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THE PORTRAYAL OF A KOREAN ADOPTEE'S EXPERIENCE IN NICOLE CHUNG'S *ALL YOU CAN EVER KNOW: A MEMOIR OF ADOPTION*

Rizqia Nuur Maziyya
e-mail: rizqia.nuur.m@mail.ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Transnational adoption has become one of the factors of transnational migration to Western countries, including America. Transnational adoption can be viewed from at least two perspectives, South Korea as the origin country and America as the targeted country. From the birth country, transnational adoption becomes a way to help the children from poverty, have a better future, and contribute to the birth country when they return. From the adoption-targeted country, this adoption is a humanitarian way to save the children from poverty, primitive way of life, and God's blessing. One of the countries which regularly "send" the children to Western countries is South Korea. The children become Korean adoptees and mostly living in white American neighborhoods. Living with white Americans has shaped the Korean adoptees' behavior and way of thinking same as Americans. Korean adoptees face various problems, starting from adjusting themselves in new environment, finding their cultural roots and identity, and struggling to find their biological parents. This study employed Phinnes' ethnic identity development to make sense of the experience of a Korean adoptee called Nicole Chung in her memoir, *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir of Adoption*. Through the discussion, it can be understood how transnational adoption programs become national agenda and big business field since it is not expensive to have children from other countries. There is also an assumption that the children will have better and happier life when they are taken to America and other western countries. However, throughout their life as adopted children in America, the children also find difficulties, especially in finding their identity.

Keywords: *America; identity; Korean adoptee; transnational adoption*

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INTRODUCTION

Transnational adoption is a term that describes the phenomenon of the adoption process across national borders. This phenomenon creates a significant social dynamic between two or more nation-states. The adoption process started in the 1950s through the 1970s. It established substantial political and social relationships between the

United States in America (Kim, 2007). The relation after between the U.S. and Korea are unequal because of U.S military power occupied Korea. America made a narrative that the orphan children, who were left by their parents in Korea, as "rejected" and "improper." Thus, America rescued Korean children under adoption programs and let them stay with American families to make them have a better life. Since 1953, about 150.000 Korean children have been adopted to 15 Western countries and pointed as the most significant international worldwide. International adoption of Korea is acknowledged as legal as supported by the legal constitution (Kim, 2007). The recent international adaptation refers to the movement of non-white children from developing countries to dominantly white countries after the Korean War is continuing with Korea. The host countries develop what has been seen as the symbol of Western dependency.

This paper focuses on the U.S as one of the host countries for adoptees from Korea and several developing countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, Colombia, Chile, and Guatemala. Korean adoptees are portrayed in Korean local media as an orphan who was abandoned by their birth family and nation. Such portrayals remind South Korean peopleof a third-world country in the past (Hübinette, 2004). According to Volkman (in Kim, 2007), transnational adoption is not a one-way journey but an ongoing, unfolding process, crisscrossing flows in multiple directions, both in real and virtual space. Dashesky (in Hübinette, 2004) argues that for Korean adoptees, they live with two main elements in their life, being Korean by race and Western by culture. Most Korean adoptees fall into the ''Victim Diaspora", which means an involuntary displacement caused by catastrophic and traumatic events. Hübinette also added that Korean adoptees are communities that transcend race, citizenship, language, religion, and culture. The adopted children will assimilate with their host families, learn the new language, values, religion, and culture. Each of them shares one similarity, which is born in Korea and grows in Western countries. When describing Korean adoptee identity, Kim (2007) states that it is a sense of collective identity and relationship beyond the biological or adoptive family. Each adoptee has their own life stories, history, and kinship between their individual and collective identities as Korean adoptees. The kinship is not naturally existing, but it is a result of social practice and cultural representation. The adoptees try to fit in in their new environment and even face suppression because of their racial differences within their new family and community.

As Kim (2007) explains, the official institution refers to the adoptees as cultural ambassadors from their country. The adoptees function as a bridge between Korea and Western countries. From the Western perspective, international adaptation is seen as a form of a humanitarian act that aims to help the orphan of war or abandonment. From a Korean perspective, the children become their asset for the future when they return to Korea. For the adoptee transferred host countries, especially the United States, there are some processes that must be followed. Before the adaptation, the children must have "orphan status" as a prerequisite in adopting based on American immigration law. The children are eligible to adopt if they are left by parents because of the death or the departure of them or through legal relinquishment by at least one parent. The children become exceptional

migrants who get a new family and “reunited” with them in the U.S and they do not have any legal kinship with other people. (Kim, 2007). The birth mother of the soon-to-be adopted children has no legal rights. Once the children are transferred to the adoption agency, the birth mothers lose custody and rights over the children. Their trace will be legally erased. It is an essential requirement for the children to make them considered adoptable by prospective adoptive parents. The previous information is sealed when the children have a new birth certificate. The life of transnational adoptees is often archived in writing, especially memoir. Autobiographical writing gives enough space to deliver both fact and fiction by understanding the story told by the protagonist. The purpose of narrating "I" in autobiographical writing is to design who the agent of the story (Kim, 2007).

A memoir written by Nicole Chung entitled *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir of Adoption* (2018) is chosen to see how the identity of Korean adoptees is formed in the United States. Nicole Chung was born to Korean parents and given up for adoption at birth, raised by White families. In this memoir, Nicole Chung examined the effect of transnational adoption and growing up as the lone Asian face in her host countries. The exploration to find her true ethnic identity from her childhood until she becomes an adult gives her a new perspective. Transnational adaptation makes the Korean adoptee struggle to accept the value that their host family gives without knowing their root culture. Struggling with the rejection, they get a new neighborhood which not showing the same physical characteristic as they have. The narration of “saving the children,” as stated before, is not entirely true because they feel loss and grief since their identity is taken.

The focus of this paper is to answer how a Korean adoptee's identity and experience portrayed in Chung's *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir of Adoption*. The transnationalism perspective and transnational immigration theory will be used to answer the research question. To support the analysis, ethnic identity development is used to see how America’s environment forms the identity of Nicole Chung as Korean adoptee who spent her entire life in America.

Transnational perspectives provide a deeper understanding of a number of globally contingent social, economic, and political processes, including social movements, governance and politics, terrorism, political violence, and organized crime among others. Transnational migration becomes one of the main topics in this study. Research in this area looks at issues such as the salient interaction with the receiving society's institutions, the migration policies of states, the role of discrimination in limiting access to the institutions of the receiving society's civil society, access to computers within the home and receiving societies, and the costs and other hardships that affect groups of migrants (Kivisto in Levit, 2004). According to Vertovec (in Tedeschi, 2020), transnational is defined as dispositions and practices which have a substantial impact on individual and family life, individual's sense of self and collecting belonging, personal and group memories, the pattern of consumption, collective sociocultural practice, approaches to childrearing and other modes of cultural reproduction. Vertovec also uses a term called “bifocality” to describe how the immigrant maintain their “dual frame of reference” when they compare their situation between their “home” society and their “host” countries. It will result in the feeling of being “here” and

"there," which develops in maintaining themselves when participating in transnational field and conception of self. The immigrants need to maintain their transnational relationship and activities, or they will no longer as "immigrants." Transnational migration defines as process of movement and settlement across international borders where individuals maintain or build networks to their origin country while at the same time keep settling in a new country. The most important point from this definition that the immigrants and their family continue to have relationship with their home countries even they have settled in another country. Transnational migration called the people who made a movement as "transmigrants" which defines the individual who lives their lives simultaneously crossing national borders physically, socially, or politically.

Korean adoptee's identity can be examined through ethnic identity development theory proposed by Phinnes (1989). Ethnic Identity Development focuses on young children when identity development occurs. The young children are still in their early phase in their life and their early stage of socialization and realization. Beyond childhood, the concern of ethnicity shifts from learning a particular ethnic label to understand the significance of a group's membership. After the childhood phase, they will be in the adolescence phase, where they are faced with great changes, such as improved cognitive abilities, having more interaction outside their own community, and more concern about appearance and social life. These factors involve their exploration in finding their ethnic identity development.

There are four main stages of ethnic identity development as follows: The first phase is called *diffuse*. The individual has little or no exploration of one's ethnicity and doesn't have a clear understanding of the matter. The individual has taken the values without questioning. The individuals in this phase do not have a clear perspective on which one is positive or negative with what they have got. Many adolescences might not have faced the issue of ethnicity in their own lives and may assume that is an unnecessary matter to think of. Individuals in this phase have not engaged in the exploration of their identity. Usually, they live on the basis of their parental value which is made without exploration. The second phase is called *foreclosed* when the individual still little information about one ethnicity, but there is clarity about it. The feeling about particular ethnicity, either positive or negative, depends on the individual's socialization experience. The third phase is called the *moratorium*. In this phase, the individual has evidence of exploration, accompanied by some confusion about the meaning of a particular identity. For the minority adolescent, the search for true identity is showed by making an attempt to clarify their identity. This attempt derived from the feeling to have a better understanding about themselves and people who share the same values with them. This period of exploration of particular ethnic is central to ethnic identity development.

Cross (in Phinnes, 1989) argues that it is derived from a shocking personal or social event that pulls someone from his previous worldview. This event is called an encounter. The exploration can be resulted by growing awareness on the part of minorities of the conflict between the values and attitude of the majority society. The fourth phase is called *Achieved* when the individual has got clear evidence of exploration, secure understanding,

and acceptance of particular ethnicity. The individual feels positive and comfortable with both parts of themselves (being Korean and American). The individual has got clear and confident acceptance as a member of a minority group and replace the negative self-image which obtained in the past. In their journey to find their identity, it is related to their ethnic identity development. According to Phinnes (in Lee, et al., 2010) is the aspect of one's self-concept, which is perceived from awareness and knowledge of membership in an ethnic group. It covers the role of ethnicity in someone's identity and the feeling of group belonging and pride by belonged into a particular ethnic group. When an individual has found their ethnicity, they will perceive certain values and beliefs, behavior engagement related with the tradition with the ethnic group.

Ethnic identity development begins in an individual's early life through socialization and practicing the custom. The development reaches its peak when adolescence when the children start to develop their personal and social identities separate from their parents and family members. The development continues and brings new experience and perspective, also get new roles and responsibilities in their life. Lee also added that the ethnic identity development that occurred in Korean adoptee children becomes complicated because they are confronted with the reality that they are grown in a White family and treated the same as White. Meanwhile, outside their family and community, they will be treated as a minority because physically, they are different. The Korean adoptee often perceived a sense of belonging and rejection in their life journey, and thisconflict makes them not want to explore their ethnic root. The adopted parents have a significant role in this phase to help the children overcome the use in their earlier life (Lee et al., 2010).

Korean adoptees may identify themselves with more than one cultural identity, which is influenced by the socialization process through family, community, and different groups. They struggle to understand themselves and their surroundings. Some will not feel comfortable because of the racial identity and it will bring self-destructive behavior (Baden & Wiley in Fry, 2015). For them, ethnic identity development can become a complicated and emotional journey because they have no contact with their birth parent or their heritage. Even many adoptive parents try their best to educate their adopted children about their root culture, but the children still face the challenge of development (Brodzinky in Hoffman and Pena, 2013). Brodzinky suggests that the adoptee should find a "biological mirror" to ensure the adoptee does not force themselves to feel similar to their adoptive parents. Racial identity development occurs primarily in the family and school experience of children and teenagers phase. Palmae (in Huffman and Pena, 2013) explains that Korean adoptees do not match any of the established racial identity models because they have the unique experience of being people of color growing up in a White household.

Korean adoptees must face the loss and the realization they are given away by their birth parents. Those can trigger anger, aggression, depression, self-image problem, which can affect their identity development. The lost feeling led the adoptees to find their true identity and get rid of their problems. However, some adoptive parents tend to say that their heritage is gone and they will accept the children as the way they are and not encourage them to find their true identity. If

the adoptive parents behave as the substitute of their birth parents, it may cause the vanishing of ethnic identity and heritage and force the adoptee to depend on them for the sake of the family (Brondzinky in Huffman and Pena, 2013). The Korean adoptees, they are not feeling "Asian or Korean enough". It is influenced by their growing phase in the White community and raised by White parents. They have rare interactions and opportunities about their heritage unless other Korean adoptees introduce and encourage them to explore it.

DISCUSSION

Identity Development

Ethnic identity development occurs in the adolescence phase and is developed through customs, tradition, language, religious practice, and cultural values. Phinnes' stage of ethnic identity development doesn't directly relate to specific ages, but it can occur during the early to late adolescence phase. The first phase of ethnic identity development is called diffused; during this stage, the adolescent doesn't understand the sense of ethnic identity. They don't have any clear perspective about their cultural root since they have been living as a member of the dominant culture. In Chung's *All You Can Ever Know*, Nicole (the narrator and main character) has struggled to discover her true identity since her childhood when her surroundings keep asking why she has different features from her white parents. Her parents never tell her about the truth and keep encouraging her as a special child in the family. She got bullied by her classmates, asking her to go back to China, feel unseen and uncomfortable, and no one in her surrounding gives support for her, except her adoptive parents. Korean adoptees often face discrimination when entering their new neighborhood, trying to do their first socialization. Since they have different features, not resembles s or White, they are placed in.

> My classmates, arranged in a semicircle on the woven rug, naturally wanted to know why all of my pictures showed me flanked by my redheaded, freckled white mom and early-graving white dad, though that wasn't what they said—what they said was, "Are those your parents? How come you don't look like them?" (Chung, 2018, p. 15)

Korean adoptees often endure several forms of racism, especially caused by their looks. Their experience facing racism still continues today. They have shared similarities to other Asian ethnic groups because of their shared physical characteristics and not because of their ethnic group membership (Yoo in Kyeong et al., 2017). The second phase is called *foreclosed*. In this phase, Nicole has perceived her identity, but just on a superficial level. She acknowledges her identity as a Korean after told by her adoptive parents and having different features than her peers. However, she tries to be humble and accept those facts.

> I feel strangely proud of my heritage. I'd made friends in middle school and high school who liked and accepted me even though I was one of the few Asian kids they knew. Then I had gone off to college and found myself living among huge numbers of fellow Asians; on campus, which soon felt more like home than the town where I had lived all my life, I finally learned how it felt to exist in a space, walk into a classroom, and not be stared at. I loved being just one Asian girl among thousands. Every day, I felt relieved to have found a life where I was no longer surrounded by white people who had no idea what to make of me (Chung, 2018, p. 20).

Nicole learns how to live as a Korean adoptee who lives in America. She needs to embrace her identity without being ashamed of it. On the other side, she needs to adapt to how her surroundings and society works. Showing her existence without fear and ready to have a better life and mingle in broader American society. The third phase is called *moratorium*, when an individual finds evidence of the identity and willing to explore them. In the process of moratorium, an individual often faces confusion when exploring the identity since it is different from what they learn. As an adoptee, Nicole needs extra effort to explore her identity as Korean and often gets cultural confusion compared with her recent way of life.

> Why hadn't my parents raised me in a place like *this*? When I asked if we could move back here, I'm sure they thought I was kidding, but I wasn't. The seed of an idea, strange and hopeful, had been planted in my mind: there were real places, not far off in Korea, but here in my own country, where I could be just another face in the crowd (Chung, 2018, p. 36).

As a Korean, Nicole wished to live in a Korean neighborhood, even in America. She thought if she had lived there, she would have had a better understanding of her Korean root and not had a worry when minglingin her surroundings because everyone would have recognized her as Korean American without judging her. With her condition, Nicole is just a different person in a strange place.

The fourth phase is called achieved when an individual has a clear finding of identity and self-acceptance. Nicole's journey to accept her identity as a Korean adoptee was perceived together with her journey finding her Korean birth parents. Meeting her birth father is a blessing for her; even though she does not understand a whole Korean language, her birth family still supports her and recognizes her as their child.

> My Korean family spoke a language I couldn't and shared a history of which I had never been a part, but here, surrounded by signs and symbols of my adopted faith, I was the one who felt most at home. Everyone watched me light a candle, one among rows flickering votives, each one representing a prayer. As I recited a silent Hail Mary, I thought about two healthy babies, their names and their lives still unknown, part of the nineteenth generation since their oldest ancestor (Chung, 2018, p. 161).

As stated by Nelson (in Lee, 2010), racial isolation might prevent the identification of the adoptee. The barrier is made by the closest person, the adoptive family, which organizes the adoptee to adapt to a new environment rather than introduce their real heritage, such as went to public school and go to the white-dominant church. The adoptees do not have many choices other than following what the adoptive parents ask them to do and being "White." In fact, when trying to do socialization in a new neighborhood, they are placed as a minority by society. It can be seen from Nicole's perspective on how her adoptive parents treat her as a precious daughter, as a gift in their life:

> I was uncertain who I was supposed to be, even as I resisted some of my adoptive relatives' interpretations—both *you're our Asian Princess!* and *of course we don't* think *of you as Asian.* I believe my adoptive family, for the most part, wanted to ignore the fact that I was the product of people from the other side of the world, unknown foreigners turned Americans. To them, I was not the daughter of these immigrants at all: by adopting me, my parents had made me one of them. My

> parents and I almost never talked about race. We didn't real acknowledge that it mattered. I never called anyone in my family out about their racism (Chung, 2018, p. 17).

Young Koran adoptees who are raised in White Families are often perceived and treated as a member of majority community and culture, by family members, friends, and themselves. They feel comfortable adopting the majority culture and apply it on their daily basis. On the other side, their racial and ethnic minorities still make them the target of racism (Tuan in Kyeong, 2017). According to Phinnes (1989), the family does not give enough encouragement to the adoptees to develop their identity. By placing them in white-dominant families and neighborhoods, they wish they can shape their adoptive children to have a better life. It is called identity foreclosure when parents have made enough effort to help children to overcome this identity crisis in the early stage of their life. Most families choose to deny the race and ethnicity being told in their family, or they just talk about it in superficial way in front of their adoptive child (Berquist in Kyeong, 2017).

> Even now, when there is more awareness, more "celebration" of adopted children's cultures, many parents are not provided with the guidance or resources they need to bring up children of color in white families, white communities, a white supremacist society. To fault only my white parents for not fully understanding the things they were shielded from—first by professionals and later by me—is to miss the larger point: we were and are representative of so many and transcultural adoptions from that era (Chung, 2018, p. 20).

Based on the narration above, the identity which develops by Nicole is an ethnic identity. As Tuan (in Lee, et al., 2010), adopted individual has problem when they are confronting themselves with the paradox of growing up in White family and community. Getting treated in a white family, make the adoptees as an honorary White, since they have been shaped by the new environment, leaving the past identity behind. Following Nicole's narration, her journey to find the identity continues to the adolescence phase when she finally realized that there is someone who has similar features to her face. She is aware of her differences between her and her parents and began questioning who she is and why she is different. She begins to believe what her friends said to her is a truth that she does not belong to her recent family and assumes there is a big change in her life.

> When I was young I certainly, felt more like a white girl than an Asian one, and sometimes it was shocking to catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror and be forced to catalog the hated differences; to encounter tormentors and former friends and know that what they saw was so at odds with the person I believed I was. Why did I have to look the way I did—like a foreigner; like my birth parents, two people I would never even meet? Why hadn't my adoption transformed me into the person I felt I was? (Chung, 2018, p. 21)

Adoption Process

As explained by Kim (2007), the adoption process requires orphans who have been left by the parents, either because of death or leaving the household. In fact, the orphans were not necessarily parentless children. The children who are available to adopt can have at least one living parent. Nicole points out in her memoir that her adoption is closed adoption, which no information with the birth parents, contact and completely cut the ties, and the

adoptive parents agree to not have contact with the birth parents.

> All parties agreed to a closed adoption, with no information exchanged and no further contact planned. *Boilerplate*, the lawyer would later call it. With no outlandish requests on either side, paperwork moved along at an impressive clip. Officially it was deemed a "special-needs adoption," and no one wanted to force a vulnerable child to spend weeks or months in temporary care. By law, the placement could not be finalized for a full six months, but the adoptive parents could get custody upon the child's release from the hospital (Chung, 2018, p. 150).

In order to have an adopted child, the applicant (future adoptive parents) is required to have enough money to finish the adaptation process. According to New Beginning (2020), an international adoption agency, the cost to adopt children from South Korea is about $42,545 to $45,845. For Nicole's cases, her adoption is not held by a big agency. However, her adoption process is quite personal, just through a facilitator named Liz and an attorney named Katty. It is shown that Nicole's adoptive parent just asked for a small amount of money compare to recent adoption fees, as stated in the quotation below:

> The birth parents had asked if the new parents could cover some of the girl's medical bills. The requested portion amounted to less than three thousand dollars. Compared to most infant adoptions, it was a real bargain (Chung, 2018, p. 58).

Nicole's birth parents are coming from Korea who settled in America and attempted to open a small business. They haven't made much money and got the news that their third baby, Nicole, is not in good condition. Nicole's birth parents finally decided to let the baby be adopted by another family as long as they can take care of her. Since it is a closed adoption, not much information was gathered by them. The attorney has agreed not to tell the detail to Nicole's adoptive parents since they do not have the intention to share their confidential information. It is shown on Nicole's narration when telling about her adoptive family's story:

> The social worker didn't call the birth parents by their names, first or last, when referring to them—"The family name is unpronounceable!" she insisted—and made no effort to hide how confused she was. The birth parents were married; they had a stable, if not enormously profitable family business (Chung, 2018, p. 60).

Based on South Korean adoptive laws, South Korean parents who wanted to give up their children were obliged to give adoption agencies written consent. However, there were circumstances where either false information was given or no records were provided. There are circumstances applied in this process. Their previous information and data will be kept by the adoption agency, and their relation with the birth parents will be vanished legally since the birth parents lose the right of the children. The birth parents' information also will be kept and will be available if the children are willing to "meet" their parents one day (Burwell, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Transnational adoption has impacted American Society since its first initiated in 1950s until today. By bring humanitarian act, United States become the savior for the children who left behind because of war, poor, or losing their parents. Taking the children to America and other western countries believed that the children would have better and happier life than their home country. South Korea becomes one of the sources of transnational adoptee which provides children to be adopted

by a family who has a good intention in caring for children. Transnational adoption can be a solution for a family to have a child and become a new home for future adoptees. In fact, transnational adoption programs have become national agenda and big business field since it is not expensive to have a child from other countries. Nicole Chung, in her memoir, "*All You Can Ever Know*," gives a perspective on how a Korean Adoptee faces identity development, discrimination and find out how the adoption process occurred. Korean adoptee has been part of American society and they have right to embrace their heritage as part of their identity. The identity process is examined through Phinnes' ethnic identity development theory. Nicole Chung's identity development could be traced from her adolescence period. As a Korean adoptee who lived in White surrounding since an infant, Nicole Chung struggles to understand about the reason beyond her adoption and the Korean heritage. Through four stages of development (diffused, foreclosed, moratorium, and achieved), Nicole Chung perceives herself and identity acceptance while knowing the truth about her adoption.

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