

## A STUDY OF A SECOND GENERATION KOREAN-AMERICAN IN COPING WITH HER IDENTITY AS PORTRAYED IN MINOR FEELINGS: AN ASIAN AMERICAN RECKONING BY CATHY PARK HONG

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### ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the writer discuss two things related to the identity of the second-generation of Asian-American in America. First, the writer analyzing: What factors caused Cathy Park Hong to feel struggle to prove her identity and existence as a second generation of Korean-American in her society. The first is how does Cathy Park Hong's society make her feel struggled to prove her identity and existence as a second generation of Korean-American in America? Then the second is how does she overcome problems of her identity and existence as a Korean-American in her society in America. In this research, the writer uses qualitative descriptive research. This study uses data in the form of writing and descriptions of the data sources that have been collected. At the end of this thesis the writer concludes that: Hong has difficulty proving the existence of her ethnic identity as a Korean-American because she is too often traumatized by being abandoned by other people. Ethnicity and also often feel underappreciated by other ethnicities. Hong, in dealing with the problems she faces, prefers to store and vent her feelings of sadness into poetry.

Keywords: Asian-American Immigrant, Minor Feelings, Korean-American, Immigrant, Identity.

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### INTRODUCTION

After reading *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* by Cathy Park Hong (2020), I was very intrigued by the experience of Cathy Park Hong this book. This book is an autobiography. An autobiography is a biography of a person written by him or herself. However, it can also be written by other people but must be above the knowledge of

the person concerned. An autobiography is a non-fiction literary work because the autobiography itself comes from a real story. An autobiography can also contain the personal experiences of the person concerned which is written so that it can be read by the readers (Sejuta, 2022).

It tells the story and experiences of being a child of Korean immigrants who was born in and grew up in America. Because this is an autobiography, Cathy Park Hong is the main character and this is the topic of this thesis. This book voices the life of Asian immigrants from Cathy Park Hong's point of view, not from the point of view of the white. This book also explains how literary and artistic works can convey the author's message to readers. In this case, what Cathy Park Hong means is that she is a child of Korean immigrants who was born in America and living among the white people who make up the majority of America's population. The treatment that Cathy experiences is unpleasant and is carried out by a white child against herself as a child of Korean immigrants. There are examples of unpleasant treatment that Cathy gets, such as when Cathy tells about the incident at the church camp that she attends. The surprising thing is that this unpleasant behavior is carried out by children who also have Korean blood, like Cathy.

This book provides many descriptions of Cathy Park Hong's original story and the feelings she experienced during her life. In this autobiography, we can find the story of how immigrants have to try hard to learn a language that they do not really master. Not infrequently these Korean immigrants make mistakes in composing sentences or even wear T-shirts with pictures or writings that are actually inappropriate to wear just because they do not understand the meaning of those words or sentences on their T-shirts. This book also tells how Cathy Park Hong can make peace with herself, become a writer, and can even laugh at things that she thought it was funny when she did in the past when she was a child. From this book, the writer also very interested in how Cathy Park Hong is able to reconcile and finally able to tell her life story through poetry and other writings.

The topic that the writer carried out for this thesis is identity. To support the analysis, the writer also provide this thesis with some examples of the difficulties that Korean-American children face when they adapt to their environment where they are a minority. In this thesis, the writer discuss factors that cause Cathy Park Hong to want to prove her identity and presence in society and eliminate her lack of confidence as a

child of Korean immigrants born and living in America. The writer also talk about how Cathy Park Hong managed to overcome all that problems and manages to live well in America. In this analysis, the writer will use qualitative research methods. In this thesis, the writer discuss two problems that the writer has formulated from reading this book by Cathy Park Hong. First how does Cathy Park Hong's society make her feel struggled to prove her identity and existence as a second generation of Korean-American in America. The second is how does she overcome problems of her identity and existence as a Korean-American in her society in America.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The method that the writer uses in this thesis is the descriptive qualitative analysis method. The writer collect all the data to answer research questions that have been formulated previously. After that the writer prepare the supporting data from the second source and excerpts from the main data that the researcher has prepared to analyze this thesis. In analyzing the problems in this study, the writer took data from the autobiographical book by Cathy Park Hong, entitled *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. The process of collecting data is needed and very important to be able to find answers to the formulation of the problems in this thesis. The qualitative research method begins with the existence of a data source, processes that data, and develops a theory. This study's objective is to meticulously collect data in order to provide a comprehensive explanation of a known phenomenon.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, the writer present the discussion with explanation based on the related theories as it has been mentioned in chapter two. In chapter two the writer explain theories about literature and biography by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1949), mimetic theory by M. H. Abrams (1953), Korean Immigrant theory by Ronald H. Bayor (2011), and theories about personal identity and social identity by Fearon J. D (1999).

From the data that the writer have collect before, the writer will group the data into two groups. The first is an external cause and the second is an internal cause that Hong experience from within herself. In the table below, the writer will provide the main

problems that Hong feels are aimed at helping answer her first research question more easily.

**Table 1.3**

**Data regarding the main problems that are often experienced by Cathy Park Hong**

No	External	Internal
1.	Not get enough respect by other ethnic groups.	-
2.	Trauma from being left out by other ethnicity.	-

From the data grouping that the writer have done, the writer will state that the main factor causing Cathy Park Hong to find it difficult to prove the existence of the identity she has is an external factor. From the table above, there are two main factors of external problems that Hong faces so she finds it difficult to prove her identity as a Korean-American and also to prove the existence of her ethnicity. The main problems that Hong receive from external greatly affected Hong's lifestyle, which chose not to mention her identity as Korean-American.

The first external problem is not get enough respect by other ethnic groups. According to the data I collect and write on the table, it is not only young people who are not get enough respect by other ethnic groups. So Hong feels reluctant to write stories and poetry that tell her identity as a Korean-American because identity is something that has to be seen from two perspectives, from Hong herself and others in her society.

According to McCartney dan Moje (2008), identity is and important aspect for individual. Identity is not only how we see ourselves but also how other see us. From this theory and also from the main factors that I have concluded, Hong's reasons for having difficulty proving the existence of her identity can now be explained in this discussion section. According to Hong, people who have Asian-American ethnicity are much underappreciated and also not very important in society. Charisma is lacking in Asians. Asians are in charge of excuses. They cannot be considered genuine minorities just by being here. They are not adequately racial to be token. Because we are so post-racial, they are silicon. This sentence really shows how Asian-Americans are so neglected by other ethnicities in America. The difficulty of getting attention from others makes it difficult for people of Asian-American ethnicity to prove their identity. This also makes it difficult for Hong to prove that the Korean-American race exists and

lives side by side with other ethnicities in America. Because identity requires views from both sides, both from within an individual and from outside society.

As a person who has a Korean-American identity, Hong is aware that she is an American who has the original ethnicity from her parents are Korean. Hong wants to admit that she is an American who has Korean blood, however, in her autobiography book Hong tells how Korean Americans are seen by other ethnicities, especially by white people and black people. Asian Americans are portrayed as having a hazy purgatorial status in popular culture: a deficiency in black and white; we are misunderstood by African Americans and ignored by whites unless we are being used by them to subjugate the black man. We are the service industry's carpenter ants and the business world's apparatchiks. We're middle managers who keep the business running smoothly and analyze financial data, but we never get promoted because we lack the leadership "face." For Hong, Korean-Americans cannot be classified as black people because there have been several incidents where Korean-Americans have tried to win the favor of the white majority by participating in what they did to black people. However, Korean-Americans also cannot be classified and included in the group of white people. It is also difficult for Korean-Americans to get good jobs because according to society they are still inappropriate and cannot be called leaders even though they are actually people who are very meritorious in the field of work they are passionate about. This feeling again made Hong doubt how she could prove that ethnic Korean-Americans exist when the people around him are still reluctant to admit that they also live side by side in America.

As a writer, Hong often tries to find inspiration from other writers of color. However, according to Hong writers of color, especially those with Asian-American ethnicity, they are very lacking in presenting their stories, so it is still difficult for Asian-Americans to see and understand their life stories and struggles while in America. There is a lot of literature about Jews and African Americans who hate themselves, but not enough about Asians who hate themselves. Literature that tells about the experiences of ethnicity is really needed because literature can be a window for other ethnicities living in America, and can also be a mirror for the ethnicity itself. Having readings that tell how the struggle of an ethnic group in the same country makes an individual feel calmer because that individual understands that he or she is not alone. Literature is a window that can make every ethnicity know the life of one another. It

can also build a bridge to understanding each other's culture. Every story told in literature will provide an overview of their culture, where they come from, and also how they adapt in an environment with a new language. Hong regretted that Korean-Americans rarely write about this.

Besides regretting that there will be a paucity of literature on her ethnicity. Hong also shared how a writer of color had to be careful when writing stories or poetry. Writers of color are required to tell their stories of racial trauma; however, our stories have been shaped by the white imagination for far too long. Publishers expect authors to privatize their trauma: Before the character realizes their own worth, they are put through their paces by a remarkable family or a historic tragedy. The story that the writer will write in color has already been directed toward how they should tell about their bad experiences, how they should tell what they experienced. Publishers have managed everything as if to the difficulty that writers of color are experiencing especially those of Asian-American ethnicity are all the same. With such regulations from publishers, written literary works are no longer a window for other ethnicities to find out more about Asian Americans living in America. This literary work also cannot be said to be the right mirror for Asian-Americans because of the limited issues they are allowed to discuss, so Asian-Americans still cannot find a story that reflects how they really are in America. All this time Hong always thought that her writing always needs to be in line with the feelings of the white majority because Hong herself had listened to question and answer sessions with a writer of color and there was said that if a writer of color wants to write then they must be kind and polite so that white people are comfortable and want to listen or read that.

Apart from feeling that his ethnicity is still underappreciated, Hong also shared an experience that left her with trauma, when Hong see Korean-Americans around her being discriminated against by white people. Hong shared how she suffered at that time when Hong was wearing clothes with the Playboy logo, she also see how her grandmother was the target of ridicule from white children and also how Hong and her sister experiencing verbal discrimination from white couples when they wanted to return home from the shopping center.

In this section, the writer will discuss what traumas Hong described in her autobiography prompted her to finally have the courage to write this book as a window and mirror for other Korean-Americans. According to M.H. Abrams in his

book entitled *Mirror and The Lamp*, (1953), Literature and biography has benefits that aim to help readers of biographical literature learn about the issue regarding growth, language creativity and every word uses by characters in their writings. Works from literature and biography also aim to be means for writers to tell the world about their life history honestly. For Hong, this is a very difficult thing to do but Hong still challenge herself to write this book. The trauma that Hong tells the most about is Trauma from being left out by other ethnicity. Due to her dissatisfaction with the conventional ways in which racial trauma was framed, she never felt comfortable writing about personal racial trauma. Because her pain felt isolated, exceptional, and operatic when my life is more mundane than that, the confessional lyric did not seem appropriate. Additionally, she was unable to write traditional narrative realist fiction because she did not wish to mold her thoughts into an anthropological experience that would cause the reader to conclude that the life of Koreans is so heartbreaking after reading my novel. As long she was a poet, Hong herself never became an autobiographical poet because Hong's feelings that she has been experiencing are far more painful than what people expect. Hong is still dissatisfied with what her ethnicity has received so far. What the Korean-American ethnicity received still cannot heal the trauma that Hong experienced from her childhood to adulthood. According to Hong, Asian-Americans, especially Korean-Americans, are often forgotten by other ethnicities living in America. The only way to get a little attention is to be more disciplined and harder on yourself. By becoming more disciplined, Asian-Americans can achieve high educational value so that other ethnicities can observe them and begin to take into account the presence of Korean-Americans around them.

In the book by Ronald Bayor 4th volume (2011). It is written there how the majority of the Korean-American population was born in their native country in Korea and came from outside America, so they find it difficult to adapt and be connected to the culture in America including the language barrier they use every day to communicate. Korean-Americans also prefer to live in an area where there are many people who can speak their native language, namely Korean. This has something to do with an experience Hong had when she was a child.

When Hong was seven years old, she had an experience that really make her feel embarrassed and confused because she didn't know where she went wrong, but her feelings knew that something was wrong with her. According to Hong, her mother

sent Hong to school wearing Playboy shirt when she was just seven years old. A fourth-grader asked if she knew what "that means," pointing to the front of her shirt. When she said no, she saw that girl grin and dash to her friends. Hong's face was flushed with blood. But she did not know the meaning of the shirt. The trauma that Hong experienced as a child when her parents were still trying to adjust and Hong was also trying to understand the cultural situation in America made Hong feel ashamed. The shame she has to endure made her feel that she needed to know more about American culture.

Another time when Hong and her grandmother see a group of white kids playing on a cul-de-sac, her grandmother had just brought a branch of lemons from someone else's front yard to bring back to our house. Hong was alarmed when her grandmother decided to greet the white kids. As is customary in the United States, her grandmother waded into the group of young people and began shaking their hands. In front of Hong's grandmother face, one of them imitated absurd sign language. From that point forward, a brown-haired, tall young lady crept up behind her grandmother, kicked her grandma in the posterior as hard as possible. When her grandmother fell, her grandmother broke her leg. The kids all laughed. In her book like what I have paraphrased, Hong wrote how she felt shocked and confused, but also couldn't do anything when her grandmother became a victim of ridicule by white children just because Hong's grandmother tried to greet and be friendly to them.

Another thing that still makes trauma in Hong's memory is when she has to see her parents being treated like children by adults of white ethnicity just because they do not fully understand how the customs and manners apply in America. One characteristic of bigotry is that children are treated as adults and adults as children. To witness a parent being treated as if they were a child is the deepest form of shame. Hong cannot count the number of times that white adults have treated her parents in a demeaning or condescending manner toward them. As an Asian American growing up in the United States, Hong learn not to rely on her parents and witness their humiliation: You cannot be protected by them. From this experience Hong learned to be independent, she tried to protect at least herself because immigrant parents were still in the same process of adapting to the environment. This is a painful process for both children and parents because they still have to continue to transition in order to better understand their environment in America. Hong's parents still had to go through stages before



becoming American. There are three stages that must be passed. According to Lame, (2004), there are three levels that an immigrant must pass before becoming an American. The first is making a transition in which an immigrant inevitably feels lost, misses their home in their country of origin, tries to adapt to their experiences of American culture, and works hard to achieve their goals. The second stage is making the connection where immigrants still carry out and remember their original culture and bring that culture into America. The last is the third stage where an immigrant finally feels that they are an American who has two cultures, namely their original ethnic culture and American culture. In the process of becoming American, Hong parents must go through these stages in sequence, according to how they must begin to adapt and transition, then they still remember and introduce Korean culture to their children, then they become Americans. But, Hong she already feels that she is an American because she is born in Los Angeles, California. Hong does not deny the fact that she is an American, but she feels saddened by the behavioral discrimination that her ethnicity suffers from.

In the process of becoming an American with an American social identity, Hong experienced many hardships. Hong in her book tells how the friendly attitude of her grandmother was reciprocated by bullying from white children, and also how Hong, who is still seven years old, has to try to understand with shame that he remembers into adulthood because she wore clothes with the Playboy logo at school. This also happens in the picture book which tells the story of a Japanese-American child named Suki when she wears a kimono to school. Suki, who used to feel very confident, slowly began to feel a little doubtful about what she was wearing when she had to go to school. However, with courage and patience, Suki showed that what she was wearing was a traditional Japanese kimono that her grandmother had given her. Likewise with Hong, due to her ignorance, Hong began to try to find out how culture existed in America through the web, and finally, with that process, Hong managed to transition from not knowing much about American culture at first, because of her curiosity Hong finally learned a lot about American culture and can socialize with her schoolmates who also have American citizenship well.

To answer the second research question, the writer will also classify what Hong do in dealing with the problems she experience. The following is the data that the writer

have grouping. There is one main way that Hong does in overcoming her problems, and this method arises from Hong herself. This way is the way that happens internally.

**Table 1.4**

**Data Categorization**

External	Internal
	Feels compelled to prove her ethnicity exists in America.

Basically, Hong prefers to keep her problems private and feels that she cannot trust other people to be able to hear and provide solutions to the problems she faces. Hong also prefers to write poetry which allows her to imagine being another person so she can forget the problems she has. During this time Hong always wrote to please other ethnicities, especially white ethnicity, after seeing Pryor he became inspired and wanted to write for her ethnicity. Hong had a similar realization while watching Pryor: She have no idea what she doing here. Whom do she write to? Hong began writing her story and sharing her experiences as a Korean-American by starting writing her autobiography book.

According to Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's book entitled *Theory of Literature*, (1949), biography in literature has the benefit of being able to help literature readers understand and know about the language that the biographer uses, the experience of the biographer and culture as well as the new situation experienced by the biographical writer. In her book, Hong tells a lot about her ethnic situation. She also tells about her experience, and how she transitioned from being a victim of suffering to finally having the courage to write the story she experience in a book.

Since Hong was a child, she loved writing poetry and she used poetry as a medium where she could forget the problems she was experiencing in her life. Hong can be any character according to her imagination she has. Hong has never written poetry about her own experiences or those of her ethnicity. Hong had wanted to write a story about her parent's country of origin in Korea, but due to a lack of experience and also knowledge of Korea, Hong discouraged her. Hong, who often watched Pryor's stand-ups and read poetry from other colorful writers, finally found the feeling she had been looking for, the feeling of being the minority. Hong saw someone channel what she call minor emotions in Pryor; the negative, dysphoric, and, as a result, ungentlenic range of

emotions that are racialized and come from everyday racial experience and the irritation of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed. Minor emotions arise, for instance, when you hear a racial slur and are told. It was from here that Hong began to write her biography, but Hong still found obstacles because she had to remember her bitter memories in the past, and she had to tell how it felt to be treated by others. Hong continues to write because, from the very beginning, she wrote the book *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* she want to challenge herself to be able to share her experiences with all people in America so that her ethnicity can now regain the meaning of literature in the form of windows and mirror. Hong wants people of Korean-American ethnicity living in America not to feel like they are fighting alone in trying to achieve what they want in the United States. Hong also wants her story to be a window for other ethnicities so that Korean-Americans are more noticed and respected by people in America. In her book, Hong is forced to discuss how white ethnicity behaves because for Hong, white ethnicity, which is the majority ethnicity, is still abused very often and has not really taken into account the position of Korean-Americans in the capitalist white supremacist hierarchy in the United States. In her book, Hong wants to voice the grievances she experienced while being a Korean-American who was born and raised in America to represent other Korean-Americans who still don't have the courage to express their grievances to the public. Although not written specifically, in her book Hong wrote that she wanted to make Korean-American ethnic citizens even more human in the eyes of society in America through the books she wrote. With her autobiographical book, Hong wants to voice the life story of the Korean-American ethnicity and wants to humanize her ethnicity more. From this discussion, the writer can say that what Hong did to overcome her problem was to write. Hong wanted to use media literature in her move to make ethnic Korean-Americans more human and more considerate of their presence in America.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussions that the writer have discussed in the fourth chapter, the following are some conclusions that the writer can give in this sub-chapter. The first conclusion that the writer can state in this sub-chapter based on the discussion

and also the data the writer got to answer her first research question is that Hong has difficulty proving the existence of her ethnic identity as a Korean-American because she is too often traumatized by being abandoned by other people. Ethnicity and also often feel underappreciated by other ethnicities.

Based on the data and also the discussion that the writer had in the previous chapter, to answer her second research question, the writer will state that Hong, in dealing with the problems she faces, prefers to store and vent her feelings of sadness into poetry. Because since childhood Hong liked to write poetry and imagined being someone else in the poetry she wrote to distract her from the problems she was experiencing. It was because of her love for writing and her desire to make her ethnicity more recognizable in America that Hong decided to challenge herself and write an autobiography. With her autobiography, Hong hopes she can provide a mirror for fellow Korean-Americans who are struggling together to get a better life in America.

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