

The Representation of the Blackness/Darkness in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the representation of the blackness/darkness in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*. Franklin Hata, whose Japanese name was Jiro Kurohata (kurohata means a black flag), the protagonist, was born to Korean parents in Japan during the annexation of Korea by Japan. When World War II broke out, he was obligated to take care of comfort women—especially Kkutaeh, a Korean woman. His superior used a black flag to let him know when he should get her ready. I present an analysis of his name and the symbolism of the flag. After the war, Hata emigrated to the United States and adopted Sunny from Pusan in Korea. She was a GI baby (a GI baby is a baby who is born to a soldier in the US military and a local woman) — a black girl. I explore the relationship between Hata and Sunny. By referring to *Comfort Women of the Empire* published by Park Yuha, I also present evidence regarding the hidden history of comfort women.

Key words

black flag, comfort women, history, trauma, identity

‘But I have never got outside that circle. I have never broken out of the ring of what I have already done and cannot ever undo,’ he thinks . . .

—William Faulkner, *Light in August*

I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home.

—Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life*

Introduction

Chang-rae Lee was born in Korea in 1965 and immigrated to the United States after three years in 1968. In 1999, he published *A Gesture Life*, his second novel, which received the Asian

American Literary Award. Franklin Hata, the protagonist, is a Japanese American who was enlisted as a medical officer and cared for comfort women during World War II. The story is set in the late 1990s when he is in his seventies. In the narrative, his present life with Sunny, his adopted daughter in the United States, parallels with his past life with Kkutaeh, a comfort woman in Burma. It implies that he has been haunted by his past.

In this paper, I would like to discuss the representation of the blackness/darkness in the novel. As it is symbolized in Jiro Kurohata, Hata's Japanese name, the author emphasizes the blackness/darkness in *A Gesture Life*. By interpreting the meaning of the blackness, we can understand Hata's identity and traumatic past. I also focus on the hidden history of the Japanese comfort women system with reference to *Comfort Women of the Empire* written by Park Yuha.

I Jiro Kurohata

Hata hardly discusses his childhood, especially when he lived with his biological parents. His parents were Koreans who were “a hide tanner and a rag maid” (257). They lived as Japanese in a ghetto where Korean hide tanners and renderers inhabited. After a while, his parents gave him to “the office of the children's authority” (235-236) so that he could “become wholly and thoroughly Japanese” (235). He was adopted by Kurohata's who were “a gear factory owner and his wife” (72). In “Adoptees and the Seven Core Issues of Adoption,” Sharon Kaplan Roszia, an educator, and Deborah N. Silverstein, a medical social worker, assert that adopted children lose their culture when they lose their real parents. Hata remembers the day when he became a foster child: “... and the day the administrator came for me was the last time I heard their tanners' raspy voices, and their birth-name for me” (236). This scene signifies that he lost not only his real parents but also Korean heritage.

Roszia and Silverstein also argue that adopted people have tendency to undergo an identity crisis. They tend to lose their identity and that leads them to “seek out ways to create a feeling of belonging.” In the latter part of the novel, Hata confesses: “All I wished for was to be part (if but a millionth) of the massing, and that I pass through with something more than a life of gestures” (299). This sentence embodies his way of life—he leads a gesture life. When World War II broke out, the Japanese vowed allegiance to the Emperor by participating the war. Hata took part in the war as a medical officer to fit in with the Japanese—his aim was not to show loyalty to the Emperor but belong to the Japanese society.

Hata was stationed in many foreign countries during the war. When he was in Burma, he was a subordinate of Captain Ono, who was a racist. He demanded him to take care of comfort women, especially Kkutaeh whom Hata simply called K. The captain used a black flag to inform him “when to get her ready” (223). The black flag—kurohata, which is his surname—was “the banner a village would raise by its gate in olden times to warn of a contagion within” (224). His adoptive family descended from a long line of apothecaries who went to infected villages. It is obvious that Captain Ono used the inauspicious flag to disgrace him. In addition,

he tested his sexual desire by placing K at Hata's infirmary. Captain Ono intended to mock his "desire for her or lack of it" and reduced his "status as a medic to that of personal servant and sexual go-between" (Sato 25). Thus, Hata had to raise up the black flag to recognize his social status as a Korean.

Besides this, it is important to note that the black flag is a symbol of anarchism. The origin is not clear, but it would have been influenced by "the black background of the skull-and-crossbones flag of the floating republic of pirates" (Owen RB2). Black is the color which conveys messages such as "negation and refusal" (Owen RB2); hence, it is suitable for anarchist. Anarchy, the word, is defined as "contrary to authority or without a ruler" (Ward 1). In other words, anarchists seek to subvert the government. When Japan colonized Korea, anarchists "fiercely resisted" (Ward 11) the colonizers. Considering the meaning of the black flag, Captain Ono's decision would have been derogatory for Hata. It can be interpreted that the captain tried to stigmatize his Japanese identity and imposed him with a submissive identity by making Hata use the black flag.

As the previous paragraphs show, Hata had no power in the camp, but it was also true that he was not in the lowest position there. It was comfort women who were completely powerless, so that he hesitated to take care of them and spend nights with them. He had no connection with Koreans since he started to live as Jiro Kurohata, but he reconnected with them when he met K. When they met first, he ordered her to follow him in Japanese. Despite his command, she did not move. Therefore, he asked her again in Korean:

But when I turned, K was still standing in the doorway. . . .

And then she said, quite plainly: "You are a Korean."

"No," I told her. "I am not."

"I think you are," she said, Certainly, I had an impulse to order her to be silent, harshly command that she leave immediately. But I felt unsettled by her forward bearing, as I was at once amazed and strangely intimidated. (234)

Even though he passed as a Japanese, she sensed that he was a Korean. It must have been a sensitive moment for him because he had repressed his Korean identity. Despite his denial of his Korean ethnicity, "his subconscious memory of his former national/colonial subject" was shaken by the conversation (Lee, "A Comparison" 16). He "felt a certain connection to her, not in blood or culture or kind, but in that manner" (239) by having talked in his "childhood language" (239). When he spoke Korean, his identity as a Japanese disappeared, and as a Korean emerged. We can interpret that K symbolizes his repressed/hidden identity. As she asked for his help and allured him, his real identity appealed him to regain it.

Since Hata longed to be a member of Japanese society, he could do nothing for K. She begged him to kill her before having been sent to a comfort house, but he did not. If he had murdered her to rescue her, he would have been excluded from the Japanese. He fell in love with her—he wanted to be with her and wished her death if she were to be with other men.

In his infirmary, he decided to “lock her in the surplus supply closet” (239). She was often confined in his dark closet during daytime and was let out there at night. She was always in the darkness—she was forced to be invisible: she was objectified by him.

K thought that Hata was a gentle countryman; therefore, she asked him for help. Furthermore, she felt the bond of a sibling as she told him: ““When you first spoke outside, I thought it was my younger brother talking to me again. Your voice is just like his”” (235). For these reasons, she tried to have a close relationship with him. As for him, he was enchanted by not only her nature but also her physical beauty. In the novel, he depicts her appearance artistically over and over again to “articulate his erotic desires” (Lee, “Form-Giving” 105). His artistic description “reinforces his complicity in K’s captivity by blinding him to the full horror of the ‘comfort woman’ system” (Lee, “The Semblance” 110). From that perspective, he was a part of the Japanese as a perpetrator.

On the day when she was supposed to perform duties for Captain Ono, she tried to persuade Hata to murder her. After she failed to convince him, she exhausted and passed out. He wanted to express his devotion to her by having intercourse—he raped her. He exploited her as a sexual object:

She was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, or somehow forcing herself to, and she did not move or speak or make anything but the shallowest of breaths, even as I was casting myself upon her. I kissed as much of her body as was bared. I kissed her small breasts, which seemed to spill a sweet, watery liquid. I gagged but did not care. Then it was all quite swift and natural, as chaste as it could ever be. And when I was done I felt the enveloping warmth of a fever, its languorous cocoon, though when I gazed at her shoulder and back there was nothing but stillness, her posture unchanged, her skin cool and colorless, and she lay as if she were the sculpture of a recumbent girl and not a real girl at all. (260)

K is described like a corpse—Hata seems to be a necrophiliac (Nakachi 74). Despite his brutality, he delineates the intercourse aesthetically. He told her that he loved her during the intercourse, yet he thinks later: “I loved her, though I cannot say how that love was or if it was true or worthy in any sense, having never in my life been sure how such a thing should be” (261). Hata resembles Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Cholly raped his own daughter because he loved her and wanted to help her. He did not have real parents like Hata—he was left by his mother when he was four days old. Both of them did not know what love was and how they should have shown their love; they hoped to express their love by having intercourse.

Even though Hata and Cholly seemed to be perpetrators, they were victims of patriarchy and masculinity as well. The ideology of patriarchy and masculinity are rooted that men are “superior to others, particularly in comparison with women, resulting in many instances of power-play and domination” (Eze 68). Actually, the thought drives men to rule others by

violence. If there are chances to give orders, they are willing to do it. If there are no chances, they try to do it coercively. They sometimes try to show their superiority “in the form of emotional or physical torture such as fighting, beating, bullying, and rape etc.” (Eze 68). Hata and Cholly are racial minorities—Hata as a Korean and Cholly as an African American. They were men, yet they were feminized in the society they belong to. It looks that they wanted to retrieve their masculinity by raping. While Hata was a victim of patriarchy, K was victimized by him.

After K noticed that Hata had no will to protect her, she protected herself and resisted her enemies. She slashed two men: Captain Ono and a lieutenant. Because of her rebellious act, she was murdered—she was raped by twenty-five to thirty men and dismembered. Hata has been tortured by the guilt of having sacrificed K and her unborn baby—who was fathered by another man. Even though she is dead, she appears as a ghost. He sees her ghost—the incarnation of his guilt for her. When she comes back to his home at midnight, he finds her “in a black silken flag” (286). The black flag which she wears is a symbol of his marginalized position and stigmatized identity. Thus, her presence stirs his identity as a primary citizen and disturbs his successful life in the United States.

II Franklin Hata

Hata immigrated to the United States and settled in a city called Bedley Run after the war and adopted a girl named Sunny, who was a GI baby from Pusan in Korea. By helping an Asian girl, he wanted to atone for K's and her baby's demise. When he got in contact with an agency, they “promised a child from a hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family who had gone down on their luck” (204). We should pay attention that the situation of the child is similar to that of K. She must have been from the upper class because her father had been an ambassador. Although her family was in a higher position, their house was burned down and K and her sister were conscripted as comfort women after the colonization by Japan. Therefore, he must have thought that he could save helpless woman like K this time.

When Hata met Sunny for the first time, however, he was disappointed because “it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her” (204). Jenny Wills considers that he could not accept her for the following reasons: “supremacist beliefs” in the United States, “Japan or Korean past,” or “residual anger” for the mistreatment “of Korean women by American and Japanese servicemen during the war¹.” Sunny was a production of the violence: she was born to a Korean woman and a GI who exploited her. As for Hata, her presence makes him think of comfort women who were exploited by Japanese—she reminds him of K.

1 Wills, Jenny. “Claiming America by Claiming Others: Asian-American Adoptive Parenthood in *A Gesture Life* and *Digging to America*.” *The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*. Spring 2011. < http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2011/wills.htm > Web. 3 Apr, 2018.

Hata and Sunny lived in one of the most magnificent houses in Bedley Run, which the real estate agent even admired. He adopted her “to mark the recommencement” (74) of his life, but it only failed. He compares his house to “the darkened museum of a one-man civilization, whose latent history . . . would be left always unspoken, unsung” (289). As he depicted, the house is an embodiment of his whole life or his way of life—his life is darkened by a shadow which is casted by his tragic past. His life is but a waking shadow. When K in a black flag visits his house at night in his hallucination, she says that she wants to go somewhere else. He also remembers that Sunny hated the house. K and Sunny felt uncomfortable with his house which symbolizes his life or his way of life. Moreover, he had a pool in his house. He used to swim in the pool which is “painted a dark battleship gray” (22), but he was about to be drowned “beneath the surface of the lightless water” (22) one morning. The scene suggests that his past intrudes into his present life like flooding water—he is about to drown by his tragic past. In the darkened pool, he becomes invisible like K does—he loses his subjectivity when he is swallowed by his past.

Hata has been regretful for K’s and her baby’s killing; therefore, he has been not able to build a good relationship with his daughter. When Sunny was eleven years old, he began seeing Mary Burns, a white widowed woman. Their relationship lasted for some years and she once told him about his attitude toward his daughter:

“But it’s as if she’s a woman to whom you’re beholden, which I can’t understand. I don’t see the reason. You’re the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone, much less a child.” (60)

He lives as Franklin Hata which he must have named from Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was a heroic president of the United States during World War II. It should be noticed that Franklin D. Roosevelt was seen as an enemy by Japanese American because he sent many of them to concentration camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1942. Hata named himself Franklin as if he had punished himself as a Japanese (Nakachi 73). Although he immigrated to the United States to lead a new life, he “cannot erase the traumatic history of Jiro Kurohata” (Carroll 600). In addition, he shortened his name from Kurohata to Hata in order to hide his disgraceful past. He eliminated his blackness from himself, but it appeared in front of him as Sunny, who was a black girl. She could be a trigger for him to remind him of his repressed past. That is why he cannot face his daughter.

During her adolescence, Sunny became rebellious. She hung around with gangs and went to a drug dealer’s house, where she was involved in a case—a man named Lincoln stabbed the dealer. Hata condemned Lincoln for his crime, but she defended him because it was protection against rape. In hearing his daughter’s remark that she would kill herself before being raped, Hata “felt the drug of fear course through” (150) him, “and with it the revisitation of a long-stored memory of another young woman who once spoke nearly the same words”

(150). Babette Rothschild, a psychotherapist, claims that people who suffer from PTSD struggle to avoid “reminders of the traumatic events” (24). Hata calls K “another young woman” in his narrative to avoid recalling about her. While K symbolizes Hata’s lost identity, Sunny represents his suppressed past. He tried to forget about K, but she was in his “long-stored memory.”

When Sunny was eighteen years old, she got pregnant. She lived in another city, but she asked her father for help. When they met, he was astonished by her figure—she was at a late stage in her pregnancy. While he was driving a car to his house with her, he got furious and thought: “I wanted an end to us, inglorious and swift . . . to leave a few lines hardly noticed in the local paper concerning a longtime Bedley Run resident and his daughter, with no survivors” (340). He even felt: “. . . the imminent disgrace and embarrassment that would hang about the house like banners of our mutual failure” (340). He symbolized “the imminent disgrace and embarrassment” as banners—flags which are signs of dishonor for him—to be aware of their failure. He did not want to concede his failure; therefore, he could not help making her have abortion. At that night, he persuaded her to go to a clinic for an examination. Dr. Anastasia told him that it was too late to abort her, but Hata helped the procedure.

Hata killed an unborn baby for the second time. Thus, he repeated the traumatic event. He does not give a detailed description of his daughter’s unborn baby because he hoped to forget the procedure (Terazawa 10). As compensation, Hata was traumatized by Sunny’s procedure. He “began to entertain a certain waking nightmare” (272) after she left him. He was a physician in his daydream:

And so on a typical day of full appointments with the sick and injured and scared, who should walk in but an adolescent girl, unescorted, safeguarding with one hand an immense belly in that tender, cupping way, asking if she might see me immediately. . . . I’d come out in my white coat and her sallow face would brighten, the simple sight of me enough to lend some calm and relief. But just then the girl would shudder, momentarily swoon We rushed her into the back room and laid her down, and when I lifted her long skirt the baby was already showing itself, not by its crown but with a tiny, perfect foot, unwrinkled and pink. . . . I still couldn’t sense the baby’s contours, the hip, the shoulder, the orientation of the head, and when my nurse warned that the foot was turning color, grayish blue, a hard tick of panic set off in my chest. The girl was writhing in pain, unable to listen to me and pushing too much, pushing when she shouldn’t have been, and as the precious minutes passed, the foot grew grayer and bluer and I knew I would have to open her up and lift the baby out. The girl was now delirious with pain. The nurse placed in my hand a shiny blade, and I realized then that it was a travesty and I was not a surgeon, that I had never cut into living flesh. (273-274)

In this scene, there are three points to pay attention to. First, it should be written that his dream in his youth was to be a surgeon. He told K that his wish was to receive the final training and be

a surgeon, but he could not be a surgeon. In the fantasy, he was a respectable doctor and tried to rescue the young lady and her baby—K and her baby and Sunny and her baby even though he took the life of them. Second, he was handed a blade to help the pregnant girl. In the past, he imagined that he would stab Captain Ono’s throat with a blade for K and himself, but he could not do it. The blade signifies his helplessness. Third, he was afflicted with the picture of the girl and her baby in anguish. Cathy Caruth, a professor at Cornell University, argues that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Even though he did not narrate his emotion during Sunny’s abortion, he was perplexed in his daydream. He paralyzed his feelings during the abortion, yet he was obsessed by the sight. His guilt for Sunny made him see the nightmare.

Due to his atrocity, the relationship between Hata and Sunny collapsed. He tried to erase his past with K by adopting Sunny, but he merely repeated the traumatic experience. People cannot conquer trauma unless they confront it. Trauma produce further trauma; hence, they should break the vicious circle. From that standpoint, trauma is a black flag because both of them signal its contagiousness. In the latter part of the novel, he realizes his existence as a black flag: “. . . I’m at the vortex of bad happenings, and I am almost sure I ought to festoon the facade of my house and the bumpers of my car and then garland my shoulders with immense black flags of warning . . . ” (333). K in his hallucination “let slip the black cloth from her shoulders” (288). He says that he would drape his shoulders with it—as if he had accepted his presence of a jinx. He seems to be willing to be blamed, but no one blames him, so that he blames himself terribly.

III Hidden History of Comfort Women

When Hata saw a black flag raised by Captain Ono, he thought it was “a colorless void” (253)—it indicates the holes in history. It is said that history is only told by conquerors: the history of the comfort women system was not told by Koreans, but Japanese. Like the history of slavery was not told by blacks, but whites. That is to say, history is selected by storytellers. K, who was covered with a black flag, signifies that the comfort women issue was deleted from history. During the conversation with Hata, she said that she and her sister were conscripted by a recruiter. Although their father refused the conscription of his son, he offered his daughters. Park Yuha, a professor at Sejong University, claims that it was patriarchy that excluded girls from “home” where they were supposed to be protected and educated (Park 65). Outside the safety net, some girls were doomed to be comfort women.

Japanese soldiers tend to be condemned because of their abuse of Korean women, but Park claims that the Korean society should also be blamed. According to her book, *Comfort Women of the Empire*, there were many middlemen who lied and recruited young Korean women for profit (Park 46). For instance, K and her sister were forced to be comfort women even though they were told that they would work at a boot factory in Japan for their

family. Given its situation, the comfort women system was supported by Koreans as well as Japanese—Korean women were exploited by both of them. Nobody can distinguish Japanese as perpetrators from Koreans as victims, but it is clear that Korean women has been victims.

Park states that some Japanese soldiers and comfort women fell in love and committed a double suicide (Park 80). K was sent to a camp with her sister whom Corporal Endo would have loved. Having been slashed across her throat, she died. It is not written whether he slashed her or she slashed herself, but K thought that her sister had asked him to do it. She said: "I am happy for my sister now. I don't cry for her anymore. And I am hoping that someone like you will do the same for me" (238). She apparently thought that Corporal Endo had taken risks to save her sister. In the extreme situation, he seemed to think that it was better for her to be killed than be a comfort woman and she had the same feeling. The girl's slashed throat signifies that she had no voice to tell her stories or testify what had happened to her. In that sense, she symbolizes a comfort woman who cannot speak about herself.

Recalling one of the comfort women, Hata "wondered if she had survived the war and was still living now, in Singapore or Korea or perhaps even here in this country" (112-113). However, it was impossible for comfort women to go back to their home country where patriarchs and chastity are emphasized. Park points out that they could have another reason why they could not go back to their country: they cooperated with Japanese (155). They were victims, yet they felt guilty. In *A Gesture Life*, there is no comfort women who survived the war. Even if they could have escaped from camps, they did not have their house or home countries to return to. This might be one of the factors for some comfort women to choose their own death. Moreover, they were not buried in graves as K's sister was not. Hata thought it was too merciless—he wanted to give them a place to rest. He says that he purchased resting places for him and Sunny in a cemetery. It should be discerned that Hata does not have his home and home country just like comfort women; therefore, he bought graves for himself and his daughter who is partly a Korean.

Conclusion

All Hata wants to do is to forget his past, yet he cannot. He has suppressed his past related to K as he put the black flag in his closet. He placed the flag out of his sight, yet it was there. He also placed the box that contained many photographs of Sunny in the storeroom, yet it was there. It is important to note that Hata keeps silent because he is a perpetrator. If he were simply a victim, it might have been easier for him to tell his stories. Many ethnic minority writers think that people should pass on traumatic stories so that never re-experience the tragedy. Akiko, a former comfort woman in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, delivers her experiences to her daughter named Beccah after her death by a tape she recorded while she was alive. While Beccah listens to her mother's narrative, she writes it down on a canvas. By writing her mother's story, she tries to rewrite history. The daughter learns from the past and steps into her

future. However, Lee does not give any tales to inherit for Sunny in *A Gesture Life*. Hata has no voice to tell about his suffering because of his guilt. It can be assumed that Lee intended to describe how history remains unspoken.

During an interview with Jacki Lyden, Lee says: “And I think in the end this is not a book about the comfort women. I would never say that this was.” As the author himself affirms, the theme of the novel is not the comfort women issue, but *A Gesture Life* is regarded as a significant novel concerning comfort women along with *Comfort Woman*. Their books are often compared by critics. While Lee unfolds a story from a man’s point of view, Keller does from a comfort woman’s perspective. It incites some critics to judge that Lee does not convey the story of comfort women accurately. However, there should be stories that only men are able to tell. To Dwight Garner, an interviewer, Lee says that he felt it was more unbearable to be a witness than be a victim. He wanted to portray the torment of being a witness. Cathy Caruth asserts “by carrying that impossibility of knowing out of the empirical event itself, trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of *impossibility*” (10). By writing *A Gesture Life*, Lee wanted readers to recognize history from another standpoint.

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