

The Effect of Cultural Differences on a Relationship:

Marriage, Love, and Suitability in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*

Marriage is often seen as the highest form of romantic love. However, East Asian culture often emphasizes pragmatism and the suitability of a life match over the lust and love Western marriages are ruled by. No matter how passionately couples may feel about each other, amorous infatuation can never overrule the practical need to consider the life-altering effects brought by the event of marriage. Overwhelming devotion will not necessarily lead to a good long-term relationship, as a lasting union must rely on more than just the intensity of affection. The willingness of both partners to work for the success of their relationship, as well as the respective families, backgrounds, and cultures of the couple, play extremely important roles in determining the success of a relationship. In the novel *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee, two key relationships, namely between Noa Baek and his Japanese girlfriend Akiko Fumeki, as well as Solomon Baek and his Korean-American girlfriend Phoebe, are used to advance the theme of marriage as a matter of suitability between families, situations, and choices instead of individual love, which, as a result, is able to grow a stronger type of familial love from the basis of a steady partnership by highlighting the cultural differences that ultimately keep these couples apart.

The first marriage Min Jin Lee introduces in *Pachinko* is the union between Hoonie, the kind-hearted and hardworking village cripple, and Yangjin, “an adolescent girl married off to relieve [her family’s] financial hardship” (Munson). Although they “met on their wedding day,” their shared philosophy of hard work for the sake of family extends to their relationship, allowing their marriage to remain secure and dependable (Lee 8). Yangjin is determined to accept her husband, with his cleft palate and club foot, for who he is, and Hoonie is diligent in providing for her and their daughter, Sunja. In *Pachinko*, it is a common belief among the

women that “the man you marry will determine the quality of your life completely. A good man is a decent life, and a bad man is a cursed life” (Lee 27). In this case, despite never having any choice in who they married and thus not marrying for any reason of attraction, Yangjin and Hoonie have a relationship that is quietly fulfilling, improving both their lives. The fact that Min Jin Lee chose to start the novel with Yangjin and Hoonie’s marriage, which continues to be the basis of comparison for every following relationship, reveals a fundamental belief of the importance of marriage as a partnership based on suitability instead of individual selection of a spouse.

When the offspring of this couple grows up, Sunja Baek enters the same type of marriage that her parents had with a mild-mannered pastor named Baek Isak. Because Sunja is pregnant with another man’s child, it is necessary for them to get married in order for her to escape the shame of having a child out of wedlock. Furthermore, Isak’s decision to marry Sunja comes from a place of Christian duty to help “this young woman and her child” and his wish for a family, as well as the desire to make his life “significant,” even if only “to a few people,” not from deep-rooted love or passion for the woman who would be his future wife (Lee 67). Although this relationship was born out of necessity and situation instead of romantic love, the familial affection and respect that they have for each other causes their marriage to become a stronger and healthier relationship than several other relationships in this novel that are sprung from lust and personal love. However, unlike her parents, Sunja does experience a moment of passion once in her life. “When Sunja becomes a teenager herself, her attention is drawn to a handsome outsider named Koh Hansu” (Munson). Hansu, a “formidable middle-aged gangster” with ties to the Japanese yakuza, lures a naive, adolescent Sunja into a secret relationship with his sheer novelty, leading to her eventual pregnancy (Zimmerman). Sunja is initially drawn to Hansu

because of the attention he places on her, as well as her attraction to his looks, status, and worldliness, which she has never before been exposed to. The “love” Hansu and Sunja had for each other was rooted in lust, desire, and selfishness. There was no possibility for marriage because Hansu already had “a wife and three daughters in Japan,” but even if Sunja had allowed them to stay together in an affair as Hansu wished, the difference in situation and expectation was far too great for the relationship to have succeeded (Soman). After she marries Isak and experiences a real relationship, she realizes “that the man she’d loved as a girl was an idea she’d had of him—feelings without any verification.” She never really knew Koh Hansu, nor did he know her. Sunja’s marriage with Isak, on the other hand, is built on mutual respect, and learning how to complement each other. They engage in open and honest communication about Sunja accepting life into her God because of Isak’s faith. When Isak asks her if she could care for him as her husband, she promises to do her “best to be a good wife” (Lee 79). Throughout their marriage, she fulfills this promise by making up for the areas her husband lacks. While “Isak knew how to talk with people, to ask questions, and to hear the concerns in a person’s voice,” Sunja understood “how to survive, and this was something he did not always know how to do” (Lee 109). Isak asserts that “He needed her; a man needed a wife,” but Sunja needs her husband just as much as he needs her (Lee 109). When Sunja and Isak move to Japan together from Korea, Sunja is separated from everything she has ever known, including her mother, Yangjin, whose parting words of advice for her marriage serve as a reminder that Sunja is now “a member of [her husband’s] family” (Lee 93). Sunja must rely on Isak as her only source of kin, and on their first night in Japan, she resolves to “love him” (Lee 111). The contrast between the two relationships that Sunja experiences throughout her lifetime demonstrates the importance of

choice in the success of a marriage: her choice to love Isak and build a family with him is ultimately more important than any sort of surface-level attraction she ever felt for Koh Hansu.

The relationship between Noa Baek, the illegitimate son of Sunja and Hansu, and his college girlfriend Akiko Fumeki serves to again advance the idea that a stable relationship needs to be based on more than just romantic love. These “minor characters such as Akiko and Phoebe” expand further on this theme, however, probing “the nuances in cultural difference in a way that Noa, Hansu, or even Solomon are not able to” (Aw). While with Akiko, a Japanese college student, Noa is fetishized and exploited in a relationship by someone he loves. Although Noa is in love with her, Akiko can not see past their ethnic differences. In her eyes, he will always only be a Korean, not himself but “some fanciful idea of a foreign person” (Lee 307). After Noa realizes that Akiko is proud of herself for rebelling against her parents by dating a Korean, he sees that he is not a human to her; he is a symptom of her desire to be seen as “someone special because she had condescended to be with someone everyone else hated” (Lee 307). Akiko is essentially using him as a token Korean in order to prove “to the world that she was a good person, an educated person, a liberal person” (Lee 307). She does not understand that “seeing him as only Korean—good or bad—was the same as seeing him only as a bad Korean. She could not see his humanity, and Noa realized that this was what he wanted most of all: to be seen as human” (Lee 308). Noa breaks up with her after this realization, unable to stay in a relationship with someone that he loves due to a significant disagreement in their values and family backgrounds. *Pachinko* is best described as “sprawling,” a narrative of historical fiction that lasts over four generations and “resists summary” (Lee). And yet, for Lee, “No one story seems too minor to be briefly illuminated” (Lee). While this relationship is a very small part of the book, its inclusion adds complexity to the message that a marriage must be built on more

than simple affection by introducing an ethnic and cultural reason behind why this relationship in particular was not “suitable.” The differences between Akiko and Noa in terms of their upbringing and backgrounds, as well as Akiko’s inability to look past their ethnic divide, all contribute to the failure of this couple.

Although Solomon Baek has never met his uncle, Noa Baek, several parallels between both men’s relationships with their college girlfriends reflect how cultural differences may interfere in the necessary compatibility between couples for a sustainable marriage in terms of background, families, situations, and choices. Solomon grows up as the product of wealthy but stigmatized pachinko parlors and is thus placed in a strange limbo of privilege, experiencing extreme financial entitlement but still having to face systemic discrimination in Japan. Even though he was born in the country, he is considered a “Zainichi, or foreign resident” and is required to register “for alien registration cards every three years” since his fourteenth birthday (Lee). His father sends Solomon to Columbia University for college, hoping that his son will be able to work and live in America in order to escape the deep-rooted prejudices Japan holds toward Koreans. While at Columbia, he meets his girlfriend Phoebe and is, at first, mesmerized by “her confidence and self-possession” (Lee 471). Once they move to Japan together, however, Solomon realizes he “wouldn’t marry her. He had known it almost as soon as they’d landed in Narita,” partly because of her insistence on what Solomon dubs “the whole Japan-is-evil stuff” (Lee 471). As a Korean-American, Phoebe’s view on the relationship between Koreans, the Japanese, and the Korean-Japanese zainichi is myopic, and she is unable or unwilling to understand that, despite the institutional discrimination against Koreans living in Japan, “there are still good Japanese people” (Lee). Solomon also believes that “in a way, [he] was Japanese, too, even if the Japanese didn’t think so” (Lee 471). Even though Phoebe views Solomon and

herself as solely Korean, Solomon knows there is “more to being something than just blood” (Lee 471). These fundamental differences in how they perceive the world come from a disagreement rooted in cultural discrepancies and contribute to the overarching idea of marriage as a matter of several factors of suitability, not just individual compatibility. “The space between Phoebe and [Solomon] could not close” (Lee 471). Solomon recognizes that he has to end things with Phoebe, allowing her to go back to America and freeing himself to accept his identity as a *zainichi* by returning to his roots and running a pachinko parlor with his father. Before he breaks up with Phoebe, he visits his ex-girlfriend, Hana, who ran away from home to become a prostitute and is now dying of a disease that is likely AIDS. During the visit, Hana states “Maybe people should marry from the same background. Maybe life is easier then” (Lee 412). In this case, she was attempting to support Solomon and Phoebe’s relationship by mentioning they were both Korean and similar by virtue of that fact. Of course, just being ethnically similar was not enough for this couple, supporting the message that marriage is an interplay between several variables, with just one of them being similar backgrounds. Solomon and Phoebe had different childhoods, values, cultural views, and, most importantly, different amounts of effort they were willing to place into the relationship. No matter how well their personalities clicked in college, they were unable to work as a long-term couple because these factors are so important to consider when discussing marriage. The end of Solomon and Phoebe’s relationship further cements the idea introduced by Noa and Akiko’s relationship that marriage is reliant on several important elements, not just romantic love, by focusing on the cultural differences that influenced their break ups.

Marriage is a lifelong commitment in Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*. The two relationships between Noa and Akiko and Solomon and Phoebe serve to emphasize how cultural differences

can be detrimental to the factors that cause a long marriage to succeed. Although there are many relationships throughout the novel that subsist only on love and romance, the healthiest couples promote the longevity of their marriages through a combination of similar backgrounds, familial experiences, values, and choices. Passion fades; commitment remains.

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