

Asian Expatriation, to Balance in Mobility: The Construction of Asian Americans' Multiple Identities in Shawn Wong's *American Knees*

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Abstract—*American Knees* is a novel that delves into the complex and diverse identities of Asian Americans in modern society, through the life of Raymond Ding, a Chinese American. Raymond is deeply invested in preserving the history of Asian Americans, and strives to connect with his community and immigrant past in order to shape his own identity. However, Aurora Crane and Brenda pursue their identities through integration into American society, believing that ethnicity is not necessary for self-understanding. The clash of these contrasting perspectives, and the contrast between the cultural interpretations of San Francisco and Hawaii, lead to a realization that Asian American identity is pluralist and constantly evolving. In the novel, there are the juxtaposition of a heavy historical tone and rigid family stereotypes in the first half, and a lighter, more open plot in the second half. This duality highlights the complex nature of identity formation, with the two techniques complementing and supporting each other. Through the interweaving of history, reality, self, and other, the novel portrays the many attempts at self-realization and multiple identities of Asian Americans, which do not necessarily conflict, but rather offer infinite possibilities for the shape of ethnic identity. *American Knees* is not just a lighthearted portrayal, but a nuanced attempt to decode the complexities of Asian American identities.

Index Terms—*American Knees*, Asian Americans, ethnic identity, multiple identities

I. INTRODUCTION

American Knees [1], written by Shawn Wong, is a novel that focuses on the identities and relationships within the Asian American community. As a novel revealing the current situation and life patterns of Asian Americans in the modern era, *American Knees* presents the life of Raymond Ding, a Chinese American who has an almost obsessive pursuit of asking his friends and father to remember the Asian American immigration history instead of being a pathetic "hollow bamboo". His quest for his Asian American identity relies on two main paths: a spiritual connection with Asian American people and a keen, deep empathy with immigration experience and narration.

However, Aurora Crane and Brenda, have sought their identities through the integration into American mainstream society, believing that one does not need to learn about ethnicity to understand who he or she is, but rather that one knows the identity consciously and naturally.

In the midst of acquaintances and the collision of opinions,

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and the contrast between the cultural interpretation of San Francisco, a city where many Asian Americans live, and that of the beautiful island Hawaii, with free and bold atmosphere, a new concept is gradually generated: the ethnic identity of Asian Americans is pluralist, drifting and flowing between Asian, American, and Asian-American identities. This balance in mobility provides infinite possibilities for the shape of ethnic identity. It can be found that the portrayal by Shawn Wong is not just lightly comic, but an attempt to decipher the hidden dichotomy with a technical dichotomy. The heavy historical tone and stereotypical rigid Asian American family stigma in the first half of the novel, and the lighter style and openness of the plot in the second half, decipher the dichotomy of identity formation with the dichotomy of literary techniques.

In the interweaving of history, reality, self and other, Asian American ethnic identity and the multiple ethnic attempts of self-realization are not in conflict, instead, they can well complement and support each other.

Oh [2] notes that Shawn Wong, in his first novel, *Homebase*, was a little bit too intent on presenting the immigration history of Asian Americans. However, in *American Knees*, with light comedic overtones and the swinging of point of view, this identity thing has been presented in a more imperceptible way. In the essay, Wang [3], taking the perspective of postmodern identity politics, analyzes how Shawn Wong tried to use the concept "the third space" in the social construction process of ethnic identity to transcend the influential yet dated binary oppositions. Wang [4] uses theory on the discursive hegemony, elaborates the essence of the "emasculated" Chinese American men to further portray the construction of their identities and the transmutation process of this fluid-identity construction. Dong [5] puts emphasis on the narrative motivation of *American Knees*, and the vital importance of body metaphors to build a new-age-sensibility of Asian Americans. The existing studies have pointed out the advantages of this novel for transcending the traditional binary narrative structure and realizing the gradual construction of multiple identities. They argue that the novel's lighthearted atmosphere and witty tone present issues of Asian American identity exploration in a narrative that otherwise tends to appear serious and rigid: "Business was business, and a promise was a promise. In the end, all Chinese stories came down to loyalty, betrayal, and revenge" [1]. But these studies mainly focus on the second half of the novel, while seeing the first half as a foreshadowing for the second half, and thus, to some extent, underestimating its own significance and role.

The development of the novel's narrative is itself a process

that moves from the construction of oppositions to their dissolution. In the first half, some of the traditional issues of Asian American families and the stigma of immigration history can be seen in the details of the text. The further narrative in the second half, however, is a transformation of the previous text to better express the author's point of view. What this paper tries to explore is how exactly Asian American identity, under the influence of multiculturalism, has moved from the result of expatriation, diaspora, to the subject seeking balance in mobility.

"What remains to be thought is the repetitious desire to recognize ourselves doubly, as, at once, decentered in the solidarity processes of the political group, and yet, ourself as a consciously committed, even individuated, agent of change — the bearer of belief." [6] Partial identification, an impetus to depict a portrait between fact and fantasy, is part of the theory. "The anti-nationalist, ambivalent nation-space becomes the crossroads to a new transnational culture. The 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves'" [7]. Bhabha believes that dialogue can still hide the violence of discourse, misinterpretations, and the crisis of culture. Only by acknowledging differences and contradictions is it possible to truly resolve such invisible problems. Otherwise, dialogue is just a strategy to conceal the cultural hegemony of discourse.

Bayor [8] offers his argument on how to better understand the development of mixed racial and ethnic intermarriages. He thinks even the U.S. has acknowledged mixed ancestry, there are many ambiguities hidden inside. Moreover, according to Healey [9], there are three types of cultural pluralism, one of which refers to integration without acculturation. It's intertwined with the concept of cultural hybridity as the mutual influence of different cultures refers not to a fusion, but more to a hybridization. Immigrants are at the junction of two cultural mediums, stuck on the edge, living in a culturally third space that is different from the one-dimensional world.

As a result, their identity inevitably takes on a dual quality. In the case of Asian Americans, they both carry Chinese cultural identity and confront American cultural traits; in addition, they are Asian Americans, and more importantly, themselves.

II. ASIAN EXPATRIATION, IMMIGRATION HISTORY, AND FAMILY BONDS IN ASIAN AMERICANS' LIFE

A. *The Deep-Rooted Family Expectations and Shared Dreams*

A bond based on family ties that cannot be severed, interrupted, or abandoned, can be clearly seen. For Darleen's family, the second generation had to inherit the family business and run the restaurant, whether they were willing to do or not, the reason is: one should never quit his or her family. Even Darleen's outstanding educational background and research experience failed to make her part of the family business. She distinctly knew that it was male members who maintained the family. What seems treacherous and ironic is that she did not see this as a discrimination or an exclusion;

she saw it as an incomparable blessing — the call of freedom. For Raymond, no matter where he went to, the values instilled in him by his family were ingrained in his heart, which is more like: one cannot quit his or her family.

Raymond was eager to join Darleen's family, to gain a sense of belonging, to truly "become a Chinese", to have a male child, or to say, fulfill "the list of family dreams" deep rooted in his mind because "there's a heritage to protect, the family tree" [1]. When Darleen and Raymond ended their 7-year-marriage, Raymond's conduct and choice, being the first member to confront divorce and to face the possibility of not marrying a Chinese wife in the future, were seen as a huge disgrace to his whole family. For the marriage with Asian women, both for himself and for his son, Raymond's father, Wood, even tried a new version of "photo bride" though strongly rejected by Raymond, stating it's "their reality; our fantasy" [1]. Besides, Raymond had an anxiety — an ineffable fear of relapsing into a western discursive hegemony that roughly equals Chinese Americans to Chinese.

Moreover, this traditional imprint of family concept was not weakened by the distance, but on the contrary, it was highlighted and exaggerated by the deliberate intensification within the coteries and the thirst for the everlasting, lifelong pursuit of spiritual "homeland".

Nevertheless, the distance and time eroded and worn away the braw days, the fine picture of hometown culture as well as family legacy, leaving few customs, regulations, and procedures instead — as it is said, "getting a good education, getting a good job, writing thank you cards for gifts, and knowing what to do at funerals"; "to have children, to keep the family name alive" [1]. Gradually, the imprint became part of his body, an indelible tattoo: "The liquor burned his father's words deeper into his tongue"; "He lived his life as a series of symbolic gestures" [1].

From this perspective, it's quite clear how delicate, vulnerable, and unstable Raymond's identity was after the separation with Darleen. He encountered the most tragic, ironic situation of cultural diversity. He thought he might be a "lapsed Chinese" [1]. That's because his self-recognition of being a Chinese could only be confirmed by the identity as being the husband of a Chinese American woman, and the identity as the half-son of a complete, traditional, and thus "real" Chinese American family. Otherwise, he could not recognize his self-being.

B. *Silent, Distorted, and Complicated Asian American Masculinity*

Furthermore, there's an unusual manifestation of love, in order to resist uncertainty and chaos, composed of silence, and strongly related to a misleading masculinity and gender stereotypes, guilt, and sacrifice, worthy of being noticed.

Although Raymond's mother Helen had passed away for years, "guilt kept the spirit present" [1]. Between the pained father and son, "silence was love" [1]. The memories and stigma of his mother's death gave him a need to truly become "Chinese", and the end of his marriage with Darleen closed off his access to self-identification based upon the outside world, leaving him very anxious and confused.

Even apart from fictionality, the masculinity can still be reflected in the paradigm of authorial writing. *American*

Knees is an attempt to break free from the prejudicial stigma and rigid stereotypes of Asian Americans. However, this breakthrough is still demonstrated by how Raymond, a male character, interacts with the Asian American women who are portrayed as objects. Women are still treated as a canvas for showing diversity, to be sketched and painted at will, although the women's discourse leads and prepares the way for the male protagonist's great adventure of identity search.

C. Immigration History of Asian American Family: Belonging or Burden

The construction of identity, upon ethnicity, has been discussed through the shape of half-Asian American woman character, who first appeared in *Eye Contact: Aurora Crane*. Aurora lives in a biracial family. Aurora's mother is a nisei, referring to the 2nd generation Japanese Americans, for example, Lily in the representative American movie *Come See the Paradise*, which was released in 1990, directed by Alan Parker. Aurora's father is an Irish American. In a conversation between Aurora and Raymond, it is shown that as a nisei, Aurora's mother had been caught in wartime concentration camps for "relocation" for a long period in her childhood. Also, Aurora's uncle did not become "no-no boys", instead, he joined the army to prove his loyalty to the land in one of the all-nisei teams.

World War II brought about the worst conditions Japanese Americans could ever imagined. They were identified as "enemy aliens" by ancestry without the recognition of citizenship [10]. On December 7th, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led to the internment of Japanese residents in the U.S. This was done to prevent potential espionage, but was also fueled by wartime prejudice and hysteria towards Japanese Americans.

The sudden actions of the governor of California and the state attorney general resulted in the firing of Japanese immigrants (both issei and nisei) and their disqualification from the necessities, such as medical care, fishing, and even access to food and gasoline. Japanese Americans faced difficulties in obtaining the foundations of life as their insurance was cancelled and they were denied services by various establishments.

When Raymond's father, Wood, was Raymond's age, it's precisely after the end of the Second World War. The U.S. outlawed immigration restrictions specifically for China, and therefore, Chinese finally had the opportunity to become legal U.S. citizens.

According to Raymond, the efforts they'd made and the endeavors of being "model minority" had been "paid off" — "A man who had been a prince of Chinatown could now become a prince of the city" [1]. That was also the first time Wood felt intimacy and attachment in America — the country where he was born and raised, but had never truly belonged to before. "We work hard. We keep quiet. I am the model minority." [1] More than commendation and reward, the title of model minority is a chattering mantra, a kind of hovering monitor that shapes Chinese Americans into people who live in a case.

Why did America need over a dozen different exclusionary immigration laws, and why did several states pass anti-miscegenation and alien land laws? A second generation of bachelors were

dying out as the gift of American citizenship was bestowed on them. Could the 'loyal minority' now bring their wives and families from China? Yes, said America, but only 105 per year. Those with wives were royalty, and the children born to those families walked the streets of Chinatown like princes and princesses among the aging kings of a generation made important by law. [1]

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a discriminatory law that aimed to restrict Chinese immigration to the United States. This was done in an effort to favor local workers and prevent the so-called "racial mixture" of the population. The act prohibited Chinese people from becoming U.S. citizens and suspended immigration from China for ten years, which was later extended by the Geary Act of 1892. It imposed high taxes, making it difficult for Chinese miners to come to the U.S. Those who were already in the U.S. faced difficulty in re-entering the country. The act also made it untoward for Chinese immigrants to reunite with their families.

However, the Magnuson Act of 1943 led to the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, as the U.S. and China were allies in World War II. The repeal changed the requirements for Chinese immigration and allowed Chinese to become citizens, helping the U.S. to distinguish itself from fascist regimes and clear itself from charges of racial discrimination.

Aurora hardly knew the historical facts. She was young, sociable, and fitted very well. Before dating with Raymond, she never thought about questioning the Asian American history of immigration. Raymond, as an assistant director of the Office of Minority Affairs, thought identity and dignity worth the most. He said, "If you don't know what questions to ask, you lose your history; when you lose your history, you lose your sense of self." [1]

He imposed on Aurora the notion that he subconsciously wanted her to be not of mixed race, but completely Asian. He wanted her to be sensitive to identify the oppression of Asians in American society and hoped that she would be able to defend herself, as well as her Asian identity, at all circumstances.

However, too many hopes and demands against oppression became another kind of invisible oppression, different from the oppression from American mainstream society though.

III. MOBILITY AND DYNAMICS IN ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNIC IDENTITY

A. Multiple Ways of Seeking Asian American Self-Identity

It's quite noteworthy that the mobility and dynamics of identity, and especially ethnic identity, has been revealed through Aurora's quarrels with Raymond. It is about the complex composition of a person's ethnicity and how it had been reflected in "others'" eyes.

Raymond has a habit of seeking, confirming, and verifying his identity by building connections with his Asian friends and girlfriends. "Was he harboring some guilt for having a half-white girlfriend instead of displaying pride for having a half-Asian girlfriend?" [1] He achieved the construction of a complete self-identity by making sure the location of his girlfriends on the map, through their shared memory ties.

Moreover, the name was the original tool to help pursue

one's identity. As for Aurora, she tried to use her middle name since school days, "I'd write 'Aurora Reiko Crane' in the upper-right-hand corner of every page of my homework. It gave me an identity" [1]. Unlike Raymond, who seeks his identity from history, and interactions, Aurora finds her identity through her name, written in a typical American way. The name is the channel that connects the self to the society, through which the self becomes so visible to others.

"I wasn't his daughter, I was a prostitute. They've seen me in the movies. The sailor and the pretty Asian girl. When I'm with you I'm safe from blame." [1] When Aurora and his father walk together, people rarely treat them as daughter and father, according to Aurora. Some people have already been controlled by that ingrained cultural codes which give an impression that the beautiful young Asian girl, with an aged Irish man, is always a prostitute. However, this may also reflect how Aurora has been drawn in and constrained by her own imagination, of course, on the basis of social conventions, of how people see her and gaze her as and into a mix-raced Asian American.

B. Possibilities and Risks of Being "Jook-Sing" — Asian American Dilemma and Anxiety

For the descendants of Chinese immigrants like Raymond and Jimmy, there is a huge fracture between their appearances and their identities, and they cynically call themselves "hollow bamboos" [1]. Bamboo is a symbol of China, and the hollow bamboo means a person with Chinese appearances yet without either the "substance" of Chinese backgrounds, or the access to Chinese languages and cultures.

Furthermore, all these ethnic things do not merely appear in the scope of western versus eastern world, but also exist within the Asian American group, and then became intra-Asian ethnic paradoxes.

An example is that during the travel, Raymond always wants Aurora to carry the camera because he would like to do anything to prevent the situation: being identified as a Japanese tourist. This ethnic identity incubus changes with places. In San Francisco, one of the main cities Asian Americans inhabit, Aurora belonged to the city when she was with Raymond because she did not need to explain anything to anyone anymore; in Hawaii, it's Aurora who naturally felt like she belonged, while Raymond became an "outsider". Being there, Aurora was independent of Raymond's identity, and of his doctrines of identity as well.

C. Indestructible "Loyalty" to Asian American Identity

For another thing, the ethnic identity of the minorities is centered on the "conscience", the "responsibility" of the choice of ethnicity, and the "loyalty" to one's race:

'But you're not being responsible at other times for the race. Each time you let something pass that's generally insulting or racist about Asian people and it isn't specifically directed at you, you're in a sense passing for white, or at least non-Asian.' [1]

For Aurora, at first, the identity was such a changeable and fluid thing that someday she could even choose not to be an Asian American, while that's something Raymond could not understand at all. Although that is partly because Aurora is half Irish, half Japanese [11], a much more fundamental reason was the way how they viewed the construction of

identity.

In terms of dating, while Asian Americans date Asians, they are seen as outsiders of the social circles of mainstream society; and when they date white people, in Asian restaurants or ghettos, they become outsiders themselves — the one and only outsider in this interracial relationship. The possibility of becoming an outsider at any time makes them insecure and uncomfortable, as if they are dancing on an ethnic tightrope.

IV. BALANCE IN MOBILITY: NEW POSSIBILITIES IN MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF ASIAN AMERICANS

A. The Challenges Against and Deconstruction of "Ethnically Correct Robot"

For Raymond, a character helping carry Shawn Wong's serious historical narrative, which dominated in *Homebase*, into Wong's *American Knees*, the history of immigration is a topic too important for him to forget, yet too heavy for him to carry on.

He was always in a state of great contradictions: on the one hand, he had lived the life of a new-age Asian American. On the other hand, he constantly forced himself and people around him to safeguard, to remember, and to ask after immigration history.

He required Aurora to remember her mother and uncle's immigration history and asked his father, Wood, not to return to China to look for a wife. Because if he found a Chinese wife, he would fall into the oversimplified tendency of mainstream U.S. society in history to conflate Chinese Americans and Chinese, Raymond contended. He could not help pursuing the question: "Could history and identity be re-formed, re-created, re-enacted?" [1]

The presence of Aurora and Brenda, on the other hand, gives a completely alternative voice to the historical perspective on identity.

Brenda Nishitani, Aurora's best friend, offered a very different view: "racial paranoia". She thought people should not become politically correct robot. She hated Raymond's doctrines because "Ro (Aurora's nickname) is Ro. You made her start talking all that nonsense about being an Asian American woman" [1]. She argued that the degree to which people integrate into society and with social groups is never solely related to race and gender, but depends more on the attitude people use to accept others, connect with others, and actively build self-images. Also, she believed that people do not need to be indoctrinated about the knowledge of identity to know who they are. According to Brenda, obviously, Asian American women are much more adaptable, and therefore, they blend in nicely.

B. Asian American New Identity: Seeking a Created Path Towards Pluralism and Fluidity

"American Knees" can be interpreted from two aspects. For one thing, it refers to the "leftovers" of Asian American childhood memories. This humiliation is wrapped in jokes and children's slapstick, but it exists in the deepest memory. Until they become adults, they are still disturbed and perplexed by the haunting problems from childhood: "In the schoolyard, kids used to taunt him. 'What are you — Chinese,

Japanese, or American Knees?’’ [1]

For another thing, this is a borrowing of the concept in biology during the process of cultural construction. The knee is the turning and intersection point of the joints. The same holds true for Asian American identity. They have both a psychological and bloodline connection to Asian society and a geographically and culturally inseparable intermingling with American society, and thus belonging to an identity that crosses borders as a knee.

Raymond had an almost obsessive demand for identity. When he felt confused and ambiguous, he wanted to escape. “Away. That was the key to the whole matter: away from what? Raymond knew exactly what he had given up and what had been led away from” [1]. The fluidity of identity, in a multicultural context, means dislocation, drift, and uncertainty.

This uncertainty makes the fulfillment of stability almost impossible: “Did a search for identity have to have symbolic momentum? Was it enough to push ‘deep’ into the heart of America in a romantic search for identity, or was it enough to find something somewhere on the surface, a momentary acknowledgement of a specific time and place?” [1] Therefore, if he could not recognize his own identity from his own perspective, relying merely on extrinsic confirmation to acquire it, Raymond would have nowhere to go.

Nevertheless, this uncertainty also brings a multitude of possibilities, helping shaping the multiple identities with plasticity.

V. CONCLUSION

The rewriting, twisting, and subverting of the second half of the novel, on the first half, is a proof of a certain degree of recognition of multiple identities. The narrative of the work delves into the intricacies of identity, showcasing the fluidity and multiplicity of the Asian American memories and experience.

It highlights the importance of acknowledging one’s history while striving towards a new, self-determined future. Through the characters such as Aurora and Brenda, it underscores the coexistence of the pluralism and fluidity of identities. The Asian American identity should serve as a spiritual core rather than a limiting label.

The reunion of Raymond and Aurora symbolizes a newfound understanding of multiple identities, transcending

a singular, rigid expression of Raymond’s Asian American identity. Instead, he internalizes it, making it an integral part of his life.

The two cities of Hawaii and San Francisco serve as powerful symbols, representing the steady, defined, and standard Asian American identity, and the boundless possibilities of self-expression and self-exploration, respectively.

Through the interplay of various characters, the novel indicates that the desire to be one’s authentic self and the embrace of the Asian American identity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they can precisely complement and reinforce one another.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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