

## THE LOST IDENTITY OF A KOREAN AMERICAN IMMIGRANT

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*Abstract: This research analyses Leonard Chang's social novel, which is clearly inspired by real events that occurred during the Los Angeles riots. The present paper offers keen insight into the internal and external struggles of a second-generation Korean American who faces difficulties when reconciling his identity as an American citizen with the one of a person of Korean descent. Furthermore, the paper underlines, at one time, how the main character is trying to adapt to the American way of life by using each of the four types of strategies of acculturation, as defined by Berry (2005), but ends up losing all identity through the process of deculturation. This happens due to the fact that he can neither assimilate both cultures nor accept one of them entirely.*

*The paper will also focus on the image created by a second character who depicts America as a dystopian land where the majority of people are lawbreakers, such as burglars, drug dealers or drug addicts, and so on. Moreover, the life of Mr. Rhee's daughter will also be analysed, as well as the way in which she becomes American or Asian American. Lastly, the paper will highlight the stressful relationship between Asian Americans and African Americans; how Asian Americans tend to discriminate against African Americans, which lead to protests and violence in 1991 and 1992.*

*Keywords: Acculturation, Deculturation, Discrimination, Leonard Chang, Los Angeles Riots.*

### 1. Introduction

Nowadays, upon reading contemporary well known books written by American authors and watching the most popular television series and movies from the United States of America, it is doubtless that they depict America as a Utopian land or, at least, as the place where any major problem can be solved, starting with youth issues and carrying through to zombies or nuclear apocalypses.

Unfortunately, serious and realistic topics such as discrimination, acculturation, alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic violence, are less often represented in the works of the majority of American authors, but these topics are more readily found in ethnic American literatures. Works from these literatures adopt the aforementioned themes because authors from ethnic minorities want to give a warning signal about the current state of the American society, which is not a Utopian land, but a dystopian world in which actions such as discrimination, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence and drug abuse are daily habits for some of today's young and old generations of Americans.

### 2. Historical context

Considering that the Chinese minority in America, which is composed of 2,422,970<sup>1</sup> Americans of Chinese descent, is one of the largest minority groups in the United States, it stands to reason that the Asian community, as a superordinate group, constitutes a large part of the population of the United States. Unfortunately, although their numbers are significant,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthes Markus, *Chinese Americans – A "model minority"?*, Munich, Grin Publishing GmbH, 2007, p.2.

they are still discriminated against by white and African Americans, because they fear that Asian Americans will steal their jobs and business opportunities.

Moreover, the discrimination and the lack of ability to adapt to the new American culture makes Chinese Americans isolated from the rest of society, and it becomes evident that the Chinese have constructed special Chinese towns in the major cities in order to preserve their traditional culture and their segregation from others.

The Korean minority, which is composed of 1,500,000 million Korean Americans<sup>2</sup>, is another important Asian American community and is the result of several waves of Korean immigrants. Furthermore, the first Koreans came to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and they continued to come in constant waves, although they encountered some problems starting from 1910, when they became part of the Japanese Empire.

The integration of Korea into the Japanese Empire made the Koreans seem like Japanese nationals, which made them undesirable to the United States because the Japanese and their collaborators were banned, in 1907, from entering America through the *Gentlemen's Agreement*<sup>3</sup>. Fortunately, after 1910 "students, diplomats, merchants, and wives of men already in the United States"<sup>4</sup> still managed to get into America. Moreover, "the 1950s witnessed new Korean immigration to the United States of America, including military brides, orphans, and college students"<sup>5</sup> and after 1965, because of "the dramatic change in American immigration policy"<sup>6</sup>, a large wave of Koreans from the South and refugees from the North came to the promised land.

Unfortunately, the fate of Korean immigrants and Korean Americans from the second and third generations is similar to the fate of other Asian immigrants, who had to face direct and indirect discrimination and conflicts; in 1992 the discrimination against Koreans culminated with the Los Angeles Riots, during which African American protestors destroyed several Korean stores<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Acculturation

When discussing texts written by American authors of Asian descent, in general, and particularly of Korean origin, the processes of acculturation needs to be taken into account. This process of acculturation may be defined as "the cross-cultural adaptation process where individuals learn a new cultural system in their new host society but still maintain their own cultural integrity"<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, this process may have numerous factors which determine its success and formal education, social networks and the age of contact with the new culture are just some of the factors that have a great impact<sup>9</sup>.

Usually the acculturation means a process of fusion between the original culture and the new culture, because by "encountering the other, I am forced to recognize my identity, to evaluate myself and defend my own identity"<sup>10</sup> and this sometimes leads to the immigrant

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<sup>2</sup> Won Moo Hurh, *The Korean Americans*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1998, p.11.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Soon Choi, *Korean Americans*, New York, Chelsea House, 2007, p.pp.11-18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p.18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p.19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> Indira Somani, *Enculturation and Acculturation of Television use Among Asian Indians in U.S.*, Ann Arbor, ProQuest, 2008, p.120.

<sup>9</sup> Constantin Cucos, *Educația. Dimensiunii culturale și interculturale*[*Education. The cultural and intercultural dimension*], Iași, Polirom, 2000, p.126.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

exhibiting symptoms such as “stress towards acculturation, anxiety, depression, feelings of marginalization and exclusion, confused identity”<sup>11</sup>.

According to Bery’s theory we find four strategies of acculturation depending on the ethno-cultural group (assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization) the immigrant makes use of, after answering to himself about how important it is to maintain their original identity and cultural characteristics and which group they want to be part of. The first type of acculturation process posits that the immigrant assimilates the new culture and forgets their own culture, whereas in the case of integration, it can be said that it is a process through which a person preserves their own culture in their private life, but embraces the dominant culture in the public sphere<sup>12</sup>. The third type of acculturation process, separation, is a process during which the person has to live in a separated community because they want to preserve their own culture or because the dominant others consider them to be strangers and do not approve of their existence in society. The fourth type, marginalization, is the process during which the person who adapts to the new culture has to suffer either from being ignored by the members of dominant society or from fun being made of their cultural background<sup>13</sup>. When the immigrant reports themselves to the society of the majority, the aforementioned strategies transform into the acculturation strategies of large societies (multiculturalism, melting pot, segregation, exclusion), where multiculturalism is a consequence of the integration of the individual, melting pot is the consequence of the assimilation of the new culture, exclusion is the consequence of marginalization and group segregation is the consequence of living in a separated community<sup>14</sup>.

Oftentimes acculturation can lead to the process of deculturation and through this process “a person or a group [ends up] denying his/their own culture, and also any other form of culture, as a consequence of an inadequate manner of adapting to a different culture. Moreover, sometimes this process is accompanied by personality disorders”<sup>15</sup> and suicide. These types of symptoms were exhibited by the Africans brought to America at the beginning of the sixteenth century<sup>16</sup>.

#### **4. Between loss of identity, separation and marginalization**

Through his first novel, *The Fruit’n Food*, Leonard Chang, a second-generation Korean American, introduces the seemingly ignorant American and the unknowing European to a dystopian world where immigrants that are forced to become American lose their identities and those few brave Asians who manage to find their place in their new society have battle being discriminated against or discriminating against other ethnic groups. Moreover, his work “indubitably recalls the Riots”<sup>17</sup> that occurred in Los Angeles in 1992.

The riots the book references began at the end of April when hundreds of poor Hispanic, African American and white people took to the streets to protest against the jury’s decision that found the four police officers, who had violently beaten Rodney King, to be not

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup>John Berry W, “Acculturation: Living successfully inn two cultures” in *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Issue 29, 2005, p.705. Available: <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic551691.files/Berry.pdf>. [Accessed 2015, April, 20].

<sup>13</sup>*Ibidem*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibidem*, pp.705-706.

<sup>15</sup>Anghelache Valerica, *Educație interculturală [Intercultural education]*, Galaț, Lower Danube University Press, 2006, p.116.

<sup>16</sup>Constantin Cucoș, *op.cit.*, p.128.

<sup>17</sup>Hyeyurn Chung , “The Korean American Cowboy and the Fallacy of Regenerative Violence in Leonard Chang’s *The Fruit’N Food*”, in *Culture, Society and Masculinity*, vol.2, issue 1, p.4.

guilty<sup>18</sup>. Unfortunately, one year earlier “Empire Liquor Market owner Soon Ja Du shot and killed 15-year-old Latasha Harlins in South Los Angeles [...] believing that Harlins was trying to steal a bottle of orange juice”<sup>19</sup>. When the riots began, the angry mob remembered the incident and expressed their rage by attacking Korea Town, which “led to the destruction of more than 2,000 Korean-owned businesses, amounting to over \$400 million in damages”<sup>20</sup>.

At a first reading, the novel may seem to start in a peculiar vein because it presents a confusing conclusion, wherein main character Tom, a second-generation Korean American, is presented as a young shopkeeper who went “blind”<sup>21</sup> after getting into a fight with a group of protestors. But on a closer reading, the placing of the conclusion at the beginning of the novel can be understood, due to the fact that the blindness can be used as a key to interpret the whole novel. In fact, Tom’s blindness may be interpreted as a metaphor for losing one’s identity, and thereby the entire text can be interpreted as a failed journey to find one’s identity.

The novel has another metaphor for the loss of identity. When Tom loses his wallet, he not only loses the wallet, but his identity as well, because without “wallet he had no identification. He had no identity”<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, it can be thought that he never had an identity to begin with, because those whose duty was to teach him to be Korean or Korean American simply passed him from one to the other and never taught him anything. Furthermore, the metaphor of the lost wallet can be also interpreted in a different manner, where it can be considered that Tom was a simple Korean American citizen who had assimilated into American culture until the moment when he entered the shop, but he lost his wallet and his American identity by entering the Korean shop because he had reentered in the world of his ancestors.

Although Tom is Korean American and had lived for a while with “his grandmother in Korea”<sup>23</sup>, he could not speak Korean which is evident in the beginning when Mr. Rhee asks him something in Korean that he cannot understand or answer. Moreover, he does not know the names of Korean food and mistakes guksoo with noodles, nor does he know how to eat Asian food, because when Mr. Rhee gave him food “he handed it to Tom with chopsticks, but paused and also gave him a fork”<sup>24</sup>. Furthermore, it can be said that, although he did not understand Korean and could not eat like a Korean, he wanted to learn the names of Korean food and to understand Koreans due to an integration process where he tried to understand his original culture during work hours while maintaining the dominant culture during his free time.

Unfortunately, although Tom tries to remain American and he adapts to the new society, he is trapped in Korea Town, because “the attraction of the Fruit’n Food was some inexplicable link to his past”<sup>25</sup> and all his efforts of watching television, eating pizza or going out with a girl are futile because he cannot forget his adherence to his Korean inheritance.

Not only does Tom work at a Korean store, but when he goes out with June, he goes to a café that looks more like an Asian tea house than as a western café, because there were

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<sup>18</sup>Matthew Hughey, “Los Angeles (California) Riots of 1992”, in Walter Rucker, James Nathaniel Upton (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of American Race Riots*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2007, pp.. 381-383.

<sup>19</sup>Kim Katherine Yungmee, *Los Angeles’s Koreantown*, Charleston, Arcadia Publishing, 2011, p.107.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibidem*, p.10.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard Chang, *The Fruit’n Food*, Seattle, Black Heron Press, 1996, p.1.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibidem*, p.8.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibidem*, p.13.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibidem*, p.15.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibidem*, p.13.

some “Japanese rice paper lamps hanging from wires running high over the customers”<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, when the two young Korean Americans go out for a drink they go to a bar where “almost everybody [...] was Asian and he thought this was strange”<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, it is emphasized that Asian Americans, in general, and Korean Americans, in particular, usually separate themselves from American society by going to places designed especially for them. Furthermore, Tom seems to find this segregation as strange at first, but after getting into the atmosphere and enjoying his date with June “he thought that this didn’t seem so bad”<sup>28</sup>, as he could simply enjoy himself without having to worry about getting into a fight with some African American who liked June’s looks.

Although Korean immigrants wanted to earn a decent living in their new country, they could not find decent jobs despite the fact they were educated as they were marginalized. This situation is exemplified by Mr. Rhee who “had gone to college in Korea; he had studied electrical engineering, but couldn’t get a job here”<sup>29</sup> and was finally forced to open a grocery store. Moreover, not only Mr. Rhee had trouble finding a job, Tom was probably also marginalized because of his Korean looks and “he couldn’t seem to find [...] work”<sup>30</sup> that would offer him enough money to live a decent life, although there “were minimum wage jobs in fast food places that he could have taken”<sup>31</sup>, until he was hired at the Korean shop.

Tom is not the only Korean American that needs to adapt to the segregated Asian American society, but June, or Jung-Me, Mr. and Mrs. Rhee daughter, a second-generation Korean American young girl, also has to fight between her attraction to the Asian American world and her parents’ desire for her to obtain a better American life. Therefore, on the one hand, her parents want for her “to go to college and all that”<sup>32</sup> so that she can get a better job and have perfect life, which meant that “they’re putting a lot of pressure”<sup>33</sup> on her, and that she had to study a lot, which she does not want to do, and on the other, she wants to explore Asian American society by working at her parents’ shop, going out with Asian friends or with people of Asian descent, like Tom, to Asian-style coffee houses or to bars frequented mainly by Asians.

June makes use of syncretism in order to find an identity, because she wants to go to coffee houses and bars like any other American youngster, but she chooses establishments that cater mainly to an Asian clientele when she decides to go out. Moreover, in an act of rebellion against society and her parents, not only does she drink, but she also smokes cigarettes and sleeps with Tom.

The whole structure of the novel is based on Mrs. Rhee’s discriminatory attitude, as she suspects each person, in general, and gumbungee, African Americans, particularly, of shoplifting, because she thinks that every gumbungee is a member of a gang and that all of them take drugs and steal things. Unfortunately, this discriminatory attitude is the consequence of there having been five hold-ups in the store and during the last one “the man hit her and take all the money”<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, during the two years of the shop’s existence numerous products had disappeared from the shop, because “they put in coat, in pocket, in

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibidem*, p.70.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibidem*, p.79.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibidem*, p.80.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibidem*, p.72.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibidem*, p.8.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibidem*, p.72.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibidem*, p.83.

bags”<sup>35</sup> and left the shop without paying anything. Even Tom finds this attitude to be disturbing and judges Mrs. Rhee as being “racist”<sup>36</sup>. Unfortunately, after working for a long time at the store, and after a child runs away with a bottle of water, he also becomes racist and suspects every African American of shoplifting. Therefore, it is not surprising that he became obsessed with watching clients that may be shoplifters and that, the moment when two African Americans tried to run with stolen goods, he takes the gun from under the counter and threatens to shoot the thieves in order to protect the shop, although Mrs. Rhee only asked him to push the alarm button.

The existence of a small gun in a store located in a bad neighborhood may be useful and it may offer some help in case of a robbery, but it denotes the lack of confidence in the police and it shows that the owners, or shopkeepers, want to answer violence with violence, which is decidedly not a good idea, as it motivates the relatives of the victims (would-be robbers) to seek revenge and thus the whole cycle of violence will repeat endlessly. Moreover, Tom’s violent reaction brought with it a large wave of discontent from the African Americans in the neighborhood, who started protesting against Mrs. and Mr. Rhee’s discriminatory attitude in front of their store.

The protests against Mr. Rhee shop are not a novelty in American society and the author warns the reader about this type of manifestation throughout the novel. Firstly, the narrator mentions that “a new story came on the radio about the continuing boycott of a Korean grocery in Brooklyn’s Flatbush section after a Haiti woman accused the owners of assaulting her”<sup>37</sup>. After the robbery, Tom hears “news about recent gang activity, especially the shootings involving neighborhood Asian gangs against other local gangs”<sup>38</sup> on the television. Furthermore, after the incident, Tom witnesses the protest against the Korean shop where he works, which starts as a peaceful protest, but the protestors became violent when their numbers increased and the media and police became involved, which led to the destruction of the store in the end.

Tom, as a second-generation Korean American who has lost his identity, can be considered the cause for all the incidents, because if he had had a clearly defined self-identity he would not have been influenced by Mrs. Rhee’s opinions on African Americans and he would not have responded violently when the two gumdnee had tried to steal from the shop. Moreover, if he had had a clear identity, he would have accepted that he was a stranger in someone else’s country and that he had to behave, but he could not accept this, unfortunately. Furthermore, this lack of identity will force him to show the protestors that he does not care about them or about Koreans because, when he left the store, he “knocked over the snack food stand”<sup>39</sup> leaving the snacks scattered on the floor and he showed his middle finger to the African American protestors, which provoked the protestors to attack him and the shop.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Leonard Chang’s social and realistic novel truly is a contemporary masterpiece because it offers a clear picture of the dystopian American society wherein Asian immigrants and second- and third-generation Asian Americans try to find their place, either in the segregated and marginalized Asian American society, either in the American dream land. Moreover, the novel offers a clear picture on how first- and second-

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<sup>35</sup>*Ibidem*, p.16.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibidem*, p.17.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibidem*, p.25,

<sup>38</sup>*Ibidem*, p.91.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibidem*, p.188.

generation Korean Americans try to adapt to the new society and how they usually end up living in segregated groups or wander around the country with no direction and without any sense of identity.

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