

Neoliberal Human Development

The short story “Human Development,” by Anthony Veasna So, depicts Anthony, a young Cambodian man, struggling with the weight of outside plots imposed on his own life. As seen in quote B3, many of the plots that bind Anthony to the normative idea of Asian-American success are imposed by his own sister, Annie. In her own way, however, Anthony’s sister is also attempting to resist an unremitting plot by “elevat[ing]” both her brother and herself out of the reaches of “the poverty shackling almost 30 percent of Cambodian Americans” (So, 189-190). Annie, in her refusal to become another statistic, utilizes the language of economic optimization to figure her own family as an economic subunit. Through Becker’s idea of the family as a “space for profit making,” she both imposes the plot of normative Asian-American success on her brother and refuses the statistical plot of Cambodian-American poverty (Nadal, 92).

While “Human Development” deals with the uncertainty of creating and maintaining family, with Anthony working through his feelings about creating a life with his boyfriend Ben and being separated from his sister, the diction within pages 189 to 190 constructs these uncertain Asian-American family units as undoubtedly economic. The use of language such as “growth mindset,” “mapping,” “Excel spreadsheet,” “maximizing...potential,” “opportunities,” and “statistic[s]” in reference to the relationship between Anthony and his sister renders the words “sister,” “twins,” “kids,” “neighborhood,” and even “Cambodians” as part of an economic process (So, 189-190). The idea of family and, to a certain extent, a larger Asian-American community, therefore, is made “legible” only through his sister’s effort, defined by the language of economic optimization.

This choice of diction ties the Cambodian-American family in “Human Development” to Nadal’s argument in “How Neoliberalism Remade the Model Minority Myth” of the Asian family being configured as a “transmissible set of kinship techniques” under human capital theory (92). Nadal provides the Asian self-help genre as an example of the Asian/American family being packaged, utilized, and sold as a racialized model of neoliberal economic embodiment. Everything, including education and family, is economic, just as everything for Anthony and Annie, including their Stanford degrees, their future plans to become “an Ivy League professor” and “CFO and CEO,” respectively, and their two-person family unit is used to defy the Cambodian-American poverty plot (So, 189-190). Through the actualization of family as human capital, Annie and Anthony become the “only kids in [their] neighborhood” and “basically the only Cambodians in general” to succeed (So, 189-190).

Despite the position of family as economic in “Human Development,” family, for the main characters of the short story, is also distinctly Cambodian. Meanwhile, through the use of the word “rather” to transition between his two definitions of family, Nadal implies that the practical economics of “kinship...techne” replace “a deterministic biological or ethnographic referent” to the Asian-American family (92). So’s focus on his characters’ Cambodian-American identities and communities, therefore, resists the all-encompassing nature of Nadal’s argument that the Asian-American family unit appears as a solely economic object. Instead, the relationship between Annie and Andrew balances the economics of resisting poverty and imposing success with their biological ties as twins and their tenuous status as “role models” in their Cambodian-American community.