



LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL SPECIFICITIES IN 'FREE FOOD FOR MILLIONAIRE' BY MIN JIN LEE

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an in-depth literary and linguistic analysis of Min Jin Lee's novel "Free Food for Millionaires," concentrating on its examination of identity, race, culture, and gender in the context of Korean-American immigrant experiences. The narrative follows Casey Han, a young Korean-American woman navigating life in 1990s New York City, highlighting her struggles with familial expectations, romantic relationships, and career aspirations. Min Jin Lee's vivid and descriptive prose, akin to that of Fyodor Dostoevsky, crafts a multi-generational saga that explores the intricacies of human experience.

The analysis underscores Min Jin Lee's use of third-person narration, past tense, and a structured chapter format, offering insights into her narrative techniques and thematic elements. The novel's ironic title and its portrayal of contrasting characters, such as Casey's strict father and supportive friends, emphasize themes of familial love, cultural expectations, and personal ambition. The article further examines the representation of racial discrimination and gender inequality, illustrating the challenges Korean immigrants face in attaining success and respect within a predominantly American society.

Additionally, the analysis considers the autobiographical elements in Min Jin Lee's writing, drawing parallels between her experiences and those of her characters. Through meticulous character development and a realistic depiction of socio-economic struggles, the novel weaves a rich tapestry of immigrant life, highlighting the significance of cultural heritage and the pursuit of individual dreams. Overall, the article highlights Min Jin Lee's skill in creating complex, relatable characters and addressing significant social issues through engaging storytelling.

Introduction

Free Food for Millionaires is a novel written by Min Jin Lee, an American writer of Korean descent. The work tells the story of Casey Han, a young Korean-American woman trying to navigate through life in New York City. It is a well-rounded novel that explores different themes such as identity, race, culture, and gender. Recent years literature has become simple or a lot more shallow I dare say, works do not make us, readers to put too much of an effort. Things are different with this book. Min Jin Lee created a complex line of events and enriched

the plot with interesting main and supporting characters. The author can be compared to Fyodor Dostoevsky when it comes to writing style. Min Jin Lee's writing style is characterized by its vivid and descriptive prose, which brings to life the worlds she creates. Her novel *Free Food for Millionaires* is multi-generational and is the first novel in the trilogy saga of Korean immigrants abroad. In this analysis, we will delve deeper into the themes and how they play out in the novel through character development and discuss the author's writing style in the process.

The novel *Free Food for Millionaires* is set in New York, mostly, and events start in early 90s. Readers do not have to rely on poetic details to understand what time or place everything is happening as it is in 'Cat in the Rain' by Hemingway, for example, where you guess approximate time of events by the author's descriptions. Min Jin Lee provides this information explicitly in the first chapter, of course after establishing a the setting by imagery. If the following extract tells about where the book set "A Korean immigrant who'd grown up in a dim, blue-collar neighbourhood in Queens, she'd hoped for a bright, glittering life beyond the workhorse struggles of her parents, who managed a Manhattan dry cleaner" , "Kearn Davis was the bank that every econ major wanted in 1993" gives idea on when it is set.

Third-person narration is the narrative type Min Jin Lee used here. The novel initially is divided into three books that consist of several chapters each. Each chapter had a one to two word title which can be a little hint that helps you to predict the content of it. Also, story is told in past tense and Min Jin Le herself mentioned in of the interviews she preferred this way of writing: "I prefer the omniscient point of view for novel length work. I also prefer to use the past tense rather than the present tense, which is far more popular now." she says in the interview with Hachette Book Group. As an example we can take any line from the book, but let's look at the opening line that describes Casey Han: "As a capable young woman, Casey Han felt compelled to choose respectability and success. But it was glamour and insight that she craved."

There is scene in the first book in which the author references to the title of the book "*Free Food for Millionaires*". investment bankers receive free lunch after closing a deal: "walnut-paneled doors opened for the free food. The aromas of the Indian food issuing from the room were intoxicating", "—whichever desk that sells a deal buys lunch for everyone in the department.", "The funny thing is that if you were a millionaire like some of these managing directors shaking down seven figures a year, you'd have known to push your way ahead and fill up your plate" By giving this kind of contrast, the author provides us with a truly ironic title. Continuation of what Walter, a handsome Asian guy from Kiern Davis said "Rich people can't get enough of free stuff" is another antithesis. And repetition of the same consonants in the title creates alliteration which adds musicality to it.

Everything starts with rather cruel scene where Joseph Han slaps his daughter Casey so hard that she falls. Casey is kicked out of her parent's house which she was thinking to leave anyway as his forbidden (It was law: If either of them brought home a white boy, that daughter would be disowned. They were to marry Korean.)boyfriends Jay asked her to move in with him. Unfortunately, freshly graduated from Princeton with no job Casey has no penny with her and adding oil to the fuel she catches her boyfriend Jay cheating on her with two younger and more beautiful girls. Without money, parents, boyfriend and roof over her head the protagonist is put through line of challenges from the first chapters making readers feel

empathy to her.

I would like to mention Min Jin Lee's ability to create complex and fully-realized characters, who are both flawed and relatable. Just remember one of the supporting characters Ted Kim, Ella's fiancé who is referenced to as a guy Ella marrying in chapter four and introduced in person in later chapters of the first book to the reader. A reader can find oneself in a character that came to a big city from a remote place and studied, worked hard to achieve what he has now and became an executive director. Representation of Ted Kim can give people hope that they are able to do the same. Although Ted is just a supporting personage who doesn't appear in all chapters, Min Jin Lee described his inner feelings and thoughts too. For example, just remember the scene where his attitude and his primary feelings towards Casey, our protagonist is given. Ted thinks "now this so-called friend who had quite a mouth on her had been camping out at Ella's place for four weeks." He admires her at the same time without realizing himself. In the scene in church where Casey recites by heart what Ella, a perfect Korean girl in his opinion is reading out of the book astonishes him. If Ted and some other characters consider Casey as an opinionated girl in less positive context, Jay Casey's white boyfriend thinks she is afraid to tell what is inside of her.

You can assume Min Jin Lee is intending to show that everyone is important by narrating what is in their minds. On the other hand, sometimes focusing on too many people instead of the main characters can take up space and make the book rather boring. However, exposition gives readers background information that later leads us to the realization of the problem which is in the centre of the book and emotional effect is not cut because of it. For instance, portrait of one character through narrator's and other characters' point of view is another distinctive point of the novel that creates emotional depth and complexities of human experience. The way Casey's father, Joseph Han thinks she is irresponsible and has no respect contradicts what Jay Currie, Casey's American boyfriend's mother Mary Ellen Currie thinks of her. Mary loves Casey like mother is supposed to love her child. Just remember the chapter that starts with description of Mary where she comes across with Casey suddenly and these what she feels according to the narrator: "She felt happy to see Casey so unexpectedly, and she kissed her again". As if so many people who love Casey, but she still lack love in her life "Casey burst into tears. It had been several weeks since anyone had actually touched her. The touch of a person she loved was almost too much to bear." Sabine's, a middle aged Korean immigrant woman who married an American man Isaac and runs her own fashion business, thinks completely different of Casey. As the narrator tells, in Sabine's opinion, Casey Han is a very good girl, she just need a little direction from older people and a little more love. This may be the reason why Sabine spoils her with pricey gifts and it leads us to the next point which is theme and representation of love in the novel.

Love is one of the major themes in the novel and you can witness it in different shapes and forms. In fiction, love is often portrayed as a powerful force that can transform people's lives. It is often depicted as a complex emotion that can bring joy, pain, and everything in between. Love can be portrayed as a source of inspiration, motivation, and strength, but it can also be portrayed as a source of confusion, heartbreak, and vulnerability. In many novels, love is used as a plot device to drive the story forward. Characters may fall in love, face obstacles and challenges, and ultimately overcome them to be together. Love can also be used to reveal the true nature of characters, as they may act differently when in love. It is relevant in Free Food

for Millionaires too. Familial love is one type of love described here. Especially, here I would mention and compare at the same time parental love that depicted in parent-child relationship. Besides the love Sabine expresses with presents and attention, there is a real parental love Leah Han shows her daughters Casey and Tina by sewing clothes or cooking for them. In most Asian cultures, love between parents and children is not exposed and is often expressed through practical and emotional support. Parents play a crucial role in guiding and nurturing their children through various stages of life, and children are expected to show respect and deference to their parents in return. "This girl has no respect for me," Joseph Han says to Leah in the chapter one. Korean parents often emphasize education and academic achievement, viewing it as a way of securing a successful future for their children. They can be strict and demanding, pushing their children to excel in all areas of their lives. However, this strict parenting style is usually driven by a deep sense of love and concern for their children's welfare. The Han family love is representation of traditional family love Korean families have in common. Communication also can be more reserved, and physical affection may not be as openly expressed as in Western cultures. Pay attention to what the author has to say about it in the book "The sisters parted without any hugging or kissing—the intimate gestures that came so easily to Americans." Nevertheless, another personage, also Korean parent is a complete reverse to other parents. Doctor Shim, Ella Shim's father is kind and supportive single parent who puts his child's feelings above other people's opinions. "You don't have to marry him," Douglas blurted out." The fact that he is saying these words just before the wedding march not caring what guests would think is impressive while compared to Doctor Shim, Joseph Han is furious when he when he hears Tina wants to be something different than he expected. "My daughter's supposed to be a surgeon. That's what I told everybody. That's what they think you're going to be." In the scene before Tina, Casey's younger sister's wedding with Chul when Tina announces that she wants to become an endocrinologist not a brain or a heart surgeon because she is more into research than practice, Joseph feels deceived.

It's interesting to see warm feelings of not only young people, but also romantic feelings of older generation in the book. Take as an example respectful love of Joseph Han to his wife Leah and this romantic tension between Doctor Shim and again Leah. "If her solo had coincided with a committee visit, Douglas would've told her how much he'd enjoyed her singing in her husband's presence. It was a curious position to be in—that is, being an attractive widower and talking to married women, especially at church, and especially with Leah." "Douglas tried to think of something else to say to make her stay a little longer. He liked looking at her up close." It is refreshing to read about amorous feelings of older people while nowadays novels are aiming at young adults mostly. Moreover, this side of the work makes it appealing to wide range of reader age groups. After all, young people aren't only ones who can love, right? Actually, Leah Han is a popular love interest in Fee Food for Millionaires. Choir director, handsome, talented, but arrogant Charles develops passionate feelings toward her from the day one at church too. "She was a gorgeous woman, her features small and fine," Racial discrimination and gender inequality are one of the central issues raised in the novel. The fact that representatives of Korean as well as other diasporas have to work twice as hard as Americans described in the book. Ted realizes Casey is like him in many ways, but these qualities annoy him in Casey and makes him proud in himself. Or else in the second book one

year after Tina and Chul's wedding when Tina has a baby, Leah tells Dr. Shim that Tina will take a break from medical school while Chul will continue studying: "She finished the first semester of her second year, but she's taking a break for now. Until things get a little easier. Chul is finishing his third, and this is an important year for him". Saying this Leah as a representation of many Korean women lets us know the same education is more important for men than women while taking care of a child is mainly mother's duty. There tons of other examples like situations when men underestimate Casey just because she's a girl and so on, yet let's move to the next point.

The novel encompasses different literary techniques and the author managed to combine them together well. Stubborn and irresponsible with finances Casey, her finally Korean boyfriend, gambling addict Unu Shim, too soft Ella, and Delia who sleeps around with guys from the office, everyone no matter young or old, male or female, they are all flawed and Min Jin Lee shows them realistically with these flaws as they are. Essence of naturalism is vividly seen in multiple scenes as well. The moment Casey is hit by her dad how everything is described so a reader portrays a girl with a huge bruise on her cheek that she is trying to hide with a hat and sunglasses. The fact that Casey sometimes isn't able to buy even a sandwich or she scenes in which she confesses taking an egg from Ella's refrigerator without permission to cook her a three-for-a-dollar ramen noodles bought from Odd-Job to make it more filling and adding as much water as possible to go full for couple of hours show us the misery of being poor. Another moment to compare to Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov and the way he was described at the fall of his life.

An autobiographical narrative in fiction is famous, especially, in diaspora literature as they provide a unique insight into the experiences of individuals who have undergone displacement and the challenges of identity formation in a new context. Min Jin Lee used both personal experience and fruits of her journalistic research and presented them in a fictional format. She fictionalized moments and places to make the narrative more engaging or interesting. In one of her interviews it is mentioned that Min Jin Lee's ability to write about her immigrant life was thanks to the hundredths of hours spent reading the books picked from the Elmhurst library in Queens, New York. Lee and her two sisters were introduced to the library by Uncle John. Parallely, in the novel Casey spends her childhood with her sister Tina in the same library: "The literary classics borrowed from the Elmhurst Public Library had taught the sisters about Americans and Europeans from long ago, but modern life had been extrapolated from the small screen", " She had read some old books from a short list made up by Mrs. Mehdi, her favorite librarian from the Elmhurst Public Library." Min Jin Lee confessed she loved reading authors such as Tolstoy, Bronte sisters, Dickens, Hemingway, Fitzgerald who later obviously had influence on her writing. Casey doesn't consider herself an avid reader and finds it difficult to discuss books with her friends. Joseph, an old gentleman who runs this small bookshop in New York City observes her and says followings: "But on Saturdays when I see you on the bus, you are always reading. Sometimes I worry that you'll get hit by a car because you're not paying attention. This year, you read Thackeray, Hardy, and Eliot. Either you're a slow reader or you read the same books over and over. Last year, you read Anna Karenina for a long time. You've read some of the Americans: Cather, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Sinclair Lewis." Casey even gives fifteen hundred dollar for rare edition of Jane Eyre just to help him even though she herself is suffering from mounts of debts while her

boyfriend Unu's gambling worsening the situation. Isn't this situation reminding you any certain character from a certain book of certain mentioned author? Yes, remember Rodion Raskolnikov gives last money he had in his pocket to Marmeladov's wife.

Finally, through older generation in the novel and Casey and Ella's visit we get a view on church centered social circle of people. To the topic of religion in *Free Food for Millionaires* there is significant attention and there are occasional references to it. For instance, Casey visits a church with her friend Ella on Sundays, or how she reads Bible every morning jotting down verse of the day shows she is religious even if she doesn't show it to people. She reflects on religious themes a lot too: "Casey was keenly aware of her Christian failings: Routinely, she mumbled, "Jesus Christ..." In her interview to the *New Yorker* Min Jin Lee says she was raised in the church and that church is her life. She also mentioned she read Bible every day before writing just like Casey does in the book.

Overall, Min Jin Lee's writing style is characterized by its attention to detail, journalistic approach before writing, relying on historical events and ability to capture the natural characters gave us a book that became a best-seller the year it was published. Race, social class, love, religion and others are major themes discussed in the book through life experience of young woman and those who surround her. Characters are real and natural so you feel related to them while reading the book. Rejected by Korean boys and decided to date a white man, Casey end up with Unu not ambitious Korean divorcee who makes her realise her own flaws. In general, the novel ends in a positive note with a hope the protagonist will be fine.

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