'ı merkeze alarak göçmenlik, kültürel kimlik ve asimilasyonun birey üzerindeki etkilerini derinlemesine incelemektedir. Henry, göçmen toplumu için bir umut simgesi olan, kariyer basamaklarını hızla yükselmiş Koreli Amerikalı politikacı John Kwang'ın siyasi kampanyasına sızma görevlendirilmiştir. Casusluk görevini sürdürürken kendi kimliğiyle de mücadele eden Henry aracılığıyla roman, "örnek azınlık" mitinin getirdiği baskılar, zorlayıcı kişisel ilişkiler ve kültürel aidiyet meseleleri üzerine derinlemesine bir sorgulama yapmaktadır. Henry'nin içsel çatışmaları aracılığıyla *Native Speaker*, göçmen deneyimini çeşitli bir bakışla inceleyip toplumsal beklentiler ve asimilasyon süreçlerinin kişisel kimlik üzerindeki etkisini ve kültürel sınırların ötesinde yaşamın getirdiği karmaşıklıkları vurgulamaktadır. Bu makale, *Native Speaker*'daki üç ana karakterin -Koreli göçmen Bay Park'ın, baş kahraman Henry Park'ın ve politikacı John Kwang'ın- hayallerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, Koreli Amerikalı karakterlerin farklı bireysel hedeflerine rağmen, ortak noktalarının Asyalı Amerikalılar için kalıplaşmış örnek azınlık miti ile olan bağlantıları olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Henry Park, babası ve John Kwang, nesiller arası farklılıklara rağmen, bu stereotipin farklı yönlerini temsil etmektedir: Henry'nin babası kendi çabasıyla yükselen Koreli göçmeni, Henry kendini geri plana atan ve sadık bir astı, John Kwang ise kendini gerçekleştirmiş, başarılı bir kamu figürünü simgeler. Bu karakterlerin hayalleri, bireysel mücadelelerini yansıttığı kadar, Koreli Amerikalıların deneyimlerini şekillendiren ve kısıtlayan daha geniş sosyokültürel baskıları da gözler önüne sermektedir. Makale, başarıya ulaşmanın ve örnek azınlık miti peşinde koşmanın beraberinde getirdiği ağır bedellere dikkat çekmektedir.

## Introduction

The Korean American experience is a complex tapestry woven from threads of immigration, identity, and the pursuit of the American Dream. As one of the fastest-growing Asian American communities in the United States, Korean Americans have navigated the challenges of assimilation, cultural preservation, and racial identity within a society that often sees them through the lens of the “model minority” stereotype. This stereotype, while ostensibly positive, imposes expectations that can block out the diverse realities of Korean American lives. For many Korean immigrants and their descendants, the American Dream represents the promise of economic opportunity, social mobility, and a better future for their children. This dream has driven waves of immigration, particularly since the 1960s, when American immigration laws began to favor proficient professionals and entrepreneurs. Yet, the pursuit of this dream has often come with significant sacrifices. Korean Americans have faced the pressures of balancing traditional cultural values with the demands of life in a predominantly white society. This balancing act is further complicated by the racialization of their identity, where they are simultaneously celebrated for their perceived economic success and marginalized as perpetual foreigners. The dreams of Korean Americans are thus shaped by a dual narrative: one of resilience and achievement, and another of struggle and adaptation. These dreams are not monolithic but are influenced by factors such as generational differences, socioeconomic status, and the unique challenges of maintaining a sense of cultural identity in the diaspora. As Korean Americans continue to carve out their place in the broader American society, their experiences and aspirations reflect both the promises and the limitations of the American Dream.

One of the contemporary Korean American authors, Chang-rae Lee, who is known for his exploration of identity, immigration, and the complexities of the Asian American experience, delves deeply into the psychological and social ramifications of the immigrant experience in his work, offering a nuanced portrayal of the tensions between cultural heritage and assimilation in a multicultural society (Naimon, 2014, p. 121). Born in Seoul, South Korea, in 1965, Lee immigrated to the United States with his family when he was three years old. Lee’s debut novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and established him as a significant voice in contemporary American literature. His other notable works include *A Gesture Life* (1999), *Aloft* (2004), *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), and *My Year Abroad* (2021). His works through their nuanced exploration of identity and cultural assimilation, have made a profound impact on the literary landscape, enriching the dialogue around the immigrant experience and contributing to a deeper understanding of Asian American perspectives.

*Native Speaker* centers on Henry Park, a Korean American man working as a spy for a private intelligence firm. Henry is tasked with infiltrating the political campaign of John Kwang, a rising Korean American politician who represents hope for the immigrant community. As Henry navigates his double life, the novel explores his internal conflicts—struggling with the expectations of being a “model minority,” his fractured relationships, especially with his estranged wife, and his sense of belonging in both his Korean heritage and American society. Through Henry’s journey, *Native Speaker* examines the challenges of maintaining one’s cultural identity while trying to succeed in a society that often demands conformity. The novel is a poignant reflection on the immigrant experience, the burdens of assimilation, and the costs of living between two worlds. This article examines the aspirations of three central characters in Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*—Korean immigrant Mr. Park, his son Henry Park, and the politician John Kwang. By analyzing their respective dreams, this study reveals that these Korean American ambitions, while diverse in their personal goals, are unified by their entanglement with the Asian American model minority stereotype. Despite

generational differences, Mr. Park, Henry Park, and John Kwang represent distinct facets of this stereotype: the self-made immigrant, the self-effacing and dutiful subordinate, and the overachieving public figure, respectively. These characters' ambitions not only reflect their individual struggles but also underscore the broader socio-cultural pressures that shape and constrain the Korean American experience, highlighting the hidden costs associated with their pursuit of success and the model minority myth.

In exploring the complexities of gender identity, Judith Butler's concept of performativity challenges the conventional understanding of gender as a fixed, inherent quality. Butler elucidates that gender is not a pre-existing identity, but rather an ongoing performance, a repetition of acts that create the illusion of a stable identity. As Butler succinctly puts it: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender. . ." (Butler, 1990, p. 138). This perspective unravels the notion of an "original" gender, suggesting that all gender expressions are, in essence, forms of imitation" (Butler, 1990, p. 138). The performance of drag, thus "reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler, 1990, p. 137). Butler's concept of gender as performative can be applied to the American immigrant experience by considering how immigrants often navigate and "perform" cultural identities. Just as gender is not inherent but constructed through repeated acts, immigrant identities are shaped by the need to adapt, mimic, and sometimes resist dominant cultural norms in America, revealing the fluid and constructed nature of both identity and belonging. In *Native Speaker*, Chang-rae Lee in indicating how his Asian American characters perform the model minority and American national identity, exposes the stereotype and the myth of the American success story as similarly constructed, both compulsory and fictitious narratives.

At first glance, the model minority stereotype might seem benign or even favorable. However, a thorough understanding of its problematic nature requires an examination of its origins. The myth of the Asian model minority emerged in the 1970s, following the civil rights movements, as a tool to undermine calls for social justice and structural reform. White conservatives argued that if Asian Americans, who had also endured racist practices like the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese American internment, could succeed, then other racial minorities should be able to thrive without government intervention. This reasoning positioned Asian Americans as a "proof" that success was attainable through individual effort alone, irrespective of systemic inequalities. As William Petersen discusses in his article "Success Story, The Japanese-American Style," the stereotype was strategically deployed to promote the idea that Asian Americans' success could be easily replicated by other marginalized groups without the need for societal changes or policy interventions (Petersen, 1966). The most insidious aspect of the model minority stereotype lies in its strategic use to create divisions between Asian Americans and other communities of color, leveraging perceived success as a means to invalidate broader struggles against systemic racism.

Several issues arise from the conservative reasoning behind the model minority stereotype. First, many recent Asian immigrants have arrived with significant economic and cultural resources, in contrast to African Americans, who have endured centuries of slavery and its associated legacies of poverty and illiteracy. Second, the absence of visible reliance on government assistance among Asian Americans does not necessarily indicate a lack of need; rather, it may reflect barriers such as limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with the American social services system. Third, the stereotype's portrayal of Asian Americans as a monolithic group obscures significant economic diversity within the community, with many Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Cambodians living below the poverty line. Lastly, the attributes often ascribed to Asian Americans, such as diligence, deference, and compliance, are frequently linked to Confucian

cultural values. However, the experience of being marginalized or perceived as “enemy aliens” in America has likely intensified the need for such behaviors to avoid conflict and remain inconspicuous. This dynamic is poignantly expressed by the protagonist in Shawn Wong’s *American Knees* (1995), who reflects on his military service during the Vietnam War: “All he could remember was the fear he’d felt when the sergeant had called him a “gook.” That, and the desire he’d brought back from his few months in the army to be anonymous in the world. There was safety in being Asian American at home in America. We work hard. We keep quiet. I am the model minority. Don’t shoot me” (Wong, 1995, p. 59). What Wong points out underscores how the model minority stereotype functions as a strategic response to being perceived as an outsider; it represents a way to counteract marginalization by conforming to an image of docility and invisibility.

However, many Asian Americans have internalized the stereotype as a cultural emblem. The troubling effects of this internalization are compellingly addressed by the editors of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*:

The general function of any racial stereotype is to establish and preserve order between different elements of society ... and enforce white supremacy with a minimum of effort, attention, and expense. ... The stereotype operates as a model of behavior. It conditions the mass society’s perceptions and expectations. ... The stereotype operates most efficiently and economically when the vehicle of the stereotype, the medium of its perpetuation, and the subject race to be controlled are all one. The successful operation of the stereotype results in the neutralization of the subject race as a social, creative, and cultural force. ... For the subject to operate efficiently as an instrument of white supremacy, he is conditioned to accept and live in a state of euphemized self-contempt. This self-contempt itself is nothing more than the subject’s acceptance of white standards of objectivity, beauty, behavior, and achievement as being morally absolute, and his acknowledgment that, because he is not white, he can never fully measure up to white standards. ... This gesture of self-contempt and self-destruction, in terms of the stereotype, is euphemized as being successful assimilation, adaptation, and acculturation. (Chin et al., 1983, p. xxvi—xxviii)

As the editors claim, by embracing the stereotypes, Asian Americans risk perceiving themselves as merely inferior imitations of white culture. While the mainstream culture may view Asian Americans as hardworking, dependable, and polite, it often denies them qualities such as boldness and innovation, and excludes them from leadership roles. This dynamic contributes to the “glass ceiling” faced by many Asian Americans, who, despite being perceived as “triumphant” in public, encounter significant barriers to advancement.

The stereotype that emerges from “racist love” can swiftly transform into one of “racist hate.” For instance, a self-made individual lauded for their ingenuity might also be condemned for their perceived cutthroat ambition. Similarly, someone valued for their subservience and reserve may be criticized as passive or enigmatic. Likewise, an overachiever celebrated for their exceptional intelligence or competence can be regarded with suspicion as a potential threat or fraud. Consequently, the “model minority” stereotype is never far removed from the fear-inducing image of the “yellow peril,” a xenophobic concept that portrays Asians as an existential threat to Western values and society. This duality reveals how admiration can quickly shift to hostility, reflecting the underlying racial anxieties that fuel both stereotypes.

### **Mr. Park: The Self-Made Immigrant’s Pursuit of the American Dream**

In *Understanding Chang-rae Lee*, Amanda Page explores the complexities of identity, assimilation, and cultural conflict in Lee’s works, particularly highlighting the nuanced portrayal of immigrant experiences in *Native Speaker*. Accordingly, the characters in Lee’s novel effectively illustrate the impact of the stereotype on Korean Americans (Page, 2017, p. 10). The protagonist’s father, Mr. Park, a prosperous green grocer, perceives himself as a model of the American Dream. As the narrator puts it,

in his personal lore he would have said that he started with \$200 in his pocket and a wife and baby and just a few words of English. Knowing what every native loves to hear, he would have offered classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient, resourceful. (Lee, 1995, p. 49)

This narrative embodies the quintessential story of the self-made man—the diligent immigrant who, much like the protagonists in Horatio Alger’s “from rags to riches” narratives, rises through hard work. The widespread appeal of this story lies in its reinforcement of the myth that America is truly a land of opportunity, where anyone who puts in the effort can achieve success and prosperity. However, it also subtly implies that those who fail to thrive in this land of abundance have only themselves to blame, absolving society and its more affluent members of any responsibility to assist the impoverished or the vulnerable.

While Mr. Park portrays himself as a self-made American hero, his son Henry Park is quick to highlight the Korean cultural support that underpinned his success. In the novel, the protagonist reveals that his father’s initial capital came from a “*ggeh*,” a Korean money club where members contribute to a collective pool, which is then distributed to each member on a rotating basis. Each participant contributes a set amount weekly, and eventually, each receives the full sum during their turn in the cycle (Lee, 1995, p. 50). It was through this collective financial support from his Korean community, rather than solely through individual effort, that the father was able to secure the capital needed to launch his business.

In the context of the immigrant experience, achieving material success often entails considerable sacrifices. While the father takes pride in his financial achievements in his new country, his move to America has resulted in severe downward occupational mobility. Despite holding a Master’s degree in engineering, he becomes a greengrocer in New York. When Henry inquires about his father’s grocery business, his mother interjects, “Don’t shame your father! . . . He graduated from the best college in Korea, the very top, and he doesn’t need to talk about selling fruits and vegetables. It’s below him” (Lee, 1995, p. 56). Although proud, he endures daily indignities from both white and black customers. For example, when a white woman returns a partially eaten apple, his father discourages Henry from confronting her, saying, “She’s a steady customer” (Lee, 1995, p. 54). On another occasion, after being physically assaulted by African Americans in his store, he comes home with “deep bruises about his face, his nose and mouth bloody, his rough workshirt torn at the shoulder” (Lee, 1995, p. 56). Despite these humiliations—and his academic qualifications—he never mentions these experiences when recounting his success story.

Achieving financial success as part of the American dream often entails sacrificing personal time in favor of professional obligations, leading to a growing disconnect between father and child. Mr. Park, who believes he is fulfilling his paternal responsibilities by working tirelessly and ensuring his son’s education, fails to recognize that Henry desires more tangible expressions of affection and attention. Consequently, the protagonist, unable to understand his father’s preoccupation with wealth, sees his father’s aspirations with disdain. As he points out, “I though his life was all about money. He drew much energy and pride from his ability to make it almost at will. He was some kind of human annuity. He had no real cleverness or secrets for good business; he simply refused to fail, leaving absolutely nothing to luck or chance or something else” (Lee, 1995, p. 49). Henry sees his father’s unwavering commitment to duty as cold and self-centered, rather than admirable for its perseverance and iron discipline. As he continues to reflect on this, he realizes:

for him the world . . . operated on a determined set of procedures, certain rules of engagement. These were the inalienable rights of the immigrant. I was to inherit them, the legacy unfurling before me this way you worked from before sunrise to the dead of night. You were never unkind in your dealings, but then you were not generous. Your family was your life, though you rarely saw them. (Lee, 1995, p. 47)

The generation gap is deepened by both cultural and linguistic differences. Influenced by American cultural norms, Henry mistakenly equates his father's limited verbal and physical expressions of affection with an absence of love. He fails to recognize that his father's nonverbal actions, like returning home early after his wife's death or attending all his son's basketball games, are alternative ways of showing care. Moreover, the father's struggle with English and the son's limited proficiency in Korean create further distance. In a society where English holds significant cultural value, Henry's stronger grasp of the language leads him to lose respect for his father.

As Mr. Park's financial situation improves, it paradoxically results in heightened social isolation. His increasing adherence to the American ideal of rugged individualism and subsequent economic success further distances him from his Korean American community. Initially, upon their arrival in New York, the family resided near other Korean families and maintained a strong social network, frequently engaging in weekend gatherings, picnics, and soccer games in the park. However, once the father achieves financial success, the family relocates to a predominantly white suburb, leading to a loss of connection with their Korean peers. As Henry states,

I know over the years my father and his friends got together less and less. . . . But it wasn't just him. They all got busier and wealthier and lived farther and farther apart. Like us, their families moved to big houses with big yards to tend on weekends, they owned fancy cars that needed washing and waxing. They joined their own neighborhood pool and tennis clubs and were making drinking friends with Americans. Some of them, too, were already dead, like Mr. Oh, who had a heart attack after being held up at his store in Hell's Kitchen. And in the end my father no longer belonged to any *ggeh*, he complained about all the disgraceful troubles that were now cropping up, people not paying on time or leaving too soon after their turn getting the money. In America, he said, it's even hard to stay Korean. (Lee, 1995, p. 51)

The passage highlights a paradox: as financial gain increases, there is a corresponding decline in social, and potentially ethical, values. The death of Mr. Oh underscores the significant risks that Korean shopkeepers face in their pursuit of success in America. A contrast is drawn between the shallow relationships formed with affluent acquaintances in white suburbs and the dependable, though economically disadvantaged, Korean friends in the ghetto. Additionally, the text suggests that the American focus on individualism and personal achievement contributes to the erosion of the "*ggeh*," a communal network of mutual support. The protagonist reflects on whether Mr. Park

if given the chance, would have wished to go back to the time before he made all that money, when he had just one store and we rented a tiny apartment in Queens. He worked hard and had worries but he had a joy then that he never seemed to regain once the money started coming in. . . . They had lots of Korean friends that they met at church and then even in the street, and when they talked in public there was a shared sense of how lucky they were, to be in America but still have countrymen near. (Lee, 1995, p. 51)

The narrator suggests that Mr. Park endures significant sacrifices for the pursuit of his dream, including a diminished occupational status, frequent disrespect from customers, a lack of esteem from his son, and social isolation. His desire to perceive himself as a "heroic newcomer" can therefore be interpreted as a coping strategy to counterbalance the hardships and losses experienced due to migration.

Ironically, the pursuit of being a self-made individual entails embracing American ideology and accepting the mainstream culture's categorization of Asian Americans as the "model minority." The novel illustrates that immigrants, like Mr. Park, who adamantly conform to this model minority role have unconsciously internalized the American racial hierarchy: "we believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground" (Lee, 1995, p. 53). Adhering to the model minority stereotype thus involves not only striving to please the white majority—by

being flawless, diligent, and uncomplaining—but also adopting the mainstream culture’s prejudices against African Americans. Such prejudice likely contributed to the tragic incident where a Korean grocer, Soon Ja Du, shot and killed a black teenage girl, Latasha Harlins, over a dispute about a bottle of orange juice, for which Du received a minimal sentence. It is important to note that *Native Speaker* draws connections between the American ideal of the self-made man, the model minority stereotype, and the racial dynamics in society. It also reveals that the pursuit of self-made success and material advancement is ultimately a self-centered aspiration that fails to address existing social inequalities.

### **Henry Park: The Dutiful Subordinate and His Silent Struggles**

In contrast to Mr. Park’s American Dream, which centers on financial success and providing a good education for his son, the aspirations of Henry Park, the protagonist, diverge significantly. As Ryan Chow states, Henry

is a multivalent figure, although his respective identities often seem to contradict. Each new face offers a different lens through which to view him. Henry is the son of a Korean immigrant, but an American citizen. He is a father whose son is dead, and a husband whose wife has left him. He is both a spy embedded in politician John Kwang’s operations, and a friend and supporter of Kwang’s vision. (Chow 2023, p. 2)

While the immigrant father envisions prosperity through economic achievement, Henry’s dream focuses on cultural assimilation and societal acceptance as a fully “American” individual, a “native speaker.” In pursuit of this dream, Henry makes considerable efforts to immerse himself in American culture and achieve mastery of the English language. However, despite his flawless English, he remains acutely aware that people like him “are always thinking about still having an accent” (Lee, 1995, p. 12). This observation underscores the persistent difficulty faced by individuals of Asian descent in being fully recognized as “American”—a term that, in the eyes of the mainstream culture, continues to equate to “white.” Henry’s wife, Lelia, remarks during their first encounter that although he speaks English “perfectly,” she can still discern that he is not a “native speaker,” partly due to his appearance (Lee, 1995, p. 12).

This observation reflects not only her personal perception but also highlights how Lelia’s parents’ attitudes exemplify prevalent stereotypes about Asian Americans. Her mother-in-law, despite her deep affection for the protagonist, characterizes him as possessing an “old-style charm, reminiscent of 1957” (Lee, 1995, p. 118). Henry reflects on this perception, noting, “I’m her exotic ... Like a snow leopard. Except I’m not porcelain” (Lee, 1995, p. 118). Similarly, Lelia’s father-in-law, Stew, initially expresses his disapproval of Henry, stating, “When I first learned that Lelia was dating you, I was quite displeased. I questioned who you were. Just another bright Oriental kid. When she told us about the marriage, I nearly yanked the phone off the wall” (Lee, 1995, p. 120). Although Stew later develops a positive view of Henry, his perception evolves from seeing Henry as an undesirable foreigner to a model minority. Stew acknowledges, “I can see why Lelia chose you. There are admirable aspects of Oriental culture and intellect. You’ve been raised to be cautious and deliberate” (Lee, 1995, p. 121). Furthermore, Stew’s praise for Henry’s father reveals the reliance on stereotypes: “I saw a man who didn’t feel the need to show off. You could see he had worked hard to achieve his success. He owes nothing to anyone, nor does he expect anything” (Lee, 1995, p. 121). Stew’s commendations highlight the stereotypical views that shape his admiration for Henry and his father, particularly valuing their self-reliance and independence from government aid.

In the novel, Henry’s career also exemplifies the ways in which stereotypes effectively neutralize the subject race, diminishing its role as a social, creative, and cultural force. In his efforts to conform to the expectations of the mainstream culture, Henry has lost his sense of identity. He has strived so intensely to embody the model minority—deferential, self-effacing,

and invisible—that he no longer recognizes himself. *Native Speaker* begins with the line, “the day my wife left she gave me a list of who I was” (Lee, 1995, p. 11). Through this list of idioms, Henry reveals that Lelia has constructed a “vision of [him] in the starkest light, snapshots of the difficult truths native to our time together” (Lee, 1995, p. 11). The list includes terms such as “illegal alien,” “emotional alien,” “Yellow peril: neo-American,” “traitor,” and “spy” (Lee, 1995, p. 5). However, what is more troubling than the list itself is Henry’s attachment to it:

I read through the list twice. ... Later I would make three photocopies, one to reside permanently next to my body, in my wallet, as a kind of personal asterisk . . . in case of accidental death. Another I saved to show her again sometime. ... The last, to historicize, I sealed in an envelope and mailed to myself. The original I destroyed. I prefer versions of things, copies that aren’t so precious. (Lee, 1995, p. 4)

His adoption of Lelia’s list as a form of self-identification signifies the extent to which he permits white “idioms” to shape his sense of self, indicating how deeply his own identity is obscured by stereotypes. By referring to these idioms as “instant snapshots,” he suggests they do not capture his true essence. The “original” self is deemed insignificant because it is not a genuine original but rather a construct shaped by external influences. His “original” self is endangered because throughout his life, he has strived to replicate the image sanctioned by the dominant culture (Kessel, 2012, p. 202). Henry confesses during his initial encounter with Lelia that he instinctively adapted his behavior: “I did something then that I didn’t know I could do. It was strangely automatic. Instantly I was thinking of the lover she might want. ... I made those phantom calculations ... so that I might cast for her the perfect picture of a face” (Lee, 1995, p. 13). What Henry presents to Lelia is not his authentic self but rather a crafted “picture of a face” (Lee, 1995, p. 13). This constructed persona serves to shield his vulnerabilities, creating a distance between his true identity and the image he projects.

Henry’s skill in assuming artificial identities is so refined that when offered a job as a spy, he perceives it as “the perfect vocation” and his “truest place in the culture” (Lee, 1995, p. 127). He effortlessly adopts different personas for various assignments, each necessitating the creation of a “legend.” This legend, meticulously crafted before any mission, is an extensive “story” or “autobiography” of the persona he assumes (Lee, 1995, p. 22). Typically, an autobiography is a narrative of one’s true self; however, in this context, it is deliberately termed a “legend,” highlighting its fictional nature. This concept of a “legendary autobiography” evokes the autobiographies such as *Out of the Melting Pot* (1920), *The Making of a Chinaman* (1926), *My Life in China and America* (1909) published by individuals of Asian descent in early twentieth-century America. These works, ostensibly personal narratives, often conformed to the dominant narrative of successful assimilation into American society, suggesting a certain degree of narrative shaping to meet societal expectations. While the performative aspect of these autobiographies is implied, Henry’s performance is overt. The accolades Henry receives from a colleague underscore this performative element: “You were fucking magnificent! You were brilliant. Tony, Emmy, Academy-fucking-Award” (Lee, 1995, p. 42). By inverting the stereotype that Asians are naturally inscrutable and cunning, Lee argues that it is the pressure to conform to the American stereotype that cultivates the “cunning Oriental,” turning him into an exceptional performer.

Apart from his skill in assuming multiple identities, another characteristic that makes Henry well-suited for espionage is his capacity to blend into his surroundings, deliberately minimizing his presence. As he states,

I have always only ventured where I was invited or otherwise welcomed. When I was a boy, I wouldn’t join any school club or organization before a member first approached me. I wouldn’t eat or sleep at a friend’s house if it weren’t prearranged. I never assumed anyone would be generous to me, or in any way helpful I never considered it my right to expect approval or sanction no matter what good I had done. My father always reminded me that neither he nor the world owed me a penny. So call me what you will. An assimiliist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. (Lee, 1995, p. 160)



His tendency to remain inconspicuous is not an inherent trait but stems from his fear of rejection by the mainstream culture and Mr. Park's insistence on achieving self-made success. Henry epitomizes the dual nature of two seemingly contradictory stereotypes: the model minority and the yellow peril. He is both the obedient servant and the ominous spy, though he acts as an informant for the dominant culture against his fellow Asians. His profession serves as a metaphor for his own existence. Aware of his complicity in perpetuating the stereotype, Henry becomes both a victim and an agent of the very racism that exploits him.

Henry experiences a sense of disappointment when his son, Mitt, is born, wishing the child possessed more of Lelia's Caucasian features. He not only discourages Mitt from learning Korean but also abstains from personally teaching him English, believing it better for the child to learn it from his mother, whom he views as the "standard-bearer" of the language (Lee, 1995, p. 12). Despite Lelia's persistent encouragement for Mitt to attend Korean school on weekends, Henry resigns himself to the belief that his son will never acquire the "old language." He harbors a hope that Mitt will grow up with a unified sense of identity, which, he believes, might bestow upon him the confidence and authority that his "broad half-yellow face" could not. This desire reflects Henry's own assimilative mindset—a problematic and romanticized attachment to his adopted country, one that is both "ugly and half-blind" (Lee, 1995, p. 266-67). His efforts to fully integrate into American culture, particularly through his attempts to assimilate Mitt, ultimately fail, as symbolized by Mitt's tragic death. Despite Henry's attempts to downplay Mitt's "half-yellow face," the child is subjected to racial slurs such as "chink," "jap," "gook," "Charlie Chan," "mutt," and "mongrel" (Lee, 1995, p. 103). This culminates in a fatal incident on Mitt's seventh birthday, when he is suffocated in a "dog pile" during what is described as an "accident" (Lee, 1995, p. 105). The persistence of racial prejudice proves to be an insurmountable barrier to complete assimilation. Mitt's death forces the protagonist to confront the harsh reality that his dream of assimilation was ultimately unattainable.

Henry's narrative extends beyond merely critiquing the mainstream culture; it serves as a cautionary tale for Asian Americans attempting to conform to a pre-established model. Baudrillard, in his exploration of simulacra, posits that what may initially serve as a reflection of an underlying reality can, through repeated mediation, ultimately "mask and pervert" that reality. This process can further obscure its "absence" and, in the end, exist as a "pure simulacrum" that is entirely detached from any genuine reality (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 170). The protagonist reveals that after years of performing, he, too, has transformed into a pure simulacrum, becoming, in his words, a "paper-mate":

On paper, by any known standard, I was an impeccable mate. I did everything well enough. I cooked well enough, cleaned enough, was romantic and sensitive and silly enough, I made love enough, was paternal, big brotherly, just a good friend enough, father-to-my son enough, forlorn enough, and then even bull-headed and dull and macho enough, to make it all seamless. For ten years [Lelia] hadn't realized the breadth of what I had accomplished with my exacting competence, the daily work I did, which unto itself became an unassailable body of cover. And the surest testament to the magnificent and horrifying level of my virtuosity was that neither had I. (Lee, 1995, p. 161)

The recurring phrase "well enough" evokes the notion of the model minority stereotype, suggesting that the simulacrum has supplanted the original identity. Conforming to whichever role he is given, Henry struggles to uncover an authentic self beneath the layers of his imitation.

### **John Kwang: The Overachieving Public Figure and the Burden of Representation**

Apart from Mr. Park and his son Henry Park, whose aspirations reflect more traditional pursuits, John Kwang embodies the most expansive vision of the American Dream. While Kwang consciously adopts the model minority role -specifically as an overachiever- he also transcends the limitations of this stereotype. He strategically incorporates the American success narrative, albeit with an Asian nuance, into his political agenda. His campaign staff reach out

to diverse racial groups, asserting in various languages that “Kwang is like you. He will be an American” (Lee, 1995, p. 143). However, Lee underscores the deliberate efforts Kwang undertakes to reinforce his American identity, as well as the extent to which his public image is meticulously crafted by the media and public relations efforts:

John Kwang dressed like a power broker. His taste for colors and fabrics was impeccable. ... He had every kind of shoe for his occasions, brogans, oxfords, wing tips, Loafers, patent-leather pumps, deep-beaded boots. With his suits he mostly stayed to the conservative, what the people expected of him ... the American executive look, but at more internationally flavored events ... you could see him working the room in something silken and double-breasted, the lines rakishly cut down to hug his youthful waist. (Lee, 1995, p. 137)

Even Kwang’s choice of vehicle is influenced by political strategy: “He drove several different cars, but always American models; a politician, especially an Asian-American one, has no other option” (Lee, 1995, p. 179). Kwang must consistently present an Americanized persona, particularly because his race is perceived by the mainstream culture as inherently foreign. To counteract media manipulation, his public relations manager, along with her team (including Henry), spends an entire rainy morning rehearsing the appearance Kwang is scheduled to make the next day. They meticulously choreograph his steps and timing to preempt any attempts by the media to “sound-bite” and distort his statements (Lee, 1995, p. 87). As Henry observes, “we must have looked like a small troupe of performance artists staging an imaginary event” (Lee, 1995, p. 192). The literal “staging” of Kwang’s political image underscores how, like Henry and his father, Kwang is performing a role dictated by societal expectations. He confides to Henry: “When you are someone like me, you must be many people at once ... the most versatile actor this land has ever known” (Lee, 1995, p. 293).

Although all politicians are, to some extent, actors with roles shaped by their parties, constituencies, and the media, this performance is particularly exhausting for an Asian American like Kwang, who must navigate both the constraints of the model minority stereotype and the challenge of passing as a native speaker. As a racial minority, Kwang -much like Henry- lacks the cultural capital that comes naturally to a native speaker. Henry observes of Kwang’s English, despite how fluently he spoke, how flawlessly he articulated his words, he continued to listen for the subtle inflection, the slip, the minor error that would betray his true racial identity (Lee, 1995, p. 179). This observation highlights Henry’s internalized self-contempt; he cannot accept that someone of his background could be truly impeccable, seeing himself and Kwang as mere imitations of the original. It also underscores the difficulty Asian Americans face in being fully accepted as Americans. Henry adds, “There was something in [Kwang’s] speech that I still found unsettling. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a hidden dubbing at play” (Lee, 1995, p. 179). This comment recalls Lelia’s earlier remark about Henry’s own speech: “You seem like someone who’s always listening to himself. You’re very aware of what you’re doing. If I had to guess, I’d say you’re not a native speaker” (Lee, 1995, p. 12). The terms “dubbing” and “non-native speaker” suggest that, for both Kwang and Henry, English is not their first, “authentic” language. They are also “un-original” in the sense that they cannot freely express themselves like native speakers but must constantly monitor their speech and behavior. This relentless focus on crafting an image leaves Kwang feeling a deep sense of emptiness when his political career abruptly ends.

As Betsy Huang argues, Kwang “is a clear foil to Henry’s father, who, in many ways, typifies the stock “old-world” parent figures that have populated countless immigrant narratives (Huang, 2006, p. 248). While Henry’s father never ventures far from the safe confines of his home and his grocery stores, Kwang has stepped boldly into the public arena” (Huang, 2006, p. 248). In other words, in contrast to Henry’s father, who focuses on achieving individual economic success, and Henry, who strives for cultural assimilation, Kwang ventures into a realm where Asian Americans have traditionally been hesitant—by becoming a prominent

politician. As Henry reflects, “before I knew of him, I could never have imagined someone like him. A Korean man . . . integrated into the public consciousness. Not just a respectable grocer, dry cleaner, or doctor, but a significant public figure willing to speak and act beyond the confines of his family” (Lee, 1995, p. 139). Kwang’s bold presence in the political arena challenges the conventional boundaries of the Asian American identity, redefining what it means to be both a leader and a member of this community.

Moreover, rather than adhering to a conservative party line, Kwang advocates for interethnic collaboration and democracy for all. Instead of setting racial minorities against each other, he challenges the myth of the model minority and emphasizes the shared history of suffering between Black and Korean communities. Addressing a diverse crowd of Koreans, Blacks, and Hispanics, he attributes interethnic tensions to internalized self-hatred:

A young black mother of two, Saranda Harland, is dead. Shot in the back by a Korean shopkeeper. Charles Kim, a Korean-American college student, is also dead. He was overcome by fumes trying to save merchandise in the fire-bombed store of his family.

So let’s think together in a different way. ... Let us think it is the problem of a self-hate. The problem is our acceptance of what we loathe and fear in ourselves.

If you are listening to me now and you are Korean, and you pridefully own your own store. Know that the blacks who spend money in your store and help put food on your table and send your children to college cannot open their own stores. Why? Because banks will not lend to them because they are black. ... And if they do not have the same strong community you enjoy, the one you brought with you from Korea, which can pool money and efforts for its members — it is because this community has been broken and dissolved through history. (Lee, 1995, p. 151-52)

Saranda Harland clearly alludes to Latasha Harland, the teenager killed by Soon Ja Du, while Charles Kim subtly references Edward Lee, a young man who was shot accidentally during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Kwang highlights the deep-rooted self-loathing prevalent among people of color, emphasizing how this self-hatred can manifest as antagonism toward other racial minorities, often seen as fellow underdogs. He perceptively points out that it is the broader social structure — one that enables banks to deny loans to nonwhite individuals and enforces restrictive housing covenants that bar people of color from purchasing homes — that is ultimately responsible for the poverty and despair experienced by the oppressed, rather than their neighbors of a different race.

Kwang powerfully dismantles the model minority myth, which falsely suggests that Asian Americans thrive due to their diligence, while African Americans struggle because of perceived laziness. He highlights, much like Henry does earlier in the narrative, that it is the communal support systems brought by immigrants from Korea, rather than the opportunities provided by America, that enable individuals like Mr. Park to gain a foothold in their new environment. However, Kwang takes this argument a step further by emphasizing that African Americans are not to blame for lacking similar networks, as they have faced a harsh historical reality marked by slavery, disenfranchisement, and systemic disempowerment. By deconstructing the model minority myth, Kwang also challenges the national narrative of the self-made man—a narrative often buttressed by hidden forms of capital or unacknowledged white privilege.

Kwang seeks to unite Korean Americans and African Americans by emphasizing a common history rooted in experiences of colonization. As he elucidates,

We Koreans know something of this [African American] tragedy. Recall the days over fifty years ago, when Koreans were made servants and slaves in their own country by the imperial Japanese Army. How our mothers and sisters were made the concubines of the very soldiers who enslaved us.

I’m speaking of histories that all of us should know. Remember ... most of all the struggles to survive with one’s own identity still strong and alive.

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I ask that you remember these things, or know them now. Know that what we have in common, the sadness and the pain and injustice, will always be stronger than our differences. (Lee, 1995, p. 153)

Kwang's thorough depiction of the historical oppression of Koreans by the Japanese serves as an implicit critique of the model minority myth, which homogenizes diverse Asian nationalities despite their distinct power dynamics and varied economic realities. By highlighting the parallel histories of African Americans and Koreans, Kwang's message sharply contrasts with those who see violence against African Americans as a means of assimilating into American society. Instead, Kwang proposes that racial minorities -despite their physical differences- can develop a sense of solidarity through their shared struggles. Equally significant is his belief in preserving one's cultural identity as vibrant and intact, rather than conforming to the pressure to assimilate or "disappear" into the mainstream. As demonstrated in Henry's experience, the identity crisis among Korean Americans today is just as intense as it was for Koreans over fifty years ago. Kwang's focus on the experiences of both African American and Korean American communities also serves as an implicit condemnation of the various facades of the model minority myth.

In challenging the divisive myth of the model minority and advocating for a collective struggle against the dominant culture, Kwang pushes beyond the typical constraints imposed on Asian Americans. However, this bold ambition also becomes his downfall. As previously discussed, there is a fine line separating the model minority stereotype from the "yellow peril" trope, akin to the narrow divide between figures like Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. Within the novel, there is a pervasive feeling among both white and nonwhite characters that Kwang is overstepping his boundaries. It appears as though everyone is waiting with anticipation for Kwang's inevitable misstep-both in terms of language and morality. When Kwang eventually falters, his decline is rapid and irreversible. The narrative suggests that the specific reasons for his downfall matter less than the sense of its inevitability. It is enough to note that Kwang's reputation is utterly destroyed following a minor fire in his office that results in the death of his Hispanic aide and a cleaning woman -a firebombing that is later revealed to have been orchestrated by Kwang's own associates- and a subsequent car accident. Kwang's car accident, caused by his excessive drinking, leaves a "hospitality girl" who was his passenger in a coma (Lee, 1995, p. 322).<sup>1</sup> The media frenzy that once built Kwang up now serves to tear him down: "with the barrage of questions and arc lights and auto minders, he actually falters. ... He doesn't seem to be occupying the office, the position" (Lee, 1995, p. 293). The "flash pictures" of Kwang "leaving a downtown precinct house after his bail is posted" are distant echoes of his previously immaculate image: "They have him walking away in half-profile, from the back, from the side, his suit jacket unfurled, suggesting flight. ... His tie is unknotted and his hair is dampened and mussed, and he has a gauze patch taped above his left temple ... the whole effect of him vapid and dislodged. ... The shots are nearly criminal" (Lee, 1995, p. 321).

After the incident, Henry reflects on the contrast between Kwang and his father, who eventually realizes that the sky was never truly within his reach, understanding instead that "the truer height for him was more like a handful of vegetable stores" (Lee, 1995, p. 333). Despite

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<sup>1</sup> Critics often draw parallels between Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. As Christa Baiada and Seung Ah Oh note, reviewers and scholars alike have frequently compared Lee's novel to Fitzgerald's classic, highlighting Henry Park's role as "a Carraway-esque narrator, seduced by the grandeur of Kwang's ambitions and his subsequent rise and fall" (Baiada, 2013, p. 65). Both novels explore similar themes, such as the concept of the self-made man, the elusive and hollow nature of the American Dream, and the consequences of overreaching desires (Oh, 2023, p. 45).

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the differences in their aspirations, Henry's father, Henry himself, and Kwang share a common thread in their experience: a betrayal of their own identities in their pursuit of success in America. Speaking on behalf of all immigrants, the narrator notes, "When I get here, I work. I work for the day I will finally work for myself. I work so hard that one day I end up forgetting the person I am" (Lee, 1995, p. 279). This statement exposes the hidden cost of the work ethic commonly associated with the model minority myth.

### Conclusion

Lee's novel offers a refreshing shift from the abundance of success stories prevalent in Asian American literature. As previously mentioned, trade publishers have historically favored Asian American personal narratives that highlight the ability to assimilate and adapt, which have collectively shaped the contemporary image of Asian Americans as the model minority. Although recent works endorsed by the mainstream display more diversity in terms of content and genre, many still fall within what David Palumbo-Liu describes as "model minority discourse": "The most popular texts tend to be perceived as resolutions to a generalized "problem" of race, ethnicity, and gender... There is, therefore, a doubleness in Asian American literary texts, which serve as representatives of an eccentric "ethnic" literature as well as models of successful assimilation into the core" (Palumbo-Liu, 2019, p. 395-96). In contrast, *Native Speaker* serves as a dark reflection on the American Dream and a sharp critique of the Asian American model minority stereotype, which confines each of the three central characters to the norms, ideals, linguistic and racial hierarchies, and the image-making and political strategies of the dominant culture. The novel not only deconstructs the model minority myth but also exposes the American success story—the national narrative suggesting that anyone can succeed on their own—as fundamentally hollow. Similar to how drag performance reveals the constructed nature of gender, the performances of Mr. Park, Henry, and Kwang in the novel lay bare the stereotype and the national narrative as mere regulative fiction.

By challenging conventional Asian American success narratives, *Native Speaker* redefines the boundaries of Asian American literature, illustrating the potential to disrupt the constraints of the "model minority discourse." On the surface, Lee's work appears accessible and appealing to a broad readership due to his poetic prose, deep knowledge of Western literary traditions, adept use of subtlety, and avoidance of overt protest—qualities that likely contributed to the novel's extended presence on the bestseller list upon its release. Yet, beneath this accessible veneer, the protagonist echoes Lee's critique of the very American education that shaped him, revealing the fraught relationship between empowerment and alienation. The novel's protagonist reflects on how the mastery of language and cultural codes -skills imparted through American education- has positioned him not only as an empowered speaker but also as a perpetual outsider. He describes how he and others like him learn "every lesson of accent and idiom" and dismantle the pretenses of American society, becoming at once its "most perilous and dutiful brethren" (Lee, 1995, p. 320). This duality captures the novel's double-voiced discourse: while English and American education provide the Asian American writer with a lyrical mode of expression, they also mark him as a racialized, assimilationist, or subservient figure. Lee's narrative voice operates like that of a double agent, employing the language as though he were a native speaker yet using this dual awareness to critique American ideals of success, the melting pot, and the model minority stereotype. Beneath the novel's lyrical style lies a tone that is both furious and sorrowful, revealing the deep ambivalence embedded within the protagonist's -and, by extension, the author's- navigation of American cultural myths.

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