

Acculturation in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores acculturation strategies and their expressions in the novel *Native Speaker* (1995) by Chang-rae Lee, a Korean-American author. This novel concerns the clash of immigrant identities with the notion of a genuinely American identity as well as the adaptation into the majority society by first- and second-generation immigrants. While this is not Lee's first novel concerned with intricate identity issues, *Native Speaker* is considered his most important work, as it introduced Korean-American fiction to the U.S. mainstream public. Although the novel is well known to critics, it has not been analysed using the particular view of acculturation strategies featured here which deal with psychological and intercultural relations of individuals in their private and public lives. The notion of acculturation used here is based on the well-known model proposed by psychologist John W. Berry, a paradigm consisting of four strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. This view argues that, despite coming from similar ethnic backgrounds, the plethora of characters each engage with the U.S. mainstream differently (in their public and private lives), thus their acculturation categories may also change through time. This is exemplified through changes in the protagonist Henry Park.

KEYWORDS

Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*, John W. Berry, acculturation strategies

Introduction

Set in the 1990s in New York, Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* is very well known for its depiction of identity issues. A large part of the text focuses on the protagonist Henry Park, a spy who is of Korean descent, along with his American wife Lelia, his parents, and the subjects of his espionage, who are usually immigrants of various nationalities. Henry's character is explored through the metaphor of an immigrant being a spy in the new country, one who is constantly analyzing his surroundings and the people in them, trying to learn how to blend in, etc. This article applies John W. Berry's acculturation strategies to the characters of Lee's novel, with a particular emphasis on the ambiguity of such categories in the context of the work.

Berry defines adaptation as "changes that occur in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands."¹ Furthermore, W. M. Hurh and K. C. Kim summarize adaptation as "the process in which immigrants modify their attitudinal and behavioural patterns in order to maintain and improve their life conditions compatible with the new environment." The psychologists then broaden the term by listing other "modes and resultant conditions such as acculturation, assimilation, segregation, pluralism."²

Historically, acculturation and assimilation were often considered synonymous concepts. However, this is not necessarily true. These concepts share some similarities, but they shall be examined as independent paradigms, with acculturation considered an umbrella term consisting of

- 1 John W. Berry, "Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation," *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46, no.1 (January 1997): 13.
- 2 Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, "Adhesive Sociocultural Adaptation of Korean Immigrants in the U.S.: An Alternative Strategy of Minority Adaptation," *The International Migration Review* 18, no. 2 (summer 1984): 188.

various acculturation strategies, one of these being assimilation. According to Berry, acculturation is “[a] process of cultural and psychological change resulting from contact between cultural groups and their individual members.”³ Raymond H. C. Teske, Jr. and Bardin H. Nelson report that acculturation is a dynamic process involving both individuals and groups in terms of their direct contact with the dominant culture.⁴ In addition, this is a two-way process, meaning that “acculturation has to do with continuous contact and hence implies a more comprehensive interchange between two bodies of tradition,”⁵ as Herskovits suggests. Regarding the internal changes related to acculturation, Teske and Nelson agree that an acculturated group or a person does not “require change in values, though values may be acculturated,” thus an internal change may not take place. They also claim that a positive relationship or acceptance by the out-group (the American culture in the context of the novel) is not necessary for the acculturating group.⁶

Apart from assimilation, Berry proposes three other acculturation strategies, making four in total: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. First, integration is a strategy used by individuals “with an interest in maintaining one’s original culture while having daily interactions with other groups — there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time they seek [...] to participate as an integral part of the larger social network.”⁷ Second, separation applies to those individuals who “place a high value on holding to their original culture,” while contrastingly integration involves subjects who “avoid interaction with members of the new society.”⁸ Third, Sam and Berry explain marginalization as a phenomenon “defined by little possibility or lack of interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with other (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination).”⁹

Finally, Berry defines assimilation as: “[t]he acculturation strategy in which people do not wish to maintain their heritage culture and seek to participate in the larger society,” adding that “assimilation [...] is at times a phase of acculturation.”¹⁰ This definition suggests that acculturation is a general term concerning the adaptation of one culture to another, with assimilation considered a stage or a level of acculturation. Furthermore, for Teske and Nelson, a group or an individual must also change their values internally in the process of assimilation, a claim that highlights the difference between assimilation and acculturation, with the latter a state in which internal change is not required. The claim is also emphasized that assimilation requires out-group acceptance and a “positive orientation toward the out-group,” which results in “identification with the out-group.”¹¹ Robert E. Park comments that:

3 John W. Berry, “Acculturation,” in *Encyclopedia of Applied Psychology: Volume 1*, ed. Charles Spielberger (Oxford: Elsevier Academic Press, 2004), 27.

4 Raymond H. C. Teske, Jr., and Bardin H. Nelson, “Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification,” *American Ethnologist* 1, no. 2 (May 1974): 351, 365.

5 J. Melville Herskovits, *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 15.

6 Teske, Jr., and Nelson, “Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification,” 358.

7 David L. Sam, and John W. Berry, “Acculturation: When Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds Meet,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no. 4 (July 2010): 476.

8 Sam and Berry, “Acculturation,” 476.

9 Sam and Berry, “Acculturation,” 476.

10 Berry, “Acculturation,” 27–28.

11 Teske, Jr., and Nelson, “Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification,” 359.

in the United States an immigrant is considered assimilated as soon as he has acquired the language and the social ritual of the native community and can participate, without encountering prejudice, in the common life, economic and political. [...] an immigrant is assimilated as soon as he has shown that he can "get on in the country" [...] he is able to find a place in the community on the basis of his individual merits without invidious or qualifying reference to his racial origin or to his cultural inheritance.¹²

The quote indicates that the culture of the assimilating group or person merges with that of the out-group, which accepts the assimilated entity. In contrast with acculturation, assimilation is considered unidirectional.¹³ Siegel et al. writes that "assimilation implies an essentially unilateral approximation of one culture in the direction of the other."¹⁴

Acculturation strategies and *Native Speaker*

Henry Park, a Korean-American, is the protagonist of *Native Speaker*. At the novel's beginning, Henry struggles to adapt to American society whilst accepting his heritage. Instead, he seems to be only an empty vessel filled with different roles he performs: the pretense of being a husband and sometimes American, sometimes an immigrant. His reluctance to accept a hyphenated identity results in many personal conflicts. From the very first pages, it is apparent that his marriage with Lelia, an American speech therapist, is suffering and might end in a divorce. As she separates from Henry, it is fairly evident that their cultural differences are to blame, since she leaves Henry with a note stating the following: "You are surreptitious [...] illegal alien, emotional alien [...] Yellow peril: neo-American [...] _____ analyst (you fill in), stranger, follower, traitor, spy."¹⁵ Moreover, for the most part, Lelia is not wrong: Henry works in a spy firm gathering information mainly on immigrants. While Henry wants to save his marriage (following the death of their son Mitt) as well as overcome his inability to express himself, he also has to focus on his new target of espionage – John Kwang, a Korean-American politician on a journey to become the first Korean mayor of New York. At first, Henry pretends merely to be working as an intern for Kwang. Gradually, he gains Kwang's trust and befriends him. However, while working for Kwang, Henry has to report on him to his superiors due to the possible money laundering in the political campaign. When Henry realises that he is hurting immigrants through his espionage and pretense, he decides to quit his job when he is finished with Kwang.

At the end of the novel, it is revealed that the Kwangs, who failed in their political career because of multiple scandals, have returned to Korea, and Henry works as Lelia's assistant in her speech therapy office, disguised as the Speech Monster. He pretends to eat children who can save themselves only by pronouncing the day's secret phrase correctly. However, Henry, Lelia and Kwang are not the only characters engaging with issues of belonging. Two other significant characters are

12 Robert E. Park, "Assimilation, Social," in *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930) 281.

13 Teske, Jr., and Nelson, "Acculturation and Assimilation: A Clarification," 363.

14 Bernard J. Siegel, Evon Z. Vogt, James B. Watson, and Leonard Broom, "Acculturation: An Exploratory Formulation," *American Anthropologist* 55 (1953): 988.

15 Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* (London: Granta Books, 1998), 5.

also doing so: Henry's father (a first-generation immigrant whose name is never mentioned) and a Korean maid referred to as *ahjumma*, a Korean way of addressing a middle-aged lady.

Chang-rae Lee implicitly deals with acculturation issues from multiple perspectives in his novel. Henry's father does not explicitly state why he chose to leave Korea, although many clues point to his quest for business opportunities, a view even Henry himself takes: "I thought his life was all about money."¹⁶ His father usually talked about the "classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient, resourceful."¹⁷ If one combines this idea with the fact that the father frequently sought out his Korean friends to socialize with, it seems that he identified with the Korean immigrant identity as a poor Korean who became a successful businessman in the New World. To apply Berry's acculturation scheme, Henry's father fits the integration strategy. The father values the Korean way of life (the Confucian family life in terms of family hierarchy, as he often treats his wife as a servant), knows a only limited number of English words, does business with Americans, "gently and not so gently exploited his own [workers],"¹⁸ and approved of Henry's American wife. He almost seemingly balanced his Korean nationalism with the new American sense of self to suit his business interests and acculturation goals – he sees the interracial marriage as a way to help Henry "make [his] way in the [American] land."¹⁹ The father does not see the interracial relationship as a cause of the family's demise or as a form of destruction of their Korean heritage, but instead, as an aid to his son's success in America which the father wants to achieve through the integration of his family into the U.S. society.

The Korean maid, contrastingly, is an example of the separation strategy. Even though she is a minor character, she is fascinating to study. The maid came to the U.S. after the death of Henry's mother. Upon her arrival, she brought typical Korean foods, such as kimchee, and was appalled when Henry did not know what these items were. It appears she brought kimchee as a piece of her homeland, unwilling to let go of it. As for her contact with typical American food, Henry's American friends think: "She's an alien. [...] She's completely bizarre" because she ate a popsicle in three large bites "like it was a hot dog."²⁰ As if the ability to eat a popsicle was embedded in the U.S. culture and not the Korean one, she could not perform such a simple task any American child could. Furthermore, she is the embodiment of a quiet, submissive, and obedient Korean wife/maid, and even as time goes by, she remains the same woman who cannot speak basic English. She is not only psychologically separated but also physically, literally hidden in her little room behind the kitchen pantry.

She does not complain about her domestic position in the family and sees it as sacred, seeking to preserve the gender stereotype of the kitchen being a place for the matriarch. Henry once even proclaims: "In the old Korean fashion, my presence in the kitchen was unwelcome ..."²¹ The maid values the traditions she acquired in Korea, even though she currently lives in the U.S. She behaves as if her kitchen was situated in Korea, not the American continent, an illusion

16 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 45.

17 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 46.

18 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 50.

19 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 53.

20 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 72.

21 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 59.

which gives her comfort. Henry provides a reason for her odd behaviour: "I imagined something deeply horrible had happened to her when she was young, something brutal, that a malicious man has taught her fear and sadness and she had had to leave her life and family because of it."²² By blaming a man for her distant and "zombie"²³ behaviour, Henry highlights the stereotype that in Asian culture, women's lives are influenced by their husbands, fathers, and sons. Lelia then says something significant about the maid: "I know who she is. [...] She is an abandoned girl. But all grown up." Thus, the housekeeper might represent the narrative of an immigrant forced by her family to leave Korea, and she consequently suffers in a strikingly culturally different environment. Another possible interpretation is that she was an immigrant who decided to leave of her own will and now suffers the consequences of her decisions, as she is unable to acculturate. Furthermore, the mocking by Henry's peers based on prejudice and stereotypes might have also caused much more stress on the maid, resulting in her apathy and reservation toward the American world.

This becomes even more apparent, as she has tried to integrate into the society but was often shunned because of her unusual behaviour which was embedded in the Korean culture. The separation strategy of Berry becomes even clearer after her death. She does not want to be buried in America, thus Henry's father sends her ashes to Korea: "[o]ur gift to her grieving blood."²⁴ The narrator Henry does not talk about her as a human, but as a possession to be used or given – the same way she was treated for most of her stay in the U.S.: a woman used for cleaning or giving pleasure to Henry's father, which is implied by her night visit to his father's room.²⁵ Thus the maid at first attempted to integrate as an immigrant, but in the end she represents the separation strategy: she is physically separated from others in her kitchen, she is separated from mundane U.S. foods by eating mainly Korean dishes, and she wants her ashes to be brought to Korea.

The protagonist Henry has a somewhat complicated relationship with the acculturation strategies as well as with all the surrounding characters. As Miller highlights, it is essential to mention that Lee uses the espionage genre as a metaphor for immigrants.²⁶ Henry and other employees of the spying company are expected to behave a certain way in particular situations, always acting, never being themselves.²⁷ This level of *acting* is also often required from assimilated immigrants, who are expected to fulfil the expectations of the native inhabitants by acquiring customs and rituals then performing them to please the natives and prove their genuine acquisition of the new cultural identity.

The fact that the second-generation Henry performs all his identities on the outside but none on the inside (always an actor) suggests that, metaphorically, immigrants are in fact spies in a society. They watch and observe the new surroundings and the inhabitants closely, trying to memorize patterns of local behaviour which they then use as the impersonators of the majority society. Henry is an observer, as he himself admits he has "extremely keen powers of observation

22 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 60.

23 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 60.

24 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 75.

25 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 73.

26 Matthew L. Miller, "Speaking and Mourning: Working Through Identity and Language in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," *Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies* 7 (September 2016): 123.

27 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 15.

and recollection”²⁸ as a spy. Some scholars, for instance Tina Chen, even claim he is an “invisible man”²⁹ who often goes unnoticed by others despite his level of infiltration into the society. Henry himself realises his alienation and detachment from his surroundings. He accepts his role as an observer and seems to have made it part of his reality. This detached *role* is also transmitted into his personal life, where he lacks genuine emotions and behaves like an actor in his family relationships:

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 she hadn't realised 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.³⁰

This monologue signifies that he realised his shattered identity retrospectively and did “well enough” to fool his wife and family. The overuse of the word “enough” signifies that he is trying to follow a certain standard that is perhaps just implied by others, and is thus expected from him as an immigrant. Nevertheless, he remains in between his Korean-American identity and American society, always choosing one or the other *role* to play. In her seminal work *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng calls such characters “ghostly”³¹ (ghosts are frequent metaphors in Asian American literature for migrants). Miller goes even further, describing the characters as if they are living in “a limbo of racism” since they fail to adapt the whiteness of the U.S. and are unable to erase their Asian race.³² When Henry leaves the place of in-betweenness and chooses to be American, one may say that he is assimilated, since his wife is American and not Asian and, moreover, he speaks only English as well. In contrast, when he chooses to enter the world of his Korean-American identity, integration occurs when he meets John Kwang, a Korean-American politician Henry is supposed to spy on, and the spy starts a journey of self-discovery. Kwang is not only a friend to Henry, but the two become much closer, causing Henry to realise the importance of his dual Korean-American identity. One defining moment comes when Kwang calls Henry his Korean name, which makes Henry “stop” and “freeze for a second.”³³ This is the very first moment Henry's Korean name is mentioned in the novel, and it seems to be one of those pieces of Henry's identity that are buried deep inside his consciousness since it immobilizes him on the spot. Upon continuing their conversation in English, Henry laments that he would like to talk in Korean with Kwang:

I can't offer anything more [in English]. It is in these moments that I wish for John Kwang to start speaking the other tongue we know; somehow our English can't touch what I want to say. I want to

28 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 14.

29 Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 152.

30 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 149–150.

31 Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23.

32 Miller, “Speaking and Mourning,” 117.

33 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 255.

call the simple Korean back to him the way I once could [...], our comely language of distance and bows, by which real secrets may be slowly courted, slowly unveiled.³⁴

This is the first time that Henry wishes he spoke Korean, not only English. This is in direct contrast with Henry's previous doubts about speaking Korean with fellow Koreans: "[w]hen I step into a Korean dry cleaner, or a candy shop, I always feel I'm an audience member asked to stand up and sing with the diva, that I know every pitch and note but can no longer call them forth."³⁵ Once again, one might notice the use of the phrase "audience member," which suggests that he is a by-stander, not only in the American society but also the Korean one.

In the novel Kwang serves as an enlightening device for Henry, making the protagonist realise that an identity is not stable, but remains fluid. Henry in turn feels more Korean or American based on his surroundings and immediate needs. Even though it is the American Lelia who shatters his seemingly stable position in society, and quite literally categorizes Henry's identity into multiple dictionary entries, it is Kwang who makes Henry realise that one may consciously perform more than one personality and still be a human being. In the quote above, Henry explicitly longs for the mixture of the two cultures, focusing on language. At the end of the novel, despite exposing Kwang's failures to the public, Henry still remains loyal and an admirer of Kwang, who may even be perceived as his father figure.

Similarly, Henry acknowledges his own failures in the agency and becomes a "Speech Monster"³⁶ for Lelia's multicultural classroom. At the beginning of the novel, as a spy, Henry observed his targets to report to his superiors. However, gradually, he changed his approach to his subjects by acting as a "participant-observer," as Jirousek highlights. Henry begins adapting "a different purpose for his observation and writing" – he includes himself in the immigrant community more, and the spy role is just a mere excuse for his involvement.³⁷ Henry's evolution signalises that from a distant observer, he becomes an insider due to his involvement with both Kwang and Lelia, and that is where he finds his identity – amongst all the immigrants and also Americans, pointing towards the integration strategy.

Lelia finally recognises Henry for who he is – an insider in the immigrant society, not her enemy (as initially, she perceived everything non-American as threatening), and so she tolerates him. It is essential to mention that she merely "tolerates" Henry as he himself does not feel stable in them reuniting and sees it as something temporary. On the one hand, it is apparent that her attitude changed but remains ambivalent. To explain, Lelia called Henry "a false speaker of language,"³⁸ and at the end of the novel, she appointed him to be the Speech Monster in her classroom as if she were still petty about his different (in her eye lacking) ways of expression and calling him the monster of speech. Ironically, Henry, who has issues expressing himself in either English or Korean, is supposed to *punish* the multicultural children for not knowing a secret phrase Lelia teaches them.

34 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 256.

35 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 249.m

36 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 323.

37 Lori Jirousek, "A New Book of the Land': Ethnography, Espionage, and Immigrants in *Native Speaker*," *Modern Language Studies* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 13.

38 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 5.

Previously, he also had to discern the hidden codes of American culture and ways of expressing his identity. Now, even if the children make mistakes in speech, they are called “good citizens”³⁹ which contrasts with Henry’s situation: he was punished for his cultural clumsiness by his wife separating from him. Lelia is contrastingly no longer trying to Americanize the immigrant children fully and accepts their foreign names, their incorrect English pronunciation and mistakes without issues. She is content with the children knowing the phrase without them even understanding what it means. This may also imply that she finally accepts the immigrant identity of Henry and others with its imperfections and failure to assimilate (i.e., seamlessly melting with the new culture) but lets them integrate instead.

Even though the ending seems peaceful, there is another reading at hand connected with Henry’s identity. At the novel’s end, Henry as the Speech Monster has a new role: a spy in disguise. Considering this metaphor presented in the classroom, he remains an actor or pretender (even wearing a special costume) who now tests the immigrant children to see if they know a secret phrase taught by a local American; otherwise, he will “gobble up”⁴⁰ the children as a punishment. Once again, the theme of secrecy and codes resurfaces and is still at the forefront of the narrative, as if it is haunting Henry’s existence. This situation again strengthens the stereotype of immigrants as being trained and used as invisible spies in the new society.

This gradual development of Henry’s character highlights the multiplicity of identity as well as the significance of not complying with precise perimeters and categories of acculturation. In the end, it seems that the classroom environment offers a haven that mixes all the acculturation strategies; the children are left to be whom they want to be as they engage with the white American lecturer, who still wields the power of this dynamic. Nevertheless, the fact that children actively engage with Lelia as they keep their native accents points most to the notion of integration.

The ending for some scholars (e.g., Miller) represents a happy ending. However, the reading above suggests a more unsettling situation, one full of pretense, secret codes to be learned, and the mere blind repetition of what the American Lelia tells the immigrants. Despite being imperfect immigrants, the children are accepted, but on one condition: the adherence to the rules proposed by Lelia under the supervision of the spymaster, Henry.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel Chang-rae Lee beautifully expresses the complicated nature of immigrant identities, which may be decoded through John W. Berry’s acculturation strategies. Some identities are more fixed and easier to categories, whilst others are hard to grasp. Some characters encompass multiple overlapping stages as their lives goes by. Henry’s father is a successful businessman who integrates into American society, with this integration is also present in his private life: he has treated his late wife following Korean traditions. In contrast, he longs for his son’s assimilation by marrying an American. Contrastingly, the *ahjumma* Korean maid at first tried to integrate, but after multiple attempts and discouraging experiences she has separated herself from the American

39 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 324.

40 Lee, *Native Speaker*, 323.

society, a situation highlighted by her wish for her ashes to be returned to her homeland. Henry's identity generally represents the integration strategy, as his Korean heritage and American identity merge. Only sometimes is one part of his identity stronger than the other. Nevertheless, he never leaves the realm of pretense and acting, strengthening the metaphor of immigrants as spies. Even though he is no longer an official spy per se, he wears the costume of a Speech Monster who ensures that immigrant children are "good citizens" by repeating a secret phrase, and he is still the underling of the American lecturer.

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