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Hyphenated Identities: Integration and Belonging in Korean-Canadian Narratives

Identités à trait d'union : Intégration et appartenance dans les récits des Canadiens d'origine coréenne

Rasha Deirani

Abstract

Canada prides itself on being a multicultural country, and Canadian culture is described by some as a mosaic composed of distinct parts that take pride in their Canadian-ness. My focus is directed towards Korean Canadians and their hyphenated identities. Korean Canadians, like all immigrants, have faced challenges to integrate into Canadian society, reconstruct their identities and find their own sense of belonging. Ann Y. K. Choi's novel *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety* (2016), Ins Choi's play *Kim's Convenience* (2012), and a radio documentary (2018) by Jennifer Yoon all explore themes of identity, integration, belonging and hyphenated identities. In addition to being written by second-generation immigrants, these works share similar histories and discuss the struggles that are still facing Korean immigrants in their attempts to integrate (which presents a current and possibly future challenge to Canada in terms of integration and multiculturalism). Aspects like gender, age, socioeconomic status, and generational perspectives all affect the way these immigrants relate to their surroundings and accept their hyphenated status. By examining these factors and studying the autobiographical elements in these works, I seek to understand the creation of the hyphenated identity and what it means to belong and to be hybrid in a multicultural country.

Keywords: identity formation, Korean voice in Canada, integration, generational conflict, second-generation immigrants

Résumé

Le Canada se vante d'être un pays multiculturel, et la culture canadienne est décrite par certains comme une mosaïque de parties distinctes qui sont fières de leur canadianité. Pour cette présentation, je me concentre sur les Canadiens d'origine coréenne et leurs identités à trait d'union. Comme tous les immigrants, les Canadiens d'origine coréenne ont été confrontés à des luttes et des défis pour s'intégrer dans la société canadienne, reconstruire leurs identités et trouver leur propre sentiment d'appartenance. Le roman *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety* (2016) d'Ann Y. K. Choi, la pièce *Kim's Convenience* (2012) d'Ins Choi et un documentaire radiophonique (2018) de Jennifer Yoon explorent les thèmes de l'identité, de l'intégration, de l'appartenance et des identités à trait d'union. En plus d'être écrits par des immigrants de deuxième génération, ces œuvres partagent des histoires similaires et abordent les difficultés auxquelles sont encore confrontés les immigrants coréens dans leurs efforts pour s'intégrer

dans la société canadienne (ce qui représente un défi actuel et éventuel pour le Canada en termes d'intégration et de multiculturalisme). Des aspects tels que le genre, l'âge, le statut socio-économique et les perspectives générationnelles influent tous sur la manière dont ces immigrants se rapportent à leur environnement et acceptent leur statut à trait d'union. En examinant ces facteurs et en étudiant les éléments autobiographiques, j'espère parvenir à une compréhension de la création de l'identité à trait d'union et de ce que signifie appartenir/être hybride dans un pays multiculturel.

Mots-clés : formation de l'identité, voix coréenne au Canada, intégration, conflit générationnel, immigrants de deuxième génération formation de l'identité, voix coréenne au Canada, intégration, conflit générationnel, immigrants de deuxième génération

Introduction

Canada prides itself on being multicultural. Canadian culture is often described as a mosaic of distinct parts that are united by their Canadian-ness. Nevertheless, Canadian literature lacks diversity in some areas, particularly in the representation of Korean-Canadian voices in its literature. This absence is evident in the limited number of published literary works that document the Korean experience, as alluded to by Ins Choi in his play *Kim's Convenience* and Ann Y. K. Choi in her novel *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*. For example, Ins Choi reveals in his play's introduction that "The only roles out there were two-bit parts in three-bit movies-of-the-week, involving silent on camera Asian gang members … It was then that I realized I would have to birth this play myself" (8–9). The play's huge success prompted some families to travel from distant places to watch the play because "it's about us," as one Korean family declared (10). In *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*, the protagonist Mary faces criticism from her mother for not reading works by Korean writers or showing interest in Korean culture. Mary also blames herself for expecting her boyfriend, Will, to take an interest in or read a work by an Asian writer:

> It was obvious he hadn't even looked at them. "I went to half a dozen different bookstores to find all those books for you – there's not a whole lot out there by Asian writers." Maybe it was my fault; I was expecting him to embrace that part of me that was foreign to him – to leave the comforts of his white world and try to see things from the point of view of an Asian protagonist, or at least go to a restaurant that didn't require a steak knife. (172)

This lack of representation becomes more intriguing when juxtaposed with the current global rise of the Hallyu wave (Korean culture and entertainment such as K-pop music and Korean television series). Ann Y. K. Choi draws a historical comparison

with the time her family and other migrants arrived in Canada in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. At the time, Korean restaurants were scarce, immigrants were scattered all over the country (often living atop their convenience stores), and there was little interest in Korean culture. Nowadays, there is a notable positive shift in perception, with people expressing interest in Korean culture and language and engaging with Korean music and television series.

The dilemma of a name[1]

In "'What is your Name?'", Jinhee Kim and Kyonghwa Lee assert the scholarly claim that names are closely related to cultural values and are deeply connected to identity. Moreover, according to Richard D. Alford, naming practices provide social identity and membership in society: "A named child has … a social identity. To know a child's name … is to know who that child is. And when the child is old enough to know his own name, he … knows who he is" (qtd. in Kim and Lee 211–212).

Once they arrived in Canada, Ins, Ann and Jennifer had to change their Korean names to English ones to ensure easier integration. The name-changing was a rite of passage. Ins Choi, for example, shares the story behind his name in an interview with David Bell. The closest English spelling for his name would have been Insub Chen; however, the immigration officer misheard the name and wrote down Insurp Choi. Ins Choi says he was burdened by this name for most of his life. In grade 9, he opted for the name Danny, influenced by John Travolta in the movie *Grease*. At college, Ins found his chosen English name to be mundane and reclaimed the name Insurp after meeting other Asians with similar struggles. As he states in an interview with CBC radio, "For most of my high school life I was Danny Choi. Then later in life I got a little artsy and Danny was too boring. I reclaimed Insurp and my friends started short-forming it to Ins" ("*Kim's Convenience* co-creator").

As for Ann Y. K. Choi, her Korean name is Yu Kyung Choi. She kept the initials of her Korean name as well as her last name. Although she could have changed it upon marrying an Irish man, she chose not to relinquish that part of her identity. Commenting on her name change in an interview with CBC radio, Ann says when her family arrived in Canada in 1975, and she and her brother went to register at school, they were informed it was school policy to assume English names: "We were told it was for our own good, and that it would help us adapt and become part of the community faster" ("Ann Y. K Choi on growing up"). Ann asserts that having an English name, one that people could remember, facilitated her blending in.

1) In this article the three authors are sometimes referred to by their first name for the sake of clarity.

In her documentary for CBC radio, journalist Jennifer Yoon, who arrived in Canada later (2004) with her family, unveils her experience and the circumstances behind her name change. She chose her name while en route to Canada. The famous TV series *Friends* was part of the in-flight entertainment and Jennifer was charmed by actress Jennifer Aniston, who played Rachel in the sitcom: "She was beautiful and blonde – a breath of fresh air. It was like she was representing this new world that I would soon discover once I stepped off the plane" ("At 11").

Her mother had already conveyed that selecting an English name was part of the assimilation process. Her mother became Sharon, and her father went first with Arnold but later changed it to John. Jennifer wanted a modern name that better suited her, and seeing the actress lounging on the couch, confident and relaxed, Jennifer decided that she wanted to be just like her. Despite adopting her chosen name, Jennifer's legal name remains her Korean name, Yae Gi. As she says, many people mispronounce her name, and she faces many bureaucratic hurdles. However, she feels that giving up her Korean name would mean losing a part of who she is, forgetting the sacrifices her parents made to give her this life in Canada. Despite feeling that she has two identities at times, Jennifer is not ready to let go of that part, and it does not seem she would.

Ins, Ann and Jennifer have experienced similar incidents with their names, both Korean and English. The circumstances are slightly different in each case, but all of them had to deal with the reality of having two names. The two names not only represent two different cultures but also represent two different parts of their identities; thus, we will explore how each of these three deals with assimilation and belonging. We may not be able to completely fathom the depth of the struggle since these three are still working on finding their space. As Ann Y. K. Choi mentions in an interview, she considers herself Korean-Canadian, yet "sometimes I still feel like a visitor" despite all the years she has lived in Canada ("Ann Y. K. Choi on telling Korean-Canadian stories").

As has been established, since our names are intricately tied to our identity and self-perception, having two names that represent two different worlds actively contributes to having a hyphenated identity. The works of Ins Choi, Ann Y. K. Choi and Jennifer Yoon underscore the challenges inherent in a hyphenated identity. However, by keeping a part of their Korean names, whether initials or surnames, Ins, Ann and Jennifer seem to have found a way to reconcile the two parts of their identities and to have a sense of pride in both their Korean and Canadian sides.

Generational gaps between fiction and real life

Ins Choi and Ann Y. K. Choi address the challenges of the generational gap and what ensues in terms of integration and preservation. As Ann mentions in interviews, her generation fulfilled their parents' expectations. They went to university and got a good education so they would not have to serve in the stores. The second-generation achieved what was expected of them. However, during Ann's interviews with fellow second-generation young adults in university, she discovers a shared narrative of challenges faced during their upbringing. As is noted by Kyong Yoon in *Diasporic Hallyu: The Korean Wave in Korean Canadian Culture*, with Korean immigrants being scattered all over the country, many lacked the community support enjoyed by other ethnicities. When Ann and her peers were growing up, it was not easy to identify as Korean. Ins and Jennifer share the same sentiment: it was not easy to find something to be proud of as a Korean. Just like Ann's character Mary and most of the second generation in general, they all wanted to be more Canadian. Nowadays, Korean culture through the Hallyu wave is world famous; at the time, the general population was not as interested in Korean culture, and as we can see in the play and the novel, there were even subtle references to racism.

The parents are determined to keep their children Korean while the children want to be Canadian. The struggle is reflected in *Kim's Convenience* and *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*. *Kim's Convenience* introduces Appa, an authoritarian father figure who oversees everything. He has two children: Jung and his younger sister Janet. The discord between the father and Jung, marked by dominance and rebellion, leads to Jung's running away after robbing the store, as recounted by Janet in scene 13:

> Um, well, during one of their arguments, Jung said that Appa was a horrible husband, that he was treating my mom like a slave. And Appa hit him. Hard. Jung was hospitalized for a few days. After he was released, everything seemed to be back to normal. Then, one day, my dad went to get the money from the safe and it was empty. So was Jung's room. (24)

Janet has to shoulder the burden of her parents' expectations, disappointment and the legacy of being Korean. Despite her parents' expectation that she will pursue a practical career or marry a Korean man, Janet defies their demands: she studies photography and remains single for a long time. When her father tells her to take over the store since she lacks prospects, she refuses despite her father trying to assert his dominance and diminish her accomplishments, as in scene 7:

> APPA. Janet, you is thirty years old now and still single. You have to understand, now is desperation time for you. Sudden death, overtime, penalty kick shootout. Expiration date is over. Take over store is only choice you having.

> JANET. I can't believe —
>
> APPA. Me and Umma is struggle whole life make life for you. We do what we have to do, hope you can be doctor, lawyer, big success, but what you do? Take picture. We don't have to come to Canada for you take picture. Even you can take picture in North Korea…
>
> APPA. What is my story? Hm? What is story of me, Mr. Kim? My whole life is this store. Everybody know this store, they know me. This store is my story. And if I just sell store, then my story is over. Who is Mr. Kim? Nobody know that. You take over store, my story keep going.
>
> JANET. But Appa, that's life. Whether you choose it or get thrown into it, you make it what it is. And if you're not happy with your life, I'm sorry, but you can't expect me to make your life – I don't know – meaningful. (27)

The exchange illuminates Appa's expectations of complete submission from Janet, not merely as a daughter and a woman but also as the heir to his legacy, especially with Jung's absence. Unlike her brother, who simply runs away and clandestinely seeks financial help from their mother, Janet confronts her parents and negotiates their expectations, works in the store and slowly but surely gains her independence. She makes her parents accept her true self and she finds love – all at her own pace without allowing them to push or pressure her, and while keeping her relationship with them. Her journey not only reflects the struggle of meeting parental expectations and belonging to two distinct cultures, but also reflects gender roles and how females are perceived.

In many cultures, women are expected to be silent, to make sacrifices and to accept this. Janet's journey of self-discovery and of defiance of parental expectations (without severing ties) shows the reconciliation she achieved by being both Korean and Canadian. Her brother Jung does the same by eventually returning, reconciling with Appa and taking over the store. Jung ran away from his Korean family and tried to make it on his own, though he was never completely cut off through his secret meetings with his mother. However, having struggled to make it on his own, and having a son of his own, he finally understands the sacrifice of his parents and the need to reconcile with them and his heritage. His journey may not be as mature as his sister's – partly because we do not get to learn about it in detail – but he returns and is reconciled with his father. The reconciliation with the father signifies one with their Korean roots. Both Janet and Jung ended by finding and accepting their hyphenated identities.

In *Kay's Lucky Coin Variety*, Mary embarks on a similar journey, in a novel offering a nuanced exploration of character development and thematic elements. As in *Kim's Convenience*, the parents have two children, Josh and Mary; both Josh and Mary tire of managing the store and doing what is expected of them. Like many second-generation children, Josh and Mary are expected to help in the store after school.

Similarly to Janet in the play and journalist Jennifer Yoon, Mary grapples with the desire to embrace a modern Canadian identity. Mary's discontent is palpable, as evidenced by her explicit expression of disdain for the store, wishing for it to burn down. Mary's discontent and lack of interest in Korean culture are two reasons behind her mother's persistent emphasis on preserving cultural ties. The tension between the two is acutely captured when Mary notices that her mother always asks the same question whenever she has friends over:

> "Why don't you have any Korean friends?" Then her voice would turn accusatory, hostile. "You don't like Korean people. You're ashamed of our culture. But you'll marry a Korean man if you know what's good for you." (20)

Mary silently protests, with her train of thought showing her discontent and inability to understand her parents' persistence when it comes to anything Korean. Mary wishes she could answer her mother by saying "*You can't force me to be proud of my culture when you've given me nothing to be proud of*" (20).

Mary has a tense relationship with her mother; their relationship represents many relationships between second-generation women and their mothers. In one of her interviews with CBC radio, Ann addresses this topic and explains her position and what Mary's relationship with her mother means:

> The mother in the story represents all the different mothers that I heard about when I was informally interviewing Korean women around my age for a university sociology project. I realized that we all shared very common expectations and a lot of it centred around the expectations that our mothers had of us. The immigrant expectations were the same. It wasn't until many years later when I became a mother myself that I had a much more forgiving attitude and gentler understanding of what my mother did for us. I stopped being as resentful as I was of her fourth child, the store. ("Ann Y.K. Choi on growing up").

Mary and Josh have separate expectations to meet. For example, overhearing their parents' conversation about how the two will grow up, take care of them and give them many grandchildren, Josh playfully comments "At least you'll be free of that expectation … you'll go on and marry some white guy whose parents won't care" (14). Of course, this is not true, as Mary's mother has commented on several occasions that Mary is to marry a Korean man, as if this outcome were a given.

Mary's aspiration to major in English at university prompts her mother's pragmatic response in favour of a steady career and emphasizing diverse literary representation. The mother addresses Janet, saying "Maybe it wouldn't be too bad if you become an English teacher. Steady job. Have your summers off. Have children,"

followed by "you never read books about Korean characters or even Chinese ones … make sure [your] students realize there are writers out there who aren't just black and white. Make sure they don't miss the point like [you] did" (96). From these excerpts, we can infer that for many Koreans, specifically the first generation represented by the parents, keeping Korean culture alive was of utmost importance, and having faced hardships in setting up their new lives in Canada, they had come to see Korean culture as the support they needed and where they belonged.

The generational and cultural gaps between the parents and their children lead to tension and misunderstanding. Many children blame their parents for their high expectations and struggle to find common ground, especially when it comes to their education and careers. Mary, for instance, wants to be an English major because she loves literature, not because it would be convenient to become a teacher and take summers off to look after the children.

Like Janet, Mary contends with an arduous path of self-discovery. She has to juggle representing a whole culture as a minority with meeting her parents' expectations and achieving what she wants. However, one fundamental difference that changes her life and identity is a sexual assault.

The detailed account of her sexual assault by Leon, a local pimp, vividly illustrates the brutality and lasting impact on Mary's psyche. He attacks her at night while she is going home. Leon leaves her limp and unconscious on the stairs after the depraved assault. The text makes explicit the trauma of the attack: "His fingers gouged into my cheek. The stench of cigarettes on his hand and alcohol on his breath overwhelmed me and I felt my stomach tighten … I tried to scream again. 'Mary … Don't make me hurt you.'" After he pushes her causing her head to hit the handrail, he asks, "'You still with me, Mary?' … He grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked my head back. He slapped the side of my face. 'This won't be any fun 'less you're with me.'" Her description of the last insult and reaction: "I closed my eyes and let my body, already limp, dissolve into the stairs. 'Stupid Chinese bitch!' he said" (28).

This incident not only underscores the vulnerability of minority women but also reveals the inadequate response by the police. The aftermath of the assault divulges a poignant exploration of cultural dynamics within Mary's family. Her mother chooses to conceal the truth: "My mother had told everybody I'd fallen down a flight of stairs – everybody but the police. As usual, she wanted to avoid bad publicity for the store. Just like with the newspapers." Nor does the mother talk to Mary about the incident; she acts as if nothing has happened, which fuels Mary's anger and resentment. Josh tries to justify their mother's reaction: "'You know what she's like,' Josh said. 'The way she deals with things is to bury them inside – make like nothing's ever happened.' But it did, I wanted to scream. To me. Something terrible. Why couldn't she talk to me?" (30). Mary seeks maternal

empathy in her vulnerable state but is faced with her mother's stoic and seemingly distant approach.

Mary's traumatic experiences with racism, robbery, sexual assault and the untimely death of her mother affect her understanding of her womanhood, her acceptance of the Korean way of her parents and her affairs with white men. Mary may have started subservient and submissive on the outside, but she is walking towards her liberation. Through examining her relationships with those around her, Mary brings together her Korean-ness and Canadian-ness by becoming published as a Korean-Canadian poet, something that was rare in Canadian literature.

Reliving old trauma and the struggles of the past and the present

As we have seen, the characters Mary and Janet both have strained relationships with their parents, especially their mothers; this is more evident in Mary's relationship with her mother. This relationship reflects the one many Korean girls had with their mothers. According to Ann, Mary represents many second-generation Korean women she knew and interviewed. The mother character, while demanding and controlling to a certain extent, is representative of many Korean mothers.

Ann's own mother had reservations about the release of the book because it was her life story. Ann says that it was easier for young Korean women to blame their mothers for their problems since mothers are the glue that keeps the family together in times of adversity. This situation had a negative effect on mother-daughter relationships, involving family expectations, integration and the quest for personal independence. However, with age and motherhood, these daughters came to understand the sacrifices their mothers made and everything their parents had to tolerate and lose to provide a better chance in life for their children. She concludes one of her interviews with CBC radio by saying:

> I think my mom is really afraid of this book coming out because she thinks it's like her life story. We've had some interesting conversations, but I really want her to know that this book is my way of thanking her. Even though the mother is crazy and demanding in the book, ultimately I think my character, me and all the women's voices that are woven throughout the story, it's our way of saying thank you. I don't think we necessarily say that enough.

Ann goes on to say that she feels it is her duty to write about the struggle of her parents and the first generations that came so that her daughter's generation does not forget what it took to get them to where they are now: "I don't want my daughter and

her generation to forget or be ignorant of what it took for that first group that came over in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to make their lives in Canada the way it is today" ("Ann Y.K. Choi on Telling Korean-Canadian Stories").

Both Ins Choi and Ann Y. K. Choi draw from personal and parental experiences to write about the Korean experience. Jennifer Yoon and Ann Y. K. Choi both admit that they are struggling with the sense of belonging and their identity, but as they grow older, it has become easier to embrace the Korean side of their identity and to belong to South Korea as much as they belong to Canada.

Conclusion

Interestingly, both Ann Y. K. Choi and Ins Choi set their stories in the 1980s, both migrated to Canada around the same time, and both were inspired by their parents and their own experiences to write; Jennifer migrated a few years later, in 2004, and seems to have had similar experiences and challenges despite the time gap between 1975 and 2004.

Taking into consideration the different periods in which Ins, Ann and Jennifer came to Canada, and juxtaposing the challenges they faced and still face with those tackled in the play and the novel, a striking continuity emerges. The enduring struggle with names, integration, parental expectations and identification with two cultures remains relevant and tenacious. Ann, who works as a guidance counsellor, says that matters have not changed that much: parents still sacrifice everything and set expectations for their children; the children still try to navigate these with their own desires.

For these Korean-Canadian authors, the act of writing becomes a means to rewrite the past – not to change it, but to be reconciled with it. In the two works, the convenience store is presented as a monster needing to be fed; it is always present and keeps the family apart, in a sense. As Ann elucidates, the store was the child that fed them all, thus demanding sacrifices from everyone in the family. They had to keep the store open every day, and because of that, they were never able to have dinner as a family; not even instances of illness or tragedy such as Ann's mother's battle with cancer or Mary's mother's fatal accident warrant store closure.

Ins's play was published in 2011, Ann's novel in 2016, and Jennifer's documentary in 2019. These three examples show the resilience and reconciliation of Korean and Canadian cultures and identities in the second and third generations; however, the fact that they all tackle the same problems, and the fact that after Ins's play, Ann's novel is the only Korean work to speak of the modern Korean experience in Canada, is an indication that despite attempts to fully integrate and calls for multiculturalism, the Korean voice is still scattered and needs greater representation in Canadian literature and society.

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