

From Collective Assimilation to Self-Determination: Transracial Identity Construction in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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Abstract—This paper examines Chang-rae Lee's novel *A Gesture Life* through Francis Fukuyama's theory of identity politics to explore how the protagonist Hata's outer and inner selves are continuously deconstructed and reconstructed in a transnational context across Korea, Japan, and America. It argues that wartime Japan's political assimilation policies, family adoption, and gender norms impose a collective identity on Hata, leading him to internalize a "Japanese Lieutenant" persona while denying his Korean origins. However, his encounters with K and Sunny catalyze his inner self-awareness—what Fukuyama terms "thymos"—by exposing the disjunction between his external roles and suppressed subjectivity. K's challenges to colonial narratives and Sunny's embodied racial difference reveal the limitations of imposed identities and the necessity of self-determination. Ultimately, Hata's final choice of rescuing his foreign grandson Thomas and abandoning his pursuit of racial identity illustrates the possibility of breaking free from institutional molds to reclaim an autonomous inner self. By situating Hata's journey within transnational and transracial contexts, this study highlights the complex interplay between race, recognition, and individual agency in global literature.

Keywords—transnational identity, racial embodiment, collective assimilation, institutionalization, self-determination

I. INTRODUCTION

Chang-rae Lee's novel *A Gesture Life* illustrates how identity is continuously formed and reshaped within varied racial landscapes, and how both bodily and social selves are structured by cultural and communal forces. As Hamilton Carrol observes, "to become a citizen is to lose one's uniqueness in the face of a communal national history and character one can take, indeed must take, as one's own" [1]. This subsuming of individuality functions like a castration of the inner self, forcing conformity to social norms and prompting us to ask: does our existence value derive from embodying a collective identity, or from transcending prescribed roles to craft a distinct self? Based on such question, Francis Fukuyama introduces a third dimension of the soul—"thymos," the aspect yearning for recognition—alongside desire and reason [2]. While we enact social roles externally, each person harbors an inner self that seeks recognition. Fukuyama locates identity in thymos, arguing that when both inner and outer selves are seeking for acknowledgement the inner claims primacy. [2]. Hata, the novel's protagonist, navigates three cultural spheres: Korea, Japan, and America, "is viewed, judged and incorporated by the society at large" [3]. He compulsively pursues an externally sanctioned identity across different collectives, yet constantly feels unacknowledged—precisely because his

inner self has been neglected.

Hata's inner self-awareness is provoked by K and Sunny, whose presence systematically challenges his externally imposed identity. As Young-Oak Lee observes about Hata, "his obsession with being totally accepted and recognized blinds him so that he cannot perceive truths in K or Sunny" [4]. If we read Hata as "a perpetrator of gender violence" from the perspective of trauma, K and Sunny nevertheless also embody forms of oppression, which is why many scholars have identified echoes of K in Sunny [5]. However, stripped of his external Japanese identity, Hata himself appears as an unknowing subject of being oppressed. Fukuyama argues that identity is "on the side of the inner and not the outer self" [2]. Although Hata seems to be actively constructing an individual identity, he is in fact mimicking the collective identity imposed upon him. Constrained by external structures and pursuing a contradictory goal, his attempt at authentic self-construction is therefore doomed to failure.

In this essay, I will base on Francis Fukuyama's theory of identity politics to analyze Hata's construction of outer self and inner self. Fukuyama suggests that "[the] foundations of identity [are] laid with the perception of a disjunction between one's inside and one's outside" [2]. K and Sunny, via their differing national narratives, destabilize the external order: they generate recurrent contradictions in Hata's self-perception and unsettle his quest for a self-recognized identity. Moreover, Hata's movements through various familial and national structures make his case emblematic of transnational and transracial challenges, enabling us to trace how an individual gradually reveals an inner self within collective constraints. As Suk Koo Rhee argues, this complexity and subtlety of this novel is precisely "a dimension that is crucial to understanding its racial politics" [6].

II. POLITICS OF BELONGING: HATA'S SELF-RECOGNITION OF JAPANESE IDENTITY

Against the backdrop of World War II, Hata's Japanese identity is the result of politics. Kim-Su Rasmussen states that "the novel portrays Hata as an allegory of widespread – but denied and repressed – Korean collaboration with the Japanese during the colonial period" [5]. Such collaboration enables Hata (as a Korean) to acquire Japanese identity through a systematized identity-building process, allowing him to be integrated into and to serve a kind of "martial general will" [2]. The system that promotes Hata's transformation of identity operates gradually, which works

“at the level of on-going subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject [his] bodies, govern [his] gestures, dictate [his] behaviors” [7]. The sense of belonging derived from the social system causes Hata to fully accept the identity imposed on him and regard it as his true inner self.

Firstly, identity politics is “driven by the quest for equal recognition by groups that have been marginalized by their societies” [2]. Due to the immense demand for manpower during the war, Japan attempted to create a hypocritical sense of equality in Korea to facilitate the conscription of Koreans. On one hand, Japan has reduced racist terms in the media to create a superficial atmosphere of racial equality. For example, “[already] in the late 1930s, the Japanese media in the metropole ... conspicuously began to avoid the virulently discriminatory label *Senjin*, as well as *Futei Senjin* (or ‘unruly *Senjin*’) to refer to Koreans” [8]. On the other hand, Japan creates a pan-nationalist concept that transcends single ethnic group which is the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. We can see such propaganda from K’s conversation with Hata:

He always told my brother that we should revere our Asian heritage and protect it from foreign influences, that whether Chinese or Japanese or Korean we were rooted of a common culture and mind and that we should put aside our differences and work together. (249)

K shows obvious irony towards the hypocrisy of this concept, claiming that “it is to be a Japanese life” (249). Nevertheless, Hata believes it is “exactly our Emperor’s mandate” and commits himself to the common goal of developing “an Asian prosperity” (249). The generalized concept constructed by Japan has stripped Hata’s recognition of his original Korean attribute, breaking down his racial assimilation barriers between Japan and Korea and ideologically paving the way for Hata’s strong identification with Japan.

Then, Japan grants Hata his Japanese identity through family adoption, enabling him to serve the wartime society. From the perspective of Patricia Hill Collins, family “constitutes a fundamental principle of social organization”. [9] Wilfredo F. Arce further claims that family, as a basic social unit, “exerts great influence on the functioning and organization of the larger society”. [10] This enables Hata to integrate into Japanese society through a Japanese family. However, Hata’s politically motivated adoptive family differs from traditional families. In Collins’s view, “the significance of the traditional family ideal transcends ideology”. [9] Hata’s adoptive family is completely opposite to this opinion under Japan’s assimilation system, in that the influence of ideology is far greater than the ties between family members. Hata’s view of his “strong bond” (244) with the Kurohatas only refers to some material conditions provided by his Japanese family like “a respectable house and schooling and outside lessons” (244). Compared to the adoption family that improves his living standard, Hata expresses warmer gratitude to the society that helps him achieve class transition and identity transformation “for it seems clear that it was the purposeful society that did so, and really nothing and no one else” (73). In other words, for Hata the family is merely a transitional product that has nothing to do with any traditional attributes

such as bloodline. Its existence is only a political tool to enable foreigners like Hata to gain ethnic identity.

Fujitani suggests that “[colonial] and imperial powers have worked to actually fashion gender, sex, and families in ways that have been enabling for colonial and imperial rule”. [8] In addition to family, Fujitani also mentions gender, which is the final piece of the puzzle that makes up Hata’s perception of the outer self. Lee gives the same idea that colonialism “enhances the gendering of a nation and the exploitation of the sexuality of the colonized”. [4] This gender differentiation unfolds from two aspects—the feminization narrative of the colonized and the provocation of men’s pursuit of masculinity. Japan was under an extreme “patriarchal order” at that time, and by feminizing their colonies they can artificially create a status gap which is unrelated to race. [1] “Coming into full subjecthood is thus presented as a masculinist and Japanese nationalist opportunity”. [8] This is an opportunity for Korean males to realize “a belief in the inherent superiority” which is “fundamental to the maintenance of social order”. [2] Meanwhile, it also creates a bond called masculinity for Japanese and Korean soldiers. The common sense of superiority brought by the absolute status between men and women make soldiers from different races aware of their commonalities.

Together, these dynamics constitute a politics of identity formation that transforms Hata’s sense of his Korean origins and installs him within a militarist service identity. Hata thinks himself that his acquisition of Japanese identity symbolizes “the true beginning” (74) of his life, yet he is just as doing what Fukuyama describes: “what they believe to be their true inner self is actually constituted by their relationships with other people, and by the norms and expectations that those others provide”. [2] Consequently, Hata surrenders moral autonomy—he praises the captain’s vivisection, ignores the suffering of comfort women, and, despite occasional inner conflict, repeatedly self-hypnotizes himself into the role of “Japanese Lieutenant Hata”.

III. K’S CHALLENGE AND THE EMERGENCE OF HATA’S INNER SELF

This external system is challenged by Hata’s interactions with K. His hidden inner self is activated by new passions based on a common culture and language. [2] At the very beginning, K questions Hata’s Japanese identity by using their shared language, Korean. When speaking Korean, K appears more “confident and mature” (234) and exhibits “an uprightness about her posture” (234). These behaviors indicate her pride in being Korean. Under Hata’s outward Japanese identity, K directly reveals his inner ethnicity, telling him “[you] are a Korean” (234) and that the common language connects him to Korean culture because “most Japanese would never bother to learn to speak Korean as well as you do” (234). The feeling of having “something different” (235) from his external identity causes his fear which makes him “at once amazed and strangely intimidated” (234). As noted, Hata employs a self-hypnosis way to conceal his inner self. For example, “I have lived in Japan since I was born” (234) is a clumsy lie that reveals the fragility of his resistance. Yet “K’s effort to deconstruct Hata’s colonial stance continues when she illuminates the kind of family, society,

and culture from which she comes”.[4] K’s racialized deconstruction plants seeds of doubt in Hata, and his vague inner self begins to take shape. By approaching K, he feels “he might somehow be found” (240). This is why Captain Ono describes K as “dangerous” (222). The inner self of herself that K shows is that:

She would be a young woman of character, as significant to her father as was his son. She would have the independence that comes from learning and grace. She would choose her kind of devotion; she would bear children and do her necessary work, a true vocation, and she would grow old as I have grown old, though she would look backward with a different cast than mine, a different afterlight. (299)

In any case, her identity should fundamentally conflict with that of “a comfort woman” assigned to her by the external system. Her “definite presence and will and lively spirit” (268) makes Captain Ono feel that there is a “commonality between someone like her and [him]” (268). Captain Ono has a clear understanding of his true self—as a Japanese surgeon—which enables him to determine “his course and acts” (268). Hata’s situation, however, is different: the sense of identity disjunction, mediated by shared racial attributes, is transferred to him. K’s desire for death functions as a defense of her inner self, since “inner self is the basis of human dignity”. [2] Killing K as a “countryman” (238) forces Hata to acknowledge the gulf between K’s inner and outer identities and to confront his own identity conflict. Hata’s experience with K makes him realize that what he longs for is “[his] own place in the accepted order of things” (299); it leads him to ask “who am I, really?” [2] and to doubt the outer self he has been given.

Nonetheless, the emergence of the inner self does not mean a rebellion against the system. On the contrary, “if that outer society is going to properly recognize the inner self, one has to imagine society itself being able to change in fundamental ways”. [2] Fukuyama’s argument highlights the limitations of Hata, that he relies on external changes in his pursuit of his inner self. As Captain Ono said, “blood is only so useful, or hindering” (266) and “the rest is strong thought and strong action” (266). While national identity is undoubtedly important as an unchangeable initial attribute, individual identity is not solely based on inherent traits but must be constructed through personal spontaneous actions. Hata “too much [depends] upon generous fate and gesture” (266) that he merely passively accepts the identity given him by others without “internal possession [and] embodiment” (266). When Hata seeks to acknowledge his Korean identity and his relationship with K, he tells Captain Ono of his decision to marry K, seeking Ono’s recognition. Thus, when the external system associates his inner self as a Korean with the role of “foster lover” (270), Hata finds himself in a dilemma: he begins to doubt his outer self, while the external system blatantly devalues his inner self, causing him to feel a sense of disjunction from both sides. This makes him unable to make a choice which leads to K’s tragedy.

IV. FROM DOC. HATA TO SELF-DETERMINATION: THE AWAKENING OF HATA’S INNER SELF

By moving to America, Hata escapes from the unacceptable external system of Japan, as K says, she knows that Hata “dreams of one” (301) escape. Yet she also says

that “[there] is no escape” (301). Being with K makes Hata realize that in Japan, he can only accept “the wartime culture of shared sacrifice and military codes of conduct” (68). Consequently, he leaves Japan “for the relative—though very different—liberties of America” (68). This difference is that Japan uses external system to make Hata naturally play the role of a given outer self, and there is no identity problem for him. In America, however, his identity has to be constructed by himself. Since “the most available freedom is to live alone” (68), the collectively constructed accepted order does not exist, therefore the issue of identity remains unresolved for Hata. Fukuyama points out that, “[the] psychological dislocation engendered by the transition [...] laid the basis for an ideology of nationalism based on an intense nostalgia for an imagined past of strong community”. [2] Rasmussen further states that Hata “repeats the structure of collaboration”. [5] Rather than trying to create his own identity, he parodies his ideal archetype—Captain Ono:

I was deeply impressionable and unassuming and full of dread, knowing little else but whatever was provided to me by professional men like the doctor, who were authoritative and born into an elite caste, and who seemed the very incarnation of our meticulously constructed way of life. (171-172)

As Liv says to him, “I mean inside, you are a doctor” (328). Although he keeps saying that he doesn’t “refer to himself as one” (11), he accepts the title of “Doc Hata” indeed because doctor is the model identity that he subconsciously idealizes. And he actually continues to reinforce this identity through various external elements: living in “a doctor’s kind of house” (46), running a medical supply store and giving advice to others like a doctor—just like what he does for Ms. Hickey even after selling the store. After establishing his external identity as the “number-one citizen” (95) through his role as a doctor, the inescapable racial identity becomes the only obstacle. In this way, his parody expands once again—by reenacting the family relationships under the Japanese system to gain national identity recognition. Therefore, the relationship between the external system and Hata undergoes a reversal. Just as he transitions from being an adoptee to an adoptive parent, Hata shifts from being a recipient of the system to becoming its enforcer, “sets the rules and expects [Sunny] to obey them”. [4]

Yet Sunny’s African bloodline places her in a unique role and her rebellion embodies another force against the external system. As Hata says:

But when I saw her for the first time I realized there could be no such conceit for us, no easy persuasion. Her hair, her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other colour (or colours) ran deep within her. (204)

The obvious racial differences make the separation between her outer and inner self occur naturally, without requiring a character like K to catalyze it. Within Hata’s system, Sunny is “caught between two cultures, that of their parents, which they reject, and that of their adopted country, which doesn’t fully accept them”. [2] Consequently, her escape from Hata’s system and integration into the Black community marks her first act of rebellion. However, “colored people were a rare sight in Bedley Run, especially at social events” (101). The Black community is merely a limited social space that can only provide Sunny with a sense

of African American identity, unable to offer her any other social identity like Hata gives her. “There was no concept of ‘society’ standing outside the individual, limiting a person’s choices, and no valorization of an inner self over that society”. [2] Just as Hata seeks recognition from Captain Ono for his Korean identity and his relationship with K, Sunny can only seek acknowledgment from Hata for her African identity and her relationship with the child. Giving up the right of choice also signifies abandoning the inner self. Finally, they share the same tragic ending brought about by the system: Sunny can only let her first child be killed by Hata, just as Hata helplessly watches K being dismembered by Japanese soldiers.

Sunny’s second rebellion is apparently successful. She leaves the small town and, through being “persistent” (213), builds her complete social identity by forming an African American family with Thomas while working as a store manager. Even Hata, who symbolizes the former system, admits that this is “[her] proud establishment” (214). At this point, after so many years, the changes in the external environment prompt them to once again face a shift in their identities. Sunny faces the dilemma of unemployment and will be “not so proud for long” (215), while Hata, with the house fire, is transformed from a helping doctor into a patient, and the closure of the store also diminishes his identity from “good Doc Hata to the nice old fellow to whoever that ancient Oriental” (200). Ultimately, Thomas, as a connecting figure between the two, once again awakens Hata’s vague inner self.

The relationship between Hata and Thomas almost mirrors the interaction between Hata and K. As Hata’s social identity begins to collapse, Thomas establishes a connection with Hata through family relations, which is gradually strengthened throughout their interactions. He “half-promised” (216) Sunny not to tell Thomas his identity and sooner Thomas becomes “whom I told people was my grandson” (218). When K deconstructs Hata’s identity, he feels the same vulnerability and fear:

And then my having the companion feeling, too, that my life had all at once become provisional again, the way a young man’s might be, open to possibility and choice and then vulnerability as well, a state of being I have always treated with veritable dread. (220)

The dramatic scene of Thomas’s fall into the water completely activates Hata’s awareness of his inner self. Liv, as the acknowledges of Hata’s outer self, symbolizes his identity as Doc Hata. Saving Thomas, then, symbolizes a denial of external identity. The choice between Renny and Thomas now dramatically paralleling the scene in the final moment when Hata must decide whether to kill K or not. At the same time, the imagery of the Bedley Run pool completely overlaps with that “pool” in Hata’s doctor-style house—“an archive of the trauma of his past”. [1] Beneath the waters of that pool lie Hata’s inner self he buries, once awakened to life by K. Now in the same scene, under the same sense of urgency, Hata is facing the same choice. And he decides by his own will for the first time—he swims “as fast as I can out to the line of red-and-white floats” (323) “where Thomas would be” (323) instead of turning back to save Renny. He hopes to find out through contact with Thomas that “if something like love is forever victorious, truly conquering all, or if there are those who, like me,

remain somehow whole and sovereign, still live unvanquished” (216). This time, he finds the answer within himself.

Ironically, after Hata later rescues Renny, Liv calls him “Franklin Hata” (328) for the first time in the novel. Only he knows the order in which he acts at that moment, and the truth makes it impossible for him to embrace the American identity he has always yearned for. In the last paragraph he says:

Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. (356)

This flag symbolizes the black flag, and even more so, K—“her figure naked and pale, loosely enrobed in a black silken flag” (286), asking Hata “will we be going away soon?” (286). His acceptance of the “flag” and his abandonment of everything external—the house, the store and the identity of Doc Hata—both prove that he has returned to the inner self awakened by K. Hence, as Hata has promised, he sets out on the journey with K, “to Shanghai, and Kyoto, and perhaps even Seoul, or some other place” (287). At the beginning of the novel, Hata says “living thirty-odd years in the same place begins to show on a man” (1). This recalls people of the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, in which after decades-long sentence Red describes the prison as follows:

But I’m telling you, these walls are funny. First you hate ‘em...then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes...you get so you depend on ‘em. That’s institutionalized.

Such institutionalization is Hata’s whole life. He escapes from the prison of the system and then finds himself building the same one. In the film, Red breaks free from his constraints and returns to his inner self. Similarly, Hata breaks free from his cage, sets off on a journey, and finally he will “come almost home” (356)—“when I reach the house and close the front door it’s then I think K has finally come back for me. It is the moment I think I feel at home” (286).

V. CONCLUSION

Through Hata’s final awakening and choice, we see the possibility for an individual to break through external constraints and move towards inner self-identity. His continuous process of self-exploration answers the question of why individuals often feel uncertain about their own identity within a society. In the text, racial embodiment is both the source of oppression and a catalyst for self-awareness for Hata. According to Fujitani, “[individuals] could become genuine national subjects only through their self-determination, not by ascription”. [8] While the state assigns individuals’ social identities through external conditions such as ethnicity, gender, and economic status, it also turns them into prisoners of collective attributes. For an individual to truly acknowledge the meaning of their own existence, they must rely on self-determination of identity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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