

Unveiling Hybridity: The Cultural Intersection and Discrimination in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

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Abstract

This article seeks to analyse the manner in which Korean immigrants navigate their identities in Japan. It evaluates how the characters in Min Jin Lee's novel 'Pachinko' have hybrid identities, and it goes further to explain how discrimination against Korean immigrants living in Japan is the catalyst in creating the hybrid identity. In an attempt to live a normal life and escape prejudice and criticism, Koreans attempt to adopt the dominant identity. This is the initial point where cultural intersections occur and people become hybridized. The novel 'Pachinko' takes place in the context of historical occurrences, underscoring the various difficulties faced by Korean immigrants in Japan. The researcher tries to demonstrate the complex mechanism of building an identity and the lasting consequences of discrimination against vulnerable groups by examining the nuances of hybrid identity.

Keywords: Cultural Intersection, Hybridity, Discrimination, Immigrants, Korean Diaspora.

Literature that refers to literary works that are produced by writers who live outside their native land and discuss their experiences with migration, displacement, and cultural identity is referred to as diasporic literature. The word 'diaspora' originates from the Greek word 'diaspeirein', meaning 'to scatter'. It is a vast genre that examines identity crises, homelessness, etc. The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines diaspora as "the movement of people from their own country, people who have moved away from their own country" (203).

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Maria Koinova states that diaspora falls into two categories, the first type is activated by conflict and the other one is voluntary (435). Voluntary diaspora is the contemporary diaspora, as no country is homogenous but is a multi-cultural society, containing cultural, religious, or various linguistic communities that share common bonds to their own heritage, culture, and certain societal norms. Edward Said's work *Orientalism*, talks about the concern of diasporic writings as "not only of a Said, in his basic geographical distinction but also a whole sense of interests" (12). Migrants adhere to diverse cultures.

The term 'hybridity' in diasporic literature describes how writers belonging to diasporic communities blend many cultural identities, experiences, and influences into their works. Diasporic literature typically reflects the realities of those who have been uprooted from their native nation and must navigate several cultural situations. These are complex, multi-layered experiences. In diasporic literature, hybridity takes many forms. It could refer to the fusion of numerous languages as well as the merging of diverse cultural customs, traditions, and beliefs. In *Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity: Chances and Challenges*, Consuela Wagner says that:

As typical elements of 'hybrid' identity the following characteristics multiple cultural backgrounds, experience exchange between self and external assignment and also the ongoing process of own identities negotiation. The central feature of the hybrid identity is belongingness, which may take various forms. Some migrants, especially those from the first generation, have a clear sense of mono-affiliation to the country of origin.... a cognitive level multiculturalism is recognized, which indicates a degree of hybridity. (242)

Immigrants face challenges in adapting to new cultures and identities. Immigrants find it difficult to leave their native culture behind and adopt the dominant culture and its identity, and this is the place where two cultures blend and form a hybrid culture. Homi K. Bhabha, an Indian English academic and critical theorist, expounds on this in *The Location of Culture*. He feels that diasporic communities always stand in the middle of two cultures, and due to this, their identities become complex and become hybrid. The term 'hybridity' connotes the merging of various cultures, as Bhabha says that:

The 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past. Beginnings and endings may be the sustaining myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity inclusion and exclusion. (1)

Yolanda Viviani and Robby Satria in the article titled, *Hybridity portrayed by major characters in the novel Crazy Rich Asian* by Kevin Kwan says about 'hybridity' that:

Hybridity is a common phenomenon that happened in our society today. Hybridity is a well-known term in biology. But in literature, hybridity has a close relation with postcolonial study because it is related to cross-culture identity happened to a person after colonialism era ended. (87 - 88)

This phenomenon of Hybridity is very well portrayed in the novel *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee. Min Jin Lee is a Korean American writer who is best known for her diasporic writings. Lee is very much interested in exploring subjects of identity and the blending of cultures because she has gone through such difficulties in her life since she moved to New York City from South Korea.

The novel *Pachinko*, published in 2017, discusses a Korean family living in Japan for several decades. The novel involves the description of multi - generational members of a family. Through the experiences of Baek's family, the novel explores historical events such as the Japanese occupation of Korea, World War II, and the sufferings of Korean immigrants in Japan regarding identity. In *Pachinko*, Korean immigrants face a harsh reality in Japan, Adam Morgan states:

Min Jin Lee's second novel, *Pachinko*, may be the crest of this particular wave. A heartbreaking story of immigrants who suffer needlessly thanks to bigotry, prejudice, and institutionalized oppression, it could not have been published at a more relevant time in America. (Morgan)

This article strives to investigate the means by which Korean immigrants find their identities in Japan in the novel *Pachinko*. The hybrid forms that predominate in the life of Koreans is explicated in this article. The paper also strives to comprehend the discrimination practice that is prevalent among the Koreans immigrants living in Japan.

The characters that Min Jin Lee creates in *Pachinko* expresses the hybrid identity that they adopt in Japan. The problems that Koreans face in Japan is evident in the characters of *Pachinko*. Yoseb Baek is one such character, who is a Korean living in Japan. The novelist introduces him with these words: "From appearances alone, Yoseb could approach any Japanese and receive a polite smile, but he'd would lose the welcome as soon as he said anything" (106).

Yoseb, being a Korean, tries to adopt the dominant culture, while he lives in Japan. His hybrid adaptation technique is revealed when he tried to blend his native language and the Japanese language. Though his accent discloses his original identity, he tries to speak the Japanese language. But still, discrimination prevails in Japan. "Most Japanese claimed they could distinguish between Japanese and Korean, but Koreans knew that was rubbish" (107). Because Koreans felt as if they could imitate Japanese. Koreans perceive this type of imitation as embodying a hybrid identity.

Kyunghee, the wife of Yoseb, similarly adopts the hybrid characteristics. Kyunghee adopted Japanese culture by not wearing her traditional clothes and by wearing midi skirts, the modern and western style clothes.

Kyunghee, who looked smart in her midi skirts and crisp white blouses, easily passing for a schoolteacher or a merchant's modest wife with her fine features, was welcomed in most places. Everyone thought she was Japanese until she spoke; even then, the local men were pleasant to her. (138)

Kyunghee, by virtue of her hybrid identity, undergoes assimilation into the prevailing culture. In order to escape from discrimination, she pretends to be a Japanese by merging her native culture with the foreign culture. Her adaptation to the hybrid mode of life is observed when she tries to improve her Japanese accent. "She regularly listened to Japanese programs to improve her accent" (139).

Lee describes in the novel that "due to the colonial government's requirements, it was normal for Koreans to have at least two or three names, but back home she'd had little use for the Japanese *tsunemi* - Junko Kaneda- written on her identity papers" (139). This is in the case of the protagonist of the novel, Sunja and also, having Japanese name is seen in Isak's family:

When the Koreans had to choose a Japanese surname, Isak's father had chosen Bando because it had sounded like the Korean word *ban - deh*, meaning objection, making their compulsory Japanese name a kind of joke. Kyunghee had assured her that all these names would become normal soon enough. (139)

Here, the name Bando means objection. The name highlights how difficult it is for Koreans to have a Japanese name out of compulsion. And also, the name is very much likely to be Korean, which shows how Koreans purposely chose Japanese names that sound similar to their original Korean names. This shows how Koreans stay connected to their origins.

Lee also explores hybridity through the character Noa, the son of Sunja and the illegitimate son of Koh Hansu. At school, Noa is called by his Japanese name, Nobuo Boku, rather than Noa Baek. "Though everyone in his class knew he was Korean from his Japanized surname, if he met anyone who didn't know this fact, Noa wasn't forthcoming about this detail. He spoke and wrote better Japanese than most native children" (195). Noa's persona depicts the conflict between two identities and the prevailing hybrid nature of their existence. "Noa could not speak of the boy wanting to be Japanese; it was his dream to leave Ikaino and never to return" (196). This statement expresses Noa's desire to be Japanese. Here is where Noa's hybrid identity is expressed. Noa tries to act as if he is Japanese, thereby trying to keep his Korean identity secret.

Similarly, in the case of Mozasu, the son of Sunja and Baek Isak:

Mozasu went by Mozasu Boku, the Japanization of Moses Baek, and rarely used his Japanese surname, Bando, the *tsunemi* listed on his school documents and residency papers. With a first name from a Western religion, an obvious Korean surname, and his ghetto address, everyone knew what he was-there was no point in denying it. (269)

The Japanese name Mozasu Boku suggests Mozasu's hybridity. Though he has a Japanese name out of compulsion he resists the dominant culture in one or the other way in this novel.

A Presbyterian pastor named John Maryman's dual identity is very well portrayed by Lee. "Despite his European name, the teacher, John Maryman, was a Korean who had been adopted an infant by American missionaries. English was his first language. Though he spoke Japanese and Korean proficiently, he spoke both languages with an American accent" (326). John Maryman has multi-cultural elements. He has a varied cultural identity from Europe, America, and Korea, which results in a hybrid identity. His hybrid identity is exposed when he speaks one language with another's accent.

Solomon, son of Mozasu, has a hybrid identity, which is very much expressed in the following lines: "Six days a week, Sunja took her grandson to school and picked him up. Solomon attended an international preschool where only English was spoken. At school, he spoke English, and at home, Japanese. Sunja spoke to him in Korean, and he answered in Japanese sprinkled with a few words in Korean" (382). Solomon has a complex identity of English, Japanese, and Korean. Phoebe experienced hybridity while spending time with Solomon's family; "the group spoke Korean with the elders and English with Solomon, while Solomon spoke mostly in Japanese to the elders and English to Phoebe; with everyone translating in bits, they made it work somehow" (496).

Through these characters, Min Jin Lee emphasizes the hybrid elements in *Pachinko*. The characters are often seen oscillating from one culture to the next, finding a balance between the two, thereby creating a new format of culture, the hybrid culture, where both cultures exist in their merged state. Cultural intersectionality resonates with the individuals throughout the novel, which becomes the major component that initiates the hybrid identity.

The reason behind the creation of the hybrid culture among Koreans is due to the prevalence of discrimination that exists in Japan. Despite leaving their motherland, Koreans are very attached to their origins. They feel a sense of homelessness in Japan, as they are considered to be second-class citizens. Koreans feel inferior in Japan, and they feel that their rights were deprived of them. Lee has profoundly explored the racial discrimination of Koreans by Japanese in her novel, *Pachinko*, as the initiator of hybrid identity.

Koreans are routinely the target of discrimination in Japan. John Lie states that "public-sector jobs were closed to foreign nationals, and most large companies did not hire ethnic Koreans. Housing discrimination was rife. Many Japanese presumed Koreans to be truculent, even criminal, and certainly Other" (32). The above statement expresses the prejudices that Koreans faced at the hands of the Japanese. Lee expresses that "most Japanese claimed that they could distinguish between a Japanese and a Korean, but every Korean knew that was rubbish" (107). The claim by the Japanese over a Korean is seen as a form of racial discrimination

that takes place based on physical appearance, cultural background, or other factors. Lee indicates through these words that the Japanese see Koreans as inferior creatures to them due to their biased notions towards them.

Koreans face discrimination in several ways. The Japanese will not rent houses for the Koreans. Koreans are meant to live in a shabby place like Ikaino, the ghetto in Japan. When Sunja visited Yoseb's house for the first time, she was shocked because the ghetto is very dirty and is filled with shabby houses. Yoseb said that "this place is fit only for pigs and Koreans" (112). He further adds that "Japanese won't rent decent properties to us" (112). All of these statements reflect how the Japanese see Koreans and what they think of them.

In the classroom, Japanese students showed prejudice toward Korean students, and teachers treated Korean students unfairly. In the novel, Noa, Sunja's oldest son, feels detached from other Japanese students when he is treated unfairly and humiliated at school despite being a bright student. This is seen in the lines:

Like all the other Korean children at the local school, Noa was taunted and pushed around, but now that his clean-looking clothes smelled immutably of onions, chili, garlic, and shrimp paste, the teacher himself made Noa sit in the back of the classroom next to the group of Korean children whose mothers raised pigs in their homes. Everyone at school called the children who lived with pigs buta. Noa, tsumei was Nobou, sat with the buta children and was called garlic turd. (183)

These lines depict the discrimination that Noa, a boy with a Korean identity, faces from his Japanese classmates due to his origin and the strong smells of the food his family cooks. The teacher himself made Noa sit separately along with Korean children, who have also been discriminated against by their Japanese classmates.

Additionally, the Japanese children use derogatory terms such as 'buta' (meaning pig) to refer to the Korean children whose families raise pigs, and they also insulted Noa by giving him the nickname 'garlic turd' due to the smell of his clothes. These instances show the deep racial prejudices that exist in Japanese society toward Koreans. Mozasu also experienced this type of discrimination at his school. A Korean schoolboy committed suicide as a result of racial discrimination after receiving harsh remarks from his classmates. The victim's father showed Haruki, a detective, a few handwritten messages that the Japanese boys wrote to the boy. The Japanese boys wrote, "Die, you ugly Korean" (411).

The creation of hybridity is the direct result of the cultural intersection and racial discrimination that Koreans go through. The history of racial discrimination against Koreans by the Japanese has created a legacy of resistance and determination that resulted in the formulation of hybridity. Koreans in Japan attempt to adopt the dominant Japanese culture to escape racial prejudice and discrimination, despite the fact that many Koreans in Japan reject Japanese identity. The migrants, the Koreans, stimulate and create a hybrid identity that has the trait of both identities, Korean and Japanese, thus making them live in a space where the merging identity

creates the realities of life.

The prolonged existence in the dual and mixed identity has resulted in the strong formulation of hybrid identity that have made the characters forget their original existence as Koreans. At last, when Sunja meets Noa after many years, he asks him, "Is it so terrible to be Korean?" (424), he answers, "it is terrible to be me" (424). Noa's suicide, at the end, can be seen as a response to the systemic discrimination and marginalization that Koreans face in Japan.

Pachinko portrays hybridity, which is created by the cultural intersectionality of Korean immigrants living in Japan and the racial discrimination that the immigrants face. This paper examines the characters' hybridity and the long-term consequences of discrimination faced by Korean immigrants residing in Japan.

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