

A Comparative Analysis of Historical Cyborgs in the Select Novels of Min Jin Lee and Linda Sue Park

Ms. Liliane Maria Yvette G.

Ph.D. Research Scholar (FT), Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science/ Bharathiar University/
Coimbatore/ Tamil Nadu, India
Email – lilianence@gmail.com

Abstract: Culture being the umbrella term for the beliefs, customs, and values of a particular set of people plays a pivotal role in shaping and sustaining the society and its ever-evolving ideologies. Literature, the reflector of life captures the vivid images of culture and the disputes that arise when the long-believed customs are at risk with the change in generational mindset and imperialistic influence. Apart from the above mentioned attributes of culture, events of historical intolerance play a vital role in shaping the societies and cultural evolutions of today, witnessing the rise of Cyborgs who help shape the organisation in their own pristine way. Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* and Linda Sue Park's *When My Name was Keoko*, paint clear images of war, immigration, assimilation and the emergence of Cyborgs.

Key Words: Culture, Cyborgs, History, Militarism and Patriarchy, Imperialism.

1. INTRODUCTION:

William J. Long states in his work, *English Literature Its History and Its Significance for the Life of the English Speaking World*, that the purpose of literature is knowing man intrinsically. The artists of literature consciously and unconsciously incorporate themselves, their culture and their thoughts in their works of art. There is an undeniable chemistry between writers and their affinity or opposition to their own cultural background, voicing it through their works. This expression of thought finds its place in the prospering field of culture studies, a significant embodiment of Literature, paralleling it in every possible way.

Culture studies question the very idea of canonical literature and has brought about a vast difference in the reading and theorising of texts on gaining institutional success. In the words of Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, Culture studies has sought to theorise the role of literature in society in new ways and to literary texts in relation to cultural institutions, cultural history, and other cultural texts, forms and practices. The evolution of culture studies in South East Asia is of equal importance with British culture studies, as it imparts unnoticed knowledge about the orient to the world.

The imperialistic attribute of colonisation and annexation has led to decentralisation and assimilation of the colonised. Forcing and luring people as slaves and exploited labours respectively are barbaric pictures painted in the annals of history. Karl Marx in his introduction to *Capital*, states that the foundational power of the capitalist lies in their ability to exploit cheap labour in an unlimited manner. This phenomenon of constant exploitation leads to homeland yearning in the assimilated diasporic collective. The attribute of collective yearning results in community formation, where traditions of the mother land is blended with the laws of the host land, becoming a willingly accepted change among the collective community.

Change, an inevitable part of culture accommodates itself in dire times of war, colonisation, annexation and migration. Though portraying a bare minimum of positive sides, blending of cultures give rise to opportunities in the modern world, where diversity is celebrated and voiced by the respective home nations. The result of this celebration is the reconstruction of the lost and neglected orient, as stated by Edward Said in *Orientalism*:

Modern Orientalism embodies a systematic discipline of accumulation. Far from this being exclusively an intellectual or theoretical feature, it made Orientalism tend fatally towards the systematic accumulation of human beings and territories. To reconstruct a dead or lost Oriental language meant ultimately to reconstruct a dead or neglected orient. (123)

The opportunity to embrace, learn and grow though prevalent in the twenty first century, had not been a possibility in the beginning of the twentieth century finding expression in literary works of art; creating ambiguity in

the cultural context of co-existence. The hybrids society of today provide collective human existence based on coercion or domination. Said, in his work *Culture and Imperialism*, quotes Hugo of St. Victor, a twelfth-century monk from Saxony, while explaining the all-encompassing nature of modern hybrids:

The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; but he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his. (335)

The constant shift of historical events and the advent of hybrid culture brought about the emergence of cyborgs. Being a novel term in literature it is used efficiently by Donna Haraway in expressing individuals who shun patriarchy and militarism. These cyborgs are considered to be illegitimate offspring that are often unfaithful to their origins, considering their fathers inessential. They are rebels in the eyes of a society plagued with patriarchy and militarism. On explaining this aspect Donna Haraway states in her work, *A Cyborg Manifesto*:

The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. (9-10)

The illegitimate offspring apart from being unfaithful to the origins embarks on making changes in society by being the first of its kind. Though considered to be creatures of dystopian value, cyborgs have existed in every walk of history bringing about the change that is celebrated today. The characters Sunja, Noa, Kim Sun Hee and Kim Tae Yul from the history-based novels *Pachinko* and *Black Flower* respectively represent cyborgs of history.

2. THE ADVENT AND INFLUENCE OF HISTORICAL CYBORGS:

The post human concept of cyborg, applies to the characters under study because rather being cyber organisms of the modern world, they exert defiance from patriarchy and militarism. The cyborgs of history though considered destructive of long held traditions and ways of life, become change makers of the present and the future. The very titles of the novels *Pachinko* and *When My Name Was Keoko*, portray the nature of the stories and characters involved.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE SELECT NOVELS:

Pachinko, as a noun refers to a Japanese gambling machine that resembles a pinball machine, while as a verb it means tumbling down through a series of obstacles. The Korean American Harlem based author and journalist Min Jin Lee has perfectly used the play of word while deriving the title. Through the novel Lee brings to light different obstacles like war and terrorism that brings forth shifts in long held traditions and beliefs.

When My Name Was Keoko is a novel based on the life of people who faced identity crisis in the annexed Korea. The Korean American author Linda Sue Park based her novel on this harrowing event from Korean history. She paints a vivid image of the lives of Korean people under the Japanese colonists. The facet of forced identity change and its aftermath are of importance in Park's novel. The fiat of annexation started on a friendly basis but later became imperialistic by nature. Henry Chung in his introduction to the Korean Treaties states:

The present Japanese regime in Korea is doing everything in its power to suppress Korean nationality. The government not only forbade the study of Korean language and history in schools, but went so far as to make a systematic collection of all works of Korean history and literature in public archives and private homes and burned them. (xi)

Lee and Park reflect the annexation of Korea by Japan in their novels. This aspect proves to be a bitter and unforgettable occurrence in the history of Korea. The effect of the rift among the two nations though might seem to have calmed down with the passage of time, still have an unspoken sense of hate and unforgiving attributes.

Between the years 1910 and 1945, Korea was ruled as a part of the Japanese empire. This empire mainly concentrated on making Korea another Japan by enhancing industrialisation in the country and suppressing its independence movement. The hate and resentment felt by the people of Korea towards the Japanese invaders and their own incompetent aristocrats who failed to protect their nation is expressed by various activists of the then Korea. Changho Ahn, a Korean Independence activist on expressing his view on the incompetent leaders, states:

An organisation without respect for the truth is like a body without blood, or a brick fence without mortar. An organization without sympathy and love for its principles, its members and its leaders will eventually fail no matter how rich or strong it is today. Thinking there is no one with the right qualification to be a leader means the same as not understanding the principle of cooperation and not wanting to support the leader themselves.

Based on the annexation Lee portrays the lives of the characters Sunja and Noa. Both the characters are crushed by patriarchy and militarism becoming natural cyborgs of a shattered society. Married despite the annexation, Hoonie and his matchmade wife Yangjin have a daughter called Sunja. The annexation, brought about the settlement of

many merchants from Japan seeking economic stability. Owing to this, Sunja meets a rich Japanese merchant named Koh Hansu. She instantly falls in love with Hansu and becomes pregnant. When faced with the task of taking responsibility Hansu admits to being married to a woman in Japan. Unable to take the bitter news Sunja breaks her relationship with Hansu.

Yangjin having lost her husband to Tuberculosis, considers Sunja's pregnancy a disgrace and begs a Christian minister Baek Isak who just as her late husband suffers from Tuberculosis. Isak agrees to take responsibility for Sunja and her unborn child. He accepts Sunja and her child as she was not evil in her deeds but rather a solid victim of patriarchy. Isak expresses his views on Sunja as:

The widow told me about her daughter only yesterday. And last night before my evening prayers, it occurred to me that this is what I can do for them: Give the woman and child my name. What is my name to me? It's only a matter of grace that I was born a male who could enter my descendants in a family registry. If the young woman was abandoned by a scoundrel, it's hardly her fault, and certainly, even if the man is not a bad person, the unborn child is innocent. (21)

Isak and Sunja immigrate to Osaka to live with Yoseb, Isak's brother and his wife Kyunghee. On moving to Osaka, Sunja is distraught by the demeaning treatment of women in the Japanese society. Sunja gives birth to her first son Noa, who grows up to be a very kind and intelligent man. He takes after his step-father, idealizing him and following his ideologies in life. Noa is oblivious to the existence of his biological father and ardently follows the footsteps of Isak.

Sunja has yet another son with Isak named Mozasu. Shortly after Mozasu is born Isak is arrested as a member of his church recites the Lord's prayer instead of worshipping the emperor. Sunja and Kyunghee take up the responsibility of earning wages to keep the household running by selling Kimchi, a traditional Korean side dish.

The onset of World War II brought about recession in Japan as most of the country's resources were used for the soldiers at war. This affected the economy of Japan to a great extent. Lee portrays this aspect in the novel through the eyes of Sunja and Kyunghee. The two women who spent their livelihood making Kimchi and earning their day-to-day wages suffer a lack of ingredients to make the side dish. This to a great extent affects their livelihood. At this moment, Sunja is approached by Kim Changho the owner of a restaurant. He asks the two women to make Kimchi at his restaurant. This offer helps Sunja and Kyunghee find a stable ground in an uncertain fiat of existence.

Isak is later released because of his illness. He spends his last moments with his family and eventually passes away. After Isak's death Changho's restaurant closes down and Hansu, Sunja's ex-lover, revisits her revealing the truth of him being the true owner of the restaurant. Hansu helps Sunja, Kyunghee and Yoseb work at a factory in Nagasaki until the War ends. Yoseb is unfortunately crippled permanently during the Nagasaki bombing. The novel vividly portrays the onset and aftermath of the Nagasaki bombing through the experience of Yoseb and its effect on the people around him.

Sunja, Kyunghee and Yoseb along with Noa and Mozasu move back to Osaka where the two children resume their education. Hansu offers to pay for Noa's education. Despite Sunja's resistance, he pays for Noa's education. Noa enters Waseda University and looks up to Hansu as a good mentor. Noa looks up to Hansu until he accidentally finds out that Hansu is his biological father and a member of the Yakuza. They are members of transnational organized crime syndicates primarily originating from Japan.

Knowing Hansu's background, Noa retaliates and quits the university he attends. Noa hates the thought of being the son of a Yakuza member. He finds it shameful to carry such a shameful lineage. Noa elopes from home and moves to Nagano. He lives in hiding taking up the Japanese name Nobuo. He marries a Japanese woman and has four children. Unable to bear her son's abandonment for sixteen years Sunja requests Hansu to track him down. Hansu does so and informs Sunja about his whereabouts. Despite Hansu's warnings Sunja sets out to instantly meet Noa who promises to stay in contact with Sunja but commits suicide shortly after her departure.

The novel ends with Sunja visiting Isak's grave. There at the grave she learns that despite feeling shameful of his ancestry, Noa never once failed to visit Isak's grave. Noa through the sixteen years of hiding tried to find identity through Isak as his father. Sunja understands her son's plight and buries his photograph near Isak's grave.

Characterised by Park, Kin Sun Hee and Kim Tae Sul portray a lucid image of forced identity change during the annexation of Korea. The plot of the novel revolves around Sun Hee and her brother Tae Yul. Still children the protagonists witness the annexation and the terror driven reign of the Japanese aristocrats. The government of Japan passes a rule according to which all citizens are forced to take up Japanese names and leave behind their true Korean identities. The siblings in the novel and their families are compelled to do the same. This aspect is expressed by Sun Hee as:

The Japanese made a lot of new laws. One of the laws was that no Korean could be the boss of anything. Even though Abuji was a great scholar, he was only the vice- principal of my school, not the principal. The person at the top had to be Japanese... All our lessons were in Japanese. We studied Japanese language, culture and history. Schools weren't allowed to teach Korean history or language. (4)

The Kim family take up 'Kaneyama', as their last name. This last name is of relevance as it means Geumsan, the name of a South Korean County. As for their first names Sun Hee and Tae Yul take up the characters 'K' and 'N' from the Japanese alphabets receiving the names Kaneyama Keoko and Kaneyama Nobuo respectively. Sun Hee and her friend Tomo show interest in learning one of the three Japanese scripts named Kanji while her brother takes interest in the advancement of machinery. The resistance towards name change in the Kim family is expressed through Tae Yul's narration as:

Abuji opens the door and waves his hand toward us. So we all go into the room. Uncle is pacing around like crazy.

Abuji reads out loud from the newspaper: "By order of the Emperor, all Koreans are to be graciously allowed to take Japanese names."

"Graciously allowed..." uncle says. His voice is shaking, he's so mad. "How dare they twist the words! Why can't they at least be honest—we are being forced to take Japanese names!"(12)

Food scarcity during World War II, brought about feuds between family members. Apart from reduced consumption Sun Hee and Tae Yul find themselves in a ineludible situation when the duo find their uncle's support for the Korean resistance against the Japanese. The siblings are distraught by this news. Sun Hee's uncle was believed to be a printer of newspapers. Tomo subtly tells Sun Hee about her uncle's participation in the resistance. Fearing the news about him getting caught by the Japanese soldiers the siblings' uncle flees the country.

Things become hard for Sun Hee and Tae Yul as their uncle's fleeing is an unfruitful fiat, as their uncle was never under the Japanese soldiers' radar. The siblings are subjected to questioning when the county head announces their uncle's disappearance. To avoid any further attraction, Tae Yul decides to join and fight alongside the Japanese army against America. During the war he is drawn to the American fighter planes and decides to become a pilot. When faced with a defaming situation, he decides to join the Kamikaze pilots to prove his Japanese fellow warrior's thoughts about Korean men being weak.

The Kamikaze pilot's suicide mission to destroy the American naval force was cut short because of bad weather. Tae Yul and his fellow pilots are arrested because of their hasty planning and inability to complete the mission. Months later Japan loses the war and Korea is free from its clutches. Tae Yul returns home and confesses to his family that he had originally planned to kill his Japanese comrades instead of the American navy. Sun Hee happily receives her brother and pledges to look after him. Tae Yul learns that Sun Hee had to carry all the truth with her without revealing it to anyone and had spent her time in secretly learning the Korean language from scratch from her father. The novel ends with Sun Hee boldly without resistance and secrecy teaching her brother the Korean alphabets feeding on nuts.

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL CYBORGS IN THE SELECT NOVELS:

Sunja and Noa, Sun Hee and Tae Yul from the novels *Pachinko* and *When My Name Was Keoko* respectively are cyborgs of the then society. Women's roles in early Korea were confined to the home. They were not allowed to interfere in any business of men outside the set framework. Their participation in societal activities were limited or none at all. The role of women in traditional Korea in accordance to an article in Asia Society, states:

In traditional Korean society, women's roles were confined to the home, From a young age, women were taught the virtues of subordination and endurance to prepare for their future roles as wife and mother. Women, in general, could not participate in society as men did, and their role was limited to household matters. (2022)

Amidst the chaos that ensued the war Sunja and Sun Hee manage to break free from the stereotypical ideology set for women. Sunja falling in love and being impregnated by Hansu, is considered disgrace on part of a woman. Sun Hee on the other hand is constantly shunned by her brother when asked what had been discussed inside closed walls. Despite the disgrace thrown at her, Sunja manages to create a life for herself in a foreign land where women are suppressed far more than in her homeland. Sun Hee being refused the matters of men, in secrecy learns her native language, showing resistance in her own subtle and powerful way. Both the female protagonists defy the norms set by patriarchy and militarism in their own manner.

Noa and Tae Sul unlike the subtle resistance to situations around them, take instant measures to express their perspectives. Noa on finding out that he is the real son of Hansu and not Isak feels suffocated at his sudden loss of identity. The fact that Hansu is a member of the Yakuza doesn't ease the problem at hand, rather blows it up even more. Noa shows resistance by disappearing for sixteen years and taking up a Japanese identity, trying to stay loyal to his adoptive father and not his biological one. His final resistance is suicide after he meets Sunja after sixteen years. Tae Sul on the other hand to save his uncle from the police joins forces with the Japanese with a hidden intention of killing his fellow pilots in the process. Towards the end he accepts his sister's intelligence and confides to learning his native language from his learned sister, shedding every ounce of patriarchy in him.

5. CONCLUSION:

All the four characters taken into study have in their own way shown resistance toward patriarchy and militarism. Assimilating into the imperialist nation and still finding a way to stay grounded shows traces of subtle traces of cyborgs. The characters are seen defying patriarchal norms that have long held them from moving forward, bringing about change to a fruitive extent. The small yet effective changes brought about by the cyborgs of yesterday have shaped the modern, all-inclusive society of today. Today's growth is indebted to yesterday's cyborgs. Sunja, Noa, Sun Hee and Tae Yul stand testimony to the mentioned claim.

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