

Transformation of Bicultural Korean American Identity from Role Confusion to Fidelity in Julia Cho's *Durango*

Lamia Fahim¹, Areeg Ibrahim², Samia Abou Alam³

Abstract

*This article discusses the psychological grievances of a Korean American household haunted by past traumatic experiences and drained with sociocultural constraints. Adolescents' psychosocial development is analyzed in Korean American Julia Cho's *Durango* (2007) in accordance with the theories of the American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-1994). Korean American adolescents undergo an intensified struggle between identity and role confusion concluded with the virtue of fidelity as they pledge their loyalty to a lasting coherent set of occupational and cultural identification images. Ego identity gives conformity to all discrepancies in the identification images within American minority adolescents' psyche. The representation of Korean American adolescents in *Durango* demonstrates a pressing urge to ratify occupational as well as ideological commitments that pave the way to identity formation. Julia Cho's *Durango* depicts how the ego identity of Korean American adolescents overcomes role confusion through the realization of the virtue of fidelity.*

Keywords: adolescence, Cho's *Durango*, identity diffusion, Korean American, role confusion

Introduction

Julia Cho (1975-) is a Korean American playwright who has underlined the weight of human condition through profound character delineation interwoven in a culturally diversified society. In "The Road to *Durango*," Saskia Vogel states that Julia Cho "has racked up honors [...] including awards from the Williamstown Theater Festival and New Haven, Conn.'s Longwharf Theater, as well as fellowships and favorable reviews for the Southern California productions of her plays *The Winchester House* [...] and *The Piano Teacher*" ("The Road to *Durango*"). Vogel refers to Cho's own words: "I see American stories all the time where I put myself into the character's shoes, even when there isn't an Asian American in the narrative. With *Durango*, I wanted to do the opposite. I wanted people who are not Asian to step into another skin" ("The Road to *Durango*"). In Julia Cho's *Durango*, the ego identity strife of Korean American adolescents is reflected in Jimmy's role confusion surfacing in perturbing identity diffusion that precedes the conclusion of the virtue of fidelity.

The diversified cultural fabric of America is related to the formation of minority groups which have been assigned disparate power stature reflecting their ethnic backgrounds. Hence, the term "minority" has been interlinked with race and culture presented in each group's struggle to

¹ PhD candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Helwan University, <lamiafarouk2000@yahoo.com>

² Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Helwan University, <areeg_mohamed@arts.helwan.edu.eg>

³ Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Helwan University, <Samia_aboalam@arts.helwan.edu.eg>

retain a place in mainstream social contexts. In “Minorities: European and American,” Robert Schermerhorn affirms that the geographical allocation of minorities throughout many immigration waves to America has dictated their cultural status (182). Schermerhorn argues that “it is racism cross-fertilized with power subordination that has characterized the American ethos in the treatment of minorities” (185). Moreover, Philip Gleason, in “Minorities (Almost) All: The Minority Concept in American Social Thought,” believes that the term “minority” is linked to the struggle with “culture concepts” and “rejection of [...] group norms or personal attitudes” (395-396). He adds: “By the early 1970s, the minority concept was being stretched [...] further, and in less conventional directions, by a growing tendency among sociologists to merge the study of ‘social deviance’ with that of minorities” (403). The term “minority” has been associated with adolescents’ antisocial deviant behavior which has spurred psychosocial development studies to track down the causes of their inner turmoil interlinking psychology and society.

American minorities have grappled with bicultural confliction intensified during adolescence as identity formation requires uniformity in ideological values processed in everyday interactional social contexts. In *Becoming Bicultural: Risk, Resilience, and Latino Youth*, Paul Smokowski and Martica Bacallao assert that biculturalism engages adolescents’ psychological, behavioral and social aspects through communication which leads to structuring the identification processes crucial for a bicultural identity (11). They explain that bicultural minority adolescents should have the capacity of integrating cultural differences as they “navigate between ethnic cultures” (12). Moreover, they argue that biculturalism requires “retaining ethnic cultural identity and establishing a positive relationship with the dominant culture” (21). The discord in the ego identity experienced by bicultural Korean American adolescents is driven by the critical need to pledge allegiance to ancestral heritage while straining to fit into the dominant American culture.

Korean American adolescents’ psychological affliction surges when their futile endeavors to find conformity within social contexts fall in opposition with their rooted ancestral principles. In “Cross-Cultural Considerations with Korean American Clients,” Nancy Cha, Michelle Chung and Sara Cho Kim explain that Koreans came to America in several waves of immigration. While the first wave which was between 1903 and 1905 immigrated after Sino-Japanese War and worked as laborers on farms and railroads, the second wave occurred after the Korean War in 1953 and they shifted “from professionally skilled occupations to skilled labor jobs” in order to afford living (43-44). Nancy Cha et al. affirm that this drastic shift had “its psychological, physical, and inherently cultural effects on Koreans living in the U.S.A.” as it has led to a period of “acculturative stress” during which Koreans attempt “to resolve or minimize cultural differences between themselves and the host culture” (44). Korean Americans are considered the “fastest growing of all Asian groups between 1990 and 2000” and their “relatively shorter immigration history” has urged the need for research studies on “immigration stress, discrimination, and psychological adjustment” (43). As Koreans struggle to adapt to the dominant American culture, they have showed depressive symptoms due to their “abandonment of Korean traditions and values” which requires “social support” through “social services” and “cultural activities” (44). Intergenerational family dissonance arises as Korean adolescents, who became acculturated into mainstream

American culture, are psychologically strained due to communication gaps with parents who abide by Asian-ingrained values based on “collectivism,” “interdependence” and “education” (45). In Julia Cho’s *Durango*, Korean American adolescents struggle to structure a cohesive identity is reflected in Jimmy’s role confusion as he strives to reach a set of cultural and occupational commitments marking the successful conclusion of adolescence with the virtue of fidelity.

Erik Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development

Psychosocial developmental theories have engaged a large scope of research studies due to their revolutionary enthrallment with the correlation between psychology and society. Erik Erikson is one of the most significant psychoanalysts in the twentieth century whose writings made a huge leap in the field of psychology as he studied human development in contexts of society. Psychosocial development takes place through overcoming a series of crises in the process of building an essential reservoir of virtues or ego strengths. Richard Stevens, in *Erik Erikson*, explains that Erikson’s theory of ego evolution is embedded within eight stages of psychosocial development: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and integrity vs. despair (12). Adolescents experience identity crisis as their ego identity strives to form a coherent set of identification images projected by their parents during childhood and align them with society expectations. In *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers*, Erik Erikson equates ego identity with human existence; “Indeed, in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of ego identity” (90). He explains that ego identity is the “awareness [...] that there is a selfsameness and continuity to ego’s synthesizing methods” as “self-esteem grows to be a conviction that the ego [...] is developing into a defined ego within a social reality” (23). Through occupational and ideological commitments, Asian American adolescents endeavor to resolve their identity crisis and realize an ego identity defined by sameness and continuity amidst the conflicting cultural fabric of American society.

Erikson has emphasized the critical stage of adolescence as ego identity strives to find continuity and sameness between the manifold repertoire of identification images gathered in childhood to be coordinated with societal demands. In *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers*, Erik Erikson argues that the ego aims at closing the gap between various social and individual identification images, and that “mutual complementation” should be achieved between “group identity” and “ego identity” (23). He states that “ego synthesis” involves mutual collaboration with society as social and individual efforts should be consolidated and reinforced (26). Moreover, Erikson, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, believes that the term “identity” deals with “a process ‘located’ in the *core of the individual* and yet also in the *core of his communal culture*, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (22). Furthermore, he affirms that the meaning of identity crisis “is now being accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation” (16). Erikson argues that identity crisis is “a

normative crisis” and although it prompts signs as violence, depression or delinquency, it is a “possibly passing crisis rather than a breakdown” (17).

Failing to find homogeneity between divergent cultural identification images aggravates identity crisis and leads to role confusion. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson states that “role confusion” occurs when adolescents struggle with a “crisis of wholeness” as they face a distressful “self-definition, for personal or for collective reasons” (87). He interconnects role confusion with difficulties to form ethnic and occupational identifications: “the young person counterpoints rather than synthesizes his sexual, ethnic, occupational, and typological alternatives and is often driven to decide definitely and totally for one side or the other” (87). Erikson also argues in *Identity and the Life Cycle* that adolescents struggle with “diffusion of roles” which surfaces in its strongest manifestation just before identity formation; he argues that “the diffused and vulnerable, aloof and uncommitted [...] of the not-too-neurotic adolescent contains many necessary elements of a semideliberate role experimentation of the ‘I dare you’ and ‘I dare myself’ variety” (117). However, he states that “much of this apparent diffusion [...] must be considered *social play*” and “adolescent’s ego development demands and permits playful, if daring, experimentation in fantasy and *introspection*” (117). Adolescents’ identity crisis involves symptoms of role confusion, venting internal repressions through fantasy and role play, which indicate an active ego identity struggling to realize a coherent harmonious identity.

In *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, Erikson asserts that adolescence is a critical stage that culminates with “a firm identity” signified in the establishment of the virtue of “fidelity” which necessitates being “faithful to some ideological view” (Evans 29-30). Erikson proceeds explaining that a “fully mature ego” characterized by “strength and development” requires befitting cultural conditions (Evans 31). In *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight*, Erikson defines fidelity as an ego quality which entails the “*ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems*. It is the cornerstone of identity and receives inspiration from confirming ideologies” (italics in original, 125). As minority adolescents contend with role confusion escalated with a dissension in cultural ideologies and difficulties in finding befitting occupational roles, identity diffusion rises in the context of fantasy prior to conflict resolution.

Julia Cho’s *Durango*

Julia Cho’s *Durango* depicts a mournful household of the Korean American thirteen-year-old Jimmy who struggles with loneliness and prolonged agony after the traumatic loss of his mother. Jimmy devises an imaginary American version of himself, Red Angel, who has the ability to surmount all existent limitations particularly in the presence of a distressed father grappling with work tribulations. When Jimmy’s father, Boo-Seng, announced the trip to Durango, Jimmy gets exhilarated that the family would be engaged in a recreational joint activity that can amend frayed family relationships. Though the trip to Durango is overshadowed with an abyss of intergenerational cultural differences and a heavy sense of hostility between Boo-Seng and Isaac,

the elder son, it unlocks a stream of secret disclosures that releases distressing tension and promotes Jimmy's psychosocial development.

Jimmy's Psychosocial Development

1- Identification Images and Ego Strengths

In Julia Cho's *Durango*, Jimmy's ego identity is strained with cracks in the strings of identification images due to his mother's death and his father's deranged mental state. Erik Erikson, in *Insight and Responsibility*, states that mothers shield adolescents from psychosocial declination as they take the "whole responsibility for man's sanity and maturation" and he highlights how "the individual's life-stages are 'interliving,' cogwheeling with the stages of others which move him along as he moves them" (114). Hence, parents particularly mothers signify the driving force behind adolescents' developmental progress and their role becomes even more critical under challenging societal surroundings. Moreover, Erikson argues that human development is interwoven with its surrounding contexts as adolescents "have mothers at their command, families to protect the mothers, societies to support the structure of families, and traditions to give a cultural continuity to systems of tending and training" (114). Consequently, mothers are the key enabler for Asian American adolescents' ego identity to master cultural conflictions as they carry the responsibility of ingraining rooted Asian traditions.

The privation of mother in Jimmy's proximal context of psychosocial development has led to a menacing impoverishment of ego strengths due to the absence of Korean cultural transmission. In *Insight and Responsibility*, Erikson stresses the importance of "basic human strengths which have evolved with man's prolonged childhood and with his institutions and traditions" (111). Furthermore, he asserts that ego identity is reinforced with virtues which are the "human qualities of strength [...] developed from stage to stage and imparted from generation to generation" (113). The interconnecting cultural chain between Korean American generations is shouldered by Korean mothers; Julia Cho has highlighted the mother role in cultural transmission through the song of Isaac, Jimmy's elder brother. The song, which has extended throughout the whole scope of the play, mourns the departure of the symbolic cultural figure of Korean girl divers who are the representation of Korean resilience and fortitude; "the girl divers become a lonely sight" (1.1.9). In "Culture of Jeju Haenyeo (Women Divers)," it is asserted that Korean girl divers are ideal model figures with resolute strength that conquers relentless fishing conditions. This symbolic exemplary figure of the Korean woman has been altered to the Asian American neon girl who contends with loneliness and deluding immoral provocations. Isaac's song grieves over the replacement of women divers by neon girls whose battles are with immoral artificial allurements; "She's a neon girl all dressed up with nowhere to go / and soon she'll be diving in the dark" (1.1.9). Christoph Ribbat, in *Flickering Light: A History of Neon*, states that "the metaphor of neon" is associated with melancholy singers who lament their "broken dreams" disappearing into the artificial "neon world" (160). Ribbat adds that neon songs are located in "the world of the underprivileged" and "neon women" suffer from "dark passages" of immorality as they grieve over their loneliness

(161). In the absence of Korean female ideals, the morally demeaning developmental contexts of American society overpower the operational capacity of Asian American adolescents' ego identity.

Jimmy's psychosocial development is depleted of the virtue of hope which results from the cultivation of trust generated by the mother. In *Insight and Responsibility*, Erikson asserts that the affectionate bond secured with the developing individual through the mother is necessary for imparting coherence; "the experience of the care-taking person as a *coherent being*, who reciprocates one's physical and emotional needs in expectable ways and therefore deserves to be endowed with trust" (117). Jimmy's identity crisis is agitated with his mother's absence as reflected in his unquenched thirst to see his mother's face through the cartoon character of Jean Grey. Hope emanating from his mother's face is needed for the dismissal of anxiety, agony and estrangement which are besieging Jimmy's development. His ego identity endeavors to overcome rifts in his childhood identification images; "I think it started when I was really little. I was copying some panel of Cyclops [...] after Jean Grey dies" (1.9.32). The pressing urge to draw indicates repressed anxieties and agonizing afflictions after Jimmy's traumatic experience of losing his mother:

JIMMY. And I'm drawing him and then I see these, like dark spots on the paper? And I can't figure out what they are. And then I realize they're tears. I'm drawing his face, but it's my face I mean, it's the same. My face is all ... like in the same expression as the picture. (1.9.32)

Driven by a secret wish to manage and control his surroundings, drawings have spurred Jimmy's identity crisis as he started experiencing identity division. Furthermore, Jimmy's urge to build reciprocal recognition with his mother has driven him to find a family picture which includes his mother. Jimmy has carefully secured it in a "plastic sheath" inside his sketchbook as he states: "This one's from Christmas. It's you and Dad and Mom and me. She looks happy, huh?" (1.9.32).

Jimmy's psychosocial development stages falter with depleted ego strengths as he struggles with the establishment of morals founded on rooted Korean traditions. In *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, Erikson defines "basic human strengths" as virtues so he could "point to an evolutionary basis of man's lofty moralisms" (Evans 17). He states: "The ego can only remain strong in interaction with cultural institutions and can also only remain strong when the child's inborn capacities and potentials are developed" (Evans 26). Jimmy's father, Boo-Seng, is psychologically afflicted with stagnation that versus generativity and this has been reflected on Jimmy's psychosocial deterioration; Jimmy has fabricated a dark secretive life compiled with distorted identification images kept in a hidden album. In "On Listening to the Un-Said: Julia Cho's *Durango* and Asian Americanist Critique," Karen Shimakawa states that "the Lee family is full of secrets, shame, buried resentment, and pregnant silence" which creates a "gap in world views between father and son" (83). Boo-Seng's dysfunctional parenthood state is indicated in his disturbed mental condition; "*Boo-Seng closes his eyes, as if deep in thought. He breathes heavily. Jimmy looks at Isaac, who just shrugs. They eat in silence*" (1.3.13). Erik Erikson, in *The Life Cycle Completed*, explains that generativity "encompasses *procreativity, productivity, and*

creativity, and thus the generation of new beings as well as of new products and new ideas, including a kind of self-generation concerned with further identity development” (67). Consequently, Boo-Seng’s feelings of worthlessness and frustration have encompassed Jimmy and his brother, Isaac. In “Reimagining Fathers and Sons: Race, Labor, Alienation, and Asian American Drama,” Youngbin Hyeon states that in *Durango*, the son “winds up inheriting the anxieties caused by [...] compulsory forms of compliance so foundational to the father’s mindset” (vi). As Boo-Seng gets overwhelmed with detachment from reality, the virtue of care collapses leading to Jimmy’s alienation; all links with Korean cultural heritage are dismantled and all identification strings with social surrounding are severed.

There is an interconnection in psychosocial development amongst generations as indicated in the effect of Boo-Seng’s deteriorated psychological state on Jimmy’s distressed behavior. The virtue of will is enfeebled with the collapse of autonomy under the authoritarian figure of Boo-Seng. In *Insight and Responsibility*, Erikson stresses the importance of “will” for adolescents “to gain gradually the power of increased judgment and decision” needed for ego survival; “no person can live, no ego remains intact without hope and will” (118). In *Identity and the Life Cycle*, Erikson asserts that under the persistent loss of will, a sense of defeat overwhelms the ego giving rise to shame and doubt (71). Jimmy’s will in structuring an occupational commitment in accordance with his aspirations has been succumbed to his father’s already-decided plan for Jimmy’s future career; Jimmy attends swim sessions to fit in the picture of a swimming champion that Boo Seng has delineated for him. The authoritarian figure of Boo-Seng has bereaved Jimmy of autonomy which rendered him impotent with decision making regarding his future objectives and allowed shame and doubt to conquer his self-esteem. In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson defines shame as a tendency to conceal oneself compelling “the world not to look at him, not to notice his exposure” (252). Jimmy’s disinterest to pursue swimming despite of his gifted ability is a form of withdrawal into self-imposed confinement; Jimmy recoils into hidden sheds where his perturbed identity is spurred. He meets his imaginary split other, the Red Angel, who is “different” and “perfect”:

JIMMY. There’s no light in the shed, so I can barely see where I’m going and I hear this sound, and I think it’s me knocking into something except then I realize I haven’t really moved, that this sound isn’t me, that I mean, I didn’t make it. Someone else is in there. (1.12.41).

The Red Angel’s capacity to become invisible is employed as a means to overcome anxiety and shame. The Red Angel “wears a mask so no one can see his face” and he “hides in the shadows” (1.9.33). The overcoming sense of shame that engulfed Jimmy’s psychosocial development is an extension of a wider sense of discrimination that Korean American adolescents contend with in everyday social interactions. In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson argues that shaming “exploits an increasing sense of being small, which can develop only as the child stands up and his awareness permits him to note the relative measures of size and power” (253). In “An Immigrant Family’s Three Survivors, Traveling Together, Alone,” Charles Isherwood asserts that Jimmy “takes refuge

in fantasies of fictional superheroes” as he is confronted as an American minority with and intolerant society (n. page). Jimmy resorts to imagination for self-assertive measures that would enhance his self-esteem required for his progressive psychosocial development.

2- Role Confusion

Jimmy’s adolescence has witnessed a severe dissension in overcoming role confusion; his ego identity endeavors to establish the virtue of fidelity towards occupational and cultural identification images. Lack of trust traverses into the exhaustion of fidelity as indicated in Jimmy’s occupational perplexity: “I don’t hate swimming. I mean, I don’t *like it*, but” (1.12. 40). As a result of Boo-Seng family’s distressed economic status, swimming becomes a potential career saver for Jimmy as it offers him a pathway to a top university through a scholarship. Jimmy quits swimming that would facilitate his university admission marking ego identity contention. In “Autobiographic Notes on the Identity Crisis,” Erik Erikson asserts that adolescents’ psychological well-being is derived from “a *sense* of personal continuity and sameness” that manifests itself in the realization of oneself as well as his communality through unification of human innate qualities and “open choices provided” through “available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered [and] friendships made [...] within traditional or emerging cultural [...] patterns” (732). Minority adolescents’ ego identity needs society to provide satisfactory occupational roles which should be aligned with their cultural values. Jimmy’s ego identity is strained with inaccessible societal role opportunities and a sense of estrangement from mainstream American cultural identity.

Jimmy’s ego identity withdraws from the harsh unrelenting reality to an imaginary world where he could have control over his surroundings through fantasy, role play and dreams. Cultural dissonance between Korean traditional beliefs and mainstream American ideological norms has spurred Jimmy’s identity diffusion. Karen Shimakawa, in “On Listening to the Un-Said,” states: “Jimmy’s Red Angel is an object of desire and identification: his fantasy epic tells a story that seems to fulfill Jimmy’s own desire for power and transcendence” (90). Jimmy’s inability to structure a clear ethnic framework critically needed to overcome his identity crisis has driven the emergence of the Red Angel. Jimmy is conflicted with two contradictory character identification; while he identifies himself as an Asian minority struggling with a diminishing self-esteem, his ego identity is prone to incorporate the Red Angel who is an archetypal representation of the American ideal figure. The Red Angel is “a beautiful, blonde, young sun god” who is “invulnerable,” “nothing can hurt him” and “always wins.” In “Youth: Fidelity and Diversity,” Erikson describes the adolescent who suffers from role confusion as an individual with “fragmentary identities” including “a strange mixture of superiority, almost a megalomania [...] while he is equally convinced of being nobody” (17). Moreover, in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson argues that every individual has a “composite Self” made up of “various selves” and it is within the ego identity operational capacity the ability to synthesize these selves into a “coherent Self” (217). Jimmy met his split image, the Red Angel, at the age of thirteen marking the beginning of adolescence and the initiation of identity crisis:

RED ANGEL. And then I understood –
JIMMY. – who he was –
RED ANGEL. – what I was –
JIMMY. – the bumps on his shoulders –
RED ANGEL. They were wings. (1.4.18)

As seen, both characters appear fusing into one entity as they complete each other's sentences. Identity diffusion is the closest to a defeated identity as evident in Jimmy's divided self which undergoes the psychosocial threat of developmental disintegration. In *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers*, Erikson states that identity diffusion results in "a dilemma" evident in "delinquent and outright psychotic incidents" which is "based on a strong previous doubt of one's ethnic and sexual identity" (91). He adds that adolescents with identity diffusion "temporarily overidentify" themselves with "heroes of cliques and crowds" in order to "keep themselves together" (92). Jimmy's total identification with the heroic figure of the Red Angel indicates his bicultural identity strife which aggravates identity crisis. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson states that identity diffusion implies that identity is "falling apart within itself" and he argues: "In identity diffusion, however, a split of self-images is suggested, a loss of center and dispersion" (212). Jimmy's ego identity revolts against societal limitations imposed on Asian minorities which he wishes to transcend by means of his budding wings. Korean American parents are crushed under intolerant work conditions as signified in Boo-Seng's sudden layoff and his bereavement of all retirement rights. Incited by social antipathy, Boo-Seng's psychological inflictions have disabled his role as father and impoverished Jimmy's development environments. The dysfunctional mentally disturbed Boo-Seng has consumed Jimmy with alienation which propelled his troubled psyche. Jimmy and the Red Angel are integrated into one being and they start sharing the same identity. Role play is initiated with Jimmy's incorporation of the Red Angel; "*The Red Angel unfurls his wings. Jimmy lifts up his drawing into the air, as he makes a sound of flying*" (1.4.18). The extension of the Red Angel's imaginary setting to include role play is an indication of a functional ego identity in pursuit of identity formation.

Although the emergence of the Red Angel indicates Jimmy's developmental strife with role confusion, it is a symptom of an active ego identity that has employed an imaginary superhero as a means of conquering psychosocial afflictions. In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson refers to children who turn to play when they feel "the need to re-enact painful experiences in words or acts" as a means of "recovery" (216). Moreover, in *Erik Erikson: The Power and Limits of a Vision*, Paul Roazen asserts that Erikson believes that "fantasy can be constructive, overcoming neurosis to energize unexpected social sources of support" (139). The creation of an imaginary superhero figure has compensated the deficiency of identification images; the Red Angel succeeded in formulating continuity with the American society rejuvenating Jimmy's ego identity. Through the delineation of the Red Angel who is "invulnerable" with "cruel" eyes and can disappear in the shadows, Jimmy was able to manage his ego weaknesses and anxieties. Roazen states that according to Erikson "a 'strong' ego reconciles contradictions" and the ability to weave an

imaginary self supports identity formation; he refers to Erikson who argues that “to have the courage of one’s diversity is a sign of wholeness in individuals and in civilization” (140). Consequently, the capacity of an Asian American adolescent to integrate antithetical cultural contexts adds to ego fortification and enhances psychosocial development.

Asian American adolescents’ ego identity gains its operational capacity through finding recognition underneath all conflicting differences. Jimmy’s ego identity strives to find continuity and sameness within cultural discrepancies; “Did I know I was different? Somehow, somewhere? Was there, underneath it all, some kind of recognition?” (1.4.18). Erikson, in *Childhood and Society*, asserts that play enables the developing individual to “enjoy imaginary control over a number of highly conflicting items” projected by society (210). Erikson proceeds explaining that fantasy releases an adolescent’s repressed afflictions through empowerment as he becomes “the idol of his day” (210). The Red Angel’s superheroic abilities have given vent to Jimmy’s frustrations with his limitations in intolerant societal ideologies. The Red Angel is endowed with wings that have allowed him to rescue his parents from the burning house, signifying an enraged antagonistic society, and he has the power to be invisible which has shielded him from the agonizing pain of shame and inferiority as a Korean minority. Erikson argues that play endows the adolescent with “a temporary victory over his gangling body and self by making a well-functioning whole” out of his frail ego; when play is connected with fantasy, it is an indication of the ego endeavors to “synchronize the bodily and the social processes with the self” (211).

The Red Angel is transpired through Jimmy’s dream which delineates an imaginary world where social context has an immense influence on psychosocial development. The burning house where Jimmy’s parents are trapped is situated in an inimical community which interconnects the psychological and social conditions of adolescents’ development. Erik Erikson, in *Insight and Responsibility*, states; “True identity [...] depends on the support which the young individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to him: his class, his nation, his culture” (93). Moreover, Erikson believes that dreaming is a healthy mechanism used by ego identity to brush off all cultural discordance. He states; “Dream life weaves the most recent dangers to the ego’s sense of mastery into the tapestry of previous and distant ones, using personal delusion and private cunning to make one meaningfully patterned past of them all and to bring this past into line with anticipated actuality” (200). The stressful social conditions endangering Korean American households have leaked out in Jimmy’s dreams:

JIMMY. Every now and then, the Red Angel still dreams about it.

RED ANGEL. If I close my eyes, I can see it: the burning house. (1. 18. 51).

The dream of his home engulfed with fire is woven into the imaginary world of the Jimmy’s split image of the Red Angel.

Jimmy has designed the Red Angel out of the fictional comic books of X-Men who are considered cultural representations of American minorities. In *Britannica*, X-Men are a group of mutant adolescents endowed with superhuman powers which help them to secure their presence

in a hostile society: “The comic addressed the relationship between the heroic X-Men and a public that did not appreciate, or even want, their help” (“X-Men,” n. page). X-Men are the saviors of American minority adolescents from falling into the tumultuous pit of role confusion as they navigate the perilous path of identity crisis. Moreover, in “X-Men: First Class – Mutant Heroes of the Teenage Outsider,” published in *The Guardian*, David Cox asserts that X-Men emerged as “champions of suffering minorities” who “were still struggling against unashamed prejudice, often officially sanctioned” (n. page). The Red Angel as an extended version of X-Men is created by Jimmy’s imagination to rescue his family from the weight of social grievances; “He picked up his father with one hand and with his other, he grasped his mother around her waist” and he was surprised that they were “as light as children” (1.18.51). The “glowing red” faces of the neighbors reflected their hostile aggressive demeanor; “They crowded in on him as the house burned and they raised their fists and picked up whatever their hands could find” (1.18. 51).

3- The Virtue of Fidelity

As the Red Angel fulfills his mission of rescuing Jimmy’s parents, ego identity operation is culminated with success and the fabricated imaginary world is dispersed with the disappearance of the wings; “The Red Angel’s wings are gone. After he healed, he left the town” (1.18.51). Jimmy’s identity crisis is resolved with the departure of the split image of the Red Angel who bears dominant American cultural features; “You wouldn’t even look twice at me now” (1.18.52). Jimmy’s ideological role confusion is deciphered when fidelity is successfully established towards rooted Korean cultural traits paving the path to positive psychosocial development. The bicultural conflict reaches a final resolution with disbanding the merge of Jimmy and the Red Angel. In “Globalization, Identity, and the Search for Chosen Traumas,” Catarina Kinnvall states that Erikson’s theory is concerned with achieving a coherent identity which “must be harmonized to fit in with the social context;” adolescent’s ego identity is in an incessant operation of resolving discord between the cache of identification images and “societal definitions” of fitted identity (116).

Through Isaac’s support, Jimmy reaches reconciliation with the collective identification image of Korean Americans and how they are recognized by the American society. In *Insight and Responsibility*, Erikson states that “identity and fidelity are necessary for ethical strength” and it is the role of adults to “provide content for the ready loyalty of youth” (126). Isaac explains that Wolverine’s vulnerability to pain is the very clue to his superpower; “And because he suffers. Because he feels pain, we see in him the truest expression of what we, as humans, experience. That’s why he’s the greatest X-Man. Not because he’s most powerful but because he’s most human” (1.7.25). Living and embracing grief is a sign of being human and through acceptance of pain, we find sameness and continuity with social contexts. In *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers*, Erik Erikson defines ego identity:

The sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity (one’s ego in the psychological sense) is matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others. Thus, self-esteem, confirmed at the end of each major crisis, grows to be a conviction that one is learning effective steps toward

a tangible future, that one is developing a defined personality within a social reality which one understands. (89)

Structuring self-esteem through ego identity engages learning social contexts and forging a personality that conforms with reality. In “On Sadness,” Julia Cho defines sadness as part of “ingrained” generational heritage related to sufferings involved in the process of immigration and historical trauma:

There is no end of sadness. Even in my most joyful moments, there’s a little nugget of melancholy. But over time, I’ve come to understand that nugget is part of the whole. That seems particularly true now, in these chaotic times. I see my sadness reflected in the world around me. And to hold the sadness close is, in a way, to hold the world close, too.

Unburdening Jimmy’s ego identity from all contention is indicated in rooting out all perturbations associated with psychosocial adolescence struggle; “Jimmy takes his notebook out. He opens it and then begins ripping sheets out of it. He tears the sheets up and throws them out of the window” (1.18.52). Jimmy emerges with a thriving assertive occupational role:

JIMMY. Maybe I’ll be a doctor.

BOO-SENG. Is that what you want?

JIMMY. Sure. (*Silence.*) (1.19.52)

Jimmy’s ego identity strife has been concluded with a defined resolute career role that instills the virtue of fidelity and reflects a positive psychosocial development towards a coherent identity.

Conclusion

To sum up, the psychosocial development of Jimmy, in Julia Cho’s *Durango*, is confronted with grave challenges due to the degradation of virtues extending throughout stages of childhood and adolescence. The operational capacity of his ego identity is obstructed as a result of voidness in the identification images with Korean ideal figures as well as mainstream sociocultural ideologies of marginalization. According to Erik Erikson, adolescence witnesses a struggle between identity and role confusion culminating in the virtue of fidelity; the developing individual needs to establish a sense of loyalty towards a particular ideology and a clear occupational role. In Jimmy’s family proximal contexts, reciprocal interactions are depleted because of his mother’s death and father’s remoteness which have left schisms in his connection with Korean ancestral culture. Abandoned by both significant others in family context and societal supportive institutions, Jimmy’s imagination contrived a fabricated world where he could exercise his power over a hostile world. Triggered by a troubled psyche of sociocultural contention, the Red Angel emerges as Jimmy’s split image with Western features signified in a blonde hair figure with a

sturdy well-built body. As Jimmy started embracing his limitations and accepting his reality, his ego identity progressed towards identity formation.

Contemporary American literature offers a vivid tapestry of diverse experiences that reflect the strained identities of American minorities navigating culturally conflicted settings. Korean American drama, as represented in Julia Cho's *Durango*, presents a profound insight into adolescents' psychological struggle as indicated in their repressed trauma and the prolonged sufferings of their parents who battle with social detachment and workplace injustices. In his toilsome journey for a clearly defined identity, Jimmy's ego identity has endured hardships in the process of reaching a harmonious cohesive set of identification images as he reassembles his repertoire of childhood virtues. Korean American adolescents hold inherent characteristics that enable their ego identity to alleviate fragmented discontinuities endured by their psyche. Their compassionate nature, innate intelligence and vibrant imagination help them to cope with cultural confusions and internal dissonances. Jimmy endeavors to substitute the absence of his mother to supply his father and brother with an affectionate bonding; he senses the critical need of the trip to Durango in order to amend broken family ties and his vivid imagination saves his ego identity through transcending the harsh alienating reality. Korean American adolescents have the resilience to conquer role confusion through creative mechanisms that enable ego identity to suture ruptures and construct coherence and continuity towards identity formation and fidelity.

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