

CONSTRUCTING KOREAN IDENTITY: A REPRESENTATIONAL ANALYSIS OF JENNY HAN'S *P.S. I STILL LOVE YOU*

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Abstract

Cultural representation in diaspora literature is an area of study that continues to grow, but research that specifically examines Korean cultural representations in English-language novels written by Korean-American writers is still very limited. This study aims to identify and analyze the forms of Korean cultural representation in the novel *P.S. I Still Love You* by Jenny Han (2015) through Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Alan Swingewood's sociological approach. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis techniques on sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that contain elements of Korean culture. Primary data were from dialogue and narration in the novel *P.S. I Still Love You*, while supporting data were obtained from journals, books, and scientific articles. The results of the study found five forms of Korean cultural representation in this novel, namely: Korean traditions and customs, the value of family collectivism, Korean cuisine, Korean beauty, and Korean language. These findings suggest that the novel *P.S. I Still Love You* consistently represents Korean cultural identity as an integral part of the identity of the main character, Lara Jean, as a Korean-American individual.

Keywords: *American culture, Korean culture, representation, sociology of literature*

INTRODUCTION

Literary sociology is an approach to literary theory that analyzes literary works by examining the social life of the people behind them. This theory is basically the representation of society in literary texts as well as the relationship between literature and other social structures, where literature is seen as part of the social system of its time (Ahmadi, 2021). It also considers that human actions cannot be separated from social interaction and communication, so that the social structure of the author also influences the form of the literary work he produces. Vaña (2020) added that novels are able to reveal deeper cultural meanings of social reality through the emotional involvement of the reader, so that the author's understanding of the world and reality is always reflected in his works. Among the various literary genres of drama, fiction, and poetry, novels are the most relevant genres for sociological studies due to their ability to construct character compositions, plots, and settings

that comprehensively describe the way of life of people. Through his language and narrative tactics, the author represents the reality of human existence so that the reader can identify and feel for himself the situation depicted in the story.

Culture is an accumulation of values, beliefs, language, and behaviors that are transmitted across generations as a marker of a group's identity (Jin, 2022). When associated with literary works, culture is not merely the background of the story, but rather the main substance that is actively constructed and characterized by the author. Perangin-angin et al. (2023) show that culture in the text of the novel is manifested through daily behavior, language, clothing, and character names, all of which serve as a medium of representation of the author's social reality. With the increasing phenomenon of diaspora and cultural globalization, literary works are increasingly used as a medium to record, negotiate, and maintain cultural identity in the midst of intersections with other cultures. Ivanova (2023) notes the wave of Korean or Hallyu culture that includes K-pop, K-drama, and K-literature. It has now developed into a South Korean soft power instrument that is widely known around the world. Hallyu is rooted in the philosophy of Confucianism that emphasizes hierarchical relationships, obedience to authority, community harmony, and strong family ties (Jin, 2022; Fithratullah, 2021). These values are not only alive in Korean society in the homeland, but are also maintained by Korean-American communities abroad as part of their ethnic identity.

The Korean-American community is a collectively oriented ethnic minority group, characterized by collectivist morality and strong Confucian values, in which the family is seen as an extension of the individual's own self (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985). Kim and Choi (2022) identify that Korean individuals who grow up between the two cultures develop different types of acculturation from integration, assimilation, to identity conflict that are highly dependent on family dynamics and their social environment. Yang, Shin, and Jung (2025) add that speakers of Korean heritage in America often face pressure from their parents to maintain their original cultural values, while on the other hand they are required to adapt to mainstream American culture. This tension of identity is the rich narrative field in Korean diaspora literary works. The novel *P.S. I Still Love You* (2015) by Jenny Han is one of the contemporary English-language novels that explicitly shows the life of a Korean-American woman named Lara Jean who tries to maintain her Korean cultural identity in the midst of American society. The novel offers a unique medium for examining how Korean cultural values are constructed, marked, and represented in English-language popular fiction discourse.

Although the study of Korean cultural representation in popular media has been quite developed especially in the context of K-drama and K-pop (Fithratullah, 2021; Jin, 2022), research specifically analyzing Korean cultural representations in English-language popular fiction novels by Korean-American authors is still very limited. Most of the existing research focuses more on language identity or the acculturation experience of diaspora communities sociologically, rather than on the construction of cultural representations in fictional texts themselves. This gap is what this research aims to fill. To analyze these representations, this study uses two theoretical frameworks. First, Stuart Hall's *Theory of Representation* (1997), which explains that representation is the process of constructing meaning through language and cultural practices. According to Hall, meaning is not naturally attached to an object, but is produced through the system of signs and symbols used in communication including in fictional texts. Representation is thus active: the author consciously selects and contemplates cultural signs to construct his character's identity. Second, Alan Swingewood's *Sociological Approach* (1972), which views the novel as a reflection of society and as the author's real attempt to construct his social reality through his relationship with family, institutions, and the environment. Swingewood emphasizes that the author's position in the social structure determines the perspective and values embedded in his work. Based on the above background, this study aims to identify and analyze the forms of Korean cultural representation in the novel

P.S. I Still Love You by Jenny Han (2015) through Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997) and Alan Swingewood's sociological approach (1972).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a content analysis method. Qualitative research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of society. The primary data source for this study is Jenny Han's 337-page novel *P.S. I Still Love You*, published by Simon & Schuster, United States. Supporting data obtained from scientific journals, books, and articles related to the object of study. The data collection procedure was carried out through three stages: (1) close reading of the entire novel text to identify sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that contain representations of Korean culture; (2) recording and coding of data based on the categories of cultural aspects (tradition, collectivism, culinary, beauty, and language); and (3) triangulation of data with secondary sources to verify interpretation. The units of analysis in this study are sentences, phrases, and paragraphs that explicitly and implicitly represent the values and practices of Korean culture. The data were then analyzed using Stuart Hall's theory of representation to identify how Korean cultural signs are constructed and interpreted in texts, as well as Swingewood's sociological approach to examine how these representations reflect the social reality of the Korean-American community. Data that is considered meaningful and relevant will support the achievement of this research objective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In analysis, the novel is seen as the author's real attempt to construct his social reality through his relationship with family, institutions, and nature. Jenny Han's position as a Korean-American author places her in a distinctive social structure, so that her narrative choices authentically reflect the social and cultural values of the Korean-American community. The data analyzed was in the form of quotes of sentences, phrases, and paragraphs from novels that were sorted into five cultural categories. The following are the results of the data analysis:

Korean Traditions

The culture of the Korean-American people did not change much even though they migrated to the United States, as many families retained the traditions of their homeland. In the context of a multicultural America that is often referred to as a salad bowl, each ethnic group can maintain its cultural identity while coexisting with other diverse societies. Similarly, Korean-American families continue to celebrate various important Korean traditions in their family lives. The two most well-known celebrations are Chuseok, which is often confused with Thanksgiving, and *Seollal*, which is the Korean Chinese New Year. Both celebrations are centered on family togetherness and traditional food. During *Seollal*, Koreans usually eat *tteokguk* (rice cake soup) and play the traditional game of *yutnori*.

At the beginning of the novel, the author introduces the Korean New Year ritual which is celebrated in January or February according to the lunar calendar. The celebration is very family-oriented, so Korean family members, including those living outside of South Korea, will gather together to celebrate. The family has a very important position in Korean society, where the well-being and honor of the family is upheld. Therefore, the actions of one family member can affect the entire family. In some Korean families, men are traditionally considered leaders, so the oldest family member's home is often the center of meetings during celebrations.

One of the important traditions in *Seollal* is wearing hanbok, a traditional Korean garment. This is illustrated in the novel when Lara Jean says, "*Kitty's still trying to weasel her way out of wearing a hanbok to Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor's*" (Han, 2015, p. 3). The use of hanbok in the novel shows how Korean traditions are passed down from generation to generation,

especially through the influence of Lara Jean's grandmother. According to Jeong (2006), hanbok is a traditional Korean garment worn by all ages, especially on important occasions. Hanbok generally consists of two parts, namely the top (*jeogori*) and the bottom in the form of pants (*wedge*) or skirt (*chima*). Thus, clothes became a tangible symbol of Korean cultural identity and the sustainability of their traditions.

Another important aspect of Seollal is the respect for the elderly. Similar to the tradition of gathering during Eid al-Fitr in Indonesia, younger family members will visit and salute older family members. In this celebration, younger family members perform a bowing ritual according to the order of age. In the novel it is explained, "*The order goes from oldest to youngest...*" (Han, 2015, p. 5). The quote shows the importance of the age hierarchy in Korean culture. Older people are highly respected because they are considered to have wisdom, life experience, and knowledge that can guide the younger generation. Therefore, respecting parents is one of the main values in Korean families.

In addition to the bowing ritual, parents also give money to younger family members as New Year's gifts. This tradition is illustrated when Lara Jean said, "Maybe the adults will give us more money for dressing up" (Han, 2015, p. 5). After receiving the tribute, the parents usually offer prayers for health, happiness, and a good future before giving money. Lara Jean also explained: "*We get ten dollars from Aunt Carrie and Uncle Victor... and twenty from Grandma!*" (Han, 2015, p. 6). The statement shows that the tradition of giving money is still practiced in Korean-American families. More than that, this tradition reflects the value of collectivism inherent in Korean culture. Collectivism emphasizes loyalty, mutual support, and prioritizing family interests over personal interests. According to Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clack (1985), in a collectivist society, the family is seen as an extension of the individual. In the novel, this value is reflected through Lara Jean's warm and supportive family relationships, thus showing that Korean traditions remain meaningful despite living in a diaspora environment.

Family Collectivism Values

Collectivism held by the Korean-Americans in this case includes that held by Lara Jean and her family. This means that Lara Jean's family has established a loving family because of the concept of collectivism. Collectivism is a theory held by many people in Korea whether within or outside the state. It is the concept through which people in Korea within their communities try to nurture their in-group (families), considering themselves part of it (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985). In other words, people in Korea strive to make their families perfect by supporting and loving each other. Collectivism is demonstrated in this novel as shown in Lara Jean's preparation of her family member's birthday. There is the tradition of celebration of their birthdays especially that of Kitty (her little sister). On the day of Kitty's birthday, they have made arrangements to do everything before Kitty gets up. The following sentences demonstrate family collectivism.

"It's our tradition to put the sign on Kitty's door, so it's the first thing she sees when she wakes up. I get up early and hang the sign carefully, so the edges don't bend or rip."
 (Han, 2015, p.11)

The above passage clearly portrays the actions of the rest of the family members. Kitty being the youngest in the family, is doing everything with care and love, even for those things that she will use on her birthday celebrations. This reflects the caring and loving nature of the family. In addition, the act of caring for one another also shows that they are aiming to be viewed as Korean people. They are fully supportive of one another and are working towards developing their identity as a caring and loving family.

Korean Cuisine Values

This section of the Representation is about the food belonging to Koreans or the receipt by Koreans. In the entire novel, the Writer highlights several foods that could be used to represent the real Korean foods. The first example of Korean food is depicted when the characters celebrate the New Year in the novel's introduction, as shown in the sentence below.

"Next, we make rice cake soup for good luck."

"As I begin to eat my soup, I make a wish. 'Please, please let things work out with Peter and me.'" (Han, 2015, p. 6)

The above statement indicates that they would eat the traditional cake from Korea after collecting some money from their elderly family members. Rice cake soup or tteokguk is the traditional food of Koreans as the embodiment of customs and traditions which have been around for centuries. Nevertheless, the common individuals could not afford to eat this food item in the past since it was costly, and thus could only be enjoyed by them during special days like their birthdays or other celebrations. The reason why South Korea is unique compared to the United States is varied. One of the reasons why it is unique is that the people in South Korea eat seaweed soup, known as miyeokguk, on their birthdays. In relation to the ingredients, as cited in Ladner's blog post written by Ladner (2018) in her discussion of the topic, generally, tteokguk is composed of protein such as chicken, beef, pork, rice cakes that are long cylinder-shaped, and garnishing that consists of seaweed, eggs, and onions. It can be observed from the statement above that tteokguk brings good luck to all those who consume the dish because according to the tradition, anyone who wishes to eat the dish must make their wish first before consuming the dish.

The significance of presenting the value of the food helps to give deeper meanings to the New Year's Day celebrations. As described by Ladner (2018), when people are going to consume the soup, they often do some wishes because the soup can be compared to candles in a birthday cake that needs the person's wish before he blows it out. Another significant tradition in the celebration of consuming the soup described by Ladner is that people who consume the soup would gain one year in their age. The number of rice cake soup eaten is equal to the years they would gain, and thus it is rare for kids and adults to consume more than one bowl of the soup. In Korea, the question about people's age can be asked through the number of bowls they consumed. The Korean nation has a long and rich history of unique food culture, having many traditions associated with various cultural customs. The main achievement of Korea from the background perspective can be considered as the ability of Koreans to keep their traditions alive through generations. The Korean tradition is built on three core principles of humility, sincerity, and thankfulness upon greeting, dining with friends and family members, and praying.

One more example of Korean cuisine introduced in the book is Kimchi. It represents the most famous Korean dish or side dish. *"Why don't we get our bowl of kimchi?"* (Han, 2015, p. 7). In this case, Lara and her sister were not given Kimchi since the aunty thought that they were not pure Koreans. Kimjang/Kimchi refers to an old Korean dish that has been there for more than 3000 years; the culture of Kimjang/Kimchi began as a means of preserving vegetables as a source of food in winter when most Koreans faced starvation due to lack of adequate food. Furthermore, it was through them that they kept all Korean traditions alive for the benefit of future generations. Korean culture included aspects of eating, which were taught from one generation to another.

Margot, Lara's sister, asked, *"Does this galbi jjim taste like grandma's?"* (Han, 2015, p. 68). As Margot is about to leave their house to travel to Scotland, the family prepare galbi jjim, which is considered special cuisine that is only prepared during traditional holidays in Korea. *Galbi jjim* is considered special to old parents and other relatives.

"and some of that ginseng tea grandma brought us back from Korea." – (P.S I Still Love You pp 69)

The above sentence comes after they have had galbi jjim, where their father encourages Margot to drink ginseng tea as they were brought by their grandmother from Korea. Ginseng tea, known as insem cha by Koreans, is herbal tea that keeps them healthy despite any stressful diseases. Below is another cuisine featured in the novel.

"It's Margot's last dinner before she leaves for Scotland tomorrow. Daddy makes Korean short ribs and potatoes au gratin from scratch". – (P.S. I Still Love You pp 68)

From the representations described above in regards to Korean food, it demonstrates the uniqueness and diversity of Korean foods. It also implies the use of the position in mass society (Swingewood, 1972:18). This means that the writer's works impact not only the present social environment but also beyond that. It suggests that there is a point where sociological aspects of society can be shaped via the strength possessed by the writer.

Korean Beauty

Korean culture has added another aspect known as K-beauty because it has been proved by many women and men in Korea particularly from their faces. Nevertheless, what is known about the Korean people is that they are particular about their skin and make sure to take good care of it both naturally and chemically using all those ingredients that may work well for their skin. There have been various Korean practices of skin care in the novel which serve as a symbol for their culture.

The following paragraph explains one of them, which involves Margot, Lara Jean's sister.

Margot comes racing in, wearing one of those Korean beauty masks on her face with slits for eyes, nose, and mouth. "What? What?" – (P.S. I Still Love You pp 45)

Korean people have particular beauty standards that have reached other nations as well. What helps their beauty standards to be achieved is the mask. There are many kinds of masks available from different brands that support or sponsor certain beauty standards. Masking is an essential part of taking care of your face and being recognized. Nevertheless, it has turned into a global phenomenon that everyone utilizes on a daily basis. Furthermore, in this scenario, as seen in the passage above, Margot uses her Korean mask to signify Korean beauty standards. This particular beauty standard was achieved due to the popularity of the Korean music boyband BTS (Liang, 2023). As said earlier, although the masking process for skincare purposes has been a popular one around the globe, the character Margot chooses to use a mask that belongs to Korean culture. Consequently, it reflects the representation of Korean culture in the novel. Furthermore, the book highlights that the characters apply Korean masks in their skincare routine, as seen in the following sentence.

"We were doing a Korean face mask my grandma had sent, the kind that looks like a ski mask and drips with 'essence' and vitamins and spa-like things." – (P.S I Still Love You pp 181)

This explains what they do when they have free time; despite living in New York, they also have Korean items. Korea not only has good culture and education but also offers excellent skin care products. The best of their culture, the Koreans only use natural and harsh-free materials to get beautiful and natural-looking skin. This is because of which k-beauty is famous

among current generations. These skin care products are an example of cultural representations made by the Writer as Korean-American, as she wishes to share all aspects of Korean culture with others apart from their music, cuisine, and culture.

Apart from skin care, Korea also has other beauty products for various body parts and hair as well. The Writer also talks about some other products regarding beauty standards of Korea in her book.

"You should try deep-conditioning it and see if that helps," Kitty suggests, and Chris glares at her. "I have a Korean hair mask my grandma bought me," I say, putting my arm around her. – (P.S. I Still Love You pp 194)

Apart from facial skin care, Korea also possesses its unique beauty when it comes to hair. This uniqueness is because everything that exists in the body is associated with its own special care. The beauty standards determine all the requirements of different body parts. Consequently, do not forget about this particular part of your body that should not be neglected in beauty treatments. Korean people treat themselves properly by means of several treatments, such as facial treatment using different types of masks. Being a paradise for beauty standards in other Asian countries, their music, as well as dramas, are quite common among the population. As for its history, luxurious hair was the main key to the beauty of the past in Korea (Needels, 2021). People used to have their hair shiny, dark, silky, and smooth, which was believed to represent the picture of a gorgeous Joseon (ancient name of Korea) lady. Moreover, keeping hair clean is important both for women and men in Korea.

Korean Language

Another aspect of Korean culture that can be observed through the novel is the language. The Korean language was created by King Sejong in the year 1444 in the Joseon dynasty (Omniglot, 2006). South Koreans use a variety of terms for their language such as *hanguk-to* meaning Korean language, *hanguk-mal* meaning Korean speech, and *uri-mal* meaning our language. The Korean language has a total of 24 Korean alphabets, made up of 14 consonants and 10 vowels. Koreans belong to an intensive ethnic group that shares one common language with efficient cultural identity. They possess several amazing physical features that distinguish them from other Asians including Chinese and Japanese language. According to the Korean language, there are over 65 million people residing in the peninsula and its outlying islands, while 5.5 million are living elsewhere in the world. It is important that all Koreans speak and write the exact same language because it has helped create a strong sense of identity for them as a nation. Modern-day Korea has various dialects, such as the standard dialect spoken in Seoul and other parts of Korea. However, these are very similar and people have no difficulty understanding each other. Being a member of the Korean-American community, Lara Jean has not been able to learn Korean proficiently.

"There's a Korean word my grandma taught me. It's called Jung. It's the connection between two people that can't be severed, even when love turns to hate. You still have those old feelings for them; you can't thoroughly shake them loose of you; you will always have tenderness in your heart for them. I think this must be some part of what I feel for Genevieve. Jung is why I can't hate her/We're tied" – (P.S I Still Love You pp 320)

This sentence describes the imagery related to the Korean word which she received from her grandmother. There is something significant in Korean about the word Jung which is the connection between two individuals. Even though you hate them, there will be tenderness

within your heart towards them. If it is translated into English, then it will mean love, affection, sympathy and attachment. From the sentence above, we realize that Lara Jean has failed to understand the full meaning that could have been meant by the authentic Korean since both her and her siblings were born in America. Nevertheless, lack of the language culture awareness of Lara Jean and her sisters does not hinder her from acquiring the spirit of learning them. She still uses the word Jung to express her connection with this particular situation of hers (inability to speak Korean) which can be attributed to her birthplace (as pointed out earlier). It therefore means that Lara Jean cannot speak with a Korean without her Korean mother who is dead.

Meanwhile, the conversation between Lara Jean and her father below shows the spirit to learn the Korean language.

"Daddy, UVA has a Korean language program," I say. "If I get in, I'm going to take Korean." "Your mom would've loved that," he says, and he gets that sad look in his eyes again." – (P.S. I Still Love You pp 69)

From the above extract, one can note that Lara Jean's father is reminiscing about his experience with her mother and how much she would appreciate her decision to study Korean language classes. Lara Jean's willingness to enroll in the Korean language classes demonstrates the Korean language culture in the book. The representation of the Korean language in this book is used by the writer to demonstrate her cultural background through her mother and father. It also brings out the fact that even though their mother is no more, Lara Jean's father wishes his children not to forget their roots and background.

CONCLUSION

The representation of Korean culture in the novel is seen through several main aspects, namely family traditions and values, culinary, beauty standards, and language. Traditions such as Chinese New Year celebrations, the use of hanbok, and respect for parents show the strong value of collectivism and the influence of Confucianism. Korean cuisine is depicted through typical foods such as tteokguk, kimchi, galbi jjim, and ginseng tea which have cultural significance. In addition, Korean beauty culture is reflected in the attention to skincare. Korean is also an important part of the character's identity, even if it is not fully mastered. Overall, culture plays an important role in shaping individual identity and needs to be valued in the diversity of society.

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