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Racial Conflict in the United States of America

A Deconstructive Perspective
on *Native Speaker* by Chang-
rae Lee

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Introduction

Chang-rae Lee was born on 29 July 1965 in Korea. At the age of three he left Korea with his parents and together they migrated to America, and he grew up as an American. After finishing his high school, he got into Yale University, then like many university graduates, the allure of Wall Street caught his eye. However, before long he recognized that his passion was writing; therefore, he decided to become a writer. In spite of his parents' disapproval, he enrolled in a creative writing programme at the University of Oregon. This is the background which led to his first literary appearance with his *Native Speaker*, and finally resulted in making him the most renowned Korean-American writer in the United States. In the past a foundation of Korean-American literature had been laid by authors such as Kung Young Hill whose books include *Gross Roof* (1931), *The East Goes West* (1937), Kim Yong-ik, the author of *Diving Ground* (1962), and Richard E. Kim, the author of *The Martyred* (1964) and *The Innocent* (1968). However, the unique attention that Chang-rae Lee received from the American literature community ranks him first above all other Korean-American writers (Young-oak Lee 65). His illustrious awards and honours include: the impressive Hemingway Foundation/Pen, American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, The Oregon Book Award, QPB New Voices Award, The Brances and Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, and the Notable Book of the Year Selection by American Literature association. All of them except the latter were granted to him for his successful novel, *Native Speaker*. Also, he was recognized by the New Yorker as one of the twenty best American writers under forty for his novel *Native Speaker*.

Since the publication of the novel in 1995, much work has been done on the issues of immigration, ethnic conflict, and situation of Asian Americans in America. Here, briefly some of them are mentioned. Kim Jodi in his article "From Mee-Gook to Gook: The Cold War and Radicalized Undocumented Capital in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*" analyses the novel

with specific attention to how Henry, the Korean-American protagonist of the novel, construes the difference between what is meant to be a bad Korean or good Korean or a good American. In her article “Citizen Kwang: Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Politics of Consent,” Betsy Huang “examines the ways in which the novel interrogates the ideological and cultural consent that American citizenship uncompromisingly demands of its Asian constituents” (Huang 1). Rachael Lee’s article “Reading Consent and Consenting Reading: Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker* and Ethnic New York” reviews the book and investigates the possibility of a Korean man becoming a politician in America. Liam Corley’s “Just Another Ethnic Pol: Literary Citizenship” depicts the catastrophic drowning of a ship carrying Chinese immigrants to USA in June 1993 and the mistreatment of the rescued people by the US authorities. The article claims that the novel alludes to this incident as a symbolic event which implies that it is difficult for some immigrants to be assimilated in America. Also, the article discusses the role of the immigrants in the American community. Significantly, despite of the much work that has been done on the novel, what has escaped critical attention is a deconstructive perspective on it. As Charles E. Bressler points out: “Deconstructors present a new reading strategy, one that allows us to make choices concerning various levels of interpretation we see operating in a text” (127). Deconstructors therefore look for places in the text where the author misspeaks or loses control of language and says what was supposedly not meant to be said. In this way the text undermines itself (Bressler 128).

This essay intends to analyse the novel from a deconstructive perspective, that is, to show the ways in which “the text is at war with itself” (Barry 69). In other words, it shows how the novel undermines itself, which leads to a conclusion that may go beyond the author’s intention (Booker 66). To this aim, the essay discusses gaps and contradictions in the novel which are revealed in Kwang’s, a character in the novel who is a Korean-American politician, speeches, and his statement about his *ggeh*, a Korean money club in the novel. Kwang aims to

emphasize similarities between Koreans and blacks, whereby promoting an environment of peace between the two groups in the novel. However, at the same time, he alludes to the privileges Koreans enjoy over blacks. In this way, the message of his speech is challenged. In addition, he designates his money club as a Korean money club; however, the money club is an international club within the scope of the novel. Kwang also presents himself as a person who adheres to the ideal of a pluralistic nation. Interestingly, he turns out to be a fanatic Korean. The essay also explores how the novel deals with ethnic tensions between Koreans and blacks. In depicting Koreans and blacks' racial conflicts, the novel is biased towards Koreans. That is, the author does not shed light over the ethnic frictions between the two groups. Also, in the novel Koreans are depicted positively and blacks are depicted negatively. In this way, the message of Kwang's speech in the novel is further challenged. The novel also alludes to the maltreatment of some Asian immigrants by some Americans. Interestingly, the mistreatment of immigrants and the racial conflicts are mirrored in the protagonist Henry, and his wife, Lelia's relationships, that is, due to their different racial identities they do not understand each other. Also, Lelia applies racist remarks to Henry. However, at the same time, the novel depicts America as a country in which ethnicity is of no importance, which is exemplified in Lelia's changed positive attitude toward Henry and the happy environment in which they live. Furthermore, the novel suggests that the American community does not discriminate against immigrants.

Native Speaker is the story about the first generation Korean immigrant Henry, who was born on the airplane when his parents immigrated to America. When he grows up, he works as a spy. He infiltrates the organization of John Kwang, another Korean immigrant who is a politician. Henry is married to an American woman named Lelia. Owing to the fact that Henry and his wife, Lelia, have two different ethnic identities, that is, Henry is an Asian and Lelia is a white, during the early parts of the novel, Lelia has a negative attitude toward

Henry. Consequently, they cannot reach consensus and they always argue. To exacerbate the situation, at first Henry does not understand that he needs to be trustworthy in his wife's eyes and he hides his job from her. Henry's untruthfulness with Lelia further strains his relationship with her- as she already considers him an alien. As a result, although she presumes that he works as a spy, she addresses him with the term "surreptitious" as well and condemns his job. The novel also depicts racial tensions between Koreans and blacks and alludes to the mistreatment of some immigrant groups; however, at the same time the novel suggests that racial identity is not important in America. Although the novel concludes that racial identity does not matter in America, racial conflicts between Korean Americans and African Americans remain unresolved.

Immigrants and their Assimilation Problem in America

Every year, many people especially from some Asian countries choose to immigrate to USA with the expectation of improving their life as they consider America as the land of opportunity. Statistics show that only in New York 100,000 newcomers arrive each year and many of them from Asian countries (Waters). The novel alludes to the waves of the immigration of Asian people to America with the prospect of a better life. Once, in a Chinese restaurant, Henry watches a weekly magazine show on TV on the immigration of Asian immigrants to America in the search of a new life. The anchors are interviewing some Asian immigrants who suffered many hardships just to arrive to America. Henry says: "They are interviewing several of the [Asian] men from the cargo ship that ran aground in Far Rockaway. The young men are in their twenties, rice-water skinny, unshaven. . . they describe the conditions on the ship, the lack of plumping, how some of the passengers died during the 12,000 mile voyage and were wrapped in plastic and cast into the ocean" (Lee 327). These immigrants suffered all the tremendous hardships because they presumed that America is the

land of opportunity. Henry says: “I listen closely to what they say. . . they keep repeating the words *America* and *New life*” (327). Also, the novel touches upon the waves of Koreans immigration to America. Once, Henry goes to an area in New York, that is, Parsons which used to be predominantly inhabited by whites. However, nowadays, a radical demographic transformation is evident in the area which is the result of Koreans immigration:

The Korean noodle shop is near 41st and Parsons. . . The restaurant is part of a whole block of Korean businesses lodged in converted row apartments dating from the fifties, when the population was still Italian and Irish and Jewish. Now the signs are all in Korean. The only English words in the windows are SALE and DISCOUNT and SHOPLIFTERS BEWARE. (315)

In this way the novel alludes to the changes in population in America which is the result of Asian immigration to America. In spite of the fact many people choose to immigrate to America for the promotion of their lives, some immigrants find it difficult to become part of American society as they are mistreated, and in some cases they are attacked on the grounds of their racial identities. The number of biased attacks on immigrants is palpable in New York above all else. Statistics show a dramatic rise in the number of biased attacks in New York so that in late 1980s and 1990s New York became a symbol of racial tension and violence for the nation. While between 1981 and 1986 the annual number of racist attacks was always fewer than 300, the number has increased to 463 in 1987. From 1987 up to now, the number of biased cases has been at high level, that is, 463 per year, some of them claimed the lives of immigrants (Waters).

The novel alludes to this phenomenon, that is, racial violence in New York, implying that certain immigrants, due to their racial identities are targeted by biased attacks. Henry says:

“Another cabbie is dead, shot in the back of the head, this time a Cuban driver in the Bronx. . . The man is the fifth or sixth driver murdered in the last two months” (246). Henry says that all of the cabbies are immigrants and they are extremely scared: “all of them are concerned and scared . . . they’re too different from one another, they are recently arrived Latvians and Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Hmong” (246). It can be inferred that the attackers have targeted cabbie drivers to scare them so that they would feel America is not a safe place for them and force them to leave.

Another incident which suggests that the American community discriminates against some immigrants is the story of John Kwang. Kwang has pluralistic ideas and believes that in America people with different ethnic identities can live in peace together. However, Kwang’s belief in a pluralistic society is challenged by an armed attack on him during one of his speeches. As Betsy Huang points out:

The speech Kwang delivers on the steps of the City Hall is filled with such seductively idealistic rhetoric of democratic pluralism that for a brief moment, everyone in the crowd — and perhaps the reader included — is won over. This moment of shared idealism, however, is violently punctuated with a gunshot [by an American], a voluble symbolic statement that aims to put a stop to the polyethnic utopian politics that Kwang represents. (261)

In his speech Kwang aims to promulgate the notion of equality and pluralism among his audience. His speech implies that racial identity does not matter in America. What he presents of America is a pluralistic nation in which there is no difference between immigrants and whites. However, an invader aborts his speech. As Huang observes the attack signifies that

Kwang's speech cannot be construed as a true interpretation of the American community (260).

Nonetheless, at this speech which is interrupted by a gunshot Kwang presents himself as a pluralistic person. However, Kwang's claim of pluralistic ideas is undermined by his own behaviour which manifests a nativist Korean behaviour rather than a pluralistic one. As Huang puts it: "Henry observes that Kwang speaks Korean more than English, alienates his non-Korean staffers, and keeps Henry, the only Korean staffer, by his side" (259). This suggests that Kwang is not a pluralistic person. Henry also construes Kwang's behaviour as a nativist one (Huang 259).

Significantly, Kwang's contradictory behaviour is not confined to this speech. Rather, gaps and contradiction are palpable in his other activities. For instance, Kwang owns a money club called *ggeh*. He maintains that the club is exclusively a Korean money club; however, Kwang's claim contradicts itself, because the *ggeh* is transformed from a Korean money club to a multinational club. As Huang puts it, Kwang's claim about his *ggeh* undermines itself in the sense that it "departs from the traditional Korean-only model by allowing members of other ethnic groups to participate" (260).

Nevertheless, *ggeh* provides immigrants, including Koreans, with financial aid and helps them with their applications for citizenship. In doing so, Kwang has good intentions. However, certain Americans view his club differently, which suggests that they cannot tolerate anyone helping immigrants:

The media paint *ggeh* as an operation that smuggles illegal immigrants into the country. While Henry is able to see the *ggeh* as an essentially democratic enterprise, one that encourages active participation and strives for equal distribution of wealth, the INS sees it only as an illegitimate private bank that pays revolving interest and

principle to its members, many of whom are Korean, lending activities that are not registered with any banking commission and haven't reported to tax authorities. (Huang 260)

As Huang points out, to Denis Hoagland, who is Henry's boss, and to the American media, the *ggeh* is perceived as the illegal activities of the likes of the mafia and other public enemy type, who have declined to play by the rule of law:

To Denis, and to the reporters that are here, I could explain forever Kwang's particular thinking, how the idea of the *ggeh* occurred as second nature to him. He did not know who was an illegal and who was not, for he would never come to see the fact as something vital. . . He was not a warlord or a don, he had no real power over any of them save their trust in his wisdom. He was merely giving to them just the start, like other people get an inheritance, a hope chest of what they would work hard for in the rest of their lives. (Huang 260)

The campaign against Kwang is motivated by the fact that Kwang's *ggeh* helps its predominantly Korean members to be assimilated, that is, to obtain their citizenship. This is something which some American people cannot tolerate. In other words, Kwang's *ggeh* poses a so called danger of Koreanizing within the American community. As Huang observes:

The threat of Kwang [*ggeh*] was his potential Koreanizing of American culture, and his revision of American citizenship based on, of all things, a system of Korean origin. Despite Kwang's good intentions, the *ggeh* is perceived as a legal and a social

violation. The economic assistance that he has provided to immigrants, particularly the illegal ones, is unacceptable to a society already sceptical about the nation's open door immigration policies. (260)

In other words, certain Americans object to anyone who helps so called aliens being assimilated within American society, that is why they view it as illegal. Upon discerning Kwang's assistance to immigrants some Americans turn against him. This is revealed when the outside of Kwang's house is thronged with those Americans who want him out: "They march to his house down the middle of the street, impromptu parades of them, husbands and wives and crying toddlers on shoulders. . . [they chant]: Hey, ho, Kwang must go!" (331). Among those who gather outside Kwang's house is a group of young whites who "stand behind two sewn-together sheets spray-painted with the words: AMERICA FOR AMERICANS" (331). They also chant "We want our fucking future back" (332). Finally, these demonstrations lead to Kwang's fall. Subsequently he is forced to leave America.

Lee's portrayal of Kwang and the picket outside his home are extremely significant. On the one hand, Kwang's character symbolizes American democratic ideas, and his "full subscription to the founding philosophies of American citizenship" (Huang 254), on the other hand, Lee's depiction of the fall of Kwang suggests that in the eye of some whites, certain immigrants even if fully committed to western democratic notions are considered alien and they would find it problematic to be part of the American community.

This is suggested, as Huang puts it, in the picket outside Kwang's home which carries multiple messages:

That to these folks, Kwang was never considered an American; that his multi-ethnic family, his *ggeh*, will not be accepted as the future of America; and that with every

ostensible failure of the minority to keep up the good performance, the sentiment of the people turns against him in favour of the old notion of a white, Eurocentric America. (261)

The novel further emphasizes this idea when the American demonstrators are victorious in expelling Kwang out of America. This is brought to light when Henry visits Kwang's abandoned house: "Posing a potential buyer Henry visits Kwang's vacated house a few months after the demonstration. When he asks the realtor to whom the house had belonged, she replies: "foreigners they went back home" (Huang 261). The realtor refers to Kwang as a foreigner, which suggests that Kwang has not been accepted by her as a member of their society.

Also, at a crucial point of the novel a bomb goes off at Kwang's office which kills one of Kwang's friends, that is Eduardo, and the janitor of his office. The essay discusses the attack, first in terms of Kwang's decision to keep quiet after the bombing which subverts itself, and second in terms of the message of the attack. First, in the wake of the attack Kwang is asked to comment on the incident. However, he withholds his opinion on the bombing on the pretext that he does not want to be accused of issuing racist remarks. Addressing Henry he says: "What they want from me is a statement about colour, whatever I say they'll make into a matter of race" (247). So, he chooses to keep quiet and avoids commenting on the incident. However, Kwang's decision undermines itself, because his silence is interpreted as confirmation of racial tension. As Huang puts it: "if he [Kwang] believes that talk is difficult to control, he fails to see that silence is even more so. His silence is read as a tacit admission of guilt rather than as a means to prevent self-incrimination. . . It generates a plethora of wild speculations" (258). As a result of Kwang's silence the talk of ethnic conflict dramatically intensifies in the city. Henry says:

Some blame blacks. . . Other offer each other the spectrum of notions; the bombers are North Korean terrorists; or the growing white-separatist cell based on eastern Long Island, or even the worldwide agents of the Mossad — you can always lay blame on them — who will never forget Kwang’s verbal support of the children of the Intifada. The late money says it’s the Indians, who so despise Korean competition, it’s the Jews envious of new Korean money, Chinese hateful of Korean communality, blacks who want something, anything of justice, it’s the uneasy coalition of our colours, that oldest strife of city and alley and schoolyard. (260)

Second, in the wake of the attack, people construe the incident as violence against immigrants. Some people blame racist groups for the attack and believe that the attack signifies that some immigrants are prone to be targeted by biased attacks (260). One of the city authorities also believes that the attack signifies violence against immigrants and blames anti-Kwang and anti-immigrants groups for the attack. Significantly, “everybody agrees with him” (260). So, it can be inferred that the attack’s aim was to deliver a message to particular immigrants that, on the grounds of their racial identities, they are prone to racist attacks and they will find it difficult to be accepted within the American community.

Above all else, the event that carries the most definite message to certain immigrants than the aforementioned is the *Golden Venture* incident. On 6 June 1993, the *Golden Venture*, a freighter which carried about three hundred Chinese immigrants began to submerge only a few miles away from New York City. Aware that the vessel was taking in water, the captain ordered the passengers to jump into the water and to swim ashore. In this incident at least eight people lost their lives and the rest of them were rescued by the US coast guard, subsequently they were arrested and imprisoned. The extraordinary mistreatment of Chinese

immigrants had an incontrovertible message, especially to Asian aspirant new comers that, on the grounds of their racial identities, they will be considered as aliens. This is further revealed when the White House Press Secretary repeatedly and meaningfully alludes to these Asian immigrants as aliens, and when American public construed the incident as an Asian invasion (Corley 62).

The significance of this incident to *Native Speaker* according to Liam Corley is that the novel was written about the time of the *Golden Venture*, and the novel alludes to this incident. This is suggested when Henry says that a freighter carries Chinese immigrants, drowns. Lee's fictional Chinese immigrants, here in the novel, are confronted the same mistreatment by the US authorities as their historical model, insinuating that USA is not the land that these immigrants dream about and that they will be considered as alien by some Americans (65-66). Manifestations of that incident are invoked in the novel when Henry says:

The next story is about a small freighter that runs aground off Far Rockaway in the middle of the night. The boat carries around fifty Chinese men who have paid \$20,000 each to smugglers to ship them to America. Men are leaping from the sides of the boat, clinging to ropes dangling down into the water. Rescue boats bob in the rough surf, plucking the treaders with looped gaffs. The drowned are lined up on the dock beneath canvas tarps. The ones who make it, dazed, soaked, unspeaking, are led off in a line into police vans. (247)

Here Lee makes a particular reference to the *Golden Venture* incident: a freighter which carries Chinese immigrants submerges. Some are drowned and those who are rescued arrested by police officers and mistreated. Significantly, while particular groups of immigrants are considered as aliens by certain whites, at another level there are other kinds of

misunderstanding and racial tension in the novel. This time, however, it is within the ethnic minorities. This is mostly revealed among Korean Americans and African Americans in the novel.

Koreans and Blacks' Relations: Real and Fictional Conflicts

Many Korean Americans own liquor stores in black neighbourhoods (Park 493). Due to the American television shows and the US military presence in South Korea, these Korean immigrants have a discriminatory attitude towards blacks. As King Kok Cheung observes:

The prevailing US racial hierarchy and its attendant stereotypes were transferred worldwide to every country that the United States had occupied militarily. The US military presence in South Korea had itself crystallized the hierarchy for South Koreans. They had observed the segregated restaurants, bars, and brothels and the black-white division of the US military. For Korean immigrants in the United States, these memories from home were compounded by negative image of African Americans in movies and television shows. (7)

Accordingly, as Cheung puts it, many Korean immigrants have absorbed the myths about African Americans as lazy and complaining criminals. Affected by this attitude, some Korean-American store owners treat their black customers with disrespect, which causes ethnic friction between the two groups (7). Significantly, Ice Cube, a Los Angeles Rap artist, in his Album called *Black Korea* aims to depict the above mentioned relation between Korean-American store owners and their African-American customers. As Jeff Chang observes, amidst racial conflicts between African Americans and Korean-American store owners, Los Angeles rap artist Ice Cube issued a fictional judgment of his own on the relationships

between the two groups in a song called *Black Korea* (87). In this album he presents himself as a customer in a Korean American store, trying to buy a bottle of malt liquor:

They hope I don't pull out a gat and try to rob
 their funky little store, but bitch, I gotta job.
 So don't follow me up and down your market
 Or your little chop-suey ass will be a target of the nationwide boycotts
 Choose with the people
 That's what the boy got
 so pay respect to the black first
 Or we'll burn down your store, right down to a crisp
 and then we'll see you
 Cause you can't turn the ghetto into black Korea. (Park 492)

In this album, Ice Cube attempts to expose the bigotry of some Korean merchants in black areas by using the medium of rap. In fact, *Black Korea* is a portrayal of the conflict between blacks and Koreans, and it expresses black voices against Koreans (Choe). *Black Korea* was boycotted by the Korean community because Korean American community leaders stressed that it propagates violence and bigotry (Park 492). Although here, Koreans boycott a product of a black, interestingly, it is almost always blacks who boycott Korean products and stores. According to Hoen Cheol Lee, these boycotts are the aftermath of a dispute at a Korean store between a Korean merchant and a black customer. The dispute then escalates into a full-scale racial conflict, and finally ends up in the boycott of Korean businesses by African Americans (92).

Native Speaker alludes to these boycotts; however, at first the novel intends to give prominence to the similarities between Koreans and blacks, which gives a sense of friendly environment. This is suggested in one of Kwang's speeches. However, this claim is subverted by Kwang's words during this speech. Kwang says:

This community [blacks] has been broken and dissolved through history. We Koreans know something of this 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 am speaking of histories that all of us should know. Remember, or now know, how Koreans were cast as the dogs of Asia, remember the way our children could not speak their own language in school, remember how they called each other by the Japanese names forced upon them, remember the public executions of patriots and the shadowy murders of collaborators, remember our feelings of disgrace and penury and shame. . . . (153)

Then Kwang reveals the purpose of his speech. He says: "I ask that you remember these things, or know them now. Know that what we [Koreans and blacks] have in common, the sadness and pain and injustice, will always be stronger than our differences. I respect and honour you deeply" (153). Kwang aims to be neutral in his speech and recounts the similarities between Koreans and blacks. His speech implies that the two groups have some specific similarities in common and there is no need for Korean bigotry. In this way he aims to promote peace and friendship among Koreans and blacks. However, Kwang's analogy between Koreans and blacks contradicts his own words during this speech. This is done when he alludes to the superiority of Koreans over blacks. Earlier, during his speech, Kwang says

that blacks do not have the same strong community that Koreans enjoy (123). As Min Hyoung Song points out: “While he [Kwang] makes his argument [about the similarities between Koreans and blacks], Kwang suggests that Koreans have been luckier than blacks because the latter have not been able to maintain the kind of community that the salience of Korean traumas enables” (82). In other words, Kwang’s speech contradicts itself. In this way, the message of Kwang’s speech to emphasize the similarities and friendship between the two groups is undermined. Also, this aim of Kwang’s speech is further undermined by the sensationalistic depiction of Koreans and blacks and by the biased depiction of racial tension between the two groups in the novel.

Comparative Analysis of the Depiction of Blacks and Koreans and Racial Tension Between the two Groups

The novel is biased not only in the depiction of racial tension, but also in the depiction of Koreans and blacks. In *Native Speaker* Koreans are depicted as successful and wealthy immigrants. Also, they are depicted as business owners who employ other people. One of the first impressions of the Koreans that the novel presents is that of Kwang. He is described as a politician and a businessman who is overwhelmingly rich. Henry says Kwang is a business owner whose business has dramatically developed. “Kwang, though, kept pushing, adding to his wholesale stores by eventually leasing plants in North Carolina, to assemble in part the machines he sold for Italian and German manufacturers” (183). Also, Henry says, Kwang is so rich that despite the fact that he has lost a few million dollars at least “he seems to have plenty left” (183). Another Korean American is Henry’s father. He is described as a successful immigrant whose business has flourished. Henry says that his father has a great deal of money and that he has established other businesses across the city. The other successful Korean immigrant in the novel is Henry’s master. He is also illustrated as a

wealthy person who draws “much energy and pride from his ability to make it almost at will” (49).

Interestingly, other Koreans are depicted as more affluent. Henry says some Koreans are “owners of fancy cars that needed waxing and washing” (51). Some other Korean Americans are even richer than this. Henry says that other Koreans who live in Connecticut are impressively prosperous and that “they send their kids to private day schools and drive expensive 4X4s and they belong to country clubs that have no blacks [and in which only rich people participate]” (278).

The novel also portrays Koreans as business owners who employ people of other nationalities at their stores. For example, Henry’s father employs blacks, Puerto Ricans and Spanish (187). Other Korean store owners employ Peruvians. This is suggested when the novel reveals that many Peruvians demonstrate against their Korean employers (83). This depiction of Korean Americans cannot be construed as a real portrayal of Korean Americans. As Kyeyoung Park puts it, most Korean Americans have little wealth. Accordingly, Korean-American store owners establish their small stores in pre-dominantly black neighbourhoods, because they are not wealthy enough to establish their stores anywhere else. In other words, starting a business in black neighbourhoods is very cheap and, since most Korean-American store owners are not rich people, they choose these areas for running their stores. In any case, where starting a business in black neighbourhoods is not possible they choose other lower class neighbourhoods. Also, these Korean Americans rarely employ anybody (493-94). According to this evidence, Lee’s portrayal of Korean Americans is distorted. Korean Americans cannot be presented as rich business owners who employ other people. Not only do they not employ anybody, but also they do not have enough money to establish their store anywhere else, except in poor areas. In sum, the novel is biased in its

depiction of Koreans in the sense that Koreans are depicted as successful and rich businessmen.

On the other hand, the novel is biased in its depiction of blacks, that is, blacks are depicted negatively. One of the first depictions of blacks in the novel is that of burglars. Henry says:

Once, he [Henry's father] came home with deep bruises about his face, his nose and mouth bloody, his rough work shirt torn at the shoulder. . . Some black men had robbed the store and taken him to the basement and bound him and beaten him up. They took turns whipping him with the magazine of a pistol. They would have probably shot him in the head right there but his partners came for the night shift and robbers left. (57)

Here, the novel propagates negative depiction of blacks. Henry says that some blacks have robbed his father's store. He also says that if it was not for his father's friends, the blacks would probably have murdered his father. In other words, by presenting blacks as burglars and potential murderers the novel portrays them negatively. Also, the novel depicts blacks negatively when it suggests that blacks are lazy. This is revealed when Henry says that his father hires some blacks and then expels all of them on the pretext that they are lazy.

Significantly, the novel is biased in its depiction of the tension between blacks and Koreans, that is, the author does not elaborate the real cause of the conflict. Instead, he creates an environment in which readers are pushed toward inferring that blacks are the chief culprits. This is done by the negative depiction of the blacks, which was discussed earlier, by biased depiction of ethnic tension between Koreans and blacks, and by Lee's failure to discuss the role of some Korean Americans in creating and reinforcing the ethnic conflicts. Before dealing with this aspect of the novel it is necessary to remind the readers that Lee's depiction

of ethnic tension in New York is a real portrayal of the Koreans and blacks' ethnic conflict in Los Angeles in 1992. As Min Hyoung Song puts it: "*Native Speaker* uses the 1992 Los Angeles riots [to depict blacks and Koreans tension]. . . It is important to notice that, while these events are supposed to have taken place in Queens, they make specific reference to the 1992 Los Angeles riots" (86).

In depicting the tension, the novel presents Koreans as people who would like to stay out of the trouble (93). Then, the novel illustrates blacks as the trouble makers by announcing that they have imposed another boycott on Korean store owners (93). Without informing the readers about the real cause of the boycotts, Lee writes that this is the sixth black boycott against Korean merchants within a year (93). Moreover, to emphasize the black boycotts which target Korean business owners, Henry says these boycotts are becoming endemic. "[The boycotts] were spreading from Brookline to other parts of the city, to black neighbourhoods in the Bronx and even in his [Kwang's] home borough, in Williamsburg section, and then also in upper Manhattan" (180).

While there is no explanation for the motif behind the boycotts, later in the novel Henry says that the streets of New York are thronged with blacks who chant anti-Korean slogans. Henry also accuses blacks of vandalism and says that there has been tremendous destruction as the result of the unrest. Here, Lee tries to provide the readers with a so called account of the blacks' demonstration and destruction. Henry says: "after the destruction black leaders insisted that they are protesting against callousness of Korean American merchants, and the unjust acquittal of Korean store owners who'd shot and killed a black lady" (193). This cannot be construed as a neutral portrayal of the cause of the incident; Lee does not provide the readers with his own account of the incident. Instead, he refers to black leaders' insistence on Koreans callousness rather than trying to understand the reason behind the protests, and he omits to analyse the racial conflict further.

To sum up, the novel depicts Koreans and blacks at opposite poles whose differences are much more noticeable than their similarities. Koreans are presented as civilized and business owners who would like to lead a peaceful life. In contrast to this, blacks are presented as burglars and lazy people who damage public property and impose waves of boycotts on Korean businessmen. Consequently, the aim of Kwang's speech, to give a sense of similarity between Koreans and blacks in order to promote friendship between the two groups, is significantly undermined. Furthermore, some aspects of the conflicts remain untouched, such as the motives of the blacks behind the boycotts and the role of some Korean Americans in creating and intensifying the ethnic tensions.

Racial Conflict and Mistreatment of Immigrants as Reflected in Lelia and Henry's Relationship

Significantly, the racial tension within the novel and the idea of considering some immigrants as alien by some whites is reflected in the relationship between Henry and Lelia, that is, Lelia and Henry's different racial identities dramatically affect their relationship. This is suggested when Lelia treats Henry with disrespect, addresses him with racist remarks, and does not feel intimacy with him. Subsequently, she always takes trips to different parts of New York and other cities alone, and she never tells Henry about her destination. Also, Lelia's unfriendly attitude toward Henry is suggested when Lelia is going to take a trip and Henry asks her "if she had enough money" (4), and she says that "her savings would take care of her" (4). Lelia's response can be interpreted as a kind of disappointment for Henry, since he would expect her to say "our savings" instead of her savings. Also, it can be construed as her unfriendly rejection of any of his offers. Henry says: "Her answer was also, of course, a means of renunciation, itself a denial of everything else I wasn't offering" (4). On this trip, she sends Henry a letter. This letter reveals her motivation for treating him so unfriendly and

bitterly. In this letter Lelia addresses Henry with racist remarks such as illegal alien, yellow peril, neo-American and stranger (5). In other words, she considers him as an alien. That is why she mistreats him.

Lelia's racist treatment of Henry and the role of their different racial identities in their relationships are further suggested when on the phone, before their wedding, she considers Henry as a native speaker; however, after they get married she refers to him as a false speaker of English. Juxtaposing Lelia's remarks one would discern that in her eyes, Henry is a stranger. Significantly, all these aspects of Lelia and Henry's relationships can be explained by their racial identities, that is, due to their different racial backgrounds, Henry and Lelia cannot understand each other and this leads to arguments between them. For example, for Koreans the first name is not as important as the last name, as it is for Americans. Henry says: "Americans live on a first name basis [while we Korean do not]" (69). Accordingly, Henry's parents do not call each other by their first names. As a result, Henry does not remember his parents' name instantaneously. Henry says: "when someone asks my parents name, I have to pause for a moment, I have to rehear them" (69). However, Lelia does not know the reason, and this annoys her. When Lelia gets to know that Henry does not remember his parents' names instantaneously, her face screws up and says angrily "I cannot believe this" (69). She continues misunderstanding Henry. She assumes that Henry does not remember his parents' first names because he does not like them (70).

Native Speaker's Vision of Ethnic Relationships in America

Significantly, while some whites' prejudiced attitudes toward immigrants as well as racial tension between Koreans and blacks remain unresolved, the novel suggests that everybody is a native speaker in America. In other words, the novel comes to concludes that racial identity does not matter. This is suggested in the dramatic positive change in Leila's treatment of

Henry. That is, Henry and Lelia's different racial identities no longer affect their relationships and they come to understand each other. As an incipient sign of understanding, Lelia does not condemn Henry and his jobs anymore. On the contrary she concerns herself about Henry's job. Subsequently, to make sure that everything is ok with Henry's job she goes and talks to one of Henry's colleagues about Henry's job. She also talks to Henry about his job. Addressing Henry she says: "how is work going?" (224). This comes to Henry as a surprise. Henry says that Lelia's concern about his job is an unprecedented phenomenon and that he has not observed such behaviour from her since their son, Mitt, was born (224).

Also, Lelia's shift of attitude toward Henry is illustrated when Henry says: "Now, when I go to work, she seems to understand me" (224). To support his claim, Henry says: "[now] Before I leave [for work] she makes certain to pull on my arms, pull on my ears like she used to do to Mitt before he would go outside. I take her tugs as a little warning, reminders that she is here, staying in our life. . . [and that she will take care of everything]" (281). Moreover, in a significant change of Lelia's behaviour, at a romantic point in the novel, Lelia begins to write Henry's name with a piece of chalk over and over again and then addressing Henry she says: "I love you" (283). Later on, she asks Henry to take her by the shoulders, and she says that she needs Henry's hands.

Lelia's changed attitude toward Henry is rooted in Henry's changed behaviour. That is, Henry tries to understand her. To this goal, he does not hide his job from her anymore. On the contrary, he tells her that he works as a spy which suggests that he tries to understand her. Also, in another attempt to understand his wife, he gives up his job just to stay at home and help Lelia with her job. For example, after giving up his job, when Lelia's classes are finished, they work together to rearrange the class.

Now, in this friendly environment, they visit different parts of New York together. Referring to their friendly relationship together, Henry says: "It seems to us right now that if

we stop moving, we die. We take the subway to parts of the city we've never been to and walk the neighbourhoods for hours, combing through the sidewalk clearance bins for important pieces, amulets, future totems of the city [and we have quite a happy time together] (282).

Nonetheless, the fact that Henry and Lelia, with two different racial identities, come to understand each other, and live in peace and friendship suggests the unimportance of ethnic identity in the novel. The unimportance of racial identity is further emphasized when the novel suggests that the American authorities have the capacity of assimilating particular Asian immigrants. This is suggested when Henry says that the American authorities have been kind enough to his father that they have not deported him. Referring to the Asian identity of his father Henry says: "Imagine, though, if they [the US authorities] told my father he really had to leave. If they put him inside a plane and it took off [but they did not and my father became a part of the American community]" (336).

Also, the unimportance of ethnicity and the equality of the immigrants and whites in America can be found in Jack's words. Addressing Henry he says that America is the right place for Henry because not only he, as an immigrant, has an American wife but also in this country he enjoys absolute freedom and that there is no discrimination against him, i.e. against immigrants. Henry also maintains that racial identity does not matter in America. To support this claim, Henry says that racial identity is so unimportant that no one cares about American or Asian identity in America; consequently, as an immigrant he is considered as American as any one else.

In this way the novel suggests the unimportance of racial identity. This claim strongly conflicts with the novel's earlier depiction of America and American society in which the novel suggests that certain immigrants, on the grounds of their racial identities, will find it hard to be part of the American community. Also, earlier the novel suggests that some whites

have discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants. A group of whites' demonstration in the novel with their anti-immigrant slogans, the novel's reference to the *Golden Venture* incident, the explosion at Kwang's office, murdering of cabbie drivers, the fall of Kwang, the mistreatment of Henry by his wife, and ethnic tension between Koreans and blacks, all suggest that ethnic identity does matter in America. Despite all of the above mentioned evidence, the novel concludes the unimportance of ethnicity in America without suggesting any solution on how to solve the ethnic problems.

However, this essay suggests that by investigating how the tension between Lelia and Henry is resolved, one could suggest a solution for the ethnicity problems in America. That is, ethnic minorities and whites must come to understand each other. Moreover, all of them should abandon bigotry and prejudice and racist treatment of each other, in the same way that Henry and Lelia did.

Conclusion

Written about the time of the *Golden Venture* incident, Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* makes a particular reference to that incident, whereby implying that particular immigrants, on the grounds of their racial identities, are mistreated and are considered as aliens by some Americans. To support his argument, the author chronicles the fall of Kwang, a Korean-American politician, who is very popular among Americans in New York. Also, Kwang is fully committed to the American rules of citizenship, and represents the American idea of democracy. However, upon making a minute mistake, some American people turn against him. They surround his house and shout anti-Kwang and anti-immigrant slogans. Finally, under the overwhelming racist pressure of the demonstrators, Kwang is forced to abandon America, and goes back to Korea.

While some whites discriminate against immigrants on the basis of their racial identities, there is widespread ethnic tension among these minorities. Two groups which have a hostile attitude toward each other are Koreans and blacks. A Korean-American politician, Kwang, tries to improve the relationships between Koreans and blacks. This is suggested in one of his speeches. Here the novel suggests that Koreans and blacks have some things in common which make the two groups united. However, the aim of Kwang's speech is subverted by Kwang's own words during this speech in which he alludes to the superiority of Koreans to blacks. The objective of Kwang's speech is also undermined by the sensationalistic depiction of Koreans and blacks. In the novel Koreans are portrayed as hardworking, successful immigrants, who always would like to live in peace and quiet. On the other hand, blacks are described as indolent people and burglars, who boycott Korean businesses.

Significantly, the racial conflicts between Koreans and blacks and the racist attitude of some whites toward immigrants are mirrored in Lelia's treatment of Henry. Although Henry's mother delivers him on the plane, on the way to America, and he is an American citizen, he receives racist treatment from his American wife. She castigates his Asian background and views him as a stranger.

While ethnic conflicts between Koreans and blacks and certain whites' discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants is a serious one, the novel suggests the unimportance of racial identity. This is suggested in Lelia's significant positively changed treatment of Henry, that is, Lelia does not view Henry as a foreigner or a false speaker of English anymore. Thus, Henry's Asian background has no affect on his relationship with his American wife, and they live happily together. This is partly because of the fact that Henry becomes more friendly toward Lelia. Nonetheless, the fact that Lelia and Henry with two different racial identities come to understand each other suggests that racial identity does not matter. Also, in an

attempt to convey the unimportance of racial identity, the novel suggests that there is no discriminatory treatment of immigrants and, in fact, every one is a native speaker in America.

In this way the novel undermines itself. Earlier the novel suggests that, due to their racial identities, certain immigrants are mistreated by some whites, hence their assimilation process is hindered. Moreover, the novel's allusion to the *Golden Venture* incident — the racist treatment of some immigrants by some whites, the demonstration of a group of whites against Kwang with their anti-immigrant and anti-Kwang slogans, the blast at Kwang's office, the killing of cabbie drivers all of whom were immigrants, Koreans and blacks fierce ethnic frictions, racist treatment of Henry by Lelia — all are evidence which suggests the importance of racial identity. Notwithstanding, without sorting out Korean Americans and African Americans ethnic tensions, the novel concludes the unimportance of racial identity and the equality of immigrants and whites in America.

In the novel, there is no message of how racial conflicts can be resolved. However, this essay suggests that by analysing the conflict between Henry and Lelia, finding out the cause their conflict and how it is resolved a solution can be found for the resolving of the ethnic tension in the novel and in real life.

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