

RECOVERY OF IDENTITY HIDDEN IN MEMORY: *A GESTURE LIFE* BY CHANG-RAE LEE

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Abstract

This paper examines the novel *A Gesture Life* (1999), written by a Korean American writer, Chang-rae Lee, focusing on the theme of recovering a hidden identity. For this purpose, the persona theory of C.G. Jung was applied as a device for understanding the identity issue. A retired businessman Franklin Hata, born to Korean parents, is a man of multi-identity through adoption to a Japanese family and immigration to America, where he is reputed to be an ideal Asian immigrant. Psychologically suffering from conflict in his relationship with his adopted daughter, Sunny, he reflects on his past and encounters the traumatic memory that he has been holding deep in his unconscious. The findings show that Hata's aim of assimilating into mainstream society urges him to erase his memory and conceal his identity behind his persona; his reconciliation with his memory helps him stand as a man free from the gesture.

INTRODUCTION

Chang-rae Lee is a Korean American writer who deals in depth with the experiences of the diaspora, the aspirations of immigrants to assimilate into American society, and the formation of identity in the process. In an interview with the New York Times, Lee expressed his literary perspective that he is interested in people who are forced to decide how best to live in places that can be their choice or not, and the feeling of being an emigrant (Garner, 1999). *A Gesture Life* is a self-reflective narrative that redefines one's identity through personal reconnection to the memory. Author Lee received the Asian-American Literary Award for this book.

Lee portrays a diasporic man called Franklin Hata who, changing his nationality three times through adoption and immigration, intentionally erased negative memories and built his hypocritical identity to fully assimilate into the adopted cultures. Hata's recollections of the traumatic past, overlapping with his present comfort, interfere with his tranquil life; they eventually make him face the uncomfortable truth and the past that he has been trying to ignore. The protagonist has long felt that he ought to place his energies toward "the reckoning of what stands in the here and now," especially given his "ever-dwindling years" (Lee, 1999, p. 11¹). From this point, his journey of self-discovery begins. The memories of the past will reveal who he was and who he is. In Lee's work, the memories are embodied as a tragedy and a burden to Hata, who is assimilating into a new culture.

The consistent theme of Lee Chang-rae's novels is the perception of individuals who experience the collective power contained in transnational movements such as war, colonization, and migration. The Pacific War in *A Gesture Life* is interpreted from a personal and individual level rather than having political and social meaning. Asian immigrants with different racial and cultural backgrounds feel a wall of boundaries in the process of being incorporated and assimilated into white society. Lee offers an opportunity to look at American society through the eyes of an Asian man who, despite his outward success, is constantly caught up in the sense of alienation as a stranger.

What does 'gesture' signify in the life of an elderly immigrant in America? What has caused his life to be full of gestures? With these queries as a backdrop, this paper analyzes Hata's identity issue in view of Jung's persona theory. In this paper, identity refers to who he is rather than his nationality. According to Jung (1966a), psychology can withstand the study of literature, for the human psyche is the source of all the arts and sciences. Concerning the

¹ The excerpt from the novel will be indicated by page numbers.

human psyche, Holland (1990) states that literature exemplifies the psychological supposition of its makers, and literature is understood through the psychological supposition of its interpreters. All criticism and theory advance from assumptions about “the psychology of the humans who make or experience or are portrayed in literature” (Holland, 1990, p. 29).

This study demonstrates how Lee’s novel exhibits a story of healing and identity change by examining Hata’s confession. The findings delineate how Hata establishes his identity free from artificial gestures.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Persona and Memory

In Lee’s novel, the protagonist mends his past loss and gets a chance to discover his true identity by exploring his memory. Jerng (2006) remarks on two narratives within this story: Hata’s effort to assimilate into an American community as an ideal immigrant; and his memory of the traumatic events involving a woman called K during his military service before moving to America. Hata’s adoption of a girl named Sunny serves as a link that connects these two narratives by reminding Hata of where he is coming from. Miller (2009) points out that the novel accounts for how identity can be recuperated through personal reconnection to memory. Chang (2005) explains that this novel represents how the image of an ‘ideal minority’ imposed on immigrants is embedded and projected into Hata’s inner side and materialized as gestures.

The protagonist’s self-discovery journey centers on the concept of persona, memory, and double consciousness. ‘Persona’ is from the Latin word ‘mask,’ meaning the public image one presents outwardly. It is created for the reasons of adjustment or personal convenience. To a certain extent, it suggests conduct under the requirements of everyday life. The persona is a manifestation of collective attitudes that respond to “one’s place in the socio-cultural world” (Gray, 2008, p. 54). “The persona is that which in reality one is not but which oneself, as well as others, think one is.” (Jung, 1968, p. 122). According to Jung (1966b), persona, being situated in the “midway between the real world and individuality” (p.298), is a deceptive self that one has fabricated from experiencing the common effect that we share with the world (Jung, 1971). Hudson (1978) shares Jung’s idea with a statement that the persona is a disguised personality of the individual that acts as a facilitator between the individual and society.

Double consciousness looks at one’s self through the eyes of other people or measures one’s soul “by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 2007, p. 8). Steele (2000), in her book *We Heal from Memory*, explains that memory enables us to

remember the split aspects of our existence; “It is memory, as both a problem and a promise, that forms and allows us to form our individual and collective identities” (p.2). Lee uses memory to retrieve the split aspects of Hata’s past, including his guilt.

DISCUSSIONS OF MAIN THEMES

The protagonist Franklin Hata, born to Korean parents, has a multi-layered identity through adoption by a Japanese family and immigration to America. Before settling in America, he participated in the Pacific War as a sanitary officer of the Japanese military, where he was assigned to maintain the hygiene of comfort women from Korea. He is seen as a successful immigrant, trusted and respected in the community. His remarks show that he seems well assimilated into the society where he should belong: “there is a recognition of one’s face” and “there is no longer a lingering or vacant stare” (p.8).

In the 1990s, Hata led a proper life as a number-one citizen in an affluent town called Bedley Run in America, running his own medical supply business. He has been enjoying his comfortable living until he feels disturbed because a familiar sense of belonging is waning. His relationship with his adopted daughter, Sunny, is in a state of discord. This lingering unstable sentiment forces him to look back on his life. Furthermore, while recalling his past, he meets with a young Hata ‘himself’ who was serving in the Japanese army and a Korean comfort woman named K, to whom he felt compassion and love.

The novel unfolds by overlapping Hata’s narratives of past and present life. He states at the beginning of the novel that the past does not reflect the truth. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate one’s “triumphs and failures with verity” (p.10). However, the retrospective story gradually evokes memories of Hata’s hidden past and develops into a confession narrative that reveals ‘who he really is’ and ‘what he has done.’ For Hata, denying memories can be a defense mechanism to protect the present self but denying the continuity of time results in a fabricated life.

Asian-American Hata is a septuagenarian man who has successfully settled in America through his dramatic migration experiences. He, the owner of a medical supply store, is locally called ‘Doc Hata,’ even though he is not a physician of any kind; this is Lee’s device to imply Hata’s masked life. Hata is satisfied with his presence in an American town. He declares, “PEOPLE KNOW ME HERE. Everyone here knows perfectly who I am. It’s a simple determination” (p.8). As the story progresses, however, it is revealed that what people know about him is his persona, a “compromise between individual and society” (Jung, 1966b, p. 158).

He wears a mask to hide his true self from society. In Hudson's (1978) interpretation, Hata exhibits a disguised personality to facilitate the relationship between him and the society he lives in. His life has been consistent with the act of subjugating his will and subjectivity to the expectations and evaluations of others.

His aspiration for gaining recognition from the adopted society is explained by 'double-consciousness' as claimed by Du Bois (2007). Hata could not live as a subjective human being as long as he was sensitive to the observation of others and had a double-consciousness to see himself through their gaze. Therefore, he tries "not to lose sight of his customers' attitude" and seeks "approval and consensus" (p. 10).

Hata's presence in town is well condensed in the words of a real estate agent Liv Crawford: "Doc Hata is Bedley Run" (p.108). His Tudor-style mansion is an emblem of his economic success. It is not only a living space but a symbolic object that guarantees him an identity as a middle-class American citizen. His desire to assimilate into the place urges Hata always to remain vigilant and comply with the needs of his neighbors. Sunny Medical Supply store, Hata's economic foundation, provides a sense of belonging that Hata has longed for. In his neighborhood, his store is regarded as "an informal drop-in clinic" (p.10), where people can freely enter and converse with Hata, who shows a polite and friendly demeanor.

The cause of his unstable feeling can be traced back to his hidden past. Hata's young life was contrary to his current comfortable living. He was originally the son of a poor Korean tanner. Before he settled in Bedley Run, he had entered Japanese society as the adoptive son of a wealthy Japanese couple. Even though he lived with Korean parents until the age of twelve, he deleted all the memories of his Korean background and succeeded in becoming Japanese. Hata, reluctant to reveal his Korean status, regarded as inferior under Japanese rule, abandoned his Korean name to enter the mainstream culture. For him, adolescence was the "true beginning of his life" (p.60). During this period, he first acknowledged the importance of a harmonious relationship between the self and his society. He said that the purposeful society reared him; he realized as a boy of twelve that he should entrust everything he could hope for to its care. In his early years, Hata understood that between the self and society, "there is a mutualism that at its ideal is both powerful and liberating" (p.60).

Hata connects himself to society through his persona, which, according to Jung (1966b), functions as a negotiator between an individual and the society to which he belongs: it dictates how he should behave, what name or title he takes, and what function he exercises. Therefore, he has lived under various titles, including "good Doc Hata," "a nice old fellow," and an "oriental" (p.45). Hata's persona was first noticed when he was in the Japanese army. As a

hygiene soldier, he religiously performed his duty, hoping his loyalty would allow him to be a true Japanese citizen. His senior officer commented on his attitude that “you depend upon generous fate and gesture” (p.203). However, the aged Hata confides that the feeling that he has taken for granted, “a feeling of a familiarity, homeliness and a kind of belonging” (p.22), is starting to annoy him. Hata’s passivity in conforming to the needs of others no longer works.

Despite his success, anxiety envelops his life. When Hata reflects on his life, he sees a mixed picture: a romantic and triumphant accomplishment he has made in America, a scene of sadness, “of a beauty empty and cold” (p.24). His pride in achieving successful assimilation into America is beginning to diminish. He expresses a strange and embarrassing feeling about being reputed as an ideal immigrant in his luxurious residence: “I wondered if I would ever in my life call such a house my home” (p.23). Furthermore, he confesses that there are unpleasant aspects to the intimacy he enjoys with the townspeople. The cause of this “discomfiting aspect to all this rapport” (p.23) remains unanswered.

He thought that he could become a number-one citizen in Bedley Run by obeying the norms of conduct with sincerity and courtesy so as not to violate the convictions of other members of the society. However, a sense of belonging is weakening despite Hata’s utter efforts to accept “whatever is at hand” (p.221). He remembers that he once hoped for a transformation that would deliver him “over to a brand-new life, fresh and hopeful and unfettered” (p.211), being free from a “false sense of himself” (Gray, 2008, p. 54).

His first awakening to ‘who he really is’ comes while swimming in his pool. He sees a “secret swimmer who might go silent and unseen” (p.25). In the water, a “favorite symbol of the unconscious” (Jung, 1968, p.18), he sees the portrait of himself: a transparent and secretive man. J. C. Miller (2004) quotes Jung as saying that the unconscious is key to revealing old wounds and to “learning about one’s destiny (p.13); the unconscious could serve man “as a unique guide” (p.33). Hata’s unconscious leads him to resolve his anxiety and rectify his past ills.

Examining his relationships with three women serves as a clue in understanding Hata’s uneasiness; they are Sunny, Mary Burns, and K. Mary Burns is a woman whom Hata seriously considered marriage in his fifties. Sunny is his adopted daughter, born to an Africa- American father and a Korean mother. K is a comfort woman for the Japanese army whom Hata met during the war and loved. The memory of K, induced by Sunny’s direct or indirect intervention, has played a decisive role in solidifying his current life into a gesture life of imitation and pretending.

Hata's life, which he thinks has been contented, begins to show cracks when friction arises in the relationship between him and his daughter. Hata hoped that Sunny's arrival "would serve to mark the recommencement" (p.62) of his days. He expected Sunny would be satisfied with her new life. Sunny would be, he thought, appreciative of leaving the orphanage and entering a welcoming home in America with a "hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means (p.61). As Sunny enters her teenage years, a series of discord surfaces between the two. Hata sees himself as a respected and valued person with his position in the "council meeting," where people observe his words (p.77). However, Sunny points out that Hata, being called a "good Charlie" (p.77) in the town, makes "a whole life out of gestures and politeness" (p.77) to gain a reputation as a number-one citizen. Sunny's remarks are a straightforward challenge to Hata's hypocritical attitude. Despite Hata's full support to provide her with the best education, Sunny leaves him to live on her own, to Hata's disappointment. Y. O. Lee (2005) states that Hata's obsession with being totally accepted by society "blinds him so that he cannot perceive truths in K or Sunny" (p.157). His failed relationship with Sunny results from his intention to atoning his guilt toward K by adopting Sunny.

Hata was negative about having a relationship with a new person in a new land. Still, when Mary Burns, a widowed neighbor, entered his life, he thought he could form a romantic relationship with her. There was a new-found partnership with her because "there was nothing but an immaculate calm" (p.43) in his heart. However, their relationship deteriorated. Burns discovered that Hata's attitude was not based on his natural feelings but a ritual sense of duty. She comments on his superficial gesture: "you always try, Franklin, but too hard, like it's your sworn duty to love me" (p.77). She also notices that Hata has a guilty feeling toward Sunny: "you act almost guilty, as if someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone" (p.52). In retrospect, Hata recalls that he refrained from having a healthy relationship for fear of revealing his hidden self

Intending to find answers to his disturbed state of mind and conflicts with Sunny, he looks back on his past, where he discovers the memory of K, which has been suppressed in his unconscious. The encounter with the past makes him realize that he has been acting out meticulously crafted gestures. Hata's adoption of Sunny is related to his guilty toward K; the adoptive relations are "the acting out of the past in the present in the form of an unconscious repetition" (Jerng, 2006, p.54). Burn's observation about Hata's guilty feeling toward Sunny proves that Hata justifies his gestures in the hope of erasing his feeling of culpability in K's death. Guilt is related to responsibility (Taylor, 1985, p. 90). There is a unique sense of personal responsibility inside his guilt that public history and collective memory cannot filter out.

Joyce (2014) maintains that Hata made himself a devoted Japanese subject with constant willingness; he avoids conflict, refuses to express anger, and represses his Korean ethnicity with the will to advance in Japanese society. It was during the war when his identity was seriously challenged. K, a Korean comfort woman, discerned his hidden identity and asked him: “You are a Korean” (p.179). He denied his Korean identity to survive in the Japanese army: “No, I am not. I have lived in Japan since I was born” (p.179); “I’m a medical officer of the Imperial Forces, and there’s nothing else to be said” (p.180). K opted for dying as the only means of resistance to her life as a comfort woman and asked Hata to kill her with honor. His sympathy and love for K overshadowed his yearning to be a loyal Japanese soldier. He shrank from taking action to save her from shameful death lest his Korean identity is revealed.

Jung says people bury unpleasant things in their minds (Jung, 1977). Hata purposely erased dark memories that hindered his wish to be an ideal member of American society. In this process, the recollection of K, whose death was the crucial cause of his trauma, has been completely concealed. Chang (2005) suggests that “K symbolizes a trauma that Hata has been trying to ignore and Korean identity he wishes to deny” (p.145). Trauma survivors live with an event that has not been completed, continues into the present, and exists in every respect (Felman & Laub, 1992). For Hata, the death of K is current in his life. However, Hata’s self-discovery is completed by encountering K’s illusion. K’s spiritual visit forces him to acknowledge his unstable condition, remove his persona, and begin a new life. She says: “we have an impressive house and property in the best town in the area...known and respected...yet still you seem dissatisfied; I do hope we might move on from this place. I will not die here” (p.219). The encounter allows Hata to accept every bit of his memory, whether pleasurable or tragic, welcoming the “serendipity and circumstance and ironical mien of events” (p.222).

Caruth (1996) suggests that ‘awakening’ is the first step in overcoming trauma. Awakening, if it is in some sense still a repetition of the trauma, is not a simple repetition of the same failure but a new act that repeats a departure and a difference (Caruth, 1996, pp. 106–107). Hata’s departure from persona starts by selling his house, an object of pride and emblem of his success in American life, and “a lovely, standing forgery” (p.267). Selling the house indicates his determination to move to a new life that does not seek the reputation of others. Hata confesses that he feels he has not really been living anywhere or anytime; he has lived “in the lonely dream of an oblivion” (p.243).

With the sale of his house, he gains an opportunity to give charity to those around him. His charitable act and reconciliation with Sunny instill hope into Hata’s mind. Promises of rebirth seem to shine upon Hata, for he has a “hope of a familial continuation, an unpredictable,

richly evolving to be” (p.253). He overcomes his aspiration to be “part of the massing...and want to own place in the accepted order of things” (p.228). His longing for assimilation is replaced by his wish to taste the joy of “being with someone” (p.255) who is likewise content to be with him. Hata’s narrative ends with his journey that he will set forth with “bearing his flesh, blood, and bones” (p.269). In a state where only material remains, he does not settle but becomes a being that can be harmoniously connected in any place and under any circumstances. That is the identity that Hata, who desires a truthful appearance, not a false gesture, can choose.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the subject of recovering the identity of a rootless man in Lee Chang-rae’s *A Gesture Life*. The protagonist Hata has a multi-layered identity through adoption and immigration. Hata’s aim of having a sense of belonging to the new society where he enters compels him to erase his past memory, which he thinks hinders his assimilation. The only survival strategy Hata can take to lead his life is to do his job quietly, as demanded by mainstream society, and not cause chaos in society. Thus, the life of Hata is the epitome of a model minority. Intending to adapt to American society as an ideal minority, Hata assumes the persona; it dictates him to make an appearance that fits the role the group demands.

Consequently, he loses the sense of understanding who he really is. His persona, a friendly ‘Doc Hata’ or ‘Good Charlie,’ is seriously disturbed by the deteriorating relationships with other people, especially with his adopted daughter. He reflects on his past to find a clue to his uneasiness and eventually confronts the trauma he has buried and suppressed in his unconscious. However, the repressed memory returns and heals his old wounds. Awakening his memory is the first step to making a new start. In his memory, he encounters a key person, K; she offers him an exit to the place where he can remove his mask and reconcile with his distressing past. The memory allows him to free himself from the persona he assumes. Hata’s self-reflective narrative ends with the recovery of his identity by reconciling with the oppressed memories hidden in his unconscious.

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